

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES OF QUALITY ASSURANCE IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING INSTITUTIONS IN NIGERIA

Ajadi, Timothy Olugbenga & Awe Bolupe

School of Education

National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN)

ajagbesope@yahoo.co.uk

bolawe1@yahoo.com

Abstract

This paper gives an insight into the meaning of quality, assurance, quality assurance and quality assurance in ODL. To the relativists, quality is like beauty that lies in the eyes of the beholder while the objectivists believed that quality can be specific attributes that can be identified. Quality is the responsibility of everyone in an educational institution and it should be a continuous process and not considered as one-time activity. However, assurance is primarily about ensuring accountability to stakeholders. It is a confidence that one has about a thing after all possible doubt has been eliminated. Quality assurance is a process through which a higher education institution guarantees to itself and its stakeholders that its teaching, learning and other services consistently reach a standard of excellence. Quality assurance could be internal or external. Quality assurance in ODL includes developing and producing learning materials, academic programmes, service and support, as well as standards of students learning. The paper also identified competition, customers' satisfaction, maintaining standards, accountability, improving employee's morale, motivation, credibility, prestige and status and image and visibility as some of the issues in ODL. While contribution to national development, devising a credible and universally set of quality assurance, fostering global competencies among students, inculcating a value system in students, promoting the use of technology, quest for excellence and availability of practitioners are some of the challenges of quality assurance in ODL institutions in Nigeria.

Key words: *Quality, Assurance, Quality Assurance, Open and Distance Education*

Introduction

Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa with an estimated population of 140 million (National Population Commission of Nigeria, 2006) with various social and ethnic groups. The National Planning Commission (2007) puts the literacy rate in Nigeria at 60%, but this does not reflect much appreciable governmental intervention in literacy promotion with high dependency at the urban centres while majority of the total population (i.e. 70%) resides in the rural areas.

Over the years in Nigeria, there has been a geometric increase in demand for university education as majority of the applicants for placement in the university could not be admitted due to limited space facilities and other challenges facing the conventional university in Nigeria. It is obvious that the conventional universities in Nigeria can no longer cope with the challenges of admission and the expectation of both the government and the individual projections for human development. This among other reasons necessitated open and distance learning. Despite this need, there must be concerted efforts at ensuring quality assurance in Nigerian open and distance learning institutions. Any consideration of quality assurance in the context of open and distance learning will entail a detailed analysis of those characteristics that can give credit to the various distance learning institutions and products of these institutions in Nigeria.

The quality of open and distance education (ODE) in any society is measured by the provision of what is referred to as most desirable for the well-being of that particular society, so also what determines the quality of life of that society. Since the educational goals which determine quality differ from one culture to the other, so also it differs from one country to another. It became pretty herculean to determine quality assurance in open and distance learning (ODL) institutions globally. In some countries, open and distance education is seen as instrument used to perpetuate the existing reality, while in some other countries, it is used to change the existing reality. However, the concept of quality in open and distance learning is relative. For example, in Nigeria Open and Distance Learning institution, quality education is subsumed in a philosophy which is based on the development of the learners into a sound and effective citizen (FGN, 2004).

The Concept of Quality

Quality is subjective contextual matter and it is a much-debated term. It can be examined in different analytical perspectives varying as per the needs of different stakeholders within the system. To some, it is like 'beauty' that lies in the eye of the beholder! Those who believe in this are 'relativists', whereas those who believe quality can be specific attributes that can be identified are 'objectivists'. The word 'quality' comes from the Latin word *qualis* meaning 'what kind of'. Pfeffer and Cooter (1991) referred to it as a slippery concept. The British Standard Institution (BSI, 1991) defines quality as the totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs. Green and Harvey (1993) identified five different approaches to defining quality:

- (i) It has to be exceptional (exceeding high standards and passing a required standard);
- (ii) It has to be consistent (exhibited through 'zero defect' and 'getting right the first time', making quality a culture);
- (iii) It has fitness for purpose (meaning the product or service meets the stated purpose, customer specifications and satisfaction);
- (iv) It has value for money (through efficiency and effectiveness); and
- (v) It has transformative (in terms of quality change).

Quality to Webster (1991) is the degree of worth of goodness that distinguishes a thing from another. It is an essential distinguishing element of a thing. It is perhaps the most efficient in identification process. The worth or quality of a thing is imperative for proper notion of matter because it encourages clarity and forestalls mistaken identity. Akinpelu (2005) posited that quality in education assures a change in attitudes, aspiration and action. This submission adjudges the importance of quality as it relates to education. A quality education in this submission expects an educational system which a person has passed through to affect the attitude, aspiration and action of such beneficiary such that what he/she was normally identified as being deficient in most have improved after passing through education. Likewise such quality must be relevantly identified with everybody that benefitted from education. This is to say that the initial attitude of

immaturity, selfish aspiration and common actions should have paved way for a new being whose main target would now be to work towards improvement of all and sundry.

