

APPLICATION OF QUALITY ASSURANCE PRACTICES IN THE MANAGEMENT OF NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

All over the world, sustainable development has become an area of interest to researchers in the field of education, especially the university education, given the important and multi-faceted role of the university in the achievement of sustainable development in every economy. The United Nations defined sustainable development in 1987 through the Brundtland Commission (formally the World Commission on Environment and Development) as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Thus, it has become very germane for nations to strive to achieve the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to ensure that there is continuity in the development of every sector of the economy. This paper examined the role of the university education in fostering sustainable national development through the application of quality assurance practices in the management of Nigerian universities. The concepts of quality assurance and sustainable development were reviewed. The sustainable development goal 4 as well as the national goals for tertiary education were equally reviewed with the aim of identifying the key areas of relevance in terms of the role of the university education in achieving sustainable national development.

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Introduction

Quality education is an essential ingredient for holistic growth and development of every economy. This is particularly true about the university education being the power-house of knowledge in every society. Quality university education is premised on certain criteria such as students admission standards, lecturers academic qualifications, rigorous examinations protocols, degree programme requirements, course content and availability of facilities. These criteria were met at the early stage of the Nigerian University system. The history of the university education in Nigeria shows that from the 1960s up to 1980, the Nigerian universities offered high quality education, thus graduates from the first and second generations' universities could compete favourably with their counterparts in other parts of the world, they occupied executive positions in organisations without much post-graduation training. In fact the premier universities ie University of Ibadan, University of Nigeria, University of Lagos, Ahmadu Bello University and University of Zaria

were referred to as centres of excellence. However, the Nigerian University education has been facing a lot of challenges in recent times which has often been decried by stakeholders. These challenges are due to a number of factors emanating from poor funding of the tertiary education system in Nigeria.

The Concept of Quality and Quality Education

Quality is the total effect of the features of a process, product or service on its performance, or in customers or clients' perception of the performance. (Ajayi and Adegbesan, 2006). English (2006) states that quality education is one that adequately prepares students to be productive in society, thus quality education subsumes economic growth of the society. It therefore follows that quality education is usually embedded in any systemic process that is predictable and consistent in achieving stated goals and performance results, attaining

specifications and standards set by stakeholders in accordance with the needs of the students.

To attain and maintain quality, organisations often engage in quality control, quality assurance and quality management. Quality control is a process of continual connections between work standards or objectives, performance assessment and work activities directed toward attaining desired work outcomes or standards.(English, 2006). Oakland (2003) describes quality management system as one that applies to and interacts with all activities of the organization, beginning with the identification of the requirements and ends with their satisfaction at every transaction interface.

Quality management often involve clear definition of indicators with which quality is measured in an organization such as school. Some of factors/indicators of quality as outlined by Oakland (2003) are as follows:

1. Development of appropriate curriculum that includes supportive environment.
2. A careful selection of personnel with a strategy for service and training.
3. Attention to the ratio of personnel to students. Strong administrative support with direct provision of service.
4. Effective monitoring and evaluation process

The Concept of Quality Assurance

Quality assurance is a regulatory mechanism that focuses on accountability and improvement in order to establish confidence in stakeholders that the inputs, processes and output of educational system fulfill the expectations or measure up to minimum standards. It 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 maintained and enhanced (Hayward, 2001). Ajayi and Adegbesan (2006), opined that quality assurance is related to accountability, both of which are concerned with maximizing the effectiveness and efficiency of educational

systems and services in relation to their contexts, of their missions and stated objectives.

Quality assurance is the relative measure of inputs, process, outputs or learning outcomes according to nationally agreed minimum standards (Nwosu, 2013). Ayeni (2010) views quality assurance as the set of activities that an organization undertakes to ensure that a product or service will satisfy given requirement for quality. According to him, quality assurance goals involve the anticipation and avoidance of faults or mistakes by setting attainable standards for a product and organizing work so that the goals are achieved, the required procedures documented and attained standards are communicated. Oguntimehin, Kuewumi & Adeyemi (2018) see quality assurance as a set of procedures taken by organisations to guarantee that standards are defined and attained consistently for a particular product or service. Adegbesan (2011) outlined the major needs for quality assurance in Nigeria as:

- To serve as indispensable component of quality control strategy in education;
- To ensure and maintain high standard of education at all levels;
- To assist in monitoring and supervision of education;
- To determine the quality of the teacher input;
- To determine the number of classrooms needed based on the average class size to ensure quality control of education;
- To determine the level of adequacy of the facilities available for quality control; and
- To ensure how the financial resources available could be prudently and judiciously used.

Quality assurance in education involves the process of monitoring, assessing, evaluating what is provided, resource utilization and the effect as well as communicating the outcomes to all concerned for consistent improvement. According to Ayeni (2010), the

concept of quality assurance in education is to ensure that the educational goals and objectives are achieved in schools.

