

Strengthening Internal Quality Assurance for Improved Education Delivery in Nigerian Public Universities.

Ijeoma A. Archibong (Ph.D)

Department of Educational Foundations & Administration

Cross River University of Technology, Calabar, Nigeria

E-mail: anije1997@yahoo.com

Abstract

Quality education does not occur miraculously but can be achieved through continuous improvement efforts by the stakeholders in the education enterprise. The aim of this paper is to discuss what can be done to improve internal quality assurance practices within Nigerian public universities. It starts by examining the concept of quality and quality assurance. Following this is the discussion on the rationale for the concern for quality in the public universities. The paper ends with an examination of critical issues that need to be addressed internally in order assure quality in the educative process.

Key words: Quality assurance, Education, Internal, Quality, Nigerian universities.

Introduction

There is no gainsaying that education is of great importance for overall human development. The relevance of education in the political, socio-economic and technological advancement of any nation cannot be over-emphasized. The benefits that accrue as a result of education influence nations to invest in it. Beyond the investment, concerted efforts are equally made by countries to guarantee that education will yield the expected benefits. It is an established fact that the extent to which a nation reaps the benefits of such investment largely depends on the quality of education. Owing to this fact, no other issue in education has drawn so much concern and retained the interest of stakeholders as the issue of quality especially at the tertiary education level. According to Becket & Brookes (2006) some of the reasons for the growing concern for quality assurance within the expanding global higher education system are rapid expansion of student numbers, growing public expenditure on higher education, the demand for better public services, increasing competition within the educational market for resources and students, the tensions between efficiency and quality, increasing public demand for the accountability of higher education.

Nigerian public universities have not fared well with respect to quality education delivery. The reasons for this state of affairs are not far-fetched. There has been a rapid expansion in the number of universities within a very short span of time. Currently available data from the National Universities Commission (NUC) website show that as at June 2012, there are 37 Federal Universities; 37 State Universities and 50 private universities. There are equally challenges posed by inadequate funding, brain drain, incessant strikes by the various unions and students, poor management culture, infrastructural inadequacies, examination malpractices, increased student population and so on. Writing on the state of university education, Okigbo (2000) cited in Ayodele and Abiodun (2008) posits that the Nigerian University system has grown from infancy through adolescence to near maturity and finally to decay all within the space of a short-time.

All hope is not lost however. The Federal government has settled areas of disagreement with the various unions in the university and is also making concerted efforts to improve the funding of education. The National Universities Commission (NUC) as the external statutory agency mandated to maintain academic standards in Nigerian universities is not resting on its oars. The Commission has produced a 2007 undergraduate Benchmark Minimum Academic Standards which is currently being reviewed, ensures resource assessment before approval is given to start a programme, conducts accreditation exercise for undergraduate programmes, and has initiated the process for institutional accreditation. Recently on July 12, 2012, the Commission formally presented and distributed the Postgraduate Benchmark Minimum Academic Standards, with the view of starting accreditation of Postgraduate programmes in Nigerian universities. All these efforts are tailored towards assuring quality by external bodies, that government and the NUC. The undeniable fact remains that except the external efforts are matched with a purpose driven internal quality assurance mechanism, the entire effort may be fruitless.

The aim of this paper is to discuss what can be done to improve internal quality assurance practices within Nigerian public universities. It begins by examining the concept of quality and quality assurance. This is followed by a rationale for the concern for quality in the public universities. Finally, critical issues that need to be addressed internally in order assure quality in the educative process is discussed.

