

Quality Assurance System as a University Education Policy Tool in Nigeria: International Comparative Analysis

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Abstract

The study adopted an exploratory discussion to analyse and compare quality assurance system in Nigerian universities and other European countries specifically the United Kingdom. Quality assurance is a typical case of a policy zone where there is notable global convergence within a couple of decades. The quality assurance system in Nigeria was first adopted in 1974 by the National Universities Commission (NUC) as a parastatal in the Federal Ministry of Education. Since then, it has experienced some changes such as empowering the NUC to lay down Minimum Academic Standard (MAS) and approving academic programmes for Nigerian universities. The study found that the Nigerian quality assurance system began with the regulation of its higher education system by the University of London. Although, overtime, growing differences between the Nigerian Quality Assurance and the United Kingdom Models and some other European Higher Education Areas had become evident. That was largely due to high incidences of underfunding, infrastructural decay, declining students, examination malpractices and industrial crises, all of which threatened the quality of education. This paper also pointed out that leading universities in the world held the highest amount of funds either as income or endowments. Thus, it concluded that adequate funding was necessary for the university system, if quality was to be assured.

Keywords: Quality Assurance; University Education; Higher Education Policy

Introduction

The concern for the quality of education has become a worldwide issue. Since the 1980s, many countries had treated the improvement in the quality of education as one of the most important elements in educational reform agenda. For example, in Britain, most of the universities began as colleges or other institutions and simply after a huge timeframe obtained their own university rank and title, alongside the degree granting powers and other areas of authority that went with them. Before then, they served a period of training where the quality and standards of their courses and awards were the obligation of existing established universities.

However, in the United Kingdom (UK) the development process began with the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) system (which ran for over 20 years longer than any successor quality assurance body in the UK) which laid emphasis on threshold standards and the absence of published reports on the result of evaluation processes in spite of the way that its reports, particularly basic ones, could

lead sometimes to an exceptional inner change inside establishments (Brennan & Bellingham, 2013).

In Nigeria, concerns were expressed by various stakeholders about the quality of the educational system. This is perhaps born out of the crises that the system faced in the first decade of the century which included the problems of underfunding, inadequate infrastructure facilities, poor management of schools, industrial crises and poor remuneration of staff, all of which threatened the quality of education.

Quality appears to be an elusive notion recognized by all disciplines and professions although only a few of them could specify its components and features with any degree of precision and confidence. Consequently, since the early 1990s, substantial work has been done to increase educational quality, its indication and relevance.

Furthermore, the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2008) in its work on quality education explained that quality education upheld and delivered the ethics of a sustainable world. It allows for the economic, social and environmental contexts of a specific place, and shapes the curriculum or programme to reflect these unique conditions.

The Organization further submitted that quality education was locally important and culturally proper, was informed by the past (e.g, indigenous and traditional knowledge), was important to the present and prepared individuals for the future. This further upholds the importance of culture in achieving quality education. The educational policy of any nation must also emphasize the relevance and inclusion of indigenous and traditional knowledge in achieving a high educational quality. Indeed, any educational system that does not give value to culture and indigenous learning is bound to fail (Arikewuyo, 2010). This paper therefore was examined under the following subheadings.

- Definitions and Characteristics of Quality.
- Quality Assurance as a Higher Education Policy: Some Observations from Nigeria.
- A Comparative Analysis.
- Conclusion.
- Recommendations.

Definitions and Characteristics of Quality

Assuring the quality of educational provision is an essential part of gaining and keeping up credibility of programmes, institutions and national systems of higher education world-wide. Zelvys (2004) perceived that the concept of quality was one of the most emergent concepts in contemporary educational system. Many educationists had attempted to describe the quality of education and quality assurance in education as a concern, a process or a behaviour adopted by the managers of institutions of learning. Quality is used to mean fitness of purpose (Okebukola, 2002).

Quality, as defined by the International Organization of Standardization (ISO, 2004), is the “totality of features and attributes of a product or service that bear on its ability to fulfil stated needs”. According to Article 11 of the World Declaration on Education (2003), quality is a multidimensional concept which should encompass all the functions and activities in schools. It should start from the state of inputs, the process and or transformation, the state of the output and the feedback stemming from the entire school system.

