

EXAMINING THE ROLE OF QUALITY ASSURANCE IN EDUCATIONAL STABILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

Quality assurance is a critical mechanism for ensuring the stability and integrity of higher education in Nigeria. Higher educational institutions have been engulfed in poor funding and corruption leading to instability and reduction in educational standards. As a consequence, this paper examines the role of quality assurance in educational stability in higher education in Nigeria. Educational stability refers to the consistency and continuity of educational policies, programs, and practices over time with the view of maintaining standards, stability and quality. The paper discussed some of the ways quality assurance enhance educational stability, like accreditation of academic programs, resources verification, review of curriculum and the establishment of internal quality assurance in universities. The paper suggested that for effective quality assurance in tertiary education, there is a need for restructuring of the National Universities Commission, empowered with research and authority to effectively monitor and enforce quality through regular audits, inspections and enforcement for non-compliance, and adequate funding among others. The suggestions will lead to greater stability, a more conducive learning environment, and improved global competitiveness.

Keywords: quality, quality assurance, educational stability, higher education

Introduction

Higher education is globally accepted as a veritable platform for the development of individuals and society. It is considered a factory house where skills are identified, potentials developed, and nurtured for the betterment of individuals and society. The National Policy on Education states that tertiary education is geared towards preparing students for lifelong learning programmes that equip them with knowledge and skills for self-reliance and the world of work (FRN, 2014). This epitomizes the functions of tertiary education in building the individual and society. This has also led to the proliferation of universities in Nigeria. Unfortunately, the growth of universities has not been accompanied by a corresponding improvement in the quality of education. Practitioners are of the view that the decline in the quality of education is a result of the paucity of funds, poor infrastructures, and storage of qualified faculty members among other challenges. This has called for the need for continuous monitoring and evaluation of the learning processes to ensure that educational and institutional goals are achieved. This brings to the fore the concept of quality assurance in educational institutions. It is a process of ensuring that educational institutions achieve predetermined goals as defined by national policy on education. It is a process to ensure that educational inputs are sufficient, the processes are seamless and the learning outcomes are in line with the trajectory of work and international best practices. Quality assurance is a growing lexicon in higher education institutions and this is a result of various degrees of challenges threatening the stability of the education system, leading to concern about the quality of graduates of tertiary education. Quality assurance becomes pivotal in addressing the challenges and ensuring educational stability.

Unfortunately, the quality of graduates produced by Nigerian universities has been criticized for being inadequate to meet the needs of the labour market, leading to a high level of unemployment among graduates (National Universities Commission, 2020). It is against this

background that various unanswered questions are agitating the minds of scholars and practitioners. Why are some tertiary education graduates unemployable? Are there gaps between theory and practice? What is the state of educational facilities in tertiary education in Nigeria? Are there adequate supervision and monitoring in the process of teaching and learning? It is against this backdrop that the study focused on examining the role of quality assurance in the stability of higher education in Nigeria. The study is interested in the role of quality assurance in tertiary education because any defects in the quality of the education system will be detrimental not only to the nation but also to the social and economic development of the nation. In achieving this, the study will delve into the role of quality assurance in tertiary education with the view of providing plausible solutions to challenges hampering on quality and stability of tertiary education in Nigeria.