Consequently, the Federal Republic of Nigeria as cited in Osakwe (2016) outlined the following educational quality assurance objectives: to

- Ensure that quality teaching and learning take place in schools and centres;
- Create a valid and reliable data base that can support or inform policies and decisions aimed at improving the overall effectiveness of schools and centres, monitor the level of learning achievement as well as other educational performance indications in schools and centres;
- Set and maintain uniform standard nationwide;
- Ascertain that the approved curriculum is operational in schools and centres and that stated objectives are being achieved;
- Provide regular report on the state of education in Nigeria;
- Advise on the provision of proper and adequate physical facilities in educational institutions;
- Provide professional support to teachers in the area of pedagogy and classroom management as well as to school administrators in the area of school management.

Oguntimehin *et al* (2018) observed quality assurance in education is a concept that covers a host of academic activities, such as instructional supervision, discipline, availability and utilization of instructional materials, infrastructure and finance which are meant to improve quality of resource input, process and output of the school.

Education for Sustainable National Development

The growing concern about society's impact on the natural environment gave birth to the concept of sustainable development. The Brundtland Commission (formally the World Commission on Environment and Development)

under the United Nations defined sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Brundtland, 1987). The sustainable development movement is premised on the fact that sustainability protects both the interests of future generations and the world's capacity to regenerate. The focus of sustainable development was mainly the environment in development of policies but since 2002, the focus has evolved to include social justice and the fight against poverty.

The recognition that education, at all levels can be a powerful tool in promoting sustainable development led to the concept of education for sustainable development. Consequently, in 2002, the United Nations declared years 2015 to 2014 as the decade of education for sustainable development with the objective of integrating principles and practices of sustainable development into all aspects of education and learning and UNESCO was appointed as the lead implementing agency (UNESCO, 2017). Since then the concept of 'education for sustainable development' has become one of the core educational initiatives for tackling many of the problems associated with human development.

Education for sustainable development is a process that goes beyond acquiring knowledge and learning about theories related to sustainable development. It is a holistic education process concentrated on searching for correlations, presenting a coherent picture of the world, and preparing to operate within it (Sady, Zak & Rzepka, 2019). According to Blessenger, Sengupta & Makhan (2018), Education for Sustainable Development involves educating students on the necessity of sustainable development by integrating sustainable development issues into all aspects of teaching, research and service.

It means equipping students with the requisite knowledge, skills, attitudes and values to create a sustainable future. Education for sustainable development empowers people to change the way they think and work towards a

sustainable future (UNESCO, 2002). The sustainable development goals (SDGs) initiative is a concerted universal agenda by the 193 member states of the United Nations and the global civil society and it represents a strategic framework and a bold vision of the future. The fourth goal, Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) which is on education, aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and to promote lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030. The SDG4 comprises of seven indicators/outcome targets as follows:

1. Universal Primary and Secondary Education: This target is set to ensure that by 2030, all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes.
2. Early Childhood Development and Universal Pre-primary Education: This states that by 2030, all girls and boys should have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education.
3. Equal Access to Technical/Vocational and Higher Education: By 2030, there should be equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university.
4. Relevant Skills for Decent Work: By 2030, there should be substantial increase in the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship.
5. Gender Equality and Inclusion: This states that by 2030, there should be an elimination of gender disparities in education, ensuring equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable including persons with disabilities, indigenous people and children in vulnerable situations.

6. Universal Youth Literacy: This is to ensure that by 2030, all youth and substantial proportion of adults, men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy.
7. Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship: This target is to ensure that by 2030, all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contributions to sustainable development.

The Role of the University Education in Sustainable National Development

The role of the university education in sustainable national development cannot be overemphasized. Thus, the National Policy on Education (2013), clearly stated that the goals of tertiary education in Nigeria shall be to:

- (a) Contribute to national development through high level relevant manpower training;
- (b) Develop and inculcate proper values for the survival of the individual and society;
- (c) Develop the intellectual capability of individuals to understand and appreciate their local and external environments;
- (d) Acquire both physical and intellectual skills which will enable individuals to be self-reliant and useful members of the society ;
- (e) Promote and encourage scholarship and community service;
- (f) Forge and cement national unity; and
- (g) Promote national and international understanding and interaction.

The policy further stated that University Education shall make optimum contribution to national development by:

- (a) intensifying its programmes for the development of high level manpower within the context of the needs of the nation;
- (b) making professional course contents to reflect our national requirements;

- (c) making all students as part of a general programme of all-round improvement in university education, to offer general study courses such as history of ideas, philosophy of knowledge and nationalism.

The foregoing portrays the university education as the producer of knowledge that is required for all-round and sustainable national development. The University, therefore, serves as a major agent of sustainable future and the critical source of the equalization of chances and the democratization of opportunities for all to attain self-actualization. Thus, Universities have distinctive role of teaching, training, researching, and implementing all positive templates leading to the attainment of sustainable development. Edo (2000) as cited by Ohia (2018), asserted that functional tertiary education should take cognizance of the needs of the society and should be able to meet the needs of all levels of development which makes it a necessity for sustainable national development. Oguzor (2011), noted that one of the ways the Nigerian universities can enhance sustainable development is by intensifying and diversifying their programmes within the context of the needs culture, society and economy without prejudice to intellectual training in basic sciences and liberal arts.

