STRENGTHENING THE INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE MECHANISMS IN THE UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

This paper examined the various possible ways of strengthening the internal quality assurance of university. The scope includes the student admission policy, recruitment and selection of academic staff, curricular policy, that is academic programmes, supervision of instruction and teaching effectiveness, provision of quality learning environment and clear policy on measurement and evaluation of learning outcomes. The paper recognizes that for quality assurance universities should be allowed to determine and set their standards and criteria for students' admission into their various academic programmes. It is a task that must be done because a system that does not assure quality of its products in this global era of market competitively will eventually come to atrophy.

INTRODUCTION

The centrality of the university in national development is incontrovertible. The primary and strategic mission of the university is to promote knowledge, provide vision and translate that vision into a reality via policies and actions which are purely quality-oriented. It was also to explore solutions to the country's problems and assist the larger society in achieving its objectives in the areas of human, social and economic development (Ogbodo, 2006).

The National Policy on Education (FME, 2004) captures the essence of quality tertiary education, the aspirations and expectations when it stated that the goals of tertiary education shall be to:

1. Contribute to national development through high level relevant manpower training.
2. Develop and inculcate proper values for the survival of the individual and society.
3. Develop the intellectual capacity of individuals to understand their local and external environments.
4. Acquire both physical and intellectual skills which will enable individuals to be self reliant and useful members of the society.
5. Promote and encourage scholarship and community service.
6. Forge and cement national unity; and
7. Promote national and international understanding and interaction (p.36).

Ogbodo (2006) observed that tertiary institutions of which the university is at the apex should pursue these goals through teaching research, virile staff development programmes and generation and dissemination of knowledge. The NPE expects the university research as to be relevant to the national development goals. It is evident from these policy expectations that the university should be the basic think tank of the society in all areas. It should be at the vanguard of societal response to emergent political, economic, social and environmental problems.

Letuka, Maharasoa, Strydon (2007) affirmed that advancement of mankind through the ages has been knowledge driven and knowledge is the basic product of universities. The human quest for knowledge is insatiable. The zeal with which societies pursue it and the relative values they place on its production and acquisition are what distinguish societies and nations as highly developed and underdeveloped. The developed ones continuously take giant steps in their contributions to development of mankind (Ogbodo, 2006). Others are largely bystanders, waiting for obsolete knowledge and disused methods to be passed on to them. They therefore become analogue societies in a digital age. The educational implications of this is that for Nigerian university to fulfil its mission it must devise ways of reversing the downward spiral in the quality of knowledge it produces and services it delivers to its stakeholders and society at large (Robinson, 1996). It should as a matter of urgency re-think its ways of achieving quality and sustaining it.

This is the focus of this paper. We will examine the concept of quality assurance and apply it to the universities production function. Why should the university assure quality of its products and services? What are the indicators for measuring university education? These and other questions shall be addressed in this paper.

CONCEPT OF QUALITY ASSURANCE

Birnbaum in Babalola, Adedeji and Erwat (2006), discussed the diversity in quality of higher education, and offered three dimensional typologies in discussing quality; namely,

1. Reputational approach which regards quality as excellence. It is a standard attained in our context by exceptional universities, and or other products,

2. The outcomes approach which regards quality as efficient product. Here there are no absolute standards but specifications. The quality of a product is measured by the extent to which it meets customers' specifications.

3. Total quality approach. Here, quality is seen as value added. That is the totality of features and characteristics of a product or services that bear on its ability to satisfy or implied needs. Product in education is taken holistically to include grandaunts who are awarded certificates, having fulfilled all necessary requirements (p.30).

These are different views of quality when put together. However, we can accept that quality with regards to the quality of the university education is the level of excellence in performance on the strength of the quality of the context, inputs process transaction and output (Rekkedal, 2007). This implies that to attain quality in output or for that matter assure it, a series of quality input and processes would have been made.

