

QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION FOR MEANINGFUL DEVELOPMENT: A TRANSCENDENTAL OUTLOOK.

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Abstract

Higher education is central to economic and political development as well as vital to competitiveness in an increasingly globalizing society. It is one of the tools that is believed may engender desired development in the nations of the world. However, higher education is built on the foundation of preceding stages in the educational system. The low and poor quality of unemployable graduates has been worrisome and consequently brought to bear on the nation's GDP and standard of living. Researches in this area have presented some inherent factors such as lack of autonomy for higher education, explosive enrolment figures, inadequate educational facilities, proliferation of satellite campuses and extinction of research culture. Meanwhile, these researches failed to look at the transcendental hierarchy of the Nigerian educational system in which the inadequacy at the pre-school, primary and secondary school levels has given way to poor standard and unhealthy practices thereby leaving a weak foundation and impoverishing the academic standard in the higher education level. The thrust of this study therefore, stems from this perspective, that is, to investigate some related exogenous factors that affect quality assurance in our higher education system. Hence, two sets of self developed questionnaire used to ascertain the effects of the different mechanism on quality assurance. Two hundred and fifty respondents were involved from higher institutions in Lagos State, Nigeria. The data generated was analyzed with percentages, mean and chi-square analysis. It was discovered from the result that, higher institutions administrators were aware of the various mechanisms and strategies needed for quality assurance in higher education and their effects and that the poor academic background from the primary and post primary education is responsible for the poor quality observed in the higher education level. On the basis of the findings, the study therefore recommended the integration of effective quality control mechanisms into our educational system right from the primary school level.

Introduction

Higher education (the education given after secondary education) is central to the economic and political development of the society. In the globe, tertiary education plays a critical capacity building and professional training roles in support of all the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Researchers have confirmed that expanding tertiary education may promote faster technological development and improve a country's ability to maximize its economic output (Bloom, Canning and Chan, 2006). In the same manner, an attempt at the realization of manpower development, a new range of competences such as learners' adaptability, team teaching, communication skill, team learning and motivation for continual learning have all become crucial. Thus, higher institutions must adjust their program structures, curricula, teaching and instructional strategies to adapt to these new demands. In recognition of this huge hurdle and challenges, one critical factor that may guarantee educational relevance is quality assurance. Quality assurance in our education sector, will enable individuals to identify and develop solutions to developmental challenges. In other words, it offers adequate competences for problem solving in any society.

However, there are myriads of challenges that are hampering and hindering realization of quality assurance in education. These challenges range from examination malpractices, undue accreditation procedure, lack of autonomy for higher education, explosive enrolment figure, inadequate educational facilities, extinction of research culture, proliferation of satellite campuses and collapse of primary and secondary education, to mention but a few.

It should be emphasized that, the value and worth of any product is largely determined by the process; which is the reason for the existence of quality control units within the system. Higher education needs to be given its own full autonomy from undue control and political manipulation. Education, especially higher education should be divorced from the kind of inconsistencies and incompetence embedded in our political system today. The failure of higher education cannot be unconnected with the failure of primary and secondary education in Nigeria as early as the '70s to the late '90s when university education began to witness the proliferation of private universities.

The egoistic tendencies and hedonistic nature of man in the midst of multi heterogeneous diversities of the Nigerian nation reflects in our educational administration. Hence, initiation and introduction of obnoxious policies which may be just an extension of a hand of favoritism to a certain geopolitical zone. This is experienced for example, in the admission procedure into our higher education. The Nigerian mentality of over emphasis on 'certificate' has also partly been the reason for poor quality assurance in higher education. The

drive and learners' interest are no longer geared towards the attainment and acquisition of necessary skills for functionality but obtaining 'certificate' to sustain present appointment, for promotion or to compete in the political arena for political positions.

The dilemma of poor performance and low quality of graduates is not solely the failure of the higher education institutions alone even though higher education may have its own challenges (such as teaching/teachers style, enrolment, provision of educational facilities, etc). Higher institutions only have a minimum of 3 - 4 years and a maximum of 5 years to impact the learners with specific skills and knowledge to become useful to the nation and to become independent individuals. However, the preceding stages of pre-school, primary and secondary educational stages cover a period of between 13 to 15 years before proceeding for higher education. Therefore, the bulk of the responsibility towards attaining quality assurance in higher education starts from the preceding educational stages prior to higher education which serves as the educational foundation for any meaningful development.

