

*Review*

# Quality Assurance and Sustainability of Qualitative Education in Nigerian Universities in the Twenty-First Century

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Quality assurance aims at ensuring consistency in the qualitative and quantitative outcome of learning in the university. It is a continuous process of inbuilt mechanism for monitoring of the quality of higher education, for the sustainability of high standards detection of lapses and quick response to redeem anomalies in the academic environment and programmes. The mechanisms for its application are both proactive and reactive. In scope, quality assurance incorporates internal and external monitors and evaluators for continuous relevance of university programmes to students and humanity. Its neglect makes the university an abattoir for the slaughter of minds and a morgue for national development. The paper identifies the indispensability of quality assurance, the dimensions and import of transforming our universities into citadels of learning in name and also in function. The paper argues that quality assurance is a catalyst for academic excellence and it therefore attempts to indicate how it can be effectively utilised to make our universities' ratings catch up with those of Europe and America.

**Keywords:** quality assurance, standard, internality and externality.

## INTRODUCTION

Quality assurance, "is at the centre of the existence of any respectable institution" (Balogun, 2011). This is more evident of the Universities.

The university plays a pivotal role in human, institutional and national development. No individual, corporate organisation or government can afford to toy with it without consequences. The transmission of knowledge, through the core activities of teaching, learning, research and community out-reach, has been acclaimed to have propelled the ascendancy of the developed nations and therefore capable of doing same for the developing ones.

The centrality of the role of the university in development is conveyed by this simple image: "If the universe has shrunken into a global village (as

has been often asserted) the university by its mandate, is the village headmaster to give it direction, purpose, and to light its way to progress" (Adebayo, 2012). In the 1<sup>st</sup> epistle of Paul to the Corinthians, chapter 4 v2, it is said that to whom much is given much is required. The Universal headmaster mandate bequeathed on the university is weighty and must be exercised with responsibility and integrity. It has to be overseen in order to ensure its sanctity and accomplishment. Verification is not a manifestation of lack of confidence, but an assurance of it.

The role of the National Universities Commission (NUC) in Nigeria as an overseer and regulator of the functions and activities of the

**Table 1.** The paradigm representation of the input (Quality assurance)

University input	Process	University output
Students, teachers, non-teaching staff, managers, curriculum, facilities, finance, institutional materials, other resources.	Teaching and learning, research, use of time and space, student services, administration, leadership, community participation, quality assurance.	Skilled and employable graduates, responsible citizens, economic development, production of knowledge.

Adapted from Prof. P.Okebukola, in "Quality Assurance Nigeria University System" (2008)

Universities should be seen in this light. The NUC has developed guidelines, parameters and Benchmark Minimum Academic Standards (BMAS) to assist the academic planning process and to ensure its integrity and quality.

It is the considered opinion of this paper that quality assurance, as the internal and external mechanism for ensuring that standards are not compromised in Nigerian universities, has not been implemented with adroit commitment. This explains why no Nigerian university is ranked among the top universities in the world. Ridiculous as this appears, it is the position of this paper that what actually accounts for this not too envious situation is the unserious attachment to quality assurance as a mechanism for self-assessment with a view to identifying and eliminating weaknesses.

Many Nigerian universities are yet to imbibe this quality assurance culture. The apparent absence of this culture, this paper contends, has made some university authorities to hang in mid-air above the students and the staff, and thus remain foreigners to transparency and accountability. Many of those in power at the ivory tower have politicised the diverse population in the universities through appointments and promotions based, not on skill and ability, but on sentiments. This practice constitutes a negation of quality assurance as it subtracts from sustainable high quality of institutional human and non-human resources. It also negates the objective of putting in place of appropriate measures to ensure continuity in synergy and maintenance of high standards at all times.

This paper attempts an analysis of quality assurance and its imperative to the sustainability of all-round high standards in Nigerian universities which are now operating far below internationally accepted minimum standards.

The paper addresses the topic through historical descriptive approach in three inter-related sub-

themes. Part one, which is the major theme, provides conceptual definition of quality assurance. The second looks at quality assurance from internal and external dimensions, including its benefits. The third section, which is the concluding segment, looks at quality assurance from the perspective of a self-advertising product.

#### Quality assurance: a conceptualization

Quality Assurance has been variously portrayed by different authorities. Prof. Okebukola (2008) defines quality assurance as "*the policies, systems, strategies and resources used by the institution to satisfy itself that its quality requirements and standards are being met*". In the same vein, Oladosu, A.G.A.S (2012) views it as "*the process of monitoring quality and ensuring that standards are not only continuously sustained but also improved upon*". This, he maintains, implies constant evaluation, assessment, maintenance and improvement of quality by an institution, a programme or a higher education system.

We have some key issues to underline here: these are the "*continuous nature*", the "*susceptibility to improvement*" and the "*all embracing character*" of quality assurance. Not only are all the constituents of the university actors in it, but they are also all acted upon by it. Prof. Okebukola (2008) underlines this when he proffers that quality assurance involves a constant monitoring, evaluation and review of the input, the processing and the output of the university system.