However, Garvin (1988) classified the various definitions of quality into five major groups: transcendent definitions are those that define it from subjective and personal perspective; product - based definitions are those that see quality as a measurable variable; user - based definitions are those that define it as a means of customer satisfaction; measuring – based definitions are those that see it as conformance to requirements and specifications; and value - based definitions are those that see it in relation to costs.

Quality is the responsibility of every one in an educational institution, shared and owned by all concerned, with commitment and leadership coming from top management. Quality should be a continuous process and not considered as one-time activity. From all the above, it could be deduced that the concept of quality is amorphous and contextual. It ranges from meaning 'standard' to 'excellence'. Standards can be defined in terms of a minimum 'threshold' by which performance is adjudged. In this context, quality could be defined as assessment in terms of a set of norm-referenced standards that are built around what is expected as the minimum and beyond.

The Concept of Assurance

Assurance is a concept with many parts with its central focus on confidence. Webster (1991) said assurance can be interpreted on a state of having confidence in oneself or having belief and trust in one's own power. To Ojo (2002), assurance is a promise or categorical statement made to give confidence. Carew (1991) looked at assurance from the point of life insurance policies which do not depend on possibilities as does insurance, but on a certainty – either by death or by reaching a certain age. In another context, it is simply insurance on a thing that is certain like death and retirement. Furthermore, assurance is primarily about ensuring accountability to stakeholders, some definitions allude to an enhancement or improvement function of quality assurance. To Audio-English dictionary, assurance has four senses: freedom from doubt; belief in yourself and your abilities; a binding commitment to do or give or refrain from something, a

statement intended to inspire confidence; and a British term for some kinds of insurance. However, Wikipedia (2006) posited that assurance is a positive declaration intended to give confidence, or a promise or a pledge or a guaranty or a full confidence, or freedom from timidity or a presumptuous boldness. From all the above, assurance can be defined as confidence that one has about a thing after all possible doubt has been eliminated or the act of assuring a declaration tending to inspire full confidence; that which is designed to give confidence.

The Concept of Quality Assurance

Assuring the quality of education provision is a fundamental aspect of gaining and maintaining credibility for programmes, institutions and national systems of higher education worldwide. Quality assurance is designed to prove and improve the quality of an institution's methods and educational products and outcomes. The Higher Education Quality Committee, HEQC (2004), defines quality assurance as a process of ensuring that specified standards or requirements have been achieved. Campbell and Rozsnyai (2002) define quality assurance as an all-embracing term covering all the policies, processes, and actions through which the quality of higher education is maintained and developed. Duff, Hegarty and Hussey (2000) define quality assurance as a process of demonstrating excellence, accountability and value for money. Quality assurance is a process through which a higher education institution guarantees to itself and its stakeholders that its teaching, learning and other services consistently reach a standard of excellence. Such assurance is a necessary goal for the institution itself. Increasingly, it is also necessary for publicly funded institutions to be accountable, and to provide assurances to society and the state that they are delivering the services for which they are funded, thus ensuring that they are providing value for money. Therefore, quality assurance in this regard incorporates all the process internal to the institution, whereby quality is evaluated, maintained and improved. Woodhouse (1999) maintains that quality assurance is about maintenance and enhancement of quality.

The phrase "quality assurance" refers to the policies, attitudes, actions and procedures necessary to ensure that quality is being maintained and enhanced. It may include any one or more of the approaches...audit, assessment, accreditation. Quality assurance is

sometimes used in a more restricted sense, either to denote the achievement of a minimum standard or to refer to assuring stakeholders that quality is being achieved, i.e. accountability. Fraser (1994) included enhancement in his early view of quality assurance; to him, quality assurance must possess the following four qualities:

- Everyone in the enterprise has a responsibility for maintaining the quality of the product or service (i.e. the substandard rarely reaches the quality controllers because they have been rejected at source);
- Everyone in the enterprise has a responsibility for enhancing the quality of the product or service;
- Everyone in the enterprise understands, uses and feels ownership of the system that is in place for maintaining and enhancing quality; and
- Management (and sometimes the customer or client) regularly checks the validity and reliability of the systems for checking quality.

If the word “university” replaces enterprise throughout Fraser’s view, then a university that takes quality assurance seriously emerges as a self-critical community of students, teachers, support staff and senior managers, each contributing to and striving for continued improvement.