According to Rousseau, people, like men and women are amenable only when they are young, in old age they become incorrigible. Once bad habits and customs are established and prejudices ingrained, it is dangerous and futile enterprise to try to reform them; the people cannot bear to have these diseases treated even in order to destroy it, like those stupid and fearful patients who tremble at the sight of the physician.

The process of quality assurance in higher education therefore should begin from the educational foundation (primary and secondary education) of the learners which will provide a fertile ground for quality assurance. A porous and poor academic foundation may not be compatible with quality assurance at the higher education stage, even with all hands on deck.

A brief overview of higher education in Nigeria

The origin of Nigeria's higher education dates back to 1934 when the colonial government established Yaba Higher College. However the college suffered from high dropout rates and in 1943 the government set up a commission for advice on higher education needs. It was because if the objectives of higher education were not realized it may spell doom for the developmental plans of the country. In 1948 the University College, Ibadan was founded to jointly award degrees with the University of London until 1960 when Nigeria gained independence (Clark & Seggwick 2010). In 1962 other universities were established in Lagos, Northern region and in the Western region and in 1970, University of Benin was also initiated. The Federal government established seven (7) universities between 1975 and 1977 and sixteen (16) state-owned and Federal polytechnics. These institutions were therefore regarded as the first generation institutions. The second generation institutions were established to meet the growing needs for scientific and technological developments. In 1985 and 1999 the third generation of higher institutions were established to address special areas of technological and agricultural demands. The fourth generation institutions are those ones established between 1999 to date. Nigeria as a country gives much credence to higher education as the means for socio-economic mobility, social transformation and as a major platform for higher level workforce development (managerial and technological respectively). Hence, the approval by government to private individuals and organizations to own and manage private higher institutions of learning. This lead to the proliferation in the number of universities because government acceded to higher demands for more universities in newly created states. The total number of universities between 1975 and 2002 rose from six (6) to forty-seven (47) (NUC, 2002). The total number of universities in Nigeria currently is put at one hundred and seven (107) out of which forty-one (41) are owned by private individuals, thirty (30) is owned by Federal government and twenty-seven (27) by state governments. (NUC, 2009).

Consequently, education at all levels now rests in the hands of pure 'capitalists' who are only after their profits, even marginalizing their workers thereby wearing them out enough to be unable to deliver up to quality specification. This intervention of private universities may give room to breeding of mediocre with haphazard potentialities.

It was however, regrettably discovered that forty-two (42) illegal universities are operating as conventional institutions in Nigeria. The NUC declared this as contrary to the Educational Act CAP E3 Law of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 2004.

The foregoing account reflects the dire need of the government for human capital development through tertiary education. However, this must not underscore the maintenance of quality and standard of global reckoning for the realization of national development, (Akinrolabu & Akinpelu 2010). Higher education has been identified as most virile weapon needed for national development which must be evaluated periodically in order to ascertain its status in conformity with acceptable global standard.

Higher education and funding

Sanni (2006) posited that education discovers and creates talents while economy invests in education. Therefore, there is a significant relationship between education and investment. The poor and low pattern of funding by government in education in recent past has become worrisome. The budgetary allocation to education between 1994 to 2002 for example was between 8% to 9% which was shared to all levels of education. The proportion of capital budget allocated to education has been consistently lower than the proportion of recurrent expenditure.

Over the years, the government's capital expenditure allocated to education as a percentage of total budget ranged from as low as 1.71 in 1999 and not up to 9% in all cases (Ajetomobi, 2010). Sambo (2005) discovered that Nigeria needs a total of ₦1, 811,459.00 per student for quality higher education. If this recommendation is followed, enrolment must be reduced by almost 80% in which case the labour market would be able to absorb a reasonable proportion of school leavers. However this recommendation may be overwhelmingly impossible rather an increase in the allocation would suffice. The ASUU – FGN negotiation of 1992 and 2001 on 26% allocation to education is hoped to increase the level of development in Nigeria higher education and education in general. The government placed more priority on investing the nation's wealth and financial resources in the payment of unnecessary allowances to law makers at least about 36% of the total budgetary allocation goes to the payment of allowances to the law makers (www.pointblanker.com). The table below for instance, displays the trend of government's allocation to education from 1994 – 2003.