The Concept of Quality and Quality Assurance

The term quality is perceived differently by various stakeholders. Hence, the definition of quality often varies. In most cases however it is considered against a preset standard or benchmark. The British Standard Institution (BSI) defines quality as “the totality of features and characteristics of a product of service that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs” (BSI, 1991). The definition of quality in higher education is often complex because of the difficulty in agreement among the various stake holders of what constitutes quality in education. The refined version of the popularly cited (Harvey and Green, 1993) by Harvey (2006) as cited by Harvey and Stensaker (2008) presents five different ways of defining quality thus:

- *Quality as exceptional.* Here quality is linked to excellence and usually operationalized as exceptionally high standards of academic achievement. Quality is attained if the required standards are met or exceeded.
- *Quality as perfection or consistency.* In this definition, quality implies zero defects and getting things right the first time. Quality in this sense is assumed not to apply to a learning situation except in the areas of consistency of academic judgment and reliability of management information.
- *Quality as fitness for purpose.* Here quality is judged by the extent to which it meets the specified purpose. It relates to customer requirements and satisfaction.
- *Quality as value for money.* Quality is assessed via returns on investment. The notion of accountability in education is brought into focus in this definition.
- *Quality as transformation.* Quality is viewed as a process of change. Education is conceived here as a transformation process which leads to qualitative change in the participants leading to their enhancement and empowerment.

Quality assurance in education is geared towards attainment of education targets and improvement in the process of education delivery. To Stand (2008), Quality assurance is a continuous process by which an institution can guarantee that standards and quality of its educational provisions are being maintained or enhanced. Middlehurst (2001) describe the scope of quality assurance as including the following dimensions:

- Regulation (legal frameworks, governance, responsibilities and accountabilities etc)
- Educational process (admissions, registration or enrolment, curriculum design and delivery, support for leaving, assessment etc)
- Curriculum design and content (validation and approval frameworks, levels and standards etc).
- Learning experience (consumer protection, students experience, complaints and appeals etc).
- Outcomes (qualifications, certificates, transcripts, security, transferability, recognition

Quality assurance therefore involves a systematic procedure of verifying that education is meeting the specified conditions requisite to the actualization of its goals.

The quality assurance process can be either external or internal to the university. External quality assurance usually involves a review by an authorized agency or professional body to verify if the educational institutions are operating in line with laid down minimum academic standards or stipulated professional standards of the programme. The objective here is to ascertain if standards are being maintained and improved upon.

Internal quality assurance on the other hand according to IIEP (2006) denotes the internal policies and mechanisms of a university or programme for ensuring that it is fulfilling its purposes as well as the standards that apply to higher education in general or to the profession or discipline in particular.

Why Should Quality Assurance Be of Concern in Nigerian Universities?

1. The decline in educational standards and quality of graduate output from the Nigerian public universities has had a negative impact on the economy in terms of supply of quality manpower necessary for the socio-economic development of the nation. Any systematic effort aimed at assuring quality in the education enterprise is definitely the way forward.
2. Only nations with quality education can boast of global competitiveness and advantage in both the knowledge and global economy. Nigeria can neither afford to be complacent nor to be left behind.
3. Nigerian public universities have incurred the displeasure of stakeholders owing to unfulfilled expectations in terms of delivering on her mandates. Evidence of this is the current trend where parents that can afford it send their wards either to private universities in the country or other countries such as Ghana. Restoration of public confidence in the education offered by public universities is certainly enough reason to be concerned.
4. In this era of internationalization of tertiary education, delivering quality education is the only way to ensure the acceptance of Nigerian university certificates and adaptability of her graduates anywhere in the world.
5. Assuring quality education delivery provides an avenue for public universities to justify the funds invested in them and grants them leeway to demand for more funding.
6. If Nigerian public universities are to attract students from other countries for studies; establish inter-university linkages and collaborations within and outside the country; gain from linkage/partnership with industries, then quality assurance must be taken seriously.
7. It is a fact that Nigerian universities have not entered the league of world class universities given her ranking. Quality research output is one of the criteria for this ranking. Innovation and technological transformation of the nation is attainable through assurance of quality in the universities whose mandates include research.

Improving Internal Quality Assurance: What Needs to be Done?