INDICATORS OF QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Teaching and learning are the twin-primary purposes of a university. These are jointly affected by quantity, quality and utilization of key inputs such as students, teachers, teaching contents and teaching-learning process. In support of this, Ogbodo (2006) asserts that in industry, product quality to a certain extent depends on the quality of raw materials inputs. That quality leather, all other variables being favourable, would invariably lead to quality shoes and quality grapes to quality wines. He stated further that "in university education the quality of students input is crucial to their eventual outcome". If students had not learned what they were supposed to learn at the lower levels of educational structure and somehow cheated their way into the universities, the deficiencies would persist and eventually manifest in them as low quality products. The university does not perform miracles. If the society offers defective raw materials (students), it can only at best ameliorate the effects of this

deficiency at the output end of the process. Thus, to assure quality in student output by the universities, the primary and secondary levels of the system should also assure quality in their output.

UNIVERSITY TEACHERS

According to the National Policy on Education (FME, 2004), no education system may rise above the quality of its teachers. The same argument applies, mutatis mutandis, to the university system. The quality of lecturers in the universities determines to a large extent the quality of those that they produce and the quality of their research output. In the first thirty years of the development of university education in Nigeria, there was orderly and prosperous growth (Babalola, 2007). The lecturers in the university at the time were world class. Caulcultt, (1995), submits that contrary to what it was in the earlier stage of university education of Nigeria, today general commitment to teaching and learning (to scholarships) has become extremely low. Ogbodo (2006) captured the situation succinctly when he compared the university teacher's conditions of service in the 1970s and earlier with what it become in the 90s and even presently. The financial crunch occasioned by economic crisis of the 1990s took its toll on the very crucial resource of the universities. The morale of the university teacher plummeted, many fortunate ones migrated to foreign lands where they were better appreciated and remunerated. Those that remained became despondent and had to engage in auxiliary occupations to survive. In this situation, teacher quality and effectiveness suffer a great deal.

RELEVANCE OF CURRICULUM CONTENT

The labour market is changing more rapidly than does the university curriculum in Nigeria. Okebukola (2003), is of the view that if the university has good quality learners and teachers but run irrelevant programmes that do not connect with the needs of the society nor with the "specifications" of the stakeholders and consumers then quality in this context suffers. The NPE enjoins the universities to design course contents that would reflect the state of the art. Thus, if there is a continuing mismatch between what is offered in the universities and what the society needs, then regardless of the nature of what is offered, it would still in this quality context be of poor quality. The university curriculum should be reshaped to meet the needs of the global employment market, by giving prominence to social skills and even behavioural and speech forms to actual intellectual content.

QUALITY OF TEACHING

The introduction of new pedagogical approaches supported by alternative delivery mechanisms has revolutionized teaching learning in university education. Thus, teaching is separated here from teachers as a quality indicator because not much teaching goes on in the universities even when highly qualified academic staff of the teaching departments. Overwhelmed by the sizes of their student population, university teachers have turned this unfortunate situation into a gold mine. With a preponderance of students who have no business within the perimeters of a university environment, coupled with the obnoxious and outdated demand that every student undertakes a project before graduation, as if all will become researchers, lecturers have become contractors for students, writing whole theses for students and awarding the highest score to the highest bidder.

The NPE (2004) envisages that all teachers in tertiary institutions shall be required to undergo training in the methods and strategies of teaching. This seems to suggest that quality teaching involves not only possession of knowledge, but also the ability to transfer knowledge, skills

and attitude to the learners. One waits when this policy requirement will be implemented in our tertiary institutions.

QUALITY OF LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

According to Castaldi in Ogbodo (1998), good learning environment promotes quality education. Environment here refers to the "things of education" which enable skillful teacher to achieve a level of instructional effectiveness that far exceeds what is possible when they are not provided. It includes good governance which prohibits student and teacher harassment, examination malpractices, cultism and attendant violence. It connotes good academic culture (Efanga, 2007, p.20).

The enrolment in Nigerian universities rose from 77,791 in 1981 to 227,999 in 19993/94 in the face of dwindling resources into the university resources into the university system. In a similar vein, the graduate output rose from about 15,000 in 1981 to 50,000 n 1993/94 in the face of dwindling jobs for graduates (Ogbodo, 1998). Consequently, with the radical increases in student enrolment that were not matched with corresponding improvements in facilities and funding, in existing facilities were over stretched and they can no longer support the programmes of the universities leading to improvisations that have affected quality.

