

The Imperatives of Institutional Research and Development in Sustaining and Improving the Quality of NonFormal Education Programmes in Southeast Nigeria

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Abstract

Non-formal education programmes are immensely vital for the socio-economic advancement of nations. That is why measures are taken by governments to ensure that these programmes are functional and of good quality. Several researchers and international organisations have developed quality assurance frameworks that can guide educational institutions in sustaining and improving the quality of their programmes. This paper addresses the gap between international best practices in quality assurance and the quality assurance system of State Agencies for Mass Literacy Adult and Non-Formal Education (SAMEs) in Southeast Nigeria. It was concluded that Institutional Research and Development/Procedures for Improvement as a quality assurance phase/procedure need to be made more regular and robust in State Agencies for Mass Literacy Adult and Non-Formal Education (SAMEs) in Southeast Nigeria in order to sustain and improve the quality of their programmes.

Keywords: Quality Assurance, Institutional Research and Development, Non-formal Education.

1. Introduction

Non-Formal education according to Egonu (n.d), is organised learning outside the formal school, for the purpose of raising awareness, acquisition of skills, improvement of efficiency and productivity in jobs, preparing for self employment or opportunities for further training in a specific field of endeavour, all for the purpose of enhancing the individual's standard of living and the quality of life.

Non-formal education is quite effective for economic and social transformation of nations because while conventional schools educate younger people mainly for future purposes, non-formal education programmes can be used to solve immediate problems that beset a nation. That is why governments all over the world have established institutions that promote, monitor and control non-formal education in one way or another. In Nigeria, the National Commission for Mass Literacy Adult and Non-Formal Education (NMEC) is mandated to monitor and coordinate non-formal education programmes (National Commission for Mass Literacy Adult and Non-Formal Education Act, 1990). NMEC operates at the National level and works hand in hand with State Agencies for Mass Literacy Adult and Non-Formal Education (SAMEs) which exist in all the 36 states of Nigeria and are established by the laws of each state to monitor and coordinate non-formal education programmes.

Each of these SAMEs set up learning centers in every local government areas of the state in which they are established and carry out all such activities as would ensure that the objectives of non-formal education are met. According to NMEC (2008), the non-formal education programmes run by NMEC include:

Basic Literacy: A programme organised for people that have never been to school before.

Post Literacy: A programme organised for people that have acquired basic literacy and want to acquire more. In most cases it is equivalent of First School Leaving Certificate.

Continuing Education: Programmes that offer equivalents of Junior Secondary School education, Senior Secondary School education and Vocational Education like fashion design, bread making, carpentry, e.t.c.

For non-formal education programmes to remain sustainably fit for its purpose, the quality of their services and products must be taken with a high degree of seriousness. NMEC therefore set a national benchmark for non-formal education for the maintenance of high quality non-formal education programmes. The objective of benchmarks is to assist a programme to establish baseline performance criteria for institutions (Nwabuko 2014). It is expected that according to good practice, non-formal education programmes should have internal quality assurance processes to maintain universally acceptable education standards. Non-formal education programme organisers or developers can achieve this by the application of quality assurance system in running their programmes.

2. Quality assurance system

Quality is a complex and multi-dimensional concept. It can be applied objectively with reference to goals and in relation to standards, results, needs and expectations (Faurschau, 2008). According to Belawati & Zuhairi (2007),

in general, the term Quality Assurance (QA) refers to a process of defining and fulfilling a set of quality standards consistently and continuously with the goal of satisfying consumers, producers, and the other stakeholders.

According to Business Dictionary.com (2014), a system is a set of detailed methods, procedures and routines created to carry out a specific activity, perform a duty or solve a problem. A quality assurance system is therefore a set of detailed routines that involve defining and fulfilling a set of quality standards consistently and continuously with the goal of satisfying consumers, producers, and the other stakeholders.

For this study, a quality assurance system refers to documented detailed routines that would be required to sustainably fulfil and improve on the quality standards set by the national benchmark for non-formal education with regards to curricular programmes.

The Problem of this study stems from the fact that though there is a national benchmark for non-formal education programmes, the south-east SAMEs do not utilize a robust and functional quality assurance system needed to guarantee and improve on the quality of their programmes. They do not have mechanisms for continuous alignment and regular fine-tuning of their programmes for the sustainable attainment of the national benchmark for non-formal education programmes in Nigeria. The assistant executive secretary of the southeast zonal office of the National Commission for Mass literacy, Adult and Non-formal Education (NMEC), Mrs Anyanwu informed the researchers that she is not aware of any documented record of an internal quality assurance system within the southeast zonal office of NMEC. The agencies for Adult & Non-formal Education in Nigeria all have basically the same objectives and functions which can be seen in the law that established them. Upon interviewing members of staff of the Enugu State Agency for Mass Literacy, Adult & Non-Formal Education, the extent to which quality assurance procedures of the agency are complied with could not be ascertained (Nnorom, 2014b). Such records would have been readily available if the quality assurance system operational in the SAMEs were in consonance with internationally recognised quality assurance frameworks.