Quality may also be considered on the premise of how great and efficient the teacher are, the means by which sustainable and accessible the facilities and materials required for successful teaching and learning are, and how prepared the graduates are for addressing the challenges of life especially in meeting societal needs.

These concepts of quality go on to show that there is no consensus on what constitutes 'quality' or how to measure it. With regard to quality in education, Ndili (2008) and Torey (2004) described it as dealing with issues of relevance, validity, functionalism and effectiveness of the education system in the achievement of national goals and objectives. It is perhaps in this same light that UNESCO (2005) noted that quality in higher education entailed multidimensional angles as it embraced all functions and activities of a university starting from the teachers and their teaching roles, academic programmes, researches and general scholarship, students, building facilities, equipment as well as support services available to the community and the academic environment.

Finally, Obanya (2002) summarized the five important characteristics that must be noted about the quality issues in education:

- a. Quality can be observable and tangible and its effects can be easily felt.
- b. Quality is not something we should wait till the end of the process to see, but something which is (or should be) built into all aspects of the advancement of an education programme.
- c. Quality is not a one-dimensional construct, but a tripartite affair with its input, process and output dimension.
- d. Quality in education can be specifically targeted.
- e. The educational development process can be systematically engineered to work towards quality.

Quality Assurance as a Higher Education Policy: Some Observations from Nigeria

In Nigeria, the historic development of tertiary-level education dates back to 1934 with the establishment of the Yaba Higher College which later progressed to forming the foundation students of the University College Ibadan (UCI) which was established in 1948 (Lawal, 2008). In an effort to control the affairs of the College, the Provincial Government established the Inter-University Council (IUC) (Fafunwa, 1971). The council organized visitations and the employment of staff, and gave guidance on different administrative and academic matters alongside the University of London. The IUC showed interest in maintaining a high academic standard. The achievement notwithstanding, IUC could only operate in an advisory manner within the period it existed. After independence, it was replaced by the National Universities Commission (NUC) which came into existence in 1962 and was attached to the office of the Prime Minister. In 1974, the NUC became a parastatal in the Federal Ministry of Education as a legal commission charged with the obligation of orderly development of universities in Nigeria by conducting their academic, administrative and financial activities.

The National Universities Commission (NUC) (2006) reported its first effort at the universalization of quality assurance in higher education across the globe in 2004. The study rated the universities based on their inventive functions and the relative efforts on their products. None of the African universities was ranked. Since that development, the NUC has increased its attempts in standardising the quality of university education in Nigeria.

However, it is not beyond rational thinking that with the wide range of quality assurance measures lined up at the university level in Nigeria, one would expect the country's universities to have high rating internationally. On the contrary, even universities whose programmes have been fully accredited and which have gone beyond that to achieve institutional accreditation are still far behind in international rating.

Recent development in the nation's university system seems to indicate that all is not well regarding the quality assurance in higher institutions of learning. The development seems worrisome when considered against the backdrop that Nigeria once represented the centre of university education in the West-African sub-region. The development hinges on a lot of factors ranging from the collapse of essential infrastructure to explosion in student enrolment without a corresponding increase in funding. (Nnennaya & Ahunanya, 2013).

A Comparative Analysis

All over the world, however, the task of creating and implementing affective policies for educational development has proved exceptionally difficult to achieve. Several steps which includes a regular and efficient funding of the system, curriculum development, school supervision, the continuing professional development of teachers and the provision of decent quality infrastructure have been taken. Until recently, the task of achieving real improvement across higher education systems had proved both elusive and expensive.

The study noted growing differences between quality assurance systems in Nigeria and European countries especially the United Kingdom and also other countries such as the United States (US), Korean and Russia. For comparative purposes, let us look at the affairs of the UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education which performs similar functions to that of the NUC in Nigeria. Like the NUC, the UK Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) sets up the quality code and subject-specific criteria which the UK universities use when structuring programmes of study and policies on academic values.