Also most definitions state or imply that quality assurance is something done to institutions by an external agency. Harvey (2004), in his own opinion, said although assurance of quality can be done within an institution, via an internal process of checking of some kind, or it could be part of a self-regulatory process. However, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) (2001) posited that external quality assurance focuses on standards monitoring and refers to enhancement, as well as maintenance of the quality. Quality assurance is a planned and systematic review process of an institution or programme to determine that acceptable standards of education, scholarship, and infrastructure are being maintained and enhanced. External quality assurance is also a means through which an institution confirms that the conditions are in place for students to achieve the standards sets by the institution or other awarding body.

Quality assurance is an all-embracing term referring to a continuous process of evaluating (assessing, monitoring, guaranteeing, maintaining, and improving) the quality of a higher education system, institutions or programmes. As a regulatory mechanism, quality assurance focuses on both accountability and improvement, providing information and judgments (not ranking) through an agreed upon and consistent process and well-established criteria. Many systems make a distinction between internal assurance (i.e. intra-institutional practices in view of monitoring and improving the quality of higher education) and external quality assurance (i.e. inter- or supra-institutional schemes of assuring the quality of higher education institutions and programmes). Quality assurance activities depend on the existence of the necessary institutional mechanism preferably sustained by a solid quality culture. Quality management, quality enhancement, quality control, and quality assessment are means through which quality assurance is ensured. The scope of quality assurance is determined by the shape and size of the higher education system. Quality assurance varies from accreditation in the sense that the former is only a prerequisite for the latter. In practice, the relationship between the duos varies a great deal from one country to another. Both imply various consequences such as the capacity to operate and to provide educational services, the capacity to award officially recognized degrees, and the right to be funded by the state. Quality assurance is often considered as part of the quality management of higher education, while sometimes the two terms are used synonymously. (Vlasceanu, Grunberg and Parlea, 2004).

Quality Assurance in Open and Distance Learning (ODL)

Quality assurance in ODL is frequently judged in terms of learning materials because student learning is at the ODL experience. In open and distance learning (ODL), quality assurance includes developing and producing learning materials, academic programmes, services and supports, as well as standards of student learning. Assurance of quality in ODL is the collections of policies, procedures, systems and practices internal or external to the organization designed to achieve, maintain and enhance quality. Learning in ODL does not occur the same way because technologies have created new learning environments. The quality of students' experience and learning changes inherently with

the learning context and a range of other variables. The kind of quality assurance systems that will be established will also depend on the size and nature of the institution.

Issues in Quality Assurance in ODL Institutions in Nigeria

In Open and distance learning institutions in Nigeria, there are a lot of issues on quality assurance, some of the issues are as follows:

Competition

ODL institutions in Nigeria are in the same market competing with institutions providing education at conventional mode for students, and the enrolment in ODL institutions is on the increase year-in-year-out, thereby taken away some of the product of institutions providing education at conventional mode. In order to survive this competitive situation and remain in the business of education provision, ODL institutions in Nigeria need to be worried about their quality.

Customer's satisfaction

All the stakeholders in ODL (students, employers of labour, academic community, government, and the entire community) in Nigeria are now highly conscious ever than before of their rights or how to get value for their investments in ODL. They are now demanding good quality course materials, good quality facilitation, good quality assessment and feedback, good student support services, well established ODL institutional programmes. ODL institutions in Nigeria should be more worried about the relevance of their courses and programmes to the needs of the labour market.

Maintaining standards.

ODL institution is also an educational institution in Nigeria that should be concerned about setting own standard and maintaining it continuously year after year. In order to maintain the set standard, the institution should make conscious efforts to improve the quality of educational transaction, provision and facilities within and outside the institution by the institution.

Accountability

ODL institutions in Nigeria are accountable to government, and the stakeholders on how they expended the public funds allocated to them in terms of allocation/subvention to run the institution. The concern for quality will ensure accountability of the funds allocated and their utilization, and inform the government about taking appropriate decisions. Thus, quality can be considered as a monitoring mechanism.

Improving employees' morale and motivation

The concern for quality as an ODL institution in Nigeria will improve the morale and motivation of the staff in performing their duties and responsibilities. If a quality system is in place in Nigerian ODL institutions, the internal process would be systematic making every department complementing each other's service domain and helping in developing internal customer satisfaction leading to high morale and motivation.

Credibility, prestige and status

ODL institutions in Nigeria need to be concerned about quality, continuously and not once a while; this will bring in credibility to individuals and the institution because of the consistency leading to practice, status and brand value.

Image and visibility

Quality institutions have the capacity to attract better stakeholder support, like getting merited students from far and near, increased donations/grant from philanthropist/funding agencies and higher employer interest for easy placement of graduates.