According to the Professor, the paradigm representation of the input, process(ing) and output which must be *quality assured* appears like this table above:

Prof. Ojerinde (2008) introduces an interesting dimension here. He views quality assurance as

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being much more than a process or a mechanism. To him “*it is an attitude or ethics which influence every aspect of the organisation’s activities.*” That is, a mind set to accept that anything can be made better.

### Internal quality assurance

When the policies, mechanisms and processes and indeed the attitudinal changes enumerated earlier are effected internally (by the institution) to ensure compliance with standards, accountability and fitness of purpose, it is said to be internal quality assurance (Oladosu A.G.A.S, 2012). For example, in Nigerian Universities, at the approach of accreditation by NUC, there is usually monitoring and evaluation of the entire system and processes by Academic Planning Department and the completion of self- study instruments done by Colleges, the Registry, the Bursary and other units. These activities are considered internal quality assurance steps because they are meant to evaluate the system and its processes to determine the weaknesses and possible remedial measures before the onset of real accreditation. It is observed that these activities have been rather episodic and not sustained or institutionalised. The implication is this tendency to go to sleep once the real accreditation is over.

However, with a programmed and sustained system-wide implemented internal quality assurance policy and mechanism, all the anxieties experienced at the imminence of accreditation to be carried by outside regulatory agencies and during the exercise, would definitely cease or be minimised. However, for now, internal quality assurance activities only receive attention when NUC accreditation exercises are imminent and are promptly abandoned after the statutory exercise. This discontinuity is paid for in the form of institutional *dropping of guard*, decline in standards and scholarship. When such decays accumulate over time they render universities unsure of their suitability for teaching, learning and research.

### External quality assurance

This is the monitoring and evaluation for compliance with laid down rules and standards

carried out by statutory agencies from outside the university. For example, in Nigeria, new universities undergo resource verification exercises; they also undergo review of their temporary operating licence. This is to monitor compliance with expectations with the possibility of issuing of permanent operating licence. Over and above that, both old and new universities undergo periodic accreditation of their programmes by the NUC through selected panels of renowned professors. These panels can recommend full or interim accreditation to a programme (programmes) or deny it accreditation depending on the degree of compliance of the programme concerned with the Benchmark Minimum Academic Standards (BMAS). If the recommendations are approved, (they are usually approved), full accreditation status is valid for a period of five years, and interim accreditation status is valid for two years after which the programme will be revisited. Denied accreditation attracts a ban on student admission into the programme(s) affected.

The National Universities’ Commission (NUC) also carries out institutional accreditation of universities. The exercise makes a more holistic evaluation of institutional vision, mission and strategic goals, institutional governance and administration, institutional resources, quality of teaching, learning and research, institutional efficiency and effectiveness, extension services and consultancies, transparency, financial management and stability and general ethos. Full accreditation achieved in institutional accreditation has a validity period of 7 years, interim accreditation (A) is valid for 5 years, and interim accreditation (B) is valid for 3 years while probation status is valid for 2 years. Time lines for remedying identified deficiencies are usually discussed with the NUC and remedial measures monitored accordingly.

Indeed, professional organizations like the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Nigeria (ICAN), Nigerian Bar Association (NBA), Nigerian Medical Association (NMA), etc., also carry out accreditation of professional programmes and courses run by universities to ensure compliance with professional standards.

In all cases of external quality assurance exercises, all the assessors are persons from outside the target University. One can therefore understand why universities naturally accord more

importance to the external component of quality assurance than the internal ones. This perception is however not justified as consistent and sustained internal quality assurance measures and activities already pave the way for an assured success at the external level.

It is not beyond rational thinking that, with this 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 who have gone beyond that to achieve institutional accreditation are still far behind in international rating. Is that an indication that our accreditation criteria are too relaxed or is their implementation too indulgent? The questions still beg for answers.

### **Quality assurance as a self-advertising product for universities**

The optimal benefit of quality assurance is **assured quality** and, in this technological age, everything must be put in place to assure the quality of Nigerian university as a unique product.

- Nigeria has about 124 approved universities with various proprietary arrangements, i.e., Federal Government, State Governments and Private proprietors (NUC Bulletin 17 Sept, 2012). Without internal and external quality assurance measures exercised, all the acclaimed objectives of producing knowledgeable, skilled and competent manpower to assume leadership positions in the country would have been unattainable and development seriously compromised.
- Quality assurance maintains the integrity of programmes and the credibility of the certificates issued by the institutions of higher learning.
- Quality assurance gives confidence to teachers themselves.
- Quality assurance makes universities to be competitive both nationally and internationally. Every university has a mission/mandate for teaching and research, and especially, the production of high level manpower that is disciplined, "mentally alert and intellectually developed to change the world". Quality assurance measures and mechanisms ascertain

that a given university is on the right path and provide the impetus to improve on output and eventually surpass others.

- Quality assurance protects students from inferior quality programmes, poor curriculum delivery and indeed from inhospitable academic environments.

These benefits, among others, are central to quality academic delivery, students' total academic transformation and the imbibing of professional ethics, socio-economic relevance and standardization of the institution itself.

