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Quality Assurance Mechanisms as Means for Improving Certification of Output in Universities in Niger Delta States

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Abstract
Proliferation of university education and global labour impacts on Nigeria economy has continued to increase the demand for quality assurance. As a result, concerted efforts are required by universities to internalize the culture of quality in their production function in order to produce employable graduates that can drive the needed change and build sustainable economy. Hence, the paper attempted to investigate internal quality assurance mechanisms adopted by universities in Niger Delta as a means for improving the overall quality of certification of output. The sample of 105 academic heads consists of Deans; Heads of department and Directors were sampled in three (3) universities in Niger Delta geo political zone. A 20-item instrument titled '' Quality Assurance Mechanisms and Certification of Output Questionnaire'' (QAMCOQ) was designed in five Likert measuring scale and analyzed with descriptive statistics. The results however have shown that the certification processes of graduates across universities in Niger Delta State can be strengthened by the internal quality assurance. Some quality assurance indicators identified include clearly defined goals of academic programme, involvement of academics in entrenching the culture of quality, strengthening admission procedure through the post university matriculation examination, preparation and submission of question paper, answer model and marking scheme, submission of examination booklets, and adherence to carrying capacity by management of universities and infrastructural improvement in the affected universities. It was therefore recommended that proprietors and managers of universities and relevant regulatory commission should continue to strengthen the processes of certification and provide more infrastructures to support the attainment of the National goals of university education.
Keywords: Quality, Quality Assurance, Quality Assurance Mechanisms

1.   Introduction
Universities are instruments per excellence and generally confer social, economic and political status on individual and society. The relevance of universities largely depends upon their ability to undertake the major task of teaching, research and extension services. Such institutions must be able to educate and produce highly educated, refined graduates with productive capacity for economic development. As service providers to industries, commerce and other educational institutions, universities produce qualified graduates with transferable knowledge and skills that add economic value to the process of production. But this understanding is now being challenged by the demands for accessibility and quantity rather than quality. No doubt, Nigeria is faced with increasing demand for university education. This fact is buttressed by the 1,644, 110 candidates that enrolled in JAMB examination in 2013 and 704,622 UTME candidates scoring 200 above while 1.2million were not eligible for admission this year into the 129 universities since the carrying capacity still remain insignificant (NUC, 2013). The uncontrollable increase in student admission and enrollment witnessed across Nigerian universities has outweighed the process of teaching and learning and overstretched available infrastructure. The quality of input resources are major determining factors toward attaining the minimum standards and producing quality output that can meet the expectations of consumer. Many faculties and departments that were once accredited in the past now fail to fulfill the requirements of the minimum standards in recent times.

Unfortunately, the enrolment growth and output are not always accompanied by commensurate growth in facilities and the situation has contributed to the rapid depreciation in the conditions of existing facilities. This steady increase in number of potential candidates seeking admission has made the attainment and maintenance of quality a mere shadow of reality in Nigerian universities. However, this may have been borne out of the general understanding and appreciation of the important contributions of education to nation building, economic empowerment, personal development and career progression.   According to Petersen (1999) education only for few is no longer economically feasible or politically defensible. University education is no longer exclusive preserve of the elites but nations across the globe have continued to increase their investment in education and training of their citizenry in order to compete in today's global technological market.

Importantly, universities in Nigeria are still operating behind their universal tradition both in employment, linkages and admission and have become less competitive. The critical factor in the development of tertiary education according to Tawari (2002) is the availability of adequate and qualified academic and non-academic staff. Nevertheless, the quality of teaching among other things has a direct relationship with quality of teachers, teacher qualifications, teaching experience, and availability of instructional materials and well-equipped library which provide supplement to the teaching processes. We also known that the proliferation of university education, demands of global labour market and the Nigeria economy have resulted the demand for quality assurance therefore, the quest for quality and its continuous improvement has become necessary since universities are operating in a competitive environment. Developing nations and societies with emerging university education systems are striving to ensure their institutions meet international standards. This trend however demands concerted efforts by universities in Nigeria to internalize various provisions of the minimum standards to promote the culture of quality and quality assurance in their production function. In this vein, this study investigates the quality assurance mechanisms aimed at improving certification among Nigerian Universities with particular focus in South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria.

2.   Concept of Quality

The concept of quality in the context of university education generally according to Harper Collins (1992) is the degree of excellence and of higher standard. The quality of a product is meaningful only when it is related to function that makes it work or sell. According to the British Standard Institution (BSI, 1991) quality is defined as the totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs. Quality is therefore the various attributes and unique features possessed by the output of universities which certify recipients of knowledge fit for a purpose. This simply means fitness for purpose. Quality is a multi-dimensional concept which includes all its functions and activities: teaching and academic programmes, research and scholarship, staffing, students, buildings, facilities, equipment, services to the community and the academic environment.

The above outlined elements are essential determinants of the overall process of certification. The process of educating across nations is rapidly changing as a result of the role of Information Technology in universities. Exchange programmes and linkages, students' mobility, graduates, and their employers, together with learning resources are now more globalized as never before. Hence the processes of credentialing must be higher in order to assure the fitness of their certificates.

Ifedili (2000) had argued that many departments in various Nigerian educational system are producing less qualified graduates having negative chain effect in the economic, social and political development of the country.

The World Bank survey conducted in 2000 to assess the effect of Nigerian universities' curricular on the performance of Nigerian graduates observed that the production of graduates with critical skills had not met with the required needs of the economy (NUC, 2004). In another development, Basorun (2004) believed that there is nothing wrong with the curriculum but questioned the extent the contents of the curriculum are being taught. The outlined situation has given rise to some specific questions, what are the various quality dimensions in universities? how can quality of output be strengthened by universities? What other strategies can be adopted by universities to improve the certification of output? Unfortunately, teaching as one of the critical aspects of the university function for generating, disseminating and, exposing students to new frontiers of knowledge has been distorted due to ever-rising students' enrollment, incessant industrial actions by staff and inadequate infrastructural provision in Nigerian universities. From all indications, the