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ACCREDITATION AND QUALITY ASSURANCE NEXUS IN HIGHER EDUCATION PRODUCTION FUNCTION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract
The whole essence of higher education is to produce middle or higher-level manpower for the ever-growing and dynamic industries. If the foregoing statement is true, then there is a need for the manpower produced by these higher institutions to be of quality. Thus, two concepts come to play in recent times which are accreditation and quality assurance. Accreditation and Quality Assurance has established itself as the leading information and discussion forum for all aspects relevant to the quality of higher education. Accreditation procedures are required for universities and their degree programmes, for the introduction of new degree programmes at universities, and for the establishment of new universities, while quality assurance help universities achieve their goals. This paper thus discussed the concept of accreditation, quality assurance, accreditations, and their nexus within the context of higher education. It was concluded in this paper that accreditation is a tool of external quality assurance which is part of the quality assurance system in higher education. Thus, this paper suggested that there should be synergy between accreditation toolkits and other related activities, and quality assurance toolkits, among others for standardization and uniformity of the higher education system

Keywords: Accreditation, Quality assurance, Higher education production function

Introduction
The whole essence of higher education is to produce middle or higher-level manpower for the ever-growing and dynamic industries locally

and internationally. If the foregoing statement is true, then there is a need for the manpower produced by these higher education systems to be of quality. That is, be useful as input to the industries. The fast-changing and the volatile world has made quality education becoming a universal goal where higher education should aim at the formation of personalities and intellectual abilities of the graduates and their continuing education and must not be regarded solely as a means of providing them with diplomas or degrees and entry tickets to the job market. Striving for quality education has become critical for any nation that would not be content to be an underdeveloped dependent nation. To aspire to quality education is no longer a luxury. However, it appears most higher education institutions may have ignored quality education or neglected self-evaluation procedures at the risk of stagnation or worse. Quality assurance is in most cases encouraged by continuous self-assessment and by seeking some form of internal or sometimes external validation or accreditation. Apart from ensuring quality in the higher educational institution, accreditation can also provide public confidence or trust and accountability. Through accreditation, the reciprocity of recognition of qualifications and facilitation of the mobility of academic personnel is ensured. An inherent danger, however, is often encountered in higher educational institutions seeking external assessment and accreditation. This danger lies in placing a premium on the production of documents, the writing of quality assurance plans, and policy documents rather than the obvious implementation of effective means of quality assurance and accreditation. Thus, to increase the quality of the production function of these higher educational systems, two concepts come to play in recent times which are accreditation and quality assurance. The intellectual articulation and discussion of these two concepts and their nexus in higher education production function are imperative, hence, this paper.

Concept of Accreditation in Higher Education
Accreditation is a review process to determine if educational institutions and their programmes meet defined standards of quality. Once achieved, accreditation is not permanent; it is renewed periodically to ensure that the quality of the educational program is maintained. Accreditation is a process by which a higher education

institution and or its programme is periodically submitted to an overall or partial evaluation of its educational activity. This evaluation aims to determine whether and how the educational objectives of the institution are achieved in line with some sets of minimum standards. Accreditation, in education, is the process by which an association or agency evaluates an educational institution or programme of study and formally recognizes it as having met and satisfied, or exceeded, certain predetermined requirements and criteria or standards of educational quality. Accreditation has two fundamental purposes: to assure the quality of the institution or programme, and to assist in the improvement of the institution or programme. The purpose of accreditation is to ensure quality in an educational institution and its programmes through the use of standards and rigorous evaluation criteria. Accreditation is a system or process for providing public confidence or public trust and accountability. It can help to market the success of the institution within the local, national and international context and assist institutions to recruit students and staff.

Accreditation is a process of self-study and external quality review used in higher education to scrutinize an institution and/or its programmes for quality standards and the need for quality improvement (Obadara and Alaka, 2013). Accreditation according to Nwana (2008) refers to the protocols within the teaching and research programmes of an institution and are given the stamp of authenticity by an appropriate authority whether local, national, or international. The process of accreditation assumes that any endeavor or discipline has a body of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that competent authorities (or recognized authorities) regard as the minimum and/or optimum for those who aspire to practice or operate within the endeavor must possess or be seen to possess. This is to be so if they are to receive due recognition from the authorities, the system, or by society at large within the context of education.