Table 1: Federal Government of Nigeria Budgetary Allocation to Education Sector from 1994 – 2003.

YEAR	TOTAL BUDGET (₦-B)	FEDERAL GOVT ALLOCATION TO EDUCATION	ALLOCATION TO EDUCATION AS % OF TOTAL BUDGET
1994	₦110.5b	₦8.66b	7.83
1995	₦98.2b	₦12.73b	12.96
1996	₦124.2b	₦15.3b	12.32
1997	₦186b	₦21.8b	11.59
1998	₦260b	₦26.7b	10.27
1999	₦249b	₦27.7b	11.12
2000	₦677.5b	₦50.57b	8.36
2001	₦894.2b	₦62.6b	6.75
2002	₦844.b	₦17.7b	6.8
2003	₦765.1b	₦13.9b	1.83

Source: Ikharehon, (2004)

The above table clearly depicts the nose-diving trend of government's funding of education in Nigeria. Majority of public higher institutions are consequently being advised by their proprietor, government, to vigorously mount Internally Generated Revenue (IGR) promoting programmes to subsidize whatever peanut they were given.

This failure on the part of the government in the area of adequate funding of the educational sector encourages the proliferation of private primary, secondary and higher education. Nowadays, government is almost, if not completely, out of the educational sector in terms of funding.

The need to improve higher education however, should begin with giving greater attention to our pre-school, elementary, secondary and vocational schools. These areas are the building blocks of the society's educational foundation.

Higher education and autonomy

Even at the instance of the expansionary phenomenal growth of the university system in Nigeria, it has been characterized by varieties of myriad vestiges ranging from lack of autonomy, academic freedom, facilities and infrastructural decay etc. The lack of autonomy and academic freedom constitute a huge impediment to effective realization of the higher education goals (Utile 2008).

The higher institutions have all been subjected to unnecessary affiliation with different governmental agencies like Ministries of Education, the National University Commission (NUC), and the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB). These agencies act on behalf of the government, thereby initiating policies and plans in disguised attempts to build a standard higher education system for Nigeria, but this arrangement hampers the creative and dynamic potentialities of the system.

The system is suppose to encourage internal control unit which will measure the standard of performance and implement periodically and subsequently recommend policy plans for improvement in deficient areas. The over reliance of the universities on government for funding is an academic aberration which has made successive governments (in Nigeria) to display uncanny interest in running of the universities (Fabunmi 2007).

Statement of the Problem

Quality in higher education might have lost relevance and significance in the Nigerian society today as such that, individuals are no longer concerned with the quality of knowledge and skill acquired to proffer solutions to developmental challenges but only acquiring 'certificate' to fill vacant government positions and to pursue white collar jobs that are inadequately available.

Hence, our higher education system has only succeeded in producing unemployable graduates who chase non-existing jobs in the midst of opportunities (Taiwo, 1999). Therefore, a logical evaluation of the state of our higher education becomes indispensable. Hence, the study tried to provide answers to the following questions:

- (i) What is the level of awareness of quality assurance mechanisms of the NUC by stakeholders in Lagos State higher institutions?
- (ii) To what extent could these mechanisms ensure quality in our higher institutions of learning?

- (iii) What are the factors that militate against quality assurance in our higher institutions of learning?

Research Methodology

Designed

The study is an evaluative survey cum desktop research in which relevant information was sourced through questionnaire administration and various literatures.

Instrumentation

The major research instrument was a self designed questionnaire. It was designed to generate information from academic and non-academic staff of higher institutions in Lagos State on their perception of quality assurance in higher education to the best of their experience in the academic environment. The questionnaire was divided into two parts. The first part was to assess the subjects' knowledge of the existing mechanisms used by the accreditation agency to ensure quality assurance while the second part was designed to obtain general information on the different variables highlighted in the study as factors militating against quality assurance.