According to Sedlacek (2013), universities have a key influence on society in a two-fold manner: they train and educate people and they participate in governance. She identified the role of the university education in fostering sustainable development as educational, research, governance and economic development. In the same vein, Huiz (2000) as cited by Sedlacek (2013) noted that universities are important actors for both local and national development as they have the potentials to provide expertise and specific knowledge through their connections with the society. She added that universities are also agents of academic knowledge transfer and can serve as facilitators for societal and other institutional actors towards fostering sustainable development. Chee (2016), posited that the role of the university in sustainable

development starts with helping students to understand the concept of sustainable development.

According to him, the university is a very good place for the awareness and interpretation of the meaning of sustainable development, university is also responsible for the conduct of research on this particular field. Kangha (2019) asserted that educating and empowering young people everywhere, to become effective and productive members of society is essential for sustainable growth and development. It therefore follows that the university education has a great role in fostering sustainable national development, thus, placing the need for quality university education as a sine qua non in every economy.

Challenges Associated with Quality University Education in Nigeria

One major reason assumed to be responsible for the abysmal decline in the quality of university education in Nigeria is poor funding. According to Oguzor (2011), poor funding of universities in Nigeria started in the 1970s when political leaders discovered that university education was very expensive and government began to wonder whether the high cost of maintaining the universities was justified in terms of returns to the nation. According to him, the financial allocations to universities were drastically cut and facilities began to deteriorate. Consequently, the quality of service, instruction, research and identity built up over the years could not be sustained.

Another reason, which emanated from poor funding is the incessant strike actions by the Academic Staff Union of the Universities (ASUU), thus, the preference for private universities as well as those outside Nigeria in the last two decades. In fact, some parents would rather send their children to some African countries such as Ghana than any Nigerian public university. The argument is that quality cannot be achieved in institutions that are characterized by inconsistency and delay, as is the case in the Nigerian public universities. The beginning of strike actions by the

Academic Staff Union of Universities can be traced to the early eighties.

According to Otonko (2012), the decay in Nigerian University education set in when self-seeking visionless leaders created new universities without presenting viable strategies for absorbing the graduates, thus, many students sort admission to the universities just to attach B.Sc. and M.Sc. to their names while others felt that they needed the degrees to legitimize the wealth they obtained from easy money making with or without credible degrees. Similarly, as observed by Ejiogu and Sule (2013), Nigerian Universities operated a relatively stable academic calendar before 1980, but overtime, a downward pressure on staff salaries and debilitating working conditions constrained both staff and students to embark on incessant strikes. The Academic Staff Union of Universities went on strike in 1981, 1986 and 1995 respectively, each time agitating for improved conditions of service. Similarly, in 2001, 2002 and 2003, ASUU went on strike against inadequate funding of the Universities by government, disparity in salary, lack of autonomy, non-payment of allowances and early retirement age. (Okwa & Campbell as cited in Ejiogu & Sule 2013).

These strike actions have continued to occur as government has hardly met ASUU's demands. These strike actions have undoubtedly brought about instability in the academic calendar of the public Universities thereby resulting in inadequate training and preparation of students. Thus, as observed by Ejiogu & Sule (2013), the quality of degrees awarded in Nigerian public Universities has become generally suspect. Consequently, the emergence of private universities. The essence of private Universities in Nigeria was to support the government in the provision of higher education thereby enhancing the quality of education offered. Unfortunately, as pointed out by Ejiogu and Sule (2013), the establishment of private Universities has brought about the sale of knowledge to the highest bidder and such sale would result in lowering of

standards and arbitrary award of high marks as a means of attracting high number of students.

Conclusion

Quality education (especially university education) is a major ingredient for sustainable national growth and development. It therefore follows that as a developing nation, Nigeria needs to key into the Sustainable Development Goal 4, which is geared towards achieving inclusive and equitable quality education, thereby attaining sustainable national growth and development.

Recommendations

Research has shown that university education has a great impact on society in terms of addressing the challenges and opportunities that accompany sustainable development. Similarly, it has been established that there is the need for quality assurance in the university system to ensure the universities are empowered to play the significant role of fostering sustainable development in every nation. Based on the afore-going, the following recommendations are made:

1. Government should ensure that universities are adequately funded so as to maintain quality education in our public universities. In this regard, kudos to the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFUND) for the excellent role the organization is playing in the area of funding of research as well as provision of infrastructures in many Nigerian public universities, however, there is room for improvement.
2. Government should ensure that every agreement reached with ASUU is kept to avoid further strike actions by lecturers. This will help to achieve stable academic calendar in the Nigerian public universities.
3. The National University Commission should consider the inclusion of Sustainable Development Management in the university curriculum to help prepare Nigerian undergraduate students for the role of educating

the general public on the importance of sustainable development.

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