3. An assessment of the quality assurance system of Southeast SAMEs

This study therefore aims to assess the internal quality assurance system of SAMEs in South-Eastern Nigeria by comparing it with international accounts of quality assurance (QA) in continuing education. There are a couple of QA models found in literature like the QACEP framework, EFQM, TQM, etc. The QACEP (Quality Assurance for Higher Education Institution's Continuing Education Programmes) framework is suitable for non-formal education programmes because it was modelled for continuing education programmes (CEPs). The development of QACEP framework came about through a consortium composed of eight European institutions: six higher education institutions (HEIs) and two associations representing a large number of other HEIs, spent 2 years to develop a general framework for quality assurance applicable to CEPs, compatible with and adapted to the needs and specific context of each individual CEP, and to elaborate detailed and practical tools for the assessment of their quality. The 2 year project is what resulted in the QACEP framework. The QACEP framework is a reference guide for HEIs designed to assist them in the management of the quality of their continuing education programmes, by fostering the development of a continuous improvement approach (QACEP Project Consortium, 2011).

This study will use the QACEP framework and what is referred to as "the Quality Circle" as reference points for determining how a quality assurance system can be used to sustainably improve non-formal education programmes.

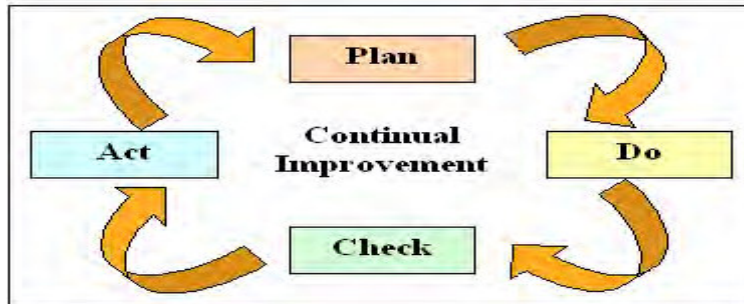
3.1 Quality Assurance measures established by NMEC for functionality in Non-formal education

- i. Minimum qualification for facilitators to be NCE;
- ii. Adult Education officers in the LGs to have a minimum of Bachelors Degree in Adult Education;
- iii. Capacity building for Literacy providers at least twice a year. NMEC can also liaise with universities to organize refresher courses for both state directors, management staff and local adult education officers;
- iv. Induction course/training as well as periodic training be given to facilitators;
- v. Relevant learning materials, primers and supplementary readers be provided for relevant programmes (Basic, post, etc);
- vi. Visitation to some advanced literate countries like Cuba, Nicaragua and Tanzania is recommended for comparative studies and improvement in literacy delivery;
- vii. Materials in some other Nigerian languages to be provided;
- viii. Uniform standard of evaluation examination both formative and summative. Contact hours, thrice a week, i.e. Literacy 9 months, post literacy 3 years then continuing education upwards ;
- ix. Three(3) years post literacy to be broken into 18 months for post literacy and 18 month for advance literacy;
- x. Learner/ facilitator ratio should be 25:1.

These measures as listed above represent a quality assurance phase known as "Planning".

4. The Phases of a Quality Assurance System

A robust quality assurance system consists of well documented procedures of planning, implementation, feedback and research & development which is called “the quality cycle” simply described as “Plan”, “Do”, “Check”, “Act”. These phases of the circle are as follows: the basis for operational planning (Plan), the operations and processes (Do), the monitoring and assessment targets (Check) and the methods, procedures and tools used to develop the operations (Act/Institutional Research & Development). (Outi, K. (2011), Deming’s study and Tague’s study as cited in Kettunen 2011, p.3).



Source: Kettunen (2011)

These four phases of a quality assurance system are further illustrated here under:

4.1. Planning

It is a precondition for any discussion on quality that goals have been set and a plan has been made for all educational and learning activities (QACEP Project Consortium, 2011). The degree to which the goals are attained is closely related to the evaluation of perceived quality (that is to say all objectives attained equals’ high quality).

The issues to be addressed in the planning phase of quality assurance include:

What are the goals? Are the goals realistic and measurable? Are the goals realistic and measurable? Are all of those involved aware of the goals and have they been agreed upon?

4.2 Implementation

Here the focus is on day-to-day activities, including teaching and learning. The issues to be addressed in implementation phase of quality assurance include:

How are the plans related to the goals? Who, in practice, decides on the quality?

