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## Quality Assurance in Nigerian University Education: The Role of the National Universities Commission (NUC) as a Regulatory Body

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### Abstract

Nigeria possesses the largest university system in sub-saharan Africa with about 129 Federal, State and Private universities. *Enrolling* over 900,000 sub-degree, undergraduate and post-graduate students. The system embraces much of the country's research capacity and produces most of its skilled professionals. But unfortunately, the system has been riddled with problems ranging from poor funding, low levels of investment in research capacity and exponential increase in students enrolment with a non-corresponding expansion in facilities and material resources. These no doubt resulted in the poor quality of teaching and learning in the system. A multidimensional and holistic approach is needed to address the issue of quality assurance, quality control and quality enhancement in the university sector.

This paper discussed briefly the historical development of university education in Nigeria from the colonial time to post independence era. It also highlights the roles of the National University Commission (NUC) with regards to quality and also x-rays the challenges that have constrained the operation of the commission. The paper concluded by suggesting recommendations that might be of help to overcome the identified challenges and further enhance the quality of university education in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Quality Assurance, University Education, The National University Commission (NUC), Regulatory Body.

### Introduction

The importance of university education in nation building cannot be over emphasised mostly in the area of knowledge creation and dissemination. Corroborating this view, Oladipo, Adeosun and Oni (2010) noted that education in general and university education in particular is fundamental to the construction of knowledge economy and society in all nations. On this premise every nation of the world seems to be much concerned about global acceptability of University education. Ade-Ajayi (2001) saw university education as a catalyst to stimulate other levels of the education system, and enhance its contribution in the development of the whole

educational system, notably through improved teacher education, curriculum development and educational research.

The aim of establishing higher education or university education is to provide a very sound and qualitative education to enable the products of the system function effectively in any environment in which they find themselves. However, these aims are to be achieved through teaching, research and dissemination of existing new knowledge and the pursuit of service to the community. The significance of University education is probably responsible for the interest shown by the various governments in this sector of the educational system. This is reflected in the situation where until year 2000, all universities in Nigeria were public universities. Thus, from historical perspectives, Nigeria governments have recognised the pivotal role of university education in national development.

The huge capital outlay of University education and its importance make quality enhancement of higher education the focus of agenda by governments. In most parts of the world, quality of university education has become a universal concern since modern technology has transformed the world into a global village. Altbach (2002) noted that education is no longer just a personal possession but also an asset that is marketable internationally. The quality of university education is often a reflection of the performance of university graduate in the labour market which is also dependent on the quality of academic programmes offered by the various universities. Borishade (2002) described the state of Nigerian universities in the 60's and greater part of the 70's as conducive for teaching, learning and research. In similar vein, Obasi (2004) observed that during the early post independence era, the Nigeria University system acquired and retained national and international recognition. The learning environment, the quality of learning, as well as the quality of the products of the universities were all considered good enough within the constraints of a developing nation. However, the prevailing situation in the Nigeria education systems shows that all is not well with the system; for instance, Babalola (2001) noted that Universities in Nigeria are in crisis as there is less money to spend on teaching, research and community service. Inadequate funding of public universities in Nigeria is a prime causal of other problems that have undermined quality in university education. Nigeria's recent allocation share for education diverge sharply from regional and international norms. For example, UNESCO's World Education report (2000) indicated that for 19 other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, education expenditures averaged 5.1% of GDP and 14.3% of government expenditure. In fact, Nigeria's funding efforts of education is low.

In 2003 out of a national budget of 765.1 billion naira only 13.9 billion was allocated to education representing 1.83% (Post Express, 2003). The resultant effects are dearth of library books, shortage of qualified staff, dilapidated buildings, and obsolete equipment. Poor laboratory, poor working conditions, enrolment explosion, cultism, poor research culture and general apathy to work or learning.

A university that is plaque with the aforementioned issues cannot produce the manpower required for the development of the nation. In this era of globalisation and massification of education, Nigeria cannot afford to run a university system that compromise quality if she is to compete in the global economy.

Hence, this paper is aimed at discussing the quality assurance in university education and the roles of National University Commission (NUC) in maintaining quality in the university.

### **The Concept of Quality Assurance and its Relevance to University Education**

Quality in Nigeria University education is a multi-dimensional concept that should embrace all its functions and activities in teaching and academic programmes. Research and scholarship, staffing, students building, facilities, equipment, services to the community and the academic environment (UNESCO, 1998). Quality assurance in Nigerian universities, according to Okebukola (2004) is a continuous process of improvement in the quality of teaching and learning activities that will be achieved through employing mechanisms that are internal and external to the universities. It is ensuring that the provision of the minimum academic standards are attained, maintained and enhanced.

Harvey and Green (1993) identified five different ways of measuring quality in Higher Education. These are in terms of:

- i. the exceptional higher standards
- ii. consistency (zero defects and getting it right the first time);
- iii. meeting stated purpose
- iv. value for money and
- v. transformation of the participants.

The concept of quality of education' when considered in terms of value for money, could be viewed from the perspective of parents and employers of labour.

