ISSUES AND CHALLENGES IN ENHANCING QUALITY ASSURANCE IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

With the increasing acceptance of Open Distance Learning (ODL) as a major channel of widening access to higher education in Nigeria, it has become increasingly necessary that Quality Assurance (QA) process is developed and maintained if the ODL provision is to be relevant and recorgnised as complimentary to conventional higher education. With the emergence of many higher institutions, what used to be correspondent was turned to distance education, which in most cases constituted an integral part of existing institution with the exception of the National Teachers' Institute (NTI), Kaduna, which was established in 1976 as solely independent distance leaning institution in Nigeria today.

The issue of quality provision has been emphasised by stakeholders including the governments, private groups, individual and the society involved in an expanded system of higher education. The onus of quality assurance falls mainly on the government because it controls the regulatory bodies like National Universities Commission. This is why it is essential for the government agencies to conduct regular monitoring and evaluation activities in order to ensure the desire quality in all the programmes as well as the institutions with a view to enhancing learning outcomes and performance of distance learners. The difficulty of recommending a universally acceptable quality assurance strategy can not be denied because the issue surrounding distance education, the background of the clienteles, the extent and level of programmes covered vary from one country to another. Despite the difficulties, the underlining principles that should guide quality assurance is that the quality of course delivery should influence the quality of learning which in turn promotes quality delivery.

This paper therefore provides a synergy on quality assurance demand as a policy stand on the establishment of institutions, the type of programmes, the quality control and entry requirements on the programmes and also calls on appropriate regulatory bodies to ensure quality assurance in Open Distance Learning in Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is one of the largest (923,768 km2) and geographically, socially and culturally most diversified African countries. It is the most populous country of Africa (the population estimated at 140 million in 2006 (National Population Commission), and potentially one of the richest. Richly endowed with human and natural resources, Nigeria is, however, highly dependent on external economic sector, particularly oil revenues (93 per cent of exports in 1989).However, the literacy rate in Nigeria put at about 60% does not show much appreciable governmental intervention in literacy promotion with high dependency at the urban areas, while about 70 of the total population reside in the rural areas.

The origin of distance education in Nigeria dates back to the practice of correspondence education in preparing for the General Certificate in Education (GCE) as a prerequisite for the London matriculation Examination for the admission of University of London. However, with the emergence of many conventional higher institutions in Nigeria, what used to be correspondent becomes distance education, which in most cases constituted an integral part of existing institution with the exception of the National Teachers' Institute (NTI), Kaduna. The NTI was established in 1976 as solely independent distance learning institution in Nigeria with a legal backing in 1987 to upgrade teachers for the implementation of the Universal Primary Education (UPE) now Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme introduced in 1999. Ahmadu Bello University's Teachers In-service programmes (TISEP) established in 1976 was to produce middle level teachers for Nigeria's primary schools. Others like the Correspondence and Open Studies Unit (COSU) (1974) later Correspondence and Open Studies Institute (COSIT (1999), now called Distance Learning Institute (DLI) (2004) of University of Lagos, established in 1974 to produce University graduates in disciplines necessary to meet national manpower needs in such areas as teaching, nursing, accountancy and so on.

The University of Ibadan, Ibadan, is not left behind in the race of provision for distance education in Nigeria. The External Study Programme (ESP) of the University later Centre for External Studies (CES), now Distance Learning Centre (DLC) was established in 1988 by the Department of Adult Education, Faculty of Education to provide on the job training for holders of Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE) to get University Degrees. The programmes for distance learning have spread to other faculties such as Agriculture, Arts and Social Sciences, with opportunity to offer Diploma and first degree of the University. The report on the emergence of ODL in Nigeria would not be completed if the establishment of the National Open University (NOUN) was not mentioned. The NOUN was established to provide opportunities for learners in professional bodies, governmental institutions that wish to have degrees and certificates in law, business administration, sciences and education related courses.

There are various programmes designed under the umbrella of distance learning approach that cut across various institutions of higher learning in the country, this led to the establishment of study centres and satellite campuses. The growth in these campuses gave way to proliferation of programmes. When the issue of the proliferation was becoming rowdy and unbearable the Federal Government had to intervene to stem the growing of these centres limiting their establishment within the radius of mother institutions.

There is a high demand for higher education as majority of the school certificate holders that are qualified for admission to higher institutions of their choice could not do so because of keen competition to do so at the approved conventional schools available. Out of the 1,275,330 candidates that sat for the West African Senior School Certificate (WASSCE) in 2007, only a quarter passed the examination. Olayinka (2006) reports that no less than 1million candidates apply for university admissions every year of which the existing 74 Federal, State and Private Universities of which less than 20% are offered places, leaving the alternative of Open Distance Learning option for those students who could not gain admission to the conventional institutions (see Table 1).

