QUALITY ASSURANCE AND THE NATIONAL VIRTUAL LIBRARY INITIATIVE

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Abstract

The paper revisits the challenges of Nigerian Universities in global arena and the need for quality assurance for Nigerian University Education System. Attempts made to maintain quality assurance by relevant regulatory bodies were highlighted. The place of National Virtual Library Initiative in ensuring quality assurance in Nigerian University Education System was x-rayed and the way forward provided. It concludes that, because provision of library and information services are central to effective teaching, research and learning, any attempt to ensure quality assurance in our educational institutions particularly in the university systems must consider the provision of library and information services to be accessed and utilized physically and remotely irrespective of the time..

Introduction

It is generally agreed that Education, particularly the University Education serves as a propeller and driving force for the overall development of any nation. High levels of education are needed to facilitate more rapid growth and development of the developing economies so as to catch-up with the advanced economies. The contributions of university education to rapid socio-economic and political advancement of a nation can be conceived within the perspective of its ability and capacity to:

- ❖ Produce entrepreneurial graduates at all levels of human needs
- ❖ Provide skills development opportunities to ensure high-quality graduates
- ❖ Provide opportunities for conducting research severally and collaboratively with interested organizations and institutions in need of such services.
- ❖ Provide research and development infrastructure as well as research programmes that could encourage and generate scientific and technological development opportunities and also provide insights into such opportunities for application and adoption.

The demands of the 21st century will require Nigerian Universities to have the capacity to focus on such critical areas of needs as:

- ❖ Agricultural production and processing
- ❖ Telecommunication and transportation
- ❖ Geosciences
- ❖ ICT
- ❖ Space and nuclear sciences
- ❖ Electrical and instrumentation technology

- ❖ Project management
- ❖ Aeronautics engineering and safety
- ❖ Peace and conflict studies
- ❖ Bio-technology and renewable energy
- ❖ Engineering design and applications etc
- ❖ Disaster management

These expectations presuppose that the Nigerian Universities have to compete favourable with other universities globally in the education, training and production of quality graduates who will transform the country scientifically and technologically to cope with the phenomenon of globalization and other related expectations such as: the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), World Declaration on Higher Education for the 21st century, the Association of African Universities (AAU) declaration on the African University in the Third Millennium, the Internationalization of Higher Education in Africa, NEPAD, NEEDS, the Accra declaration on GATS, NAPEP, UPEACE and EFA.

Quality Assurance in Nigerian Universities

Quality assurance in Nigerian university education and indeed in all Nigerian tertiary education systems should be of concern to all. It has been and it is still a thing of concern the world over principally due to the challenges posed by globalization and the need for continued scientific and technological advancement. These challenges have brought about increasing interest and concern for quality and standards of education to reflect the expected rapid growth of higher education and its costs to the public and private funds and finances. In effect therefore, if Nigeria is to achieve its desires and ambition to be the most dynamic and knowledge based economy in Africa and among the advancing

economies of the world, its university education system and indeed its tertiary educational system as a whole need to take the issues of quality and standard of the programmes seriously. Government should be ready and willing to put in place strategies for ensuring and demonstrating the application and maintenance of quality and standards in the educational systems. The internationalization of higher education, as consequence of Accra declaration, Association of African Universities declaration, the World Declaration on higher education and the need to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, have made the need for the application and maintenance of quality assurance in the Nigerian educational system more critical.

The paradigm of quality assurance of university education and indeed of any other type of educational setting could be conceived within the following framework:

- **Legal frameworks**: governance, management responsibilities, stakeholding, accountability etc
- **Educational process**: admission and graduation requirements, student enrolment, curriculum design and delivery, learning support systems, system assessment monitoring and evaluation
- **Learning** experience: students' acquired skills and experience, consumer experience and expectation, etc
- **Outcomes:** quality of certification, external and internal recognition of certificate awarded, etc

Our attempt to consider the issue of quality assurance in Nigerian university education and indeed in other types of educational set up should be governed by some basic questions. These include:

- To what extent can university education contribute to achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and sustainable development so as to achieve the objectives of EFA, NEPAD, NEEDS, SEEDS and NAPEP?
- How can university system provide the necessary enabling environment for the education, training and retraining of skilled and personnel?
- How can the universities effectively relate and develop viable partnership with government agencies, private sector, civil society and local community in the education and training of the citizenry; conduct researches and utilize the results; encourage and nurture creativity and innovations?
- How can the universities evolve inter and intra-relationships and partnerships within and outside the campuses at home and abroad to facilitate collaborative teaching and research, information access and retrieval, and dissemination of research and other scholarly outputs?
- How can the universities serve as platforms for the development, adoption and deployment of new scientific and technological advances?