Harvey & Green (1993) posited that an approach to measuring quality of a product is when it meets, satisfies or worth the value for money paid on such products and could also be measured based on the transformative approach. This refers to the empowerment of the students through the learning process or institutional changes which might have transformed the students during the learning process.

Cole (1996) remarked that quality is something everyone considered good and wants to have in order to achieve stated objectives. Different approaches such as quality control and quality assurance are used interchangeably. ESIB-European Union of Students (2005) observed that the quality assurance is a condition that leads to achievement of transparency as it will ensure the quality of academic teaching of the curriculum, structural building and computers. However the common ways of assessing quality in university education are to assess (a) the quality of inputs which comprises the admission process, staffing procedures, quality of facilities, curriculum and students services. (b) Conversion process and (c) the quality of outputs. Hence, the National Universities Commission was set up to ensure quality in Nigerian Universities system.

### **The Regulatory Roles of the National Universities Commission**

The historical development of higher education in Nigeria could be dated back to the establishment of Yaba higher College in 1934 which later became foundation students of the University College Ibadan (UCI) which was established in 1948. (Lawal,2008). The University of Ibadan was heavily dependent on the colonial government for its finances. In order to regulate the affairs of the college, the colonial government established Inter-University Council (IUC) (Fafunwa, 1971). The council conducted visitations, recruitment of staff and provided advice on various administrative and academic matters side by side with the University of London. The IUC showed interest in maintaining high academic standard. This achievement notwithstanding, IUC

could only operate in advisory manner within the period it existed. After independence, It was replaced by National Universities Commission (NUC) which was established in 1962 and was attached to the office of the Prime Minister. In 1974 and it became a parastatal in the Federal Ministry of Education as a Statutory Commission charged with the responsibility of orderly development of Universities in Nigeria by regulating the academic, administrative and the financial activities of Nigerian universities. Act No 16 of 1985, among other things empowers NUC to lay down the Minimum Academic Standard (MAS) and accredit academic programmes for Nigerian Universities (Unoh, 2008).

The goals of the Commission are:

- Attainment of stable and crisis free university system
- To work with Nigerian Universities to achieve full accreditation status for at least 80% of the academic programmes.
- To initiate and promote proficiency in the use of ICT for service delivery within the Commission and the Nigerian University.
- To match university graduate output with manpower needs and to foster partnership between the Nigerian University system and the private sector (NUC, 2008).

With the Constitution of the NUC through Degree No 1 of 1974, according to Okojie (2012), the role of NUC shifted from mere ensuring orderly development of University education to an agency which dictates what to teach and the number of students to be admitted into the universities. It advises the Federal government on the financial needs of the universities, channels all external aids to the Universities, receives, allocates Federal Government grants to Federal Universities, lays down minimum academic standards and ensures that quality is maintained in the academic programmes of the universities and carries out the accreditation of the degrees and other academic awards of the universities (Okojie et al., 2010).

In 2005, the Commission introduced new academic curricula for all Nigerian Universities. The aim was to provide a better skilled and entrepreneurial graduates suitable for not only Nigerian labour market but for the global market. The new curricula is aimed at eradicating the outdated curricula and replaced it with the modern ones that are relevant to the needs of the country. The NUC made available material resources to improve communication system. The Commission installed E-mail facilities in some campuses in Federal Universities in the country (NUC Annual Report, 1994).

For better data collection and analysis, the commission introduced the computer based Management Information system (MIS) into Nigerian University system The Commission (NUC) in 2013/2014 established the carrying capacity of every programme to be offered in Nigerian Universities. Carrying capability is the minimum number of students that the human and material resources available in the university can support for quality delivery of education. (The Commet, 2005:26).

The NUC had been responsible for granting of licences for the establishment of private Universities in Nigeria as at 2000. There were about 129 universities in the country made of public and private universities, while more are yet to be established. This is with the aim of giving access to the training population of youth seeking admission to the Universities. The NUC had also made possible introduction of E-Learning technology in Nigeria Universities. The main aims of E-

Learning technology are to improve the quality of learning, to provide learners with skill needed for their professional development, to widen access to education and to reduce cost and improve cost effectiveness of education. The Commission had also strengthened the National Open University by way of human and material resources to enable it enrol many students as projected in its blueprint (The Comet, 2005).

Other notable contribution of the Commission is the development of the Minimum Academic Standard (MAS) used for programme accreditation in the University System, introduction of modern method of teaching larger classrooms, giving the NUC international visibility through the Global University Network for Innovation (GUNI). Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEN), the visual Library Project and the ranking of Nigerian Universities based on accreditation results. (The Guardian, 2013:4).

Furthermore, the NUC has continued to discharge its responsibilities to the Universities in accordance with its original mandate of quality assurance in respect of the establishment and orderly development of universities in Nigeria. The commission streamlined part-times degree programme for quality assurance in the university. However, as laudauable as these contributions might be, the NUC has many challenges.