MEASUREMENT AND EVALUATION

Longe (1999) has argued convincingly that quality must be measurable and clearly defined. In other words there should be clearly defined learning outcomes such as knowledge, attitude and skills expected of anyone who has gone through any course of study in the university.

INTERNATIONAL QUALITY ASSURANCE MECHANISM IN THE UNIVERSITY

Based on our discussion of indicators of quality education, we can isolate possible quality assurance mechanisms in the university as follows:

- Student admission policy
- Recruitment and selection policy of academic staff
- Curricular policy, that is academic programmes
- Supervision of instruction and teaching effectiveness
- Provision of quality learning environment and
- Clear policy on measurement and evaluation of learning outcomes.

We shall now examine ways in which these mechanisms can but put in place if they are not already being used and or strengthened if they are.

STUDENT ADMISSION POLICY

We have noted earlier that quality outcome to a certain extent depends on the quality of raw materials input. Students are the raw materials that are taken into the university, processed after a period of tuition and turned out on graduation as finished products to employers and society as customers. World class larger producers go for the finest hops (they may even grow them) wine producers for the finest grapes and that is why admission standards in world class universities are very high indeed. Only the finest candidates meet the requirements.

How then can universities determine for themselves the students they will admit? Prior to the establishment of Joint Admission and Matriculation Boards (JAMB), the universities were conducting their own entrance examinations and selecting their students. With the advent of

JAMB they lost autonomy and control of this very vital aspect of quality assurance. It became mandatory for them to accept students that met certain generally prescribed criteria. It is therefore not surprising that all sorts of candidates with dubious credentials easily passed through the "large net" that was JAMB and into the universities.

As this ugly trend continued and worsened the universities became worried and started introducing ways of sorting those who had been sorted out by JAMB. That led to the now accepted internal screening exercise by universities of those who have passed JAMB.

The position of this paper is that this is a move in the right direction allowing the universities to recover autonomy in determining their raw materials. But this however, is not enough. As pointed out earlier quality assurance as a concept assumes that the organization has total control of the process concerned with ensuring the integrity of outcomes. It is only then that you can hold the organization responsible for the quality of its products. For quality assurance therefore, universities should be allowed to determine and set the standards they want those who desire to come into their respective programmes to meet before they are admitted. Each university, each programme must be allowed to do this. The standard of course must be realistic and competitive for the consumers are watching so that when it comes to consumption they know where to go. This line of thinking supports the emphasis that if the standards are too high you go out of the world to get your candidates if they are too low you will be inundated with garbage and will eventually come to atrophy.

One simple strategy of improving the quality of students admitted to the university is to abolish the "five credit passes in not more than two sittings" requirement and replace it with five credits passes in "not more than one sitting". In one stroke, that will reduce the pressure on universities by as much as 50% for presently, about that much approach the universities for entry with combined certificates and subjects obtained in two sittings. This strategy will also make prospective candidates and schools that prepare them to work harder to qualify them thereby improving the entry quality.

RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION OF ACADEMIC STAFF

The universities have autonomy in this regard. They recruit and select their staff. The only limitation here is that presently they cannot fix their remuneration outside the government approved structure which unfortunately cannot attract desired teaching personnel from anywhere in the world. Even at the present level of enhancement, the remuneration package of the Nigerian university teacher is still lower than the average in Africa and if we cannot attract lecturers in relevant areas from some African countries how can we attract them from Europe, United States of America, Japan and other key Asian countries.

The concept of the university requires that its academic staff disposition is universal in profile. That is why some culture specific programmes like foreign languages, Arabic Studies, Institute of American studies etc. should for purposes of universal relevance and comparison have on their teaching staff, specialists from those cultures. Would you expect the Department of Arabic Studies in Oxford University not to have an Arab professor on its staff? In Nigeria it is not uncommon to have departments of foreign languages without a single foreign teacher whose native language is mounted by the department. This is not just a matter of the stock of indigenous qualified persons available, but one of concern for quality and sensitivity to how others perceive you. Even when we take Nigeria as the universe, there are universities (some of them federal) where the academic staff dispositions are more than 90% native (i.e. the immediate cultural catchment area of the university). Even if these teachers are geniuses, they will still need to benefit from the experiences of other cultures and patterns for no university produce manpower and knowledge for indigenous area but for the

whole country. Since quality has to do with relevance this obviously has a quality assurance implication.

