

QUALITY ASSURANCE IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING: A YARDSTICK FOR EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The quest for lifelong learning and zeal to acquire academic qualification has opened up tertiary institutions to cater for the growing number of applicants every year. Therefore, Open Distance Learning (ODL) is a major channel of widening access to higher education in Nigeria to maintain provision of ODL and retain its relevance and recognition as complimentary to conventional or specialized higher education there is need for Quality Assurance Development. This paper therefore explores trends perspectives and challenges of quality assurance in ODL in Nigeria.

Keywords: Quality Assurance, Distance Learning, Educational Development, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Quality assurance is one of the main issues examined by scholars and practitioners in this 21st century who operate on the worth of education internationally and in the global market. Due to the high demand and acceptance Open Distance Learning (ODL) to widen the access to higher education in developing countries, it has become crucial that quality assurance processes are developed and maintained if ODL provision is to be relevant, efficient and very functional. Ntshoe and Letseka (2010:60) posits that the concept of quality and quality assurance movement have become highly demanded issues in the advent of new managerialism in higher education. Relating to Open Distance Learning, quality is defined as the purpose in which standards, perfection and consistency in line with value for cost or amount spent meets with the transformation phase of Education. The positive development is highly important to developing countries like Nigeria who has limited funds for expansion of

educational infrastructure to meet the educational needs of her rising population. In Africa, the trend is expressed in the growing attention accorded to building capacities for distance education. According to Jung(2005), Universities place more emphasis on widening access than assuring quality but now they realize quality assurance as key issue that needs to be addressed not only within individual universities but also jointly and in global context (P.79). Many of these conventional universities have adopted e-learning mainly as supplementary modes of instruction in order to reach a wide segment of the target students. Therefore to ensure the quality of ODL services, an institution as a whole must have policies and structures to direct its organizational activities.

The origination of Open Distance Learning (ODL) in Education in Nigeria dates back to the practice of correspondence education as at the level of General Certificate in Education (GCE) as prerequisite for the admission of University of London. It extended to the establishment of National Teachers Institute (NTI) in Kaduna in 1976 as solely independent distance learning institution with legal backing in 1987 to upgrade teachers for the implementation of Universities Primary Education (UPE) now Universal Basic Education (UBE)programme introduced in 1999.Later there was correspondence and open studies institute (COSIT) in 1999 now called the Distance Learning Institution (DLI) in 2004 of University of Lagos, established in 1974to produce universal graduates in disciplines necessary to meet national manpower needs such as teaching, accounting, law, nursing and technical education. The University of Ibadan, Ibadan joined the race and through External Study Programme (ESP) and later Distance Learning Centres established by Adult Education Department in 1988. The emergence of ODL in Nigeria would not be completed without the mention of National Open University in Nigeria (NOUN). NOUN was established to provide opportunities for learners in professional bodies, governmental institutions that wish to have certificates in courses such as business administration, science and education. There are various programmes designed under the distance learning approach and across various institution of learning in the country. Thus, any consideration for quality assurance in the context of ODL will therefore entail a detailed scrutiny of those characteristics that

can give credibility to the various programmes and the products of ODL in Nigeria. The quality of course delivery influences the quality of learning which in turn leads to the identification of criteria for quality delivery (Oyekan, 2012).

TRENDS IN QUALITY ASSURANCE IN ODL

Globally, the term quality assurance has been a subject of debate in higher education over decades and universities have been subjected to both external assessments of teaching quality focused on the subject matters and external academic audits which centres on the workforce of the universities as a whole. With the increasing demand of ODL as a tool for widening access to higher education globally it has become a necessity for quality assurance to be used as a standardized measure for maintaining solid functionality and relevance of ODL in the world of work. Quality assurance originated from the industrial world and its nature has been distributed to the education system of ODL to facilitate development and build commitment to meet the needs of users for continuous improvement (Vaira 2007). The proponents of quality assurance like Edward Deming and Joseph Juran in Yetunde (2001), in their study posit that attainment of continuous high standard at affordable cost and prices is possible only when there is continuous improvement in the production process and workers' and students commitment to quality product. In ODL therefore, quality assurance thus entails involvement of students lectures, parents, managers, inspectors etc, in the quality process so that it becomes the watchword of all and sundry. Quality assurance becomes important and for ODL since 1980s and 1990s, as a result of its use by public sector providers and also as a result of the growing emphasis on accountability in education. Government at the state level expanded the post secondary education in order to meet the needs of their states for more skilled labour. Business or industrial world concepts has been synergized with the education system as part of the drive to ensure there is increased investment in the provision will that the output of education needs to improve development at each state level. It must however, be noted that the focus of any quality system must be to satisfy the needs and aspiration of learners viz- aviz the appropriate delivery of services. Quality

assurance frameworks for ODL in a globalized context are still in the early stage of development. Hence, students shows that the need for investigating a wide range of quality assurance practices in different context of ODL and discussing it in depth to meet the international standards.

Studies shows that the term 'quality assurance' can be linked to some factors such as:

- government equating public investment in education relative to other expenditure.
- Institutional responsibility for education in the recent past failing in their various goals to meet the demands of the increasing growth rate of students demand to enroll into higher learning.
- reduction in the cost of education emphasis by political will and manifestos.
- assertion that education and training is essential to assist in the economic, recovery, growth and competitiveness.