This study used a philosophical methodology as its framework. The philosophical method involves establishing logical coherence in a realm of thought and examining concepts and propositions to clarify their relevance to the study (Nwaokugba & Ezeugwu, 2017). It is the rigorous discipline of examining the foundations of our beliefs about reality and knowledge. It define what constitutes good evidence to build arguments that are logical consistent and well-grounded. For this purpose, the study will rely on secondary data mainly on the existing literature, journals, textbooks, and online materials related to the study. The latitude of the study is higher education in Nigeria which consists of educational institutions where higher learning and certificates are obtained after post-basic education. It encompasses the colleges of education, science and technology, schools of health, polytechnics, and universities which is the zenith of academic pursuit. The paper is of great significance to scholars and educational practitioners on the trajectory of quality assurance and its significance in the stability of the educational system in Nigeria. The study is hinged on Quality Assurance Management QAM, a theoretical framework that emphasizes the systematic monitoring and evaluation of organizational processes to ensure that they meet predetermined standards of quality. QAM is based on the idea that quality is not a one-shop product but a process that requires continuous monitoring and improvement. Various researchers of old have contributed to QAM but Mba and Ugwulashi (2019), opine that quality assurance management in educational institutions is a holistic process of monitoring the entire educational system towards a culture of continuous improvement aimed at preventing quality problems and ensuring that standards are maintained. QAM in higher educational institutions ensures that the inputs are adequate, the processes are seamless and the products meet the predetermined standards. This includes the quality of student intake, quality of instructional materials and curriculum, lecturer-students ratio, quality of instructional facilities, quality of monitoring, supervision, and management among others. The theory is relevant to the study because implementing Quality Assurance Management in tertiary education can ensure that programs are of high quality, resulting in improved graduate outcomes, increased student satisfaction, and global competitiveness. It is against this backdrop that the paper is structured after the introduction, concepts clarifications, quality assurance and educational stability, challenges of the attainment of educational stability, conclusion and suggestions.

Quality Assurance

Quality is an old lexicon in the industrial sector used to measure the fitness of a product or service to the final consumers. It is a measuring rod used to determine the value of the product or the degree of excellence, or standard, when compared with other products or services. With globalization and the proliferation of technology, quality assurance in education has become a global phenomenon. Quality assurance in education is the process of evaluating the curriculum, pedagogy, environment, inputs (which include student enrollment, financial investment, and other relevant factors), outputs, and the overall educational environment that

supports the learning process (Wordu, 2022). It becomes imperative for educational institutions to collaborate with their counterparts to remain globally relevant and contribute to societal development thus, the need for continuous monitoring and evaluation of quality to ensure that standards are maintained. Mba and Ugwulashi (2019) noted that the business and public sectors' revolution experience during the 1980s and 1990s inspired the formation of an International Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education. This network aimed to disseminate information about the current developments in the theory and practice of assessing, improving, and maintaining quality in higher education. This led to various theories and practices to help in the evaluation and continuous improvement of standards in tertiary education.

The urge for quality in higher education led to various associations in a bid to foster quality in tertiary education. Of worthy of note is the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), founded in 2000 in response to the Bologna Process, which plays a crucial role in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). It has transitioned from a networking initiative to a formal association influencing quality assurance policies, especially after the 2003 Berlin Communiqué. ENQA's mission includes creating standardized quality assurance practices, supporting quality assurance agencies through reviews and training, fostering transparency in higher education, offering policy advice, and encouraging international cooperation.

The African Quality Rating Mechanism (AQRM) was initiated by the African Union to advance the quality, relevance, and competitiveness of higher education institutions across the African continent. AQRM promotes transparency and accountability through institutional ratings, facilitates benchmarking and the sharing of best practices, and offers valuable data for policy-making and strategic planning. Additionally, it fosters regional integration by harmonizing quality standards, thereby enhancing the global competitiveness of African universities and contributing to sustainable socio-economic development.

So, quality assurance is about ensuring that the educational inputs are correct, the processes are seamless, and the output is desirable and achieves the predetermined goals. It is about improving educational services through monitoring and evaluating educational processes of teaching, learning, and research. Ensuring that the right students are admitted, qualified faculty members, the right pedagogical content, the right educational facilities, positive management, and provision of a serene ambience for effective learning (Wordu & Jamica, 2024). According to Ajienka (2023), quality assurance encompasses the utilization of available human resources, optimal operational policies, and technology to uphold established standards. Interestingly, In Nigeria the task of ensuring that standards are maintained in tertiary education is with the Federal Government of Nigeria. These functions are performed through various agencies like the National Universities Commission saddled with the responsibility of ensuring the orderly development of universities in Nigeria, and accreditation of programmes and courses among others. In the same vein, the National Board for Technical Education is responsible for the monitoring and evaluation of polytechnics, college of technology, agriculture and other technological institutions for the award of diplomas and certificates. The National Commission for Colleges of Education is saddled with the task of streaming activities of education in Nigeria. It is the prerogative of the Joint Matriculation Board Examination to provide a quality intake of students to universities in Nigeria. Quality assurance becomes an indispensable, measure in educational institutions to ensure stability by managing inputs, processes, outputs, and feedback, fostering continuous interactions to achieve standards and the attainment of educational goals.