Challenges of Quality Assurance in ODL Institutions in Nigeria

There are so many challenges confronting quality assurance in Open and Distance Learning institution in Nigeria, some of the challenges are identified below:

Contributing to national development

Higher institutions in Nigeria have a remarkable capacity to adapt to change, and at the same time pursue the avowed goals and objectives they have set forth for themselves. Contributing to national

development has always been a goal of Nigerian ODL institutions explicitly or implicitly. ODL institutions have a significant role in building on changes to the advantage of the country and can contribute to national development by serving the cause of social justice, ensuring equity and increasing success to higher education.

Availability of practitioners

The ODL institutions in Nigeria are suffering from non-availability of experts in quality assurance who can use quality guidelines in ODL.

Devise a credible and universally set of quality assurance

Devising a credible and universally applicable set of quality assurance guidelines which are at the same time sufficiently flexible to accommodate particular and individual institutional solutions taking into consideration the different types of ODL providers. Only two (The National Teacher's Institute, and the National Open University of Nigeria) of the institutions providing distance education in Nigeria provides it on a single mode, while others are doing so through mixed mode. To determine a universally acceptable set of quality assurance is a challenge due to the various ways of providing distance education in Nigeria.

Fostering global competencies among students

The developments in the global scenario make it imperative for ODL institutions in Nigeria to include in its scope of assessment the development of skills of students such that their skills are at par with those of their counterparts in conventional institutions within and outside the country. With liberalization and globalization of economic activities, the need to develop human resources of a high caliber and consequently, the demand for higher education at nationally comparable and internationally acceptable standards has increased. While increasing access to higher education and ensuring social justice will continue to be important objectives of national development, developing internationally and inter-culturally competent human resources is of equal importance. Therefore, ODL should prepare students with global competencies to successfully face the changing scenario. This requires ODL institutions in Nigeria to be innovative, creative and entrepreneurial in their approach to skills development

among students. This may involve collaborating with industries, networking with the neighbourhood and fostering a closer relationship between the worlds of work and learning.

Inculcating a value system in students

Although skills development is critical to the success of students in the job market, skills are of no value in the absence of an appropriate value system. ODL institutions have the responsibilities of inculcating a desirable value system in students. In a country like Nigeria with cultural pluralities and diversities, it is essential that students imbibe values commensurate with social, cultural, economic and environmental realities at the local, national and universal levels. There can be no dispute about inculcating core universal values like right conduct, as well as the values emphasized in the various policy documents of the country. The values sown in the early stages of education, mostly aimed at cooperation and mutual understanding, have to be re-emphasised in open and distance education by appropriate campus experience.

Promoting the use of technology

Most of the significant developments that one can observe today can be attributed to the impact of science and technology. While the advantages of using modern tools in day-to-day life are well recognized, the use of technology in our way of 'learning' and 'administering' leaves much to be desired. The degree of use of technological innovations in educational transactions, both academic and administrative, indicates that our system of education is still uncomfortable with new technology. At a time when our educational institutions are expected to do more with less input, they should make proper use of readily available technological innovations.

Obviously, traditional instructional delivery modes have become inadequate in our institutions of higher learning in Nigeria. To keep pace with the developments in other spheres of human endeavour, ODL institutions have to build on the recent technological developments and enrich the learning experiences they provide to students. ODL institutions in Nigeria may need to be prepared adequately to make the optimum use of information and communication technologies (ICT). Conscious effort is needed to invest

on hardware and to train the faculty suitably to overcome their initial reluctance in using anything new and gadget-oriented.

In addition to using technology as a learning resource in ODL institutions in Nigeria, managing the activities of the institution in a technology-enabled way is to contribute to effective institutional functioning. Effective use of ICT in ODL involves providing ICT literacy to the campus community, using ICT for resource sharing and networking, using ICT-enabled administrative processes.

Quest for excellence

While contributing to nation building and development of students, ODL institutions should also demonstrate the drive to develop themselves into centres of excellence. Excellence in all that they do will contribute to the overall development of the system of higher education. The seven criteria developed by NAAC to measure excellence are in fact the main processes for developing the capabilities of institutions. Establishment of an Internal Quality Assurance Cell (IQAC) in each of the distance learning institutions would help develop and raise their capabilities as institutions. The seven criteria are: curricular aspects; teaching, learning and evaluation; research, consultancy and extension; infrastructure and learning resources; student support and progression; governance and leadership; and innovative practices. One of the major outcomes of the IQAC establishment would be the internalization and institutionalization of quality so that the institution strives to excel in serving its students and other stakeholders. The quest to become a quality institution is in itself a core value that open and distance learning institutions in Nigeria have to imbibe and demonstrate in their funding.