Accreditation in higher education is a collegial process based on self and peer assessment. Its purpose is the improvement of academic quality and public accountability. Accreditation is the process by which a governmental or private body evaluates the quality of a higher education institution as a whole or a specific educational programme to formally recognize it as having met certain predetermined minimal criteria or standards. The result of this process is usually the awarding

of a status (a yes/no decision), of recognition, and sometimes of a license to operate with a time-limited validity. The process can imply initial and periodic self-study and evaluation by external peers. The accreditation process generally involves three steps with specific activities:

1)   a self-evaluation process conducted by the faculty, the administrators, and the staff of the institution or academic programme, resulting in a report that takes as its reference the set of standards and criteria of the accrediting body;

2)   a study visit conducted by a team of peers, selected by the accrediting organization, which reviews the evidence, visits the premises, and interviews the academic and administrative staff, resulting in an assessment report, including a recommendation to the commission of the accrediting body; and

3)   examination   by   the   commission of the evidence and recommendation based on the given set of criteria concerning quality and resulting in a final judgment and the communication of the formal decision to the institution and other constituencies, if appropriate" (Vlãsceanu, Grünberg and Pârlea, 2004:19)

According to Obadara and Alaka (2013), accreditation is a process that aids institutions in developing and sustaining effective educational programmes and assuring the educational community, the general public, and other organizations that the accredited institution has met a high standard of quality and effectiveness. It is a measure of the quality of academic programmes on an acceptable minimum standard provided by the accrediting agency. The process usually includes a self-evaluation, peer review, and a site visit. Accreditation is the establishment of the status, legitimacy, or appropriateness of an institution, programme, or module of study. The process of accreditation should be clear, specific, attractive, and efficient. These characteristics regard not only the role and the aims of accreditation, but also the identification of sources of information necessary for accreditation, the firm belief that the process of accreditation is understood by its beneficiaries, and the lack of ambiguity concerning

situations tending to influence accreditation positively. Accreditation is of concern to:

- newly established institutions of higher education and newly created academic programmes;
- the renewal of the accreditation of institutions or academic programmes which were accredited in the past; and
- the decision as to whether or not to accredit institutions or academic programmes when certain deficiencies are observed during the accreditation process.

Okebukola (2006) described accreditation as a process of examining the availability and adequacy of resources, and merit rating of resources and programmes to enhance the quality of output. This means that accreditation involves the process of ensuring that curricula, physical facilities, personnel, funds, and so on meet the needs of higher educational institutions to achieve their stated philosophy and objectives. Its fundamental purposes are quality assurance and quality improvement in higher education. A process of self-regulation through peer and professional review, it is the oldest such system in the world. Today colleges, polytechnics, and universities with their programmes willingly undergo periodic accreditation reviews by institutional accreditors such as the NUC, NBTE, and NCCE among others.

Accreditation in the Nigerian University system as stated on the National Universities Commission's website has three stated objectives namely:

1. Ensure that at least the provisions of the Minimum Academic Standards (MAS) documents are attained, maintained, and enhanced;
2. Assure employers of labor and other members of the community that Nigerian graduates of all academic programmes have attained an acceptable level of competence in their areas of specialization; and
3. Certify to the International community that the programmes offered in Nigerian universities are of high standards and that their graduates are adequate for employment and further studies.

In Nigeria, we have a system that allows the National Universities Commission (NUC), the National Board for Technical Education (NBTE), and the National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE) to be responsible for the accreditation of higher education. It is worthy to note here that the National Universities Commission (NUC) is a body in charge of the accreditation/quality assurance of Nigerian Universities, and the National Board for Technical Education (NBTE) is in charge of accreditation/quality assurance of Polytechnics and Colleges of Technology while the National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE) accredits and ensures quality in all Colleges of Education in the country. The three bodies are all agents of the Federal Ministry of Education. The Nigerian higher educational system also allows professional bodies like accounting, engineering, banking, surveyor, medicine, etc. to contribute to the quality and maintenance of standards for academic programmes.