Educational Stability

Educational instability has been a source of concern as it affects the very essence of the educational system and the attainment of educational goals. The Nigerian educational system has been plagued by instability characterized by frequent industrial disputes, inconsistency in policies and deficits in leadership amongst others. These disruptions have significant implications for academic stability and students' achievement. Instability in educational institutions creates confusion, hampers effective policy implementation, and undermines students' academic achievement. This instability often arises from factors such as inadequate funding (Jacob et al, 2023), policy inconsistencies (Eze, 2013), and insufficient infrastructure and staffing (Enyiazu, 2022). These challenges result in a lack of clear direction in educational planning and execution (Igbokwu, 2016), ultimately hindering overall educational development. Educational stability becomes a crucial aspect of any educational institution as it ensures that educational goals are met, resources are effectively utilized, and students receive a continuous and coherent learning experience. So, educational stability refers to the consistency and continuity of educational policies and practices over time with the view of maintaining standards and quality. Educational stability underscores the continuity and consistency of maintaining academic experiences without disruptions such as frequent school interruptions, and access to quality education (Law Dictionary). This is crucial because educational stability supports students' learning, reduces the negative impacts of transition, and promotes conducive learning for academic achievement.

Educational stability within higher education institutions is impacted by a range of internal and external factors, particularly financial stability, institutional commitment, and adaptability to changing circumstances. Budihardjo et al (2021), opine that institutional commitment and guidance play crucial roles in sustainability efforts within higher education institutions. In the same vein, Ofor-Douglas (2022), avers that institutional governance reforms in Nigerian universities are designed to enhance educational stability, yet challenges of non-implementation occasioned by corruption and lack of accountability lead to instability and hinder progress. Therefore, understanding the dynamics of these factors is imperative for safeguarding and maintaining the stability of educational institutions. Educational managers must ensure the stability of educational institutions because it is crucial for the development of human capital and the overall development of the nation and the entire society.

Higher Education

Higher education in Nigeria includes universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education, providing advanced educational opportunities and equipping the nation's workforce across diverse disciplines. Higher education comprises federal, state, and private institutions, each contributing fundamentally to the socioeconomic advancement of the country. Higher education in Nigeria has evolved since its inception in 1934, the establishment of Yaba College Lagos. The University College Ibadan followed 1948, an affiliate of the University of London. Over the years, the system expanded, particularly after Nigeria gained independence in 1960, leading to the creation of more universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education across the country. As of February 2024, National Universities Commission Nigeria oversee 272 universities consisting of 149 private universities (NUC, 2024). Also of note, is the proliferation of technical and vocational education installing skills, and capacities, and providing the manpower needs of society. Despite the proliferation of universities, and vocational and technical education, higher educational institutions are saddled with numerous challenges that have shaped their current landscape, including access, quality, funding, and governance issues. In Nigeria, the higher education sector faces several critical challenges stemming from the imbalance between demand for education and supply. The intense competition for admission, particularly in public universities where tuition fees are relatively

low compared to private institutions, underscores this issue. The mismatch between the rapidly growing demand for higher education and the limited capacity of existing institutions has led to significant pressure on public universities.

Gender disparity remains a profound challenge, despite progress, disparities persist in access to education. (Kuteesa et al, 2024). Women, particularly those from rural areas, encounter numerous obstacles that hinder their access to higher education. Economic constraints, entrenched cultural norms, and early child marriages are significant barriers that restrict educational opportunities for women. Addressing these issues requires targeted interventions to create a more inclusive educational environment. Another pressing issue is the inadequate funding of higher education institutions. This financial shortfall has led to deteriorating infrastructure, insufficient resources, and a shortage of qualified staff. Roquette (2024) asserts that the decrease in public funding of higher educational institutions has threatened the very mission of higher education, further burdening students, exacerbating social inequality, and impactful learning experiences. The decline in educational funding is evident in overcrowded classrooms, outdated libraries, and under-resourced laboratories that plague many institutions. These conditions not only affect the quality of education but also the overall learning experience of students. However, challenges in quality, accessibility, and funding often obstruct its pivotal function in nation-building. To address these challenges there is a need for systematic processes and procedures to ensure that educational institutions meet the predefined standards of quality. These processes involve continuous monitoring, evaluation, and improvement of educational practices, curricula, faculty, and facilities to ensure that they meet the expectations of stakeholders, including students, employers, and the government. This brings to the fore a quality assurance role in strengthening educational stability.