A central requirement of quality assurance is that it be practised at every level of the university. Indeed, it is imperative at the academic and non-academic levels; i.e., at the levels of Colleges, Departments, Units, Registry, Library, Works, Bursary, etc. Quality assurance also involves everybody: academic and non-academic staff, either senior or junior, the university council/board and other persons or bodies related to or charged with the responsibility for administering or funding the university.

The adage that no education can rise above its teachers is relevant here. Quality assurance being canvassed here must ensure that teachers develop sound academic minds, equipped with appropriate pedagogy, understand the diversities among students and their individual differences in order to deepen their roles as nation builders. It is obvious that the making of a successful teacher goes beyond the mastery of the subject matter. It also includes delivery skills as well as the "creation and possession of ideological and philosophical environments in which these other components are immersed" (Okpanachi, 2012). Little wonder, Okpanachi (2013) asserts, with some justifications, that these explain in part, the huge supply deficit of appropriately trained academics. In line with this thinking, UNESCO (2013) contends that "the challenge of recruiting teachers does not (lay) in numbers, but in... quality... Far more often, teachers remain under qualified."

In contemporary Nigeria, there is a seeming negative entry objective into the teaching profession as many people seem to embrace teaching as a last resort, with the intention of bolting out at the least opportunity. This phenomenon could and should be upturned with a purposeful programme of teacher development through continued education and incentive

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packages to guarantee commitment, quality and professional pull. Indeed, the UNESCO Director General, Irina Bokova, in her homiletics on the 2013 World Teachers Day, spoke as if she was promoting quality assurance. She stated inter-alia: "Teachers' professional knowledge and skills are the most important factor for quality education". It is obvious that there is a worldwide concern for education delivery in quality and competence as constituent foundation for sustainable development, peace, human dignity and survival.

That is why there is a genuine fear that the objectives and overriding philosophy for tertiary education in Nigeria may remain a mirage and a wishful thinking in the absence of well-articulated, robust and efficient quality assurance programmes and activities. Quality assurance must remain in the front burner if the present effort to revamp even the country's economy is to bear the expected fruit. This is as imperative as it is unavoidable if Nigerian is to actualize her dream to be counted among the first twenty developed economies of the world by the year 2020.

### CONCLUSION

In Nigeria, the worrisome decline in education, in general, and in tertiary education, in particular, still defies solutions. The decline which earnestly commenced in the 1980s has aggravated by the day. Unfortunately, the decline in tertiary education is not only a Nigerian phenomenon. Indeed, according to Professor Jegede, Africa and the rest of the world have become concerned about the quality of education in the continent. And for good reasons! For a continent in a hurry to develop, a robust quality of higher education should be the most important tool in developing the necessary knowledge, skills and attitude for economic development. That was why the Addis Ababa Declaration of 2007 made a specific call for the "revitalisation of African universities" (Jegede, 2013).

Revitalising higher education in Nigeria, for example, would need addressing challenges such as expanding access, sourcing or allocating adequate funds, rehabilitating dilapidated infrastructure and providing new ones, developing and deploying well-trained and motivated teachers, and other challenges. However,

addressing these without quality assurance would be like pouring remedies down the drain. This is borne out by international expert observations. Among the four key areas of intervention, identified by the World Bank Conference on Higher Education in 2008, to improve access to higher education and attain desirable standards was quality assurance (Jegede, 2013).

Quality assurance will have to take the centre stage among other efforts meant to revamp higher education in Nigeria.

As more and more universities with varying structures of ownership come on stage in Nigeria and as they subscribe to international standards and in view of the unprecedented demand for access to tertiary education, stakeholders of this sector of education can ill afford to sit on the fence. The stakeholders and the general public should be constructively engaged in order to be assured that the universities, including the privately owned ones, are meeting national and international standards.

It is a clarion call for the institutionalisation of quality assurance in every university.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The contributions of quality assurance to qualitative university education that is learner-centred and problem-solving cannot be over-emphasized. The well-known low position of Nigerian universities in international rankings is probably accounted for by the gross neglect of quality assurance. To reverse this trend, the valid success route goes through quality assurance. The following recommendations, although not exhaustive, will assist in alleviating the crisis:

- i).** There is a need for more energetic advocacy for quality assurance in the university system.
- ii).** University law should institutionalize Quality assurance for effective monitoring, evaluation, sustenance and improvement of programmes and all other components and operations of tertiary institutions.
- iii).** Quality assurance should, among other responsibilities, include regular monitoring and evaluation of infrastructure to avoid decay, degeneration and disuse.
- iv).** In external quality assurance activities, there should be synergy and complementarities between the NUC and relevant professional

bodies so that universities do not dissipate energy in hosting different groups with visibly identical objectives.

v) Due to the lack of pedagogical knowledge by a lot of university teachers, a vigorous and purposeful programme of continued teacher training and professional development should be instituted and sustained as an integral part of quality assurance.

vi). In the course of performing quality assurance activities, universities should develop institution-wide time lines for remedying identified deficiencies without delay to avoid accumulation of errors and neglects.

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