There are two types of accreditation which are institutional accreditation and programme accreditation. Institutional accreditation refers to the process of the assessment of the operations of a higher education institution, guided by criteria and standards of an accreditation agency usually known as minimum standards or benchmarks, intending to confer upon the institution's accredited status. According to the National Universities Commission in Nigeria, the accreditation status for a programme is determined after a summary of the scores awarded by each panel member is entered into the Accreditation Panel Report Form (NUC/APRF) which becomes the accreditation panel's recommendation. The criteria for an award of accreditation status to a programme are as follows:

a. Full Accreditation Status: A total overall score of 70% and above in addition to scoring at least 70% in each of the core areas of Staffing, Academic Content, Physical Facilities, and Library.

b. Interim Accreditation Status: An overall score of 60% or more but less than 70% or an overall total score of 70% and above but with a score of less than 70% in any of the four core areas identified in (A) above.

c. Denied Accreditation Status: An overall score of less than 60%.

Concept of Quality Assurance in Higher Education

Quality Assurance is the proactive management of goods, services, and activities from the input stage, through the processes stage, to the output stage of production, and back to the environment. It aims at preventing quality problems and ensuring that only conforming products reach the environment for the consumption of customers. Quality assurance is a deliberate, systematic rational process of making a society's education system address the educational needs, challenges, and aspirations, by ensuring the use of available human and material resources most effectively and efficiently (Enowoghomwenma and Iguodala, 2021). Quality assurance as it applies to education could imply the extent to which the educational sub-system conforms to the established minimum standards and appropriateness of the inputs, processes, and outputs available within the environment for the delivery of the whole system's goals (Enowoghomwenma and Ogonor, 2018).

Quality assurance is a holistic approach covering all the processes in a higher education institution, to serve the students and other stakeholders in expected quality standards. Quality assurance in education is geared towards the attainment of education targets and improvement in the process of education service delivery in line with some sets of minimum standards. Quality assurance is a planned and systematic review process of an institution or programme to determine whether or not acceptable standards of education, scholarship, and infrastructure are being met, maintained, and enhanced (Hayward, 2001). The essence of quality assurance is to ensure that the outcome/product of an institution conforms and continues to conform to the expectations of the controlled procedures and policies.

Quality assurance procedures in any organization can serve two major purposes which are improvement and accountability.

- Improvement: Quality assurance procedures for improvement purposes aimed at promoting future performance rather than making judgments on past performance. The criteria and procedures used are intended to strengthen the conditions, motivations, scope, and level of information of higher education institutions (HEIs) towards quality improvement. "Procedures lead to ends that are specified in the interest of

the higher education institutions, and towards the specification of quality according to goals and criteria that are internal or may be made internal by the institutions" (Thune, 1996). Quality assurance for improvement purposes implies a formative approach, thus, the focus is not on control but on improving quality. Where this approach is predominant, the reports are written for an academic audience and the emphasis is on recommendations.

- Accountability: Quality procedures for accountability purposes are based on criteria set down by external authorities and institutions. They aim at strengthening external insight and control, with the possibility of undertaking external corrective action, if necessary. Quality assurance for accountability purposes implies the use of a summative approach. Where this approach predominates, reports include explicit statements of outcomes and are published (Billing, 2004). The purpose of the publication is to inform the public about the performance of higher education institutions (Middlehurst and Woodhouse, 1995). "A central aspect of 'accountability' in any form is that of 'rendering an account of what one is doing concerning goals that have been set or legitimate expectations that others may have of one's products, services or processes, in terms that can be understood by those who have a need or right to understand 'the account'. For this reason, accountability is usually, if not always, linked to public information and judgments about the fitness, the soundness or level of satisfaction achieved" (Middlehurst and Woodhouse, 1995).

In the educational system, there are two basic types of quality assurance internal quality assurance and external quality assurance. Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) in higher education has become one of the most important ways of monitoring and managing quality at the institutional level. This is usually called self-assessment using standardized toolkits. This is especially relevant in the context of the sector's rapid global expansion and diversification. There are specific IQA tools tailored specifically to improve university management and apply evidence to decision-making and strategic planning. Internal quality assurance refers to the policies and mechanisms implemented

in an institution or programme to ensure that it is fulfilling its purposes and meeting the standards that apply to higher education in general or to the profession or discipline in particular.

External quality assurance refers to the actions of an external body, which may be a quality assurance agency or anybody other than the institution that assesses its operation or that of its programmes, to determine whether it is meeting the agreed or predetermined standards. It also refers to the review by an external agency (e.g. a national quality assurance agency) or body (e.g. a professional body), which evaluates the operations of a university (institutional) or its programmes to ascertain the level of compliance with set minimum standards. External quality assurance is mainly carried out through the instrumentality of accreditation, and visitations and involves, as indicated earlier, a self-study, peer review, and a reporting system using standardized toolkits.