Table 1

Year	No of Application	No of Admission	Admission as % of Application
1999	418,292	64,368	15.35
2000	416,318	45,766	11
2001	749,419	90,769	12.12
2002	994,380	51,845	5.22
2003	1,046,950	105,157	10.05
2004	841,878	122,492	14.55
2005	916,371	65,609	7.1

Source: Statistics of Education in Nigeria 1999-2005

It is obvious from the foregoing that the formal school system can not meet the needs and expectations of both the government and individual bodies projection for human development. Despite this need, there must be concerted effort at ensuring the quality of ODL. Any consideration of quality assurance in the context of ODL will therefore entail a detailed examination of those characteristics that can give credibility to the various programmes and the products of ODL in Nigeria. With the increasing acceptance of Open Distance Learning (ODL) as widening access to higher education in Nigeria, it has become increasingly necessary that Quality Assurance (QA) process is developed and maintained if the ODL provision is to be relevant and more functional that the products recognised the conventional higher education in emerging open learning environment.

Indeed quality assurance in higher education is an issue that has received considerable attention of late, the work of scholars such as O'Neill and Palmer, 2004; Steyn and Schulze, 2003. Much more than the increasing numbers of applicants, there are also other reasons such as: change in work place and employment dynamics, majority of our people in developing countries start work after the professional diploma after secondary education because of the cost of education and opportunities that are available for low income earners in industries.

The quality of course delivery influences the quality of learning which, in turn permits the identification of criteria for quality delivery (Hunt, 1998) in the ODL setting, therefore, it becomes a

question of getting appropriate quality assurance processes in place and administering them concern for both the conventional education and ODL include for example content of the course, learning and teaching materials, accreditation of programmes, issue of quality in certificate awarded, etc. In as much as the same tutors are used for both the students in ODL and regular schools, the major challenge for the ODL providers therefore is how to maintain high standards of the programmes in view of the fact that the ODL operate in an environment characterised by a complex community of students with varying levels of capability and availability. Large enrolment was considered a goal and an achievement of Distance Education (DE) institutions while quality has not got attention it deserved and this attitude made it weaker option; recognition alluded DE. Secondly, in the context of structural readjustment, DE started focusing more on surplus generation or profit making practices in their operations. The fact of profit making intentions question the sincerity of the institutions, which hitherto, are prestigious institutions that were earlier established as conventional education providers.

Quality Imperative in ODL
The term 'quality' is often used in a vague, blurred way. If someone talks about 'working on quality', they may simply mean activities designed to improve the organisation and its services. Quality is essentially about learning what you are doing well and doing it better. It also means finding out what you may need to change to make sure you meet the needs of your service users. There are two definitive types of "quality": Quality of design and Quality of the process

Quality is defined as the level of value in a product or a level of achievement, a standard against which to judge others (Uvah, 2005) Quality assurance which is the process for determining this, is defined as both fitness for purpose and fitness of purpose. While fitness for purpose is related to the university's missions, that is what the universities have set for themselves; fitness of purpose refers to their capacity to satisfy the national goals of higher education (Odejide, 2007). Therefore Odejide opines further that the principal responsibility for quality assurance rests with the institution themselves and not with the National Universities Commission as it does at present. In other words, it is in the interest of the institutions to carry out periodic audits of their programmes in which they identify their strengths and weaknesses. Audit should cover teaching effectiveness, assessment of courses and lecturers, textbooks facilities, capacity development. The purpose is to institutionalize self regulation and ensure continuous improvement and innovation.

Two principles should characterize attempts to ensure quality in higher education provision. The first identifies learners' cognitive development as the major explicit objective of all education systems. Accordingly, the success with which systems achieve this is one indicator of their quality. The second emphasizes education's role in promoting values and attitudes of responsible citizenship and in nurturing creative and emotional development. The achievement of these objectives is more difficult to assess and compare across countries (EFA Global Monitoring Report, 2005).The quality of course delivery influences the quality of learning which in turns permit the identification of criteria for quality of course delivery (Hunt, 1998).

Quality assurance becomes important for ODL during the 1980s and 90s, as a result of its use by public sector providers, and also as a result of the growing emphasis on accountability in education generally. Many governments at the state level have expanded post-secondary education in order to meet the needs of their states for more skilled and capable labour. Concepts from business have been introduced into education, as part of this drive to ensure that the increased investment in provision will provide the outputs that governments require. The issue of quality of provision has also been emphasized by the demand for accountability to all the stakeholders involved in an expanded system of higher education in particular, including students as well as employers.