Internal quality assurance mechanisms are embedded in the laws of the university. The internal control measures for quality are stipulated in the powers given to the Senate in the universities as the highest academic decision making body. Control of admissions, regulations of programmes at the departmental and faculty levels, examination regulations, appointment of external examiners are some of the internal quality control functions of the university Senate. These internal control measures notwithstanding, it is a certainty that quality does not just happen, its attainment requires serious effort and dedication from those involved in the educative process. There are issues that must be tackled internally by the management, staff and students of the institution if continued improvement in the delivery of educational services and realization of educational goals are to be achieved. Some issues that influence the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance efforts and the overall quality of education but often not given due attention by public universities are discussed below with the aim of re-awakening the zeal of university management to pay heed to them.

1. ***Attitudinal change toward quality related issues***: The self-image of a university greatly matters. It is this image that influences the public perception of the institution and in essence the value attached. The starting point of building up a good self-image is the inculcation of quality consciousness among the staff and students in the university community. This will entail students and staff identification with the vision and mission of the university. Surprisingly, staff are employed into the university without a deliberate effort by the university management to induct them into what the university stands for, what has been achieved and the aspiration for the future. How can maximal contributions be expected from individuals who have no idea of the target of the university? As long as staff remain indifferent to the vision and mission of the university, quality education delivery will be difficult to attain. Any university interested in improving quality internally must be willing to ask the hard questions through critical self-appraisal; examine the effectiveness of the internal regulatory framework at both the departmental and faculty levels; intervene quickly when problems arise; learn from the good practices of other institutions; and make effort to provide a quality enabling environment. The university

cannot continue to run from one academic session to another without the management taking time to evaluate the extent of progress made, identify the weaknesses and map out strategies for overcoming them. A deliberate persistent effort geared towards sustained quality improvement is hereby advocated.

2. ***Ethical re-orientation:*** Different forms of unethical behaviour have their root in Nigerian public universities. The problem is so perverse and difficult to tackle. Some academic staff without any moral fiber have found their way into the academia and have no modicum of shame in perpetuating acts such as ignoring cheating in exams, awarding of unmerited grade in exchange for money or sex, plagiarism, truancy in attending to or teaching their assigned courses and so on. Some of the students are no better. They indulge in cultism, examination malpractice, returning to school late after resumption, absenteeism from lectures, falsification of O-Level results, destruction of school property during protests, to mention but a few. Quality cannot be attained where these forms of unethical behavior persist. Proper orientation of staff and students on acceptable conducts especially at the point of entry into the university is essential to nipping some of these misconducts in the bud. Orientation of staff and students should not be glossed over, as this often gives opportunity to some bad elements in the system to corrupt the in-coming ones. Beyond this, periodic workshop/seminar on ethical issues should be held to tackle these issues. The university management must be bold to execute judgment and justice irrespective of the staff or student involved. Punishment of erring on erring staff and students should be meted out on time as delays often give the perpetrators confidence to continue in unethical practices.
3. ***Adherence to carrying capacity:*** The need to generate more funds through increased student enrollment has taken the front seat over consideration for carrying capacity in curriculum implementation in most Nigerian public universities especially the state owned ones. For quality to be improved, cognizance must be taken of the totality of students that make use of existing facilities as well as academic staff capacity. Is it any wonder that quality is on the decline when some universities admit more than their allotted quota, establish programmes with over 50 per cent of the academic staff on adjunct, overstretch the academic staff who teach in the sandwich, part-time, undergraduates and postgraduate programmes. Adherence to carrying capacity will avert increased pressure on existing facilities and personnel.
4. ***Improved staff management and development:*** One of the errors currently occurring in the Nigerian university system is the assumption that the acquisition of a higher degree automatically translates to having efficient and competent lecturers. While a higher degree may help prepare a staff to embark on a career in the academics, it is certainly not sufficient to turn such an individual into an efficient lecturer. The practice of employing new staff and handing them courses to teach without any form of orientation or mentoring has to come to an end. Again, even the experienced academic staff equally needs training, the currency of their knowledge and practices are essential to quality improvement. Evaluation of teaching is another ignored aspect of academic staff management. For instance, some academic staff teach courses year after year without any form evaluation of their teaching and courses. This allows for use of obsolete teaching materials and lack of improvement in their course delivery methods. Avenues that allow for evaluation of teaching such as peer review and student evaluation cannot continue to be ignored since such practice yields positive result in the form of improved course delivery. Again, a forum for exchange of ideas on best practices needs to be made available within the institution. The rapid establishment of numerous universities in the Nigeria has made the dearth of academic staff more obvious. The inadequacy in academic staff strength has introduced two practices that are inimical to the maintenance of quality in the universities. First is the moonlighting of academic staff a situation where an academic staff takes adjunct positions in different universities while still holding a full time appointment at the same time in another university. This practice in no small measure affects the effectiveness of the staff and the quality of their service delivery. To curb this practice, the university management should sanction any staff who takes up adjunct appointment without approval. The second aspect is the facts that some universities in order to meet the requirement of NUC on staff mix or attract academics to join their institutions have taken to appointing