Quality Assurance and Educational Stability in Higher Education

It is imperative to state that quality assurance mechanisms are pivotal for promoting educational stability in the Nigerian educational system. This is achieved by addressing systemic challenges that hinder quality. These mechanisms could be external or internal and are aimed at not only enhancing academic standards and institutional integrity but to ensuring that the universities meet national and international standards. The National Universities Commission, NUC is a statutory regulatory body established by the federal government saddled with the responsibility of ensuring the orderly development of universities in Nigeria amongst others. NUC oversees the regulation of academic programme, curriculum development and accreditations (Ukozor et al, 2024). In the same vein, Iguodale (2023) aver that quality assurance mechanisms, such as those implemented by the NUC, ensure the quality of academic programs in Nigerian universities through procedures such as accreditation, resource verification, and planning, thereby promoting educational stability and standards. Recent initiatives by the NUC, such as the Core Curriculum and Minimum Academic Standard and the National Policy on Education, aim to standardize educational practices across the country, make students more employable and equip them with local, national and international knowledge. The internal quality assurance units in Nigerian higher education institutions strive to maintain educational stability by upholding quality standards, despite challenges such as inadequate funding and training (Ugochukwu & Jacob 2023).

Another distinguishing role of quality assurance in strengthening educational stability is by promoting accountability and transparency. Teiwowei (2023), states that implementing quality assurance in Nigerian higher education involves defining quality, emphasizing its importance, addressing internal challenges, and ensuring accountability and transparency to enhance educational outcomes. Furthermore, quality assurance in higher education for sustaining stability consists of regular review of the curriculum, fostering collaboration with industry, emphasizing accreditation, improving feedback mechanisms, modernizing equipment,

and providing continuous professional development for trainers (Korter, 2023). These mechanisms not only ensure stability but also equip students for the world of work and keep them up to date. Quality assurance improves educational stability through institutional effectiveness, fostering collaboration, providing resources, and influencing policy. Their involvement aligns educational outcomes with market needs, ensures accountability, and maintains stability in the educational sector. Stakeholders in Nigerian higher education contribute to quality assurance by providing inputs like curriculum development, and internships, aligning graduate attributes with market needs, and fostering partnerships for institutional effectiveness (Alhamad, 2023).

Quality assurance strengthens educational stability by ensuring standardized educational practices across institutions, and ensuring that there is a uniform level of quality in teaching, learning, and research. Quality assurance enhances standardization by ensuring relevant training, inculcating values, and promoting intellectual development, thereby enhancing stability and contributing to national development and societal well-being (Ezenwagu, et al, 2020). This standardization is crucial in preventing discrepancies that could lead to instability in the educational sector. It also standardized course specifications through a review of curricula and continuous improvement of academic programmes and student learning outcomes (Bui & Yasri, 2024). It is crucial to optimize quality assurance practices to build trust and confidence among different stakeholders. Educational institutions can achieve this by implementing structured and inclusive quality assurance systems, which can address the diverse expectations of stakeholders. This, in turn, can lead to the stability of the educational system and improved learning outcomes. This process involves understanding the various definitions of quality education and ensuring that quality assurance systems are customized to meet these needs (Tetteh et al, 2021).