4.3 Evaluation /obtaining a feedback from stakeholders in the system

Relates to the different evaluations and assessments.

The issues to be addressed in evaluation phase of quality assurance include:

What is evaluated? When are different phases assessed? How is the assessment carried out?

How does one reach the conclusions of the assessments?

4.4 Institutional research and development /Procedures for change.

The main issue here is how you proceed after the results of the assessment and continue towards new goals and plans/implementation. The questions include the following:

How are the conclusions of the assessment phase employed? Who uses/does not use the results? (QACEP Project Consortium, 2011).

The phases of a quality assurance system in an educational setting are summarised below:

| Plan | Do | Check | Act |
|---|--|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Action plans • Curriculum planning • Course implementation plans • Workload plans of teachers • Personal study plans of students • Follow the process descriptions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement the plans • Recruitment of staff and students • Pedagogical management • Guidance and teaching • Follow the process descriptions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feedback from students, graduates and employers • Feedback from the Ministry of Education • Feedback from the quality assurance agency • Evaluation of curriculum and competence • Evaluation of the processes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutional research and development • Improvements in education and processes |

Source: Kettunen (2011)

5. The State of the Affairs of Quality Assurance in Southeast SAMEs.

According to the QACEP Project Consortium (2011), the state of the affairs with regards to quality assurance in a continuing education institution can be categorised into the following 4 levels:

Level 1: No processes (Quality depends solely on the individual). Activities depend on individual initiatives. There are no defined associated assessment processes. Problems are rectified as they arise.

Level 2: Basic processes (Process awakening). Responsibility for activities ceases to be individual and tends to become a shared responsibility with some short term planning. There is some degree of process definition although there is no documentation. Performance is assessed occasionally.

Level 3: Intermediate processes (Vision through processes, professionalization and a guarantee of quality). There are established standards, procedures and directives known throughout the organization, unit or service. The activities are carried out in accordance with these procedures.

Level 4: Sophisticated processes (Systematic assessment and improvement of the processes). Established procedures are systematically assessed for potential improvement. The organisation/programme strives to anticipate problems and complaints.

The state of quality assurance in the southeast SAMEs as observed by the researcher are as follows:

- There are established standards, procedures and directives known throughout the organization, unit or service, however their curricular activities are not rigorously carried out in accordance with these procedures;
- There is no robust documentation of quality assurance procedures
- There is no culture that ensures regular systematic assessment and improvement of the processes. (Nnorom, 2014a). This regular systematic assessment and improvement processes ought to be carried out at the end of given academic terms or sessions so that before the beginning of the next term or sessions, the short-comings of the programmes would be addressed in planning for the new term or session. This process of addressing the short-comings of the programmes in making and documenting plans for improvements for the new term or session is what is referred to as “Institutional Research and Development/Procedures for Change.

6. Institutional Research and Development: the missing link in the Quality Assurance System of Southeast SAMEs.

The quality assurance measures in southeast SAMEs can be said to be lacking the robustness of internationally accepted standards of good quality assurance practices. This is so because;

- i. The apart from the non-formal education programme plans of the SAMEs, their implementation of the plans, and the evaluation/feedback from stakeholders, the fourth phase of quality assurance, namely the “Institutional Research and Development/procedures for change” is not regularly used as quality assurance procedure.
- ii. For the programmes of the southeast SAMEs to continually meet stakeholders’ needs, Institutional Research and Development/procedures for change are needed to continually improve their non-formal education programme plans based on the evaluation/feedback obtained from stakeholders like the learners, the facilitators of the programmes as well as the job market/industry.
- iii. Given that Institutional Research and Development/procedures for change is the fourth phase of the

“Quality Cycle” described in the QACEP Project Consortium (2011), Outi, K. (2011), Deming’s study and Tague’s study as cited in Kettunen (2011), the quality assurance system in southeast SAMEs in consonance with internationally accepted quality assurance standards.

7. Conclusion and Recommendation

For the quality of non-formal education programmes to be sustainably guaranteed, all the four phases of quality assurance namely; Planning, Implementation, Feedback/Evaluation and Institutional Research and Development/Procedures for Change must be robust. In the case of the State Agencies for Mass Literacy Adult and Non-formal education (SAMEs) in southeast Nigeria, more efforts should be made to regularly and effectively utilize institutional research and development/procedures for change as a quality assurance strategy. The whole quality assurance process is only effective when it incorporates procedures for changing the aspects of non-formal education which have been found wanting. It is therefore imperative for the southeast SAMEs to adopt internationally acceptable quality assurance practices which include Institutional Research and Development/Procedures for Change.

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