It may be almost impossible to recommend a specific quality assurance strategy that can universally be adopted because the distance education programme, the background of the clientele it serves, the extent and levels of programmes offered, the modus operandi and the purpose and scope of the distance education outfit may vary widely from institution to institution and from one country to another. It must, however, be noted that the focus of any quality system must be to satisfy the needs and aspirations of the learners vis-à-vis the appropriate delivery of services. There are many factors that may be considered for the improvement of the management strategy of distance education programmes in order to achieve higher quality. Akinpelu (1995); Braimoh, Adeola and Lephoto (1999)

have stated that the major aspects, to which good attention should be paid, in a distance education delivery mode, include the following:

- admission requirements and procedures;

- development and production of instructional materials;

- structure and management of the delivery system;

- student assessment procedures;

- quality of materials used for teaching and promotion of learning;

- problem of assessment of the effectiveness of an individual distance education facilitator since distance education has the element of quasi-bureaucratization (teamwork);

- the student support services;

- monitoring, evaluation and feedback systems

- availability of adequate human and material resources for the operation of the programme.

This is not far from Egbokhare (2006) identification of Quality of Staff Environment of Instruction; Content of Instruction; Student Support Services; Culture of Quality; Management by processes and facts; Continuous learning and Improvement; Quality of Instruction and Feedback from clients and Consumers of products as the basis of quality assurance.

Quality Assurance in ODL: Challenges

The inability to learn while at work is one reason why distance learning is not as effective as full time immersion in a learning community. Leaning is most effective when it is a student's full time-time job (Egbokhare, 2006 quoting Rosenfield, 2000), this is the more reason why quality of programmes must be maintained in order to at least produce a justified learning outcomes. However, just like the National University Extension Association (NUEA) is the body responsible for quality control and promotion of standard among the universities in the USA. This has not been so in Nigeria, the National University Commission (NUC) is responsible for accreditation of all programmes both in quality control and assessment of universities regular.

The National Teachers Institute (NTI, Kaduna) oversee the running of Grade II and National certificate in Education programmes run through distance learning channel. While the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB) control the admission exercise of candidates for Universities and Polytechnic or National Certificate in Education admission for regular students, there has been no specific regularity body assessing the admission process for the ODL programmes. Among other challenges facing the ODL in Nigeria are the determinations of:

- the institution's notion of quality;
- the quality management goals, objectives and expected outcomes;
- a framework for the quality management
- a framework for resource generation for quality management, and
- a framework for monitoring and evaluating the outcomes of the implementation of the strategic plan.

Hence, there is need for Institutions Departmental Quality Promotion Unit, Faculty Quality Promotion Panel; College Quality Promotion Committee and the Institution Quality Promotion Committee. It is therefore essential that a particular regulatory body whose main duty to oversees the running of programmes in ODL be established in the country as this will cut the excess and proliferation of programmes put in place by various institutions in Nigeria.

Appropriate structures must be put in place to facilitate due processes on Ethics, Standards and Curriculum Development. It is important to note that since the personnel being used for regular programmes are also been used for the ODL, for the success of ODL therefore, they are factors to reckon with. They must be adequately empowered so that they would give in their best and the products of ODL would seize to be seen as inferior to those produced in the conventional system of education. Lastly students in ODL should be given opportunity to think, reflect, challenge and engage in dialogue with their lectures through effective student support services whenever the opportunity arises.

Conclusion

In Nigeria, there is a high demand for higher education as majority of the school certificate holders that are qualified for admission to higher institutions of their choice could not do so because of keen competition to do so at the approved conventional schools available. About 20% of a million candidates that applied for admission into higher education in regular institutions are able to gain admission. With the increasing acceptance of Open Distance Learning (ODL) as widening access to higher education in Nigeria, it has become increasingly necessary that Quality Assurance (QA) process is developed and maintained if the ODL provision is to be relevant and more functional that the products recognised the conventional higher education in emerging open learning environment. There are various challenges facing the ODL in Nigeria and these stem from the admission requirements; quality of the teaching and learning process; management; monitoring and evaluation of quality of services provided in the various institutions that embrace ODL. This paper recommends that a particular regulatory body whose main duty would be to oversee the running of programmes in ODL be established in the country as this will cut the excess and proliferation of programmes put in place by various institutions in Nigeria.

Recommendations

If possible, this paper advocates a situation whereby examinations are drawn at the same time and administered on both the conventional and ODL candidates offering the same courses as in the regular class. As been done at the University of Ibadan, other institutions must ensure that students are admitted all round on the same requirements, without any waiver. Nigeria needs to move up technologically with the development in the ICT world by providing challenges and better opportunities to students who enrolled in the ODL programmes. This paper suggest that a collaborative efforts should be encouraged between universities and governments through regulatory bodies for modalities of working together to design appropriate policy that would give recognition to ODL products. There is the need for concerted efforts for the stakeholders to put more efforts on quality of services and products in the provision of ODL so as to meet the test of time in as much as the conventional and ODL students are competing in the same labour market. For NUC, it has not been able to coordinate the activities of the growing conventional higher institutions in the country, hence, this paper recommends that an independent body be established to monitor and regulate the activities of ODL as been done in developed nations of the world.

* The author of this paper is a product of DLC having enrolled in 1991/92 sessions and completed in 1997/98 session

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