Challenges of Quality Assurance in Achieving Educational Stability

Quality assurance is a crucial unit in the administration of the educational system, saddled with the task of ensuring that the higher educational system maintains accepted standards and contributes to the development of society. Interestingly, the regulation of universities is the responsibility of NUC and the internal quality assurance established by the university. Despite these efforts, Nigerian universities encounter obstacles that impede their ability to ensure quality education across the nation. It becomes imperative to address some of the structural flaws that are in quality assurance that hinder the achievement of educational stability. Funding remains one of the most significant challenges facing higher education in Nigeria. Public universities rely heavily on government funding, which is often insufficient to cover their needs. The underfunding has led to inadequate resources and infrastructure such as academic staff, and facilities, hindering the NUC's quality assurance efforts in Nigerian universities, as such affecting program development and accreditation (Igodale, 2023). In the same vein, Teibowei, (2023a) that inadequate resources and infrastructure in Nigerian universities hinder quality assurance by affecting funding, staff availability, policy execution, infrastructure provision, corruption, supervision, and staff development. The underfunding has also resulted in frequent strikes by university staff, particularly by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), disturbing academic standards, distorting the stability of academic programs and affecting the quality of education. It is imperative to state that inadequate resources and infrastructure in Nigerian universities can also compromise quality assurance by hindering supervision of examinations, staff training, and secure handling of examination materials, impacting assessment integrity negatively (Ofem et al, 2024).

Unfortunately, the National Universities Commission (NUC) lacks sufficient personnel to improve the performance of their statutory role, so they rely on ad-hoc personnel from universities (Wordu & Nwanguma, 2023). Also, inadequate funding in Nigerian universities

hinders the recruitment and retention of quality staff, leading to a decline in academic services, corruption, exploitation of students, and erosion of the public good (Ibrahim, 2022). With the increasing number of universities, it has become very challenging to effectively monitor programs in both private and public universities. This undermines the integrity of the process and hinders the effective discharge of their duties. There is no denying the fact that underfunding of educational institutions has negative multiplier effects on the integrity of the educational system and thereby undermines educational quality and stability. Other challenges inhibiting the quality and stability of university education are the inefficiencies of the accreditation process in university education stemming from delays in funding and poor funding (Fakokunde, 2022) systemic corruption, and poor regulatory framework. Bribery of NUC officials, falsification of results by universities, and deceptive practices like borrowing facilities contribute to inefficiencies in the accreditation process in Nigerian universities (Uroko, 2024).

Conclusion

Tertiary education is pivotal in the building of the manpower needs of society. It is also a platform to reconfigure the mindset of individuals for a productive life that contributes to the development of society. The importance has led to the increased number of tertiary educational institutions helping to re-jig individuals and society. Unfortunately, the upsurge in higher educational institutions has not yielded the desired outcome which has led to agitations by stakeholders in the educational industries. The Nigerian economy is characterized by a critical structural mismatch: a surplus of university graduates pursuing a limited supply of formal white-collar jobs, resulting in widespread graduate unemployment and underemployment. This necessitated the development of a framework to effectively monitor and evaluate higher education institutions, ensuring that the inputs are correct, the processes are seamless, and the outcomes are relevant and competitive. This is the thrust of the paper, examining the role of quality assurance in strengthening educational stability in Nigeria. Quality assurance is a framework that ensures that tertiary educational institutions are orderly developed, meet the market demand, and ensure educational stability standard practices across Nigeria's tertiary education. Some of the challenges hindering the activities of the quality assurance system are poor funding, corruption and inadequate resources for effective monitoring and evaluation of the entire process. The paper submits that increasing the funding of tertiary education is of great importance if quality, standard and stability are maintained.

Suggestions

To address the challenges hindering higher educational institutions in achieving quality and stability the following suggestions are needed:

1. **Enhanced Funding Framework:** The government should increase the funding of tertiary education through an increase in budgeting, public-private partnerships and diversification of funds by the managers of tertiary institutions. Adequate funding will improve infrastructures, teaching resources and research facilities.
2. **Restructuring of the National Universities Commission,** empowered with research and authority to effectively monitor and enforce quality through regular audits, inspections and enforcement for non-compliance.
3. **To address the systemic corruption in NUC and educational institutions,** anti-corruption measures should be integrated into the university governance. This should include a transparent procurement process, strict financing auditing and monitoring of NUC projects ensuring that standards are adhered to.

4. Continuous professional development programs for academic and non-academic staff should be prioritized to ensure they are equipped with modern teaching methods, digital technology, and other assessment tools for supervision.

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