The Punch Editorial Board's comment of August 16, 2013 noted that regulating more than 129 universities in Nigeria effectively is increasingly becoming, a burden too heavy for the National Universities Commission to bear alone. The NUC seems to have been ineffective in the performance of its regulatory roles, as organisational effectiveness is a measure of the extent to which an organisational realises its goals. If education must serve the society according to the submission of Imogie (2002) it must produce people who carry more than certificate but produce people who are ready to work for the good of the society.

### **Challenges Facing National University Commission**

Tamino, (1987); Ade Ajayi (2001); Akinkugbe (2001); Erinoshio (2004) revealed that challenges confronting Nigeria universities are multifaceted and as such constitute critical areas for management of quality University education. According to Erinoshio (2004) the challenges can be classified into two namely; internal and external. The internal problems relate to institutional management and the external problems centre around the impact of government policies on the ability of the universities to perform their statutory functions.

The first challenge is government interference with academic autonomy. Academic autonomy is the academic freedom of the universities as it pertains to academic matters.

Prior to 1978, the power to determine who had access to higher education was vested in the senate of the respective universities. However, the Federal Government through its policy had centralised admission through the establishment of Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board thereby eroding the autonomy of the Universities.

Within the University system, there exists a procedure for strict compliance with internal mechanisms for the establishment of new academic programmes. However, the current practice requires an approval from the National Universities Commission. The development has been observed by the academia as an infringement on the autonomy of the functions of the universities. Akinkugbe (2001) observed that there have been ominous signs of the intention to reduce academic freedom in Nigerian Universities. The idea of a nationally agreed set of

minimum standard for the Universities is good though not an inevitable one. Besides, where such explicit formulations are considered necessary, care must be taken to express them in more abstract forms than virtually handing down syllabuses to the University. An institution that cannot design his own curricula and syllabuses and being constantly innovative does not deserve to be called a university.

The NUC has been accused of usurping the role of the Senate on the issue of accreditation which hitherto was the responsibility of individual Universities. The Ashby Commission Report 1961 stipulated that the NUC will play a vital part in securing funds for the Universities and distributing them and co-ordinating without interfering with their activities and in providing cohesion. However, the reverse was the case; subsequently other extant laws have transformed the NUC to a body performing other functions outside its mandate at inception. Decree No 1 of 1974 had empowered the NUC to advise the Federal Government on finance, and condition of service as well as external aid to all the Universities. Hence, as noted by Ade-Ajayi (2003) that the Executive Secretary of the NUC had transformed himself into a super Vice Chancellor. The NUC claimed that the Committee of Vice Chancellors, hitherto responsible for representing the views of the Universities was declared an informal assembly but could not challenge the authority of the NUC as a statutory body. From there, the NUC has become a huge bureaucracy. Thus, relationship between the NUC and the University system is observed to have remained controversial with persistent pressure on the NUC to hands off from the affairs of the University systems and concentrate on sourcing for adequate funds for sustainable development of the Nigerian Universities.

The Academic Staff Union of Universities has been persistent in its criticisms about the role of the NUC on accreditation exercise. It was noted that the steady decay of universities resulted from under funding, steady subversion of the powers of University Senate and the failure of the controllers of the Universities to defend the powers of Senate and the integrity of the Universities. ASUU maintained that accreditation of degrees and academic programmes should be left to professional bodies empowered to regulate professional education and training or Universities Accreditation Committee specifically constituted by the Universities.

ASUU has constantly called on the Federal Government to examine the role of the NUC in the context of the law establishing it, to assess the financial accountability, administration of the institution which has played such an extensive role in the University system. Igwe (2001) criticised accreditation procedure by the NUC as a fault-funding exercise and advocates an approach that guides universities in order to ensure the expected ends are met. Eshett (2005) also questioned accreditation report when some universities scale through without being detected of sharp practices. Hence Ade-Ajayi (2003) advocated outright proscription of the NUC as it has become a Federal parastatal that could not be reformed.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The more effective the NUC is in its performance of its regulatory roles, the better for the quality of Nigerian University education and the Nigerian University system as a whole. For quality Assurance in Nigerian University, the following recommendations are made: The efforts of all stakeholders in the education sectors should be sought for.

Government should show genuine commitment to improve university education in the country. This is by adequate funding of the system. As recommended by UNESCO, any nation that spends less than 26 percent of its budget on education does not desire development.

To maintain quality in Nigerian Universities, there should be proper planning and provision of adequate infrastructure, high quality and well motivated staff, admission of qualified students and inspirational leadership. The NUC should ensure that all Universities in Nigeria are ICT compliant. The use of ICT in an academic environment is important for progress, relevance and for quality assurance in academia.

It is necessary to reconstitute NUC as a body and restore full autonomy to the Universities. Each University should be allowed to select their candidates for the positions of Vice Chancellors and other important administrative positions in the Universities, NUC should only act as an advisory body and information centre instead of a supervisory body which it now occupies. In developing countries such as France, Virtual and Japan, financial autonomy have been granted to individual universities.

The NUC should be religious about its accreditation role, and ensure that its monitoring and evaluation strategies are improved upon. The Nigerian University system must be ready to operate by the rules by giving total compliance to NUC regulatory roles on minimum academic standard.

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