Answers to these questions will no doubt pose some rethink on the state of our universities particularly with respect to their capacity and ability to meet up to the expectations without any headache.

Genesis of Maintaining Quality Assurance in Nigerian Universities

Several challenges and shortcomings have necessitated the need to consider with all seriousness the maintenance of quality assurance in Nigerian Universities by the NUC; being the government regulatory body of the Nigerian University System, vested

with the responsibility of repositioning the system to cope with the challenges of global competition and provision of quality university education in Nigeria.

Some of the challenges and shortcomings that could be said to have precipitated the need for maintenance of quality assurance in Nigerian university education and to some extent in other types of educational systems in the country include:

- The emergence of new aggressive providers of education at all levels especially by the private sector initiative including the Nigerian Open University, Distance learning programmes and sandwich programmes. This creates a complex and competitive environment for establishing new universities and indeed for the establishment of other types of educational institutions and programmes lavishly across the country.
- There are new developments, techniques and methodologies of education delivery system at all levels especially through virtual learning environments and approaches; with the attendant opportunities to enhance the quality and quantity of learning through the use of ICTs.
- Education and educational services are being conceived as public and private good and a source of intellectual capital that can be traded by business enterprises in competitive environment within the framework of globalization, knowledge expansion and technological advancement applications.
- The governments at all levels and the society at large conceived university education as instrument for economic, social and political advancement, for life-long learning, for accessibility to all the good things of life and for the overall societal development, cohesion and social mobility.

- There is a general perception of diminishing competitiveness of products from Nigerian university education system and indeed from other types of educational systems in the country. The quality of their products are said to have fallen short of the demands of the labour market.
- There is a rising graduate unemployment in the labour market reflecting a like mismatch between training and labour market expectations.
- There is an urgent need for rapid development and advancement of Nigeria in all spheres of human endeavour of which university education is expected to serve as catalyst.
- The need to expand access to university education to accommodate the products of Education For All (EFA), of which the Universal Basic Education (UBE) is a part and component, without compromising quality in the face of increasing demand for quantity.
- The concomitant effect of instability in academic calendar due to strikes by both academic and non-academic staff and the brain drain syndrome as a consequence of poor teaching environment predicated by dilapidated structures, obsolete laboratory and workshop equipments.

There is an insignificant level of presence and use of ICTs for teaching, research, information access and dissemination and domiciling research outputs on the Internet and in electronic journals and abstracts and other types of publications.

- The poor showing of Nigerian universities in the global rankings conducted in 2004 and 2005 by Shanghai Jiao Tong University (Academic Ranking of World

Universities) and the Times Higher Education supplement for ranking of the world's best 200 universities (NUC Monday Memo: 2006).

- The rapid expansion of Nigerian University System without corresponding increases in the levels of funding and physical facilities resulting to some negative consequences in the programmes taught especially in the sciences.

A critical analysis of these challenges and shortcomings no doubt point to the fact that any attempt to ensure quality university education and indeed quality tertiary education system in the country is a worthwhile endeavour. This calls for concerted effort by both the NUC as the university regulatory body and the universities severally and collectively to ensure quality in the face of rising demand for quantitative university education by the increasing troops of applicants knocking at their doors.

Attempts to Ensure Quality in Nigerian University Education

The Nigerian Universities, like other universities world-wide, have their internal mechanism for quality assurance of their programmes. These include:

- internal and external moderation of examinations
- oral defense of students' projects, theses and dissertation
- industrial attachment, and
- regular semester examinations.

The first attempt outside the universities to ensure quality in the Nigerian university education could be said to have started with the establishment of NUC in 1974 and empowered to accredit all university programmes in 1985 (NUC: 2004). Some of the NUC attempts to ensure quality assurance in the Nigerian University System include:

- ❖ setting of minimum academic standards for all undergraduate programmes and now postgraduate programmes taught in the universities. This results in the publication of Minimum Academic Standards (MAS).
- ❖ Accreditation of programmes in Nigerian Universities and making the result consequential
- ❖ Closure of mushroom Distance Learning Centres
- ❖ Introduction of Direct Teaching and Laboratory Cost Grant (DTLC) for procurement of consumables and maintenance of equipments in laboratories
- ❖ The provision of Teaching and Research Equipment Grant (TREG) for acquisition of modern teaching and research equipments for 10 years.
- ❖ Development of strategic planning to enable universities be more focused in their academic and non-academic pursuits, projects and programmes
- ❖ Institutionalization of verification exercise and provision of approvals before establishment of new academic programmes and institutions
- ❖ Introduction of universities ranking to institutionalized healthy competition among the universities in the discharge of their basic functions of teaching, research and community service
- ❖ Curriculum review/reform resulting into setting of new benchmarks and Minimum Academic Standards (BMAS).
- ❖ Introduction of carrying capacity/admission quota to match student enrolment with available human and material resources to control over-enrolment.
- ❖ Introduction of Nigerian Universities Research and Development Fair (NURESDEF) to among others things provide opportunities for networking and

collaboration among academic researchers, institutions and between them and industry and with institutions abroad.

- ❖ Introduction of Central Research Fund (CRF) scheme to fund top quality multi disciplinary and inter-disciplinary priority research from the universities for national development.
- ❖ Introduction of Nigerian University Doctoral Theses Award Scheme (NUDTAS) to encourage high quality research among doctoral students in the Nigerian university system.
- ❖ Introduction of policy for encouraging universities to focus on programmes they have more strength and capacity thereby leading to eventual evolution of Centres of Excellence.
- ❖ Introduction of special Doctoral studies scholarships for university teachers and establishment of strong international academic linkages with foreign universities
- ❖ Introduction of Nigerian Experts and Academics in the Diaspora Scheme (NEADS) to enhance teaching and research in Nigerian Universities through the participation of Nigerian experts and academics mostly brain-drained during the hard times of the university system.

On its own part, the government is supporting quality assurance in the Nigerian universities through:

- ❖ Setting up of Education Section Analysis (ESA) network monitoring committee to stem the decay in the education sector in the country (Batagarawa 2000).

- ❖ Introduction of post-UME screening to ensure that only deserving candidates who would be able to benefit themselves and the society from participation in higher education are admitted into the universities
- ❖ Establishment of Virtual Institute for Higher Education Pedagogy (VIHEP) to contribute to the improvement of quality teaching and learning in Nigerian Universities.
- ❖ The Virtual (Digital) Library Project Initiative to improve the quality of teaching and research in institutions of higher learning through the provision of current journals, books and other information resources and also enhance easy access to global information resources.

The National Virtual Library Initiative (NVL) www.nigerianvirtual library.net

There is no doubt in the fact that provision of relevant variety of information and information resources is central to the success of any project. This is also relevant in the provision of effective teaching, research and learning.

The National Virtual Library initiative was born out of the need to supplement and complement the inadequacies of the conventional libraries in our educational institutions especially in the areas of providing current information resources and access to global information resources and services. The objectives of the NVL project are:

- ❖ Improve the quality of teaching and research in institutions of higher learning in Nigerian through the provision of current books, journals and other information resources
- ❖ Enhance access of academic libraries serving the education community in Nigeria to global library and information resources.

- ❖ Ensure scholarship, research and life long learning through the establishment of permanent access to shared digital archival collections
- ❖ Provide guidance for academic libraries on applying appropriate technologies in the production of digital library resources
- ❖ Advance the use and usability of global network of library resources
- ❖ Complement the hard copy based libraries in educational institutions to counter the difficulties they are currently experiencing due to the astronomical cost of printed learning and teaching materials.

A critical analysis of the objectives of NVL confirm the need for both printed and electronic formats of information resources to support the teaching and research functions of the libraries in our educational institutions. The lecturers, researcher and students and indeed other members of the university community at large require up-to-date information to keep abreast of current developments in their areas of study, specialization and job functions. This informs why the content of the NVL include:

- ❖ Current journals, books, and other library materials especially those published by Nigeria academics
- ❖ Current core journals and text books in major disciplines offered in Nigerian Universities published aboard
- ❖
- ❖ All major Nigerian dailies domiciled on the Internet such as the New Nigeria, Vanguard, Tribune, Guardian, Comet and This Day newspapers.
- ❖ Lecture notes and videos of lectures
- ❖ Database of experts on higher education in Nigeria, etc.

Currently, the NVL has in its collection (NUC: 2002):

- Over 4000 foreign published journals containing full-length articles in Agriculture, Engineering, Medicine, Educatioh, Social Sciences, Humanities and Law.
- Over 1000 electronic books in all disciplines
- Over 100 journals published in Nigerian Universities in Agriculture, Medicine and Humanities
- On-line course materials from Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) USA.
- Internet ready Nigeria Newspapers
- Huge database of Nigerian experts in higher education.