The UK QAA goes much beyond curricular guidance, it carries out other tasks to ensure that academic standards are maintained. First, it checks the UK universities to evaluate how they keep up with their academic standards and publishes the reviews for public consumption. Second, it examines the concerns and complaints about academic standards and quality brought up by students, staff, faculty and other stakeholders involved in tertiary-level education. Third, it trains and guides the UK universities to create and enhance their own quality assurance processes (Akinaso, 2017).

There is a fundamental contrast between the UK QAA and the NUC. The former is an autonomous agency, while the latter is a government parastatal in the Federal Ministry of Education. Unlike the UK QAA, the NUC is dependent on administrative and financial constraints. Nonetheless, the NUC has a lot to learn from the activities of the UK Quality Assurance Agency.

In the UK, all Higher Education Institutions are subject to regular audits by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education and reports for each institution are published on the QAA website. The overall objective of Higher Education Review is to let students and the wider public to know if a provider meets the expectations of the Higher Education Sector.

Another notable aspect of the UK QAA is that students are the heart of Higher Education Review. They are full members of QAA's peer review teams, and there are

opportunities for students to also partake in the review by contributing a student submission, meeting the review team, and working with their providers in response to review outcomes (Goldsmith, University of London 2017)

With respect to the Nigerian quality assurance system, Banji (2010) and Dada et al (2017) noted that the NUC'S quality assurance functions in university education were more of production documentations and studies and the wider public did not have access to feedback from the NUC. In fact, students are not the members of NUC's peer review teams.

In the UK, each institution of Higher Education is responsible for ensuring the quality and standards of its provision. All financed higher education institutions have to undergo scrutiny through a process called Higher Education Review by the Quality Assurance Agency of Higher Education which also encourages continuous enhancement in the management of the quality of higher education. In Nigeria, the situation differs as the NUC, the government owned agency, handles the accreditation or scrutinization issues in the universities. Unfortunately, the Body does not have an agency for Quality Assurance and it also lacks core professional staff for encouraging the continuous momentum of monitoring the quality of Higher Education

It must be admitted however, that while the UK QAA can rely on the UK universities to use their own internal structures to carry out rigorous academic standards, the NUC cannot afford to depend on Nigerian universities to keep up standards. In fact, students who are the heart of Higher Education Quality Assurance Policy are not part of the accreditation processes. The problem is that educational activities in Nigerian universities today are caught up in a web of governance issues, infrastructural rot, deficient funding, union activities and political manipulations.

Yusuf and Afolabi (2014) affirmed that Higher Education in Nigeria, since its inception in 1932 with the establishment of Yaba Higher College and later Yaba College of Technology in 1947, had grown rapidly from two to over 365, comprising 123 universities, 74 polytechnics, 80 colleges of Education, 53 monotechnics and 45 innovative enterprise institutions.

The numerical growth has not been complemented with sustainable quality growth due to the tide of challenges and conflicts. The outcome is that Nigerian universities which measured favourably with the best in Europe in the 1960s and 70s are now in abysmal decline probably as a result of lack of development in the quality assurance. For example, the highest ranked Nigerian university by the Thompson Reuter's index, Time Higher Education Global Universities Ranking for 2018, was the University of Ibadan. Out of the 1000 top universities in the world, it was ranked number 801. Meanwhile, the University College London which the University of Ibadan was a campus of up till 1963 currently ranked 16th in the world (THE, 2018). This is a striking example of the gap between the Nigerian university system and world class universities. Figure 2 graphically illustrated the gap between Nigerian universities and the universities in the United Kingdom and United States of America in various aspects of administration. From the figure, the Nigerian university was far behind her counterparts in the UK and the US in every aspect of administration except in community service (Okebunkola, 2010).

