Developing Quality Assurance Culture for Sustainable University Education in Nigeria

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Abstract
The relevance of any university education depends on quality parameters that should be specified, adhered to and sustained. The development of quality assurance culture in Nigerian university education is imperative, considering the fact that globalization, mobility of labour, competition and the quest for best practices have subjected universities to international comparison. This article, therefore, examines the various key parameters bothering on developing and sustaining quality assurance culture in Nigerian universities, and explores strategies aimed at improving and sustaining a quality culture at the university level. Furthermore, it proposes a quality assurance model for Nigerian universities, and concludes that institutional paradigm shift towards a quality culture is imperative for sustainable university education in Nigeria.
Key Words: Quality Assurance, Sustainable, Development, Culture, University, Education.

Introduction

In the last two decades university education in Nigeria has witnessed phenomenal increase in students' enrolment, a development that has given rise to the establishment of more universities. In addition, the non-corresponding increases in facilities and funding have resulted in the dismal state of the university system, a system characterized by inadequate funding, manpower and facilities (Ibara, 2010). This put together, appear to have exerted enormous pressure on the quality of educational service delivery at the university level.

The justification for a qualitative university education can not be overemphasized. Universities contribute to the advancement of knowledge, and are expected to provide needed human capital with enhanced skills that can stimulate technological development and high productivity in the economy.   The essence of university education to national development is aptly summarized in the National Policy on Education. According to the National Policy on Education (FRN, 2004:36), the goals of tertiary education include:

- Contribution to national development through high level relevant manpower training.
- Development and inculcation of proper values for the survival of the individual and the Nigerian society.
- Development of the intellectual capacity of individuals to understand and appreciate their local and external environments.
- Acquisition of both physical and intellectual skills which will enable individual to be self-reliant and useful members of the society.
- Promotion and encouragement of scholarship and community service.
- Forging and cementing of national unity.
- Promotion of national and international understanding and interaction.

Universities in Nigeria usually pursue these goals through teaching, research, community service, staff development programmes, and dissemination of knowledge. The measurement of success of universities in achieving these goals is through quality assurance.

The concern for quality university education in Nigeria is desirable. Nevertheless, what people see in the form of the moral standards of graduates, labour market outcomes and scholastic performance have raised concern on the relevance of university education in Nigeria. Moreover, the globalised mobility of labour, information, goods and services have opened up universities to international competitiveness and comparison. As a result of this development, there are international standards against which universities across the globe are now being measured (Babalola, 2011).

This article, therefore, is an attempt at exploring ways to develop quality assurance culture for sustainable university education in Nigeria. Areas of discussion include rationale for quality assurance culture, constraints to quality assurance culture and strategies for sustenance of quality assurance culture in Nigerian university education. In addition, it proposes a quality assurance model for universities in Nigeria.

Conceptual Framework

The need to understand the term quality assurance is imperative in order to provide direction to the discussion. Quality assurance in higher education refers to setting standards for the various process and activities

that lead to the production of graduates by the training institutions (Ciwar, 2005). These processes and activities include:
- Programme duration
- Course content
- Quality of teachers
- Standard of instructional facilities
- The school environment
- Examination – this entails quality examination items, supervision, moderation of results and grading system.

Hayward (2006) defines quality assurance as a planned and systematic review process of an institution or programme to determine whether or not acceptable standards of education, scholarship and infrastructure are being met, maintained and enhanced. Also, Okebukola (2004) sees quality assurance in Nigerian universities as a continuous process of improvement in the quality of teaching and learning activities achieved through employing mechanisms that are internal and external to universities. In the same vein, Creech (1994) opines that quality assurance is the process of consistently meeting product specification or getting things right first time and every time. Furthermore, it connotes a before and during the event process concerned with preventing fault occurring in the first place (Salls, 2002).

The plethora of definitions advanced above, points to several key dimensions of quality assurance. First, quality assurance focuses on process and seeks to convince both internal and external constituents that an institution has processes that produce high quality outcomes. Second, quality assurance is a continuous, active and responsive process which includes effective evaluation and feedback mechanisms. Third, quality assurance has to do with designing quality into the education system to ensure that products of the system meet quality standards. Also, it is clear from the different definitions that, if Nigerian universities can get things right first time and every time their usual panicky disposition towards accreditation exercise would be a thing of the past.