CURRICULAR POLICY

This is a quality context. Quality assurance in the university must have to do with the relevance of the programmes. There must be societal justification for every programme on the curriculum. It must be social, economic, political, cultural, environmental or some or all of these. This sees quality as relevance. It must have utility. It must not be an abstraction. How can universities assure this? Ogbodo (2006) suggested the following:

   I.   Periodic review of existing programmes to check on flaws or breakdowns. This can be done every three years.

  II.   Review of objectives in the light to changing needs and demands of the society.

 III.   Ensure that the procedure for modifying programmes (deletion and addition of courses) is not cumbersome. This way outdated and irrelevant courses are quickly removed and new ones added (p.50).

SUPERVISION OF INSTRUCTION AND TEACHING EFFECTIVENESS

The quality of teaching (the transmission of knowledge, skills, ideas and attitudes from one person to another/others) has considerably declined in universities. This may well be the reason why the National Policy on Education NPE (FME, 2004, p.34) provides that all teachers in tertiary institutions shall be required to undergo training in the methods and techniques of teaching. Possession of knowledge is one thing; ability to transfer it to others is another. That is why teacher education is a discipline and teaching a profession.

Lack of training in the methods and techniques of teaching may not necessarily fully account for the decline in teaching in the universities. The appraisal system in the universities for academic staff partly accounts for this. The contract or mandate of teachers in universities stands on a tripod of teaching, research and community service. It is an irony that defies reason that when it comes to judgments about who is promoted and who is not, only research output is considered. That explains why many "smart" lecturers concentrate on so called research rather than on teaching for climbing the academic ladder. They therefore quickly rise to a point (professorship) where you cannot presumably question their teaching.

In his inaugural lecture on the improvement of instruction and teacher effectiveness in tertiary institutions, Arubayi (2003) recommended among other things that student ratings of lecturers teaching at the end of a course(s) should be augmented by other approaches in making promotion decisions on lecturers. This way one cannot publish at the expense of teaching and expect a favourable appraisal. They should complement each other.

Quality and quantity of teaching are central to the quality of university output. This is even more so in a developing country like Nigeria where the general knowledge base is low.

PROVISION OF QUALITY LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

We have seen that learning environment goes beyond good roads, good classrooms, library, laboratories and workshops. It includes the moral tone of the university, security, level of abuses, examination ethics and so forth. Universities therefore cannot plead lack of control in these matters. Even with regard to physical facilities they are still somewhat responsible. At the relatively same level of funding, some universities have better facilities and structures than others. What makes the difference is management. It is also within the purview of the

universities to engender a peaceful and conducive climate and academic culture so that excellence on the parts of the students and staff can thrive, assuring quality.

POLICY ON MEASUREMENT AND EVALUATION OF LEARNING OUTCOMES

When a university awards a certificate it puts its imprimatur; thereby making a statement about the quality of a product. The ways and means that the universities arrive at that statement must be clear and watertight. If it says that, this is of first class quality it must know that it is relative. For others to truly regard it as first class it must be proven and probable by works. It is only then that the statement on quality will be universal.

Universities therefore must have in place internal checks to ensure that those who through examinations and results contribute to his final statement on quality outcome do so with integrity, objectivity and a profound sense of truth; a value on which quality of academic output rests.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have examined the necessity for quality assurance in the university, the indicators of quality, the production function of the university and the strategies universities can adopt to assure quality of their products. It has become clear that universities have a heavy responsibility in this regard. It is a task that must be done because a system that does not assure quality of its products in a global market that is competitive will eventually come to atrophy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Nigerians should return to those core values of the past such as hard work, honesty, fairness, principle of the common good, discipline, and shared vision. These can facilitate commitment in the generation of quality knowledge and dissemination in tertiary institutions.

2. As no society can develop beyond the quality of its educational system, it is expected that the quality of the educational activities in tertiary institutions has great implications for the development of Nigeria. Consequently, if the society must develop meaningfully, its educational system must be overhauled to assure quality.

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