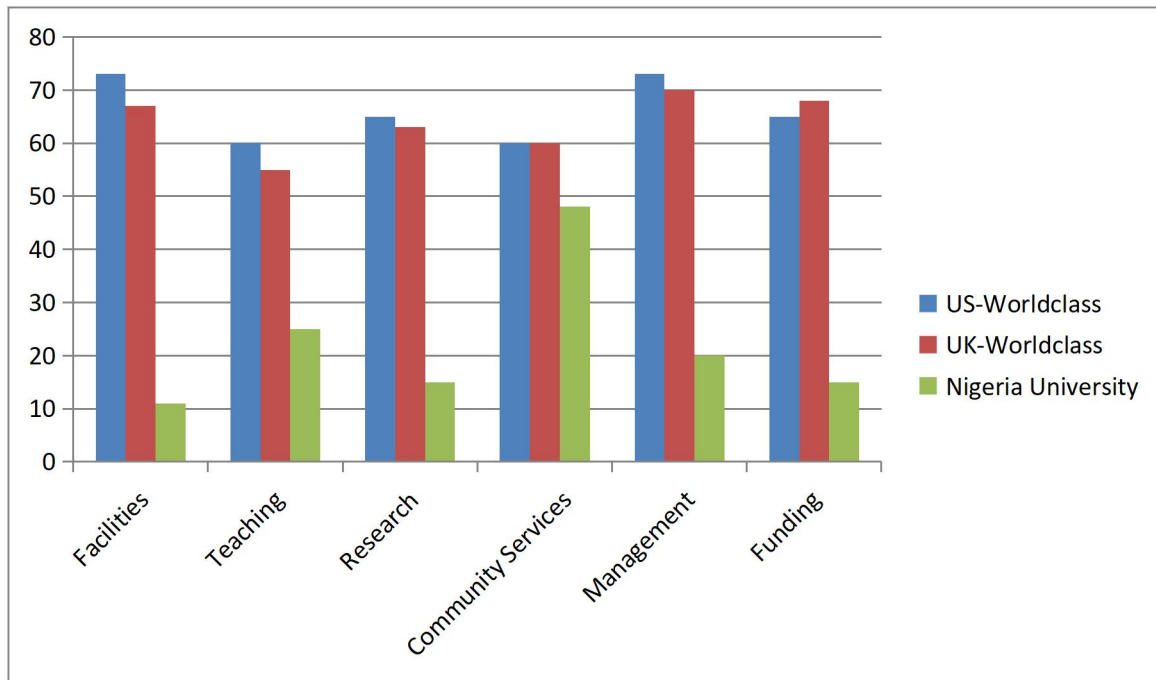


Fig 2: Gap Analysis between Nigerian Universities and World Class US and UK Universities

Source: Okebunkola (2010)

Looking at the European dimension, in 1991, the Bologna Declaration was signed by the member nations of the European Union to set up a framework for better transparency and comparison of higher education qualifications across Europe to allow better mobility of students, staff and employers. According to Goldsmith, University of London (2017), the three priorities of the Bologna Process were the introduction of the three-cycle system (bachelor/ master/doctorate), quality assurance and recognition of qualification and periods of study. The most important development in quality assurance has been the adoption of the European standards and guidelines as a Pan-European model. Both this and the European Quality Framework have comparable characteristics and are commonly compatible with UK models. However, there are still a few differences of approach concerning credit recognition.

Undoubtedly, quality assurance has seen a lot of improvement since the launch of the Bologna Process in 1999. Given the new advancement of quality assurance at the European level, we can point out some major changes:

- A clearer basis on qualification frameworks, student centred learning and learning outcomes.
- Closer attention is paid to provisions regarding funding for learning and teaching activities, and also for sufficient and readily available learning, resources and student support (Prisacariu, 2014)

The case of the Romanian quality assurance system for Higher Education is different. Romania generated a large number of unforeseen negative consequences which are largely due to the conceptual foundations of the system which cannot stand scientific scrutiny. (Lisievi, 2014). Some studies (Lisievi, 2009, Lisievi, 2011; and Lisievi, 2013) analysed the effect of the quality assurance on the Romanian Higher Education and found no evidence of beneficial impact effects. It was found

that it diverted large financial human and time resources from teaching, scientific activity and research. Instead of advancing an “evaluation culture”, it produced a culture of organizing documentations and reports and rigging procedures for better scoring, like the case of the National Universities Commission (NUC) procedures.