Every successful educational system must have and implement a quality assurance system.

Accreditation and Quality Assurance Nexus in Higher Education

The concern for quality in HEIs in Nigeria is most desirable for obvious reasons. Higher education is one of the nation's hopes for national development and technological breakthrough. One of the ways to guarantee that higher education is sensitive to national situations and offers value for money budgeted and spent on education is to constantly and efficiently assure quality in its production function for the provision of human and material resources that serve as input to other sectors of the economy. Nigeria has developed various methodologies such as quality assurance, accreditation, and audit among others to address the question of quality in the HEIs similar to those of the developed countries of the world. Quality Assurance QA) is a canopy concept for a host of activities that are designed to improve the quality of HEIs inputs, processes, and output. Therefore, quality assurance is not accreditation as some erroneously conceive. Accreditation is one of the activities in quality assurance. Thus, accreditation is one of the mechanisms for judging the quality of HEIs, while quality assurance aims to give stakeholders confidence about the management of quality and outcomes achieved. To this end, accreditation can be viewed as one of the processes of examining HEIs

procedures for assuring quality and assessing the arrangement for effective implementation of strategies for achieving stated goals.

Accreditation is the most widely used method of QA to be introduced recently in many higher education systems, either as a transformation of previously used methods of QA or as an entirely new method. It is based on assessment and evaluation methods, but it makes an explicit judgment on whether a programme or an institution meets particular quality standards, which may be either a set of minimum standards, standards of high quality or excellence, or based on the institution's purposes. Accreditation, therefore, inevitably involves some kinds of benchmarking and a set of existing quality criteria. Accreditation is thus the only method within the quality assurance spectrum which makes an explicit judgment about the degree to which an institution or programme meets the pre-determined standards or requirements. Accreditation against minimum (also called 'threshold') standards assures that the quality of programmes or institutions is acceptable. Accreditation is a quality assurance process under which services and operations of educational institutions or programmes are evaluated and verified by an external body to determine whether applicable and recognized standards are met. If standards are met, accredited status is granted by the appropriate agency. Accreditation is a quality assurance process that colleges, universities, and educational institutions or programmes undergo to confirm that they meet a strict and recognized set of service and operational standards.

Accreditation and quality assurance are related in a wider context (Okojie, 2008). It is essentially, about Quality and Standards (Oladusun, 2011). According to Harvey (2008) accreditation is official approval granted by an accrediting agency to an accredited institution at the end of a successful external assessment exercise. It could also mean the process by which the quality and standard of educational institutions are externally assessed. Conceptually, accreditation is a recognition given by a regulatory agency to an educational institution that satisfies specific standards or quality (Chernay, 2003). Okebukola (2006), defined accreditation as the establishment of the status, legitimacy, or appropriateness of an institution programme, it is a self-regulatory process by which governmental and non-governmental, voluntary association or rather statutory bodies grant recognition to

educational programmes or institutions that meet stated criteria of educational quality. The main focus of accreditation is ensuring and maintenance of standards in the academic programme offered in the universities. Abubakar (2015) defined accreditation as a process by which a non-governmental or private body evaluates the quality of a higher education institution as a whole or specific educational programme to formally recognize it as having met certain predetermined minimal criteria or standards. The result of this process is usually the award of the status of recognition and sometimes of a license to operate within time limit validity. Accreditation could also mean a process by which the quality and standard of educational institutions are assessed. In Nigeria, this quality assurance function is conducted by the National Universities Commission (NUC) for Federal, State, and Private Universities (Oladusun, 2011). Accreditation of degrees and other academic programmes by the NUC is a system of evaluating academic programmes in Nigerian universities to determine whether they have met the conditions in the Minimum Academic Standard documents. A process guided by criteria is generally based on judging an institution in the light of a stated purpose (Udom, 1996). Notably, the professional programme in Nigerian universities is also subjected to external accreditation by their professional bodies and agencies.