Equally, important in understanding quality assurance is explaining what quality assurance is not. In this context, quality assurance should not be confused with quality control. Quality control refers to measures taken to remove faults at the end of the production process (Okebukola & Shebami, 2001). Quality control is basically a system for setting standards and taking appropriate actions to deal with deviations outside permitted tolerances (Cole, 1996). Thus, quality control is a retroactive measure used to determine the quality of a product or a system after processing, and during which wastages and deviations could have occurred and what is left is to reject substandard inputs or outputs. Quality control usually relies on inspectors and is generally not regarded as sufficient in the light of more sophisticated quality systems. Moreover, it is cost effective and beneficial to take steps to prevent deviations, faults and wastages before they occur. Hence, the need for quality assurance culture which is a proactive process. Quality culture, therefore, can be seen as the ability of an institution to develop quality assurance implicitly in the da operations of the institution and involves moving away from periodic assessment to ingrained quality assurance system.

Rationale for Quality Assurance Culture in University Education
Sustained effort to develop quality assurance culture in the university system is obvious for many reasons. These include:
1. In a developing nation like Nigeria, education remains a major factor for eradicating poverty and providing high level human capital for national development.
2. Universally, one of the fundamental objectives of universities is to promote national development through intellectual inquiry, and the transmission of specialized knowledge.
3. University education is fundamental to the creation of a knowledge economy in all nations (World Bank, 1999).
4. In recent times, universities and student population have increased exponentially, but the quality of graduates has failed to meet the labour market expectations and international competitiveness. Majority of these graduates also fail to secure jobs due to inadequate preparation for labour market and low absorptive capacity of the market (Babalola; Adedeji & Erwat, 2007).
5. University education is capital intensive with huge investment that could be run as a business venture and subject to continuous demand for accountability. Prudential management and improved quality are necessary in the system to ensure it is sustainable without lowering standards. In this regard, each university should introduce its quality assurance culture to improve the quality of teaching, learning and research.
6. In the era of globalization and high competition for the global economy as well as massification of education, Nigeria can not afford to operate a university system that compromises standards.
7. Emerging global trends and competitiveness underscore the need to meet and exceed students and other stakeholders changing tastes and expectations.

Constraints to Quality Assurance Culture in Nigerian Universities

The constraints confronting sustainable quality assurance culture in Nigerian universities seem to be common irrespective of their type and ownership. Babalola (2011:13) highlights some of these constraints as thus:

- Tendency to increase access without much attention to quality issues.
- Rapid expansion without adequate strategic plan to ensure quality.
- Unethical practices by parents, students and staff at various stages in the process of admission, administration, instruction, examination, supervision, certification, graduation and absorption into the labour market.
- Poor accountability and transparency in governance.
- Shortage of academic staff in some fields.
- Double commitment by some lecturers.
- Lack of enforcement of sanctions.
- Inadequate infrastructure and infrastructural decay.
- Human capital flight or brain drain, and
- Lack of sustainable funding.

Arising from the above, it is clear that these constraints span across the input, process, and outcome elements of quality education. It is also obvious that without conscious effort at assuring quality in these critical areas, the ultimate goal of providing quality university education in Nigeria would remain elusive.

Strategies for Achieving Sustainable Quality Assurance Culture in Nigeria Universities

There are some factors that could assist universities in Nigeria, create a quality assurance culture. These include:

(1)   Provision of institutional Quality Assurance Policy: University management in Nigeria needs to provide quality assurance policy which explicitly displays their commitment for quality. The enabling policies should set the philosophy, vision, and systematic procedure for student admission, staff recruitment, delivery of courses, curriculum development, and the overall effectiveness of the university system (Ibara, 2011). Policy statements should include the methods for implementing the policy. Also, monitoring procedures should ensure that the policies are implemented, evaluated and periodically reviewed.