Population Sample

The population sample for the study comprised of two hundred and fifty respondents from the Lagos State University (LASU), University of Lagos (UNILAG) and the Adeniran Ogunsanya College of Education (AOCOED) senior non academic staff and heads of departments.

Sampling Technique

The purposive sampling technique was adopted to specifically select required experienced staff members for the study.

Data analysis

Collected data was analysed with percentages, mean and chi-square tests as presented below.

Question One:

What is the level of awareness of quality assurance mechanisms of the NUC by stakeholders in Lagos State higher institutions? Analysis of the subjects' responses to items on the question is presented in the table below.

Table 2: Staff Awareness of Quality Assurance Mechanisms in Lagos State Higher Institutions (N= 250)

	ITEM	UNILAG N = 73			LASU N = 109			AOCOED N = 68		TOTAL N=250		
		A	N A	NR	A	N A	NR	A	N A	A	NA	NR
1.	Planning and Evaluation	67	6	-	100	9	-	59	9	226	24	-
2.	Mission and Purpose	66	6	1	103	6	-	59	9	228	21	01
3.	Governance	67	6	-	100	9	-	59	9	226	24	-
4.	Academic Programmes	64	8	1	89	20	-	55	13	208	41	01
5.	Staff Quality	67	6	-	103	6	-	58	10	228	22	-
6.	Research/Teaching	66	6	1	103	6	-	59	9	228	21	01
7.	Learning Facilities	67	6	-	99	9	1	60	8	226	23	01
8.	Physical and Technological Resources	64	8	1	89	20	-	59	9	212	37	01
9.	Finances	67	6	-	100	9	-	59	9	226	24	-
10.	Integrity	66	6	1	103	6	-	55	13	224	25	01
11.	Quality Assurance Mechanism	67	6	-	100	9	-	59	9	226	24	-
12.	National Development/Community Service	67	6	-	100	9	-	59	9	226	24	-
13.	Industrial Link of Work-Based Experience	67	6	-	102	7	-	55	13	224	26	-
	TOTAL	862	82	5	1291	125	01	755	129	2908 89.48%	336 10.34%	06 0.18%

In the table above, it could be observed that among the various mechanisms and criteria for ascertaining quality assurance in the universities, none was inadequately unknown to both (senior) non-academic and academic staff (H.O.Ds) of the sampled Universities and College of Education. Hence, administrators in higher education institutions are well equipped for any accreditation exercise because 89.48% of these levels of staff were aware of all the requirements for quality assurance.

Question two

To what extent could the control mechanisms ensure quality in our higher institutions of learning? Analysis of the subjects' responses to items on the question is presented in the table below.

Table 3: Effect of Control Mechanisms on Quality Assurance in Higher Education in Lagos State (N=250)

S/N	STATEMENT	4 SA	3 A	2 D	1 SD	TOTAL
1	The varying mechanisms adopted for the sustenance of quality assurance in higher education are adequate to attain desired results.	91	129	21	9	250
2	Programme accreditation guarantees the adequacy of educational facilities and continuous staff evaluation.	80	110	40	20	250
3	The primary and secondary education should be closely monitored and funded adequately to prepare the learners for higher education.	114	91	25	20	250
4	Absolute withdrawal of government's funding of education may not guarantee quality in higher education.	113	92	30	15	250
5	Higher education autonomy in decision and policy making will guarantee quality assurance.	115	90	30	15	250
6	The establishment of internal control unit may enhance the quality and standard of higher education.	90	130	22	08	250
7	The responsibility to attain quality in higher education is a task to be borne by government, family, society and not the higher institution's academic programmes alone.	115	92	01	02	250
TOTAL		758 43.31 %	734 41.94 %	169 9.66 %	89 5.09 %	1750 100

Cal $\chi^2 = 61.46$, Table Value = 28.87, Degree of Freedom = 18, Level of Significance = 0.05.

The table above shows respondents' rating of the effects of the various mechanisms on quality assurance in higher education. About 85.25% agreed that inadequate availability of these mechanisms will grossly affect quality in higher education negatively while their adequacy of will ensure high quality. However, 14.75% disagreed with this view. The chi square analysis of these responses gave a calculated chi square of 61.46 and a table value of 28.87 together with 3.23 as the mean score. All these confirm the significant effect of these mechanisms on ensuring quality in our higher education.