Other virtual library project initiatives aimed at facilitating access to information without limitation to time and location of the information resources and users in the Nigerian educational institutions include:

- School Net for schools supported by PTF
- Teacher Net for Colleges of Education supported by NCCE
- Poly Net for the Polytechnics supported by the NBTE
- Library automation projects supported by the NUC
- Nigerian Universities Management Information System (NUMIS) supported b y the NUC
- Nigerian Universities Network (NuNet) supported by NUC
- Virtual Institution for Higher Education Pedagogy (VIHEP) supported by the NUC

- ❖ Virtual Institute for Higher Education in Africa (VIHEAF) supported by NUC and UNESCO
- ❖ Nigerian University Library Consortium project initiated by eFL.net
- ❖ The EBISCO journal subscription project

An examination of the above virtual library initiatives point to the fact that attempt is being made to facilitate easy access to current information resources critically needed by all the stakeholders in the Nigerian university education system to facilitate quality teaching, research and community service. It is expected that the result of the initiative will translate into having quality university education and quality products that will cope with the yearnings of labour markets at home and abroad.

Considering the existing situations in the Nigerian universities, particularly as it relates to the level of ICT applications in the library and for teaching and research, it could be said that much is still required to exploit the potentials of the NVL fully. Some of the shortcomings needed to be addressed include:

- ❖ Inadequate funds to finance ICT-related projects on the campuses and particularly in the library even with the encouragement of the NUC that 20% of the Universities' teaching and research equipment grants be devoted for ICT development
- ❖ The slow phase in the application of ICTs in the University Libraries especially with respect to library automation and digitization
- ❖ Lack of ample library staff with ICT training background
- ❖ Inadequacy in the number of Internet café in and around the University campuses
- ❖ Prevalence of computer illiterates among the university staff and students

- ❖ Poor maintenance culture
- ❖ General lack of project management skills
- ❖ Lack of relevant ICT infrastructure, especially the Vsat, required to facilitate data and information communication among the university libraries and in-between the university libraries and the NVL centre.
- ❖ Poor Internet connectivity in the university libraries
- ❖ Inability of the university libraries to subscribe to all journals published in and around the University for inclusion in their on-line databases.
- ❖ Ineffective network communication systems in the libraries and in the university campuses.

In the light of these inadequacies and in order to ensure maximum utilization of the NVL for teaching, research and community service in the Nigeria universities, for quality assurance, there is the need for:

- ❖ Evolving and strengthen mechanisms and techniques for quality assurance in Nigerian university systems.
- ❖ The implementation of the NUC proposal on the use of 20% teaching and research equipment grants for ICT development.
- ❖ Deliberate policy for strengthening capacity building of library staff especially on ICT application and maintenance
- ❖ Encouragement of staff and students to be computer literates
- ❖ Institutionalization of loan scheme for staff to acquire computers especially with wireless connectivity capacity

- ❖ Installation of dedicated Vsat in all the university libraries for inter connectivity with the NVL, and among the university libraries for provision of on-line resources and services within and outside the universities
- ❖ Installation and sustenance of communication network systems in the library and in the university campus to enhance data and information access, retrieval and transfer.
- ❖ Creation and sustenance of viable strategies and mediums of educating and enlightening the university community on the potentials of the library in the provision of printed and electronic format information resources at physical and remote regimes
- ❖ Creation and digitization of databases of journals publications, theses and dissertations and other strategic documents from the university for on-online access, retrieval and dissemination
- ❖ Engagement in collaboration and linkages initiatives among the Nigerian University libraries and with the foreign ones of which there should be human capacity building component for the of which the library staff.
- ❖ Mounting of training workshops on fund raising and grants to enhance the financial capacity of the libraries.
- ❖ Institutionalization of Bench Mark for minimum quantity, quality and variety of library and information resources and services to support teaching research and learning in the university and per programme.

Conclusion

Maintenance of quality assurance is needed in our educational institutions particularly in our universities from where the nation relies upon for its products to propel the country into greater heights in all human endeavours. The fact that the provision of library and information services is central to effective teaching, research and learning, any attempt to ensure quality assurance in our educational institutions must consider the provision of library and information services to be accessed irrespective of the time and location of both the resources and users. Hence, the need to make NVL project a reality and viable.

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