(2)   **Continuous Improvement**

Quality assurance is a systematic approach to achieving desired levels of quality in a consistent manner that meets or exceeds the needs of customers (students). This means that quality assurance is a continuous quality improvement process with a mindset for constant innovation, improvement and change (Uche, 2011). In this context, universities in Nigeria should make effort to periodically analyze what they are doing and procedures for improvement. This would also entail embarking on quality improvement, continuous enhancement of programmes and infrastructural facilities and ensuring that a feedback mechanism for immediate intervention is put in place.

Figure 1:   A Conceptual Model for Institutional Quality Assurance
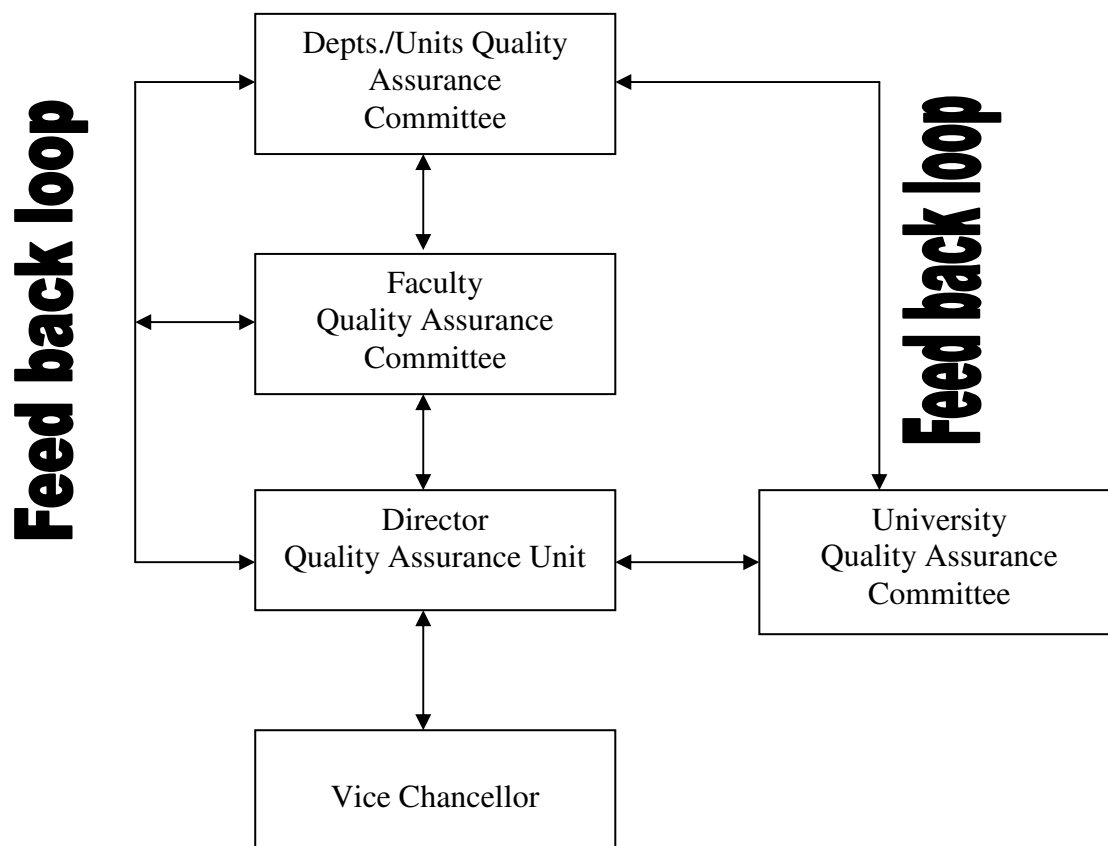
Source: Developed by the Author

Figure I shown above, indicates that quality assurance assessment should be put in place to monitor internal quality assurance mechanisms in units and departments through Departmental Quality Assurance Committee (DQAC). The DQAC reports to the Faculty Quality Assurance Committee (FQAC) which in turn reports to the Director, Quality Assurance Unit. The Director, Quality Assurance Unit receives feedback from the Departmental, Faculty and University Quality Assurance Committees (UQAC) and reports to the Vice Chancellor for the purpose of innovation, improvement and change. Continuous improvements require periodic feedback and feed-forward mechanisms, such as follow-up activities and remedial actions.