Looking at the Romanian context, Prisacariu (2014) affirmed that changes would be needed in the national quality assurance methodology after the proposed form of the new European standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area. Thus, the shifts of paradigm brought by the ESG would be reflected in every classroom, office and stakeholder proprieties.

Examining the worldwide patterns in the advancement of education, Bazhenova et al (2015) highlighted that the current Russian system of state control quality included procedures of licensing, certification and state accreditation. The Russian Higher Educational institutions apply different models of internal systems of quality assurance for training professionals. The most widely used are the following three concepts: evaluation method for managing the quality of higher educational institution activities (SWOT – analysis), a concept hinged on the principles of total quality management (TQM) and a concept hinged on the requirements of international quality standards (ISO 9000: 2000 series of standards).

The internal structure of quality assurance of preparing professionals suggests performing monitoring that is viewed as a systematic strategy of gathering data on the most essential factors of the execution of education process. Thus, for instance, if students systematically evaluate teachers’ work, they start correcting or querying the criteria used for their assessment. That is, one can state that monitoring results are an instrument for amending the activities of educational institution employees. Conversely, the conditions under which monitoring is organized and performed can have an effect on students’ learning activities.

Bazhenova et al (2015) noted that in using monitoring as an instrument for evaluating Russian Higher Education quality, various problems could arise. Monitoring, in this case, is not a general tool as it may apply to the current conditions and its result if correctly used can basically enhance the quality of the education process and its outcome.

Shin (2017) noted some growing similarities between quality assurance systems in the United States (US) and Korea. The Korean quality assurance systems started from administrative assessment in 1973 and evolved to a more advanced system with the establishment of an independent quality assurance agency in 1982 and the adoption of US style accreditation in 1994. The current accreditation system is nearer the US systems where political authority grants accreditation power to various agencies. Moreover, Korea built a system of data gathering for the transparency of institutional self-assessment, and to connect institutional performance with funding (Lee, 2008). Through its phases of development in more than four and half decades, the Korean systems developed to a more Americanized system.

Conclusion

Quality assurance emerged due to the need to produce self-reliant and nationally accepted graduates. Quality assurance is a case of a policy zone which had significant worldwide convergence within a couple of decades (Lao, 2015). Most Higher Education Systems embraced a type of quality assurance in the 1990s or later. However, quality assurance in Nigeria has a longer history like in many other countries, but the Nigerian policy differs from the UK model of accreditation

(University of London) that provided the initial visitations, enlistment of staff and advice on different regulatory and academic matters (Fafunwa, 1971).

In developing quality assurance systems, technical dimensions were moderately and effectively brought in from abroad while there was political deliberation in connection with the macro-system of quality assurance as discussed in Billing (2004). In other words, the formal structure and process of quality assurance were generally simple to borrow, however, the manner the policy works in local contexts is a different story. The assessment processes of application, self-assessment, site visits and funding in the Nigerian context are quite different from the European standards and guidelines.

However, assuring quality in education in Nigerian universities is a major problem of our education system. This is largely due to high incidences of infrastructural decay, declining standards, examination malpractices as well as maladministration in our educational institutions in Nigeria. Other challenges include lack of synergy among relevant stakeholders resulting in institutional constraints and role conflicts, scarcity of current and reliable data on quality issues, low learning outcomes in literacy, numeracy and life skills inability to provide access to quality education at all levels (Onocha, 2013).

Solving such extra – curricular problems is as vital as creating and keeping academic standards. It is apparent that the solution is beyond the National Universities Commission (NUC).

Recommendations

Looking at the comparative analysis above, we underlined a few major suggestions

- The establishment of a research department within the nation's quality assurance agency, to explore the needs of both beneficiaries and providers of Higher Education as well as showcasing the attractiveness of Higher Education and teaching career.
- Provide adequate capacity building schemes and exposure to world best practice in Quality Assurance for school managers, Federal and state monitoring teams and local government area supervisors.
- Make use of quality assessment results to formulate descriptive recommendations and suggestions rather than make classifications /ranking and deny access to resources.
- Adequate funding is necessary for the educational system if quality is to be assured. The desired funds need to be budgeted, released and properly managed in order to assist in achieving the desired quality.

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