academic staff to ranks they do not have the experience to function in. This strategy may serve as a solution to an immediate need but it certainly has a negative effect on educational quality.

Under no circumstance should the employment of staff especially the academic cadre be based on anything other than the staff needs of the academic department and the laid down criteria for recruitment. It has become a common knowledge that university management often bow to pressures from different quarters and recruit academic staff that are not needed in the departments. Sometimes these individuals lack what it takes to be called an academic and often become a burden that the institution cannot off load because they are untouchable. Quality cannot thrive if this practice is allowed to persist.

5. ***Student involvement in quality assurance process:*** A lot concern is shown by universities about the quality of students as “inputs” in the educational process. In order to gain admission into the university, a student is required to the Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME), pass the post-UTME usually organizes internally by the admitting university and must possess the relevant O-Level results. To most Nigerian universities this is where students’ concern for quality starts and ends. Very few universities in Nigeria have made effort to bring in the students into the internal quality assurance process. This is contrary to what obtains in some developing countries as well as the developed ones. Student participation in the quality assurance process has great gains such as providing valuable feedback on instruction effectiveness and courses taken, promotion of the students’ imbibing of the university’s quality culture, inculcating sense of worth and responsibility into students. Their involvement contributes to improvement of not only their learning experiences but also in the overall development of the educational process. The neglect of students’ input particularly with respect to teaching and learning leaves a gap in the university’s effort to improve quality. There is therefore an urgent need to establish suitable means of students’ involvement in the internal quality assurance process in Nigerian public universities.
6. ***Curriculum review:*** Relevance is the major concern in discussing curriculum. Any curriculum that does satisfy the needs of the beneficiaries of such an education and that of the society is adjudged wanting. Current happenings in education both within and outside Nigeria demands a response in the quality of curriculum offered in the universities. It no longer news that there is a decline in the quality of graduate output as well as academic standards in Nigerian. This coupled with the challenges posed by ICT and internationalization of education demands that universities conduct a periodic review of their curriculum. The existence of obsolete curriculums in Nigerian public universities is traceable to what I call “fulfill all righteousness committees”. Curriculum review committees are established in universities but the diligence required for this all-important duty is often lacking. The need to maintain a dynamic curriculum cannot be overemphasized. All levels of university management must of necessity give due attention to curriculum review so as to ensure its currency and relevance.
7. ***Improved facilities management:*** The acute shortage of all categories of learning facilities is glaring in most Nigerian public universities. The pertinent question however is how well managed and maintained are the available ones? The general “Nigerian disease” of lack of care for government properties and poor maintenance culture has equally been imbibed by some public university management. Under the guise of inadequate funding, these cadres of poor managers allow the available learning resources fall into a state of disrepair. The leaking roofs, dirty buildings with faded paints, poorly maintained laboratories etc. observable in public universities are evidences of neglect and poor maintenance attitude. The second dimension of this facility related problem is the lack of priority given to development of new physical facilities in view of the fact that available ones are over-stretched and over used thereby causing rapid decline in state of the facilities. Strategic planning of facility development in the university is strongly advocated in order to curb the problem of abandoned building projects. It is equally necessary to monitor the state of facilities in the university and above all make judicious use of available funds.