3.   Establishment of Quality Assurance Unit in Universities
        A Quality Assurance unit should be set up by universities in Nigeria to monitor and evaluate academic programmes, teaching as well as learning environment. However, it is unfortunate to observe that some Nigerian universities do not have a quality assurance unit and quality assurance policy, despite the fact that the entire gamut of university operation revolves around quality education delivery. Corroborating this view, Udom (2002) affirms that quality consciousness among employees is a consequence of quality assurance policy which is very rare in Nigerian institutions of learning. The roles of the quality assurance unit among others should include:
- Assessment of human and material resources available to academic programmes.
- Liaising with external quality assurance agencies, to keep abreast of latest developments and innovations.
- Monitoring the input, process, and output of the system.
- Evaluation of academic programmes.
- Organizing workshops and seminars for academic.

- Interfacing with the Academic Planning Unit and the Curriculum Committee of the University for innovations in curriculum design, content and organization.
- Monitoring of graduates for feedback information on their performance from employers.

  In order for the Quality Assurance Unit to function optimally, it should be fully computerized and equipped like other academic units in the university.

4. **Institutional self Assessment:**

Self assessment and quality audit is a major component of the culture of continuous improvement. It provides the basis for having an insight of quality and enables educational institutions to understand its strengths and weaknesses for the purpose of enhancement of their service. Also, it is the process in which educational institutions make considered judgement on their own performance. The self-assessment process would enable universities to examine the quality of its operations and identify areas in which improvement can be made for the future enhancement of educational service delivery.

5. **Attitudinal Change**

Developing quality assurance culture necessitates a paradigm shift in the prevailing circumstance of regarding public service as no man's job, a scenario that breeds indiscipline and lukewarm disposition to assigned roles in the university. For instance, academic staff should normally not engage in unethical and dishonest practices in assessing students. Besides, some universities are usually not prepared for the National Universities Commission (NUC) accreditation visits and in most cases personnel and facilities are hurriedly put in place to get their programmes accredited (Uche, 2011). It is, therefore, suggestive that internal mechanisms designed to enhance quality in Nigerian universities seems to have been compromised. Quality assurance entails attitudinal change and reorientation. Students also need a change of attitude as some of them practically go after lecturers for undeserved scores. It is important that during orientation for new students they should be made to understand the quality trend in their institution.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The development of a quality assurance culture is a vital issue in Nigerian universities. In this regard, this article has discussed the rationale for developing a quality assurance culture in the university system, constraints to quality assurance culture and strategies for overcoming constraints. A major issue that should be explored to ensure a quality culture in the nation's universities is institutional paradigm shift towards a quality culture in Nigerian universities.

Based on the foregoing discussion, it is recommended as follows:

1. The National Universities Commission (NUC) should mandate universities in Nigeria to establish quality assurance units and also provide quality assurance policy. The policy will guide universities on the calibre of staff and students to be recruited and admitted, the required service delivery process and the type of output envisaged at the institutional level.

2. University management should encourage periodical review of curriculum, possibly after every five years as recommended by the NUC to incorporate new needs of the global economy and labour market.

3. Universities should have a more objective student admission policy to ensure that only qualified students are admitted. This is because a distortion in the input process affects the output or outcome of products.

4. Universities should make concerted effort at assuring quality education through the elimination of examination misconduct/malpractice, sexual harassment and unethical practices among staff. These unwholesome practices compromise educational quality.

5. Quality assurance should be made an integral element of the university overall strategy, and entrenched in all the units and sub-units to ensure quality development of the university system.

6. Capacity building should be directed towards a quality culture in the university system. In this context, collaboration with foreign institutions and quality assurance agencies could assist in complementing local capacity building initiatives.

7. Leadership at the university level is the most potent engine for change, development and quality assurance. In line with this, institutional commitment to quality education should be reflected in all actions and decisions by the leadership for the development of a sound quality culture.

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