Quality assurance serves as a way to rank universities at the national level and this have an impact on the competition at the university level and thus has effect on the number of demands in the enrolment and admission rates of students at various levels.

PERSPECTIVES OF QUALITY ASSURANCE FOR ODL

The zeal for quality assurance in tertiary education is linked up with its processes and impact of globalization with the increase in demand for ODL there is urgent need for restructuring the system and methodology of its programmes to retain and sustain the credibility of the qualifications, requirements and certificates awarded. The issue of quality is therefore one of the most significant aspect in ODL. The educationists, policy makers and practitioners have always emphasized the 'quality factor' worldwide. Stakeholders place high expectation on the educational systems and compelled the institutions to produce high demands driven quality products through their solid service delivery. In the context of education 'quality' has been placed on the highest level in the agenda of education leaders, policy makers and practitioners and is

in the line with the consumers agitation or quest for quality education (Belavati and Zuhairi 2007:2). From sociological view, ODL is a tool for social transformation. This transformation cannot come about without high quality system and what the system offers. Therefore, quality assurance cuts across, curriculum design, content and delivery system, teaching, learning, assessment, reporting, feedback mechanism etc. Thus successful, ODL requires a proper system of quality assurance which must balance the nature of its delivery service to manage operational standard and academic task. Practically, quality assurance process is set to improve service delivery in the public sector. It is an incremental process which entails continuous development along with the development of ODL institutions. The processes thus assist in identifying problems and actions that can provide solution to the gap identified.

CHALLENGES OF QUALITY ASSURANCE IN ODL

ODL is limited to the required openness. There is therefore need for a baseline on the fact that examinations are restricted and students have to converge as assigned venues for uniformity and conformity. Also the inability to learn at work is a major challenge while distant learning is not as effective as full time study in learning environment. Egbokhare (2006) quotes that learning is not effective when it is full time and concentration is total. Therefore, there is need for maintenance of quality of programmes in order to at least produce a justified and effective learning output. National University Commission (NUC) is saddled with the responsibility of accrediting all courses both in quality control and assessment of university regularization. Joint Admission and Matriculation Board, monitor and control the admission exercise of candidates into all tertiary institutions, but there has been no specific regulatory body accessing the admission process for the ODL programme in Nigerian education system. In addition to this, distant learning support staff employed must be given enough orientation and training to understand the dynamics of the programme and to appreciate its contribution to educational development. There should be constant review of the programme periodically at least to know the areas of strength and improve on the weaknesses of the courses and systems.

Rapid growth in the number of students enrolled in the programmes should also be monitored and therefore there should be match and balance in the standard of what is done viz a viz its demand. Another major challenge is the cost of internet services to distant learning and most students rely on private internet café with expensive rates for their courses to move on smoothly. In some area, epileptic power supply disrupt the learning process and this call for urgent attention because student find it difficult at times to access their registration, result checking and payment process before the deadline. Among others, the following challenges affecting ODL in Nigeria are the determination of the following:

- Quality management goals and expected outcomes
- Institutions individual perspective of quality
- Resource generation structure and its maintenance
- Monitoring and evaluation tools for strategic work plan and management
- Curriculum development, ethics and standards
- Proliferation of programme by some institutions to increase enrolment
- Capacity deficit in institutional governance and management

THE FUTURE OF QUALITY ASSURANCE IN ODL IN NIGERIA

The ingredients for success for improved quality are building up. The regulatory agencies NUC, NBTE and NCCE are strengthening their capacity to deliver more effectively on their mandates. The Federal Ministry of Education, through its education road map to 2020 is repositioning quality control and academic standard in a way that better quality graduates will be produced in the coming years.

The following suggestions are made to ensure quality assurance of the Nigerian higher education system is set at a respectably high level in the next 50 years:

- Establishing National Quality Assurance and monitoring system.
- Subscription to international quality standard.
- Improved resourcing of NUC, NBTE and NCCE through capacity of human capital development.

- Establishment of state quality assurance agencies.
- Effective use of ICT in quality assurance.
- Setting up of a quality observatory system to monitor trends in quality of ODL with a view to responding in a timely quality breaches.
- International partnership and alliances to bolster quality assurance.

All these recommendations were made by Materu (2007). He posits that Regional collaborations in quality assurance is particularly relevant in Africa, given the large number of countries with fragile economies and weak higher education system. Desirable forms of regional collaborations include pair reviewing for accreditation purposes, common standard and guidelines for cross-border education mechanism for credit transfer and recognition of qualification and sharing of experience for regional collaboration to work well, increase commitment by government and continued assistance from international development partners are critically necessary.

CONCLUSION

Due to the increasing rate of school certificate holders that are qualified to get admitted to higher institutions of their choice and could not due to the tough admission rules and competition by the Joint Admission Matriculation Board and the universities. The percentage of the admission rate is less than the number of applications. Open distant learning (ODL) has therefore stand as an alternative and thus gained wide access to higher education especially in Nigeria. It is therefore necessary that quality assurance process serve as a yardstick for maintenance and relevance of the products and output of this emerging open learning environment. Though faced with some challenges of monitoring and evaluation, quality service delivery, expected requirements etc. This paper recommends that there should be an establishment of a regulatory body and its duty should be to oversee the running of courses/programmes in the ODL so as to meet up with the highest global standard in education development.

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