Quality assurance, on the other hand, is a system that includes all policies, procedures, processes, and actions intended to lead to the achievement, maintenance, monitoring, and enhancement of quality through the inspection or testing of samples (Rami and John, 2008). It is planned activities and actions necessary to provide adequate confidence that a programme, service, or product satisfies given requirements for quality (Olorunfemi and Ashaolu, 2010). Similarly, Adegbesan (2010) argued that quality assurance is related to accountability, the two are concerned with maximizing the effectiveness and efficiency of educational systems and services concerning their contexts, their missions, and their stated objectives. Quality assurance in education focuses on the learners' entry behaviors, characteristics, and attributes including some demographic factors that can inhibit or facilitate their learning, the teachers' entry qualifications, values, pedagogical skills, professional preparedness, subject backgrounds, philosophical orientation, the teaching/learning

processes including the structure of the curriculum and learning environment and the outcomes, which are defined for different levels in terms of knowledge, skills, and attitudes including appropriate and relevant instruments to assess these objectives (Ehindero, 2004). Quality assurance helps to establish an institution's good reputation and image by defining standards of achievements, documented procedures for all identified processes, establishing ways of responding to issues, and clear accountability for outcomes (Akerele, 2008). Quality assurance of university education has to do with meeting acceptable standards as defined by quality assurance bodies or appropriate academic and professional associations to garner greater public confidence, more satisfied students, efficient processes, and staff who are confident in their job.

According to Akerele (2008), through quality assurance, students are more likely to experience better quality instructions, learning materials, and interactions with the institution and its staff, leading to enhanced learning outcomes. According to Uvah (2005) quality assurance in education is a higher evaluation accorded to an educative process that has demonstrated that students' educational development has been enhanced. It also implies the achievement of set objectives, fulfillment of the general educational aims of autonomy, ability to participate in the reasoned discourse of critical self-evaluation, and coming to a proper awareness of the ultimate contingencies of all thoughts and actions It ensures that capable and efficient teachers, adequate and accessible facilities and materials needed for effective teaching and learning and preparedness of graduates for meeting the challenges of life and for solving the societal problems are available. Akerele (2008) defined quality assurance as a set of elements that constitute the input and output process of education that provide services that satisfy the internal and external constituencies by meeting their implicit and explicit expectations. In a similar vein, Oderinde (2004) referred to quality assurance as consisting of two aspects, internal and external. The internal aspect is concerned with the implementation of the school objectives while the external aspect deals with the implementation of national objectives, which are prerequisites to the achievement of quality in any educational institution.

Quality is no longer perceived as an institutional internal matter but as one which is of concern to various stakeholders both internally and externally. The existence of a Quality Assurance (QA) system establishes a sense of accountability and clarifies the roles and responsibilities of providers of higher education, investors, future employers, students, and other delivery partners in ensuring that programmes of study and their related support infrastructure are of the highest standards. To achieve this, accreditation which is a form of external quality assurance process under which services and operations of educational institutions or programmes are evaluated by an external body (accrediting agency like the National Universities Commission) to determine if applicable standards are met comes to play. Accreditation is both a status and a process of quality assurance. As a status, accreditation provides public notification that an institution or programme meets standards of quality set forth by an accrediting agency. As a process, accreditation reflects the fact that in achieving recognition by the accrediting agency, the institution or program is committed to self-study and external review in seeking not only to meet standards but to continuously seek ways in which to enhance the quality of education and training provided. Generally, accreditation is important to higher education institutions as it is a tool for external quality assurance which is a type of quality assurance. Accreditation is inextricably linked to the quality assurance system of any higher institution.

Conclusion

It was therefore concluded in this paper that accreditation is not quality assurance as some erroneously conceive; however, accreditation is one of the activities in quality assurance system. Thus, Quality Assurance (QA) is a canopy concept for a host of activities that are designed to improve the quality of the HEIs production function (inputs process and output). Accreditation is one of the mechanisms for judging the quality of HEIs while quality assurance aims to give education stakeholders confidence about the management of quality and outcomes achieved. Most importantly, there is a nexus between accreditation and quality assurance in higher education. This implies that accreditation is a tool of external quality assurance which is part of the quality assurance system in higher education

Recommendations
It was recommended in this paper that there should be synergy between accreditation toolkits, and related activities and quality assurance toolkits, among others for standardization and uniformity of the higher education system. The accreditation of institutions and programmes mostly focuses on strengthening the institutions and programmes production function in terms of their input, process, and output for quality assurance that will lead to quality improvement.

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