Conclusion

This paper has striven to examine the issues and challenges of quality assurance in ODL institutions in Nigeria. Nigeria has an estimated population of 140 million people with high dependency at the urban centres while majority of the total population resides in the rural areas. The inability of the conventional universities in Nigeria to cope with admission challenges necessitated the establishment of ODL institutions. Despite this, there is need to ensure quality assurance in the established ODL institutions in Nigeria. Quality is a set of norm-

referenced standards that are built around what is expected as the minimum and beyond and assurance is the confidence one has about a thing after all possible doubt has been eliminated. Quality assurance is a continuous process of evaluating the quality of higher education system, institutions or programmes. Quality assurance could be done internally or externally. Quality assurance in ODL is the collections of policies, procedures, systems and practices internal or external to the organization designed to achieve, maintain and enhance quality. The kind of quality assurance systems that will be established for ODL institutions will depend on the size and nature of the institution. Issues in quality assurance in ODL institutions in Nigeria that are identified in this paper are: competition, accountability, customer's satisfaction, maintaining standards, improving employees' morale and motivation, credibility, prestige and status, and image and visibility. So also some of the challenges of quality assurance in ODL institutions in Nigeria are identified.

Recommendations

Based on the above, the following are recommended:

- ODL institutions in Nigeria should respond to the goals of national development in the changing context.
- ODL institutions in Nigeria should organize regular workshop/seminar on quality assurance for their staff.
- There should be a quality assurance unit dealing with quality assurance in ODL institutions in Nigeria.
- There should be intra - and inter - quality assurance in ODL institutions in Nigeria.
- Funding should be improved upon by funding agencies towards the provision of necessary materials and resources that would help in the quality assurance in Nigeria ODL institutions.
- The managers of ODL institutions in Nigeria should promote the use of technology to enhance quality instructional delivery.

References

- Akinpelu, J. A. 2005. Themes in Philosophy of Education for Teachers. Badan, Tarfak.
- Campbell, C. and Rozsnyai, C. 2002. Quality Assurance and the Development of Course Programmes. Papers on Higher Education Regional University Network on Governance and Management of Higher Education in South East Europe Bucharest, UNESCO.
- Carew, E. 1991. The Language of Money. Australia and New Zealand Banking Group; Docklands.
- Council for Higher Education accreditation (CHEA), 2001. Glossary of Key Terms in Quality Assurance and Accreditation. http://www.chea.org/international/inter_glossary01.html.
- Duff, T., Hegarty, J., and Hussey, M., 2000. Academic Quality Assurance in Irish Higher Education. Elements of a Handbook: Dublin, Blackhall.
- Federal Government of Nigeria. 2004. National Policy on Education. NERDC.
- Fraser, B.J. 1994. An Evaluation of Computer Assisted Learning in Geography in Singapore. Australian Journal of Educational Technology (AJET), 10(1), 55-68. www.ascilite.org.au/alet10/teh.html.
- Green, D. and Harvey, L, 1993. Defining Quality Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education. www.qube.ac.uk/QuBE/toolbox/think/transform.
- Harvey, L. 2004. Higher Education Quality Committee. 2004. Criteria for Institutional Audits Pretoria: Council On Higher Education. Available at <http://quality.up.ac.za/docs/index.html>.
- Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC), 2004. Framework for Programme Accreditation. Didacta Pretoria. <http://www.che.ac.za>.
- <http://www.audienglish.net/dictionary>.
- National Population Commission of Nigeria (NPCN), 2006. Report of the Final Census Results. National Population Commission. www.population.gov.ng.
- National Planning Commission – Nigeria, 2007. Current Manpower Need and Supply in Nigeria. www.afdevinfo.com/htmlreports/org/org_39139.html.

- Ojo, R.C. 2002. Universal Basic Education for Equal Educational Opportunity in Nigeria. A Philosophical Analysis of an Educational programme. Ph.D thesis submitted to the Department of Adult Education, University of Ibadan.
- Vlasceanu, L., Grunberg, L., and Parlea, D. 2004. Quality Assurance and Accreditation: A Glossary of Basic Terms and Definitions. Bucharest, UNESCO-CEPES. Papers on Higher Education. Available on <http://www.cepes.ro/publications/Default.html>.
- Webster, M. 1991. Webster Third Dictionary of Contemporary English. Merriam Webster.
- Wikipedia 2006. The Free Encyclopedia.
- Woodhouse, D. 1999. 'Quality and Quality Assurance' in Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), *Quality and Internationalisation in Higher Education pp29 -44*.