8. **Integration of ICT in the university operation:** Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has enormous advantage which any progressive university management must tap into. Most Nigerian public universities now have a website and have established portals for students for easy access to information and registration purposes. This is commendable but only a limited utilization of ICT. It is a generally known fact that effective data management is crucial to the sustainability of any organization. One of the core problem areas in most Nigerian public universities is records management. The delay in compilation of students' results and the associated stress of obtaining transcript, poor records of university history, haphazard state of staff and students' statistics as well as facilities and financial records problems can be resolved through the introduction of ICT tools. This will make for easier data storage, retrieval and use.

While this paper may not highlight all the problems in the university system that the integration of ICT will help alleviate, it is hereby advocated that the process of integration of ICT into the universities should not be done haphazardly. For ICT to contribute to quality improvement there is a need to first of all develop an ICT policy. This should be followed by a strategic master plan that will guide its implementations.

Conclusion

The decline in educational standards in Nigerian public universities has been brought on by factors that are both external and internal to the universities. This paper focused on some internal factors that provide challenges to quality assurance. Realistically, it is impossible to expect all the problems that plague Nigerian universities to be resolved overnight. There are however issues within the powers of the university management to address. A little more dedication is required at addressing these issues highlighted in this paper. For if the internal challenges to quality assurance are cleared, it will place the universities in a better position to confront the external challenges.

REFERENCES

- Ayodele, J. B & Abiodun, O. O (2008). The Issue of Quality Assurance in Nigerian Universities. Retrieved on 20th July, 2012 from http://www.herpnet.org/TOWARDS_QUALITY_IN_AFRICAN_HIGHER_EDUCATION/Chapter%208.pdf
- Becket, N. & Brookes, M. (2006). Evaluating quality management in university departments, *Quality Assurance in Education*, 14(2), 123-142.
- BSI (1991). Quality Vocabulary Part 2: Quality Concepts and Related Definitions. London: BSI
- Harvey, L & Stensaker, B (2008). Quality Culture: Understandings, Boundaries and Linkages. *European Journal of Education*, 43(4), 428 – 442.
- International Institute for Educational Planning (2006). Making Basic Choices for External Quality Assurance: Module 1, External Quality Assurance; Options for Higher Education Manager. Paris: UNESCO
- Middlehurst, R. (2001). *Quality assurance implications of new forms of higher education. European network for quality assurance in Higher education.* Helsinki
- Standa, E. M (2008). *Purpose and Process of Accreditation of Universities in Kenya.* Stakeholders Workshop on Enhancing Quality in Higher Education in Kenya. Held at Kenya College of Communication and Technology from 13th to 15th August 2008.

This academic article was published by The International Institute for Science, Technology and Education (IISTE). The IISTE is a pioneer in the Open Access Publishing service based in the U.S. and Europe. The aim of the institute is Accelerating Global Knowledge Sharing.

More information about the publisher can be found in the IISTE's homepage:

<http://www.iiste.org>

CALL FOR PAPERS

The IISTE is currently hosting more than 30 peer-reviewed academic journals and collaborating with academic institutions around the world. There's no deadline for submission. **Prospective authors of IISTE journals can find the submission instruction on the following page:** <http://www.iiste.org/Journals/>

The IISTE editorial team promises to review and publish all the qualified submissions in a **fast** manner. All the journals articles are available online to the readers all over the world without financial, legal, or technical barriers other than those inseparable from gaining access to the internet itself. Printed version of the journals is also available upon request of readers and authors.

IISTE Knowledge Sharing Partners

EBSCO, Index Copernicus, Ulrich's Periodicals Directory, JournalTOCS, PKP Open Archives Harvester, Bielefeld Academic Search Engine, Elektronische Zeitschriftenbibliothek EZB, Open J-Gate, OCLC WorldCat, Universe Digital Library, NewJour, Google Scholar