Question three

What are the factors that militate against quality assurance in our higher institutions of learning? Analysis of the subjects' responses to items on the question is presented in the table below.

Table 4: Factors Affecting Quality Assurance in Higher Education (N=250)

S/N	STATEMENT	4 SA	3 A	2 D	1 SD	TOTAL
1	The enrolment rate for higher education supersede the existing educational facilities and may jeopardise quality teaching and learning	113	92	30	15	250
2	Quality in higher education is hindered more by factors relating to government, family and society than its own internal problem.	91	114	31	14	250
3	The poor academic background from primary and secondary school may not make learners academically sound in higher education level.	112	93	27	18	250
4	There may be low quality standard in higher education if the primary and secondary education is poor.	129	91	13	17	250
5	The quality of higher education will largely be dependent on the quality of primary and secondary education.	155	92	03	-	250
6	The over emphasis on certification may be one of the reasons for individual's unwillingness to embrace quality in higher education.	135	85	19	11	250
7	The absence of family and governmental role in quality education has been one of the causes for low quality in higher education.	112	95	25	18	250

TOTAL	847	662	148	93	1750
	48.4%	37.83%	8.46%	5.31%	100%

Cal $X^2 = 31.99$ Table Value = 28.87, Degree of Freedom = 18, Level of Significance = 0.05.

The table above shows respondents' opinion on those factors that are militating against quality assurance in our higher institutions of learning. 86.83% of them agreed with all listed factors in the questionnaire as barriers to qualitative higher education in Nigeria. The chi square analysis with calculated chi square of 31.99 and table value of 28.87 coupled with the mean score of 3.29 also confirm the significant effect of these factors on the quality of education at the higher institutions.

Discussion

The paper examined stakeholders' view on various mechanisms applied in determining and ensuring quality alongside those factors that could threaten the highly sought quality in Nigerian higher education. It determined the degree of effectiveness of the currently applied mechanisms and the roots of the militating factors against quality.

The mechanisms being applied by the NUC for ensuring quality, standard and uniformity in the Nigerian higher education were upheld by 86.23% of the respondents as still being adequate in ensuring quality in our higher education. Their opinions were hinged on their appropriate awareness of these yardsticks. However, in agreement with the questionnaire, effective monitoring of the lower levels of education, appropriate funding, autonomy of higher institutions, establishment of internal control unit and cooperative efforts from parents, government, the institutions themselves and the general society are factors that would further enhance quality in higher education in Nigeria.

Viewing various factors that could affect quality assurance, the paper discovered that the academic decadence experienced in our higher education is traceable to the foundation level and other factors like the unprecedented increase in enrolment, some external factors, pronounced emphasis on certificate, uncontrolled proliferation of substandard private primary and secondary schools etc.

This is a further confirmation of the fact that a myriad of factors are militating against quality assurance in the Nigerian higher education system. Suffice to say that, while the institutions have their fair share of the problems, the society, government, parents, primary and secondary school teachers, authorities and proprietors also contribute their respective quota to reducing quality in our higher education. To ensure quality therefore, all hands are required to be on deck.

Stakeholders and higher education authorities are not unaware of the various quality control mechanisms that are in place but conducive environment is necessary. Authorities need to desist from the fire brigade syndrome in which emergency provisions are being made when quality control visitors are expected. Lack of care, lack of maintenance and infrastructural decay are the order of the day in our higher institutions. Majority of these institutions are hungry for renovation of the inherited colonial resources.

Increment in demand for education must be matched with increased infrastructure, increased financing and increased monitoring which must permeate all levels of education else, quality assurance in education generally and in higher education specifically will continue to be a mirage.

Recommendation

This study thereby put forward the following recommendations based on the findings:

- The level of funding of all levels of our educational system should be improved to meet up with global standard;
- Our higher institutions of learning should establish internal control units to regulate standard and liaise with relevant accrediting bodies;
- Higher institutions of learning should be given a measure of autonomy in terms of policy and decision making;
- Government and parents should take adequate responsibility over the learners' preliminary stages of education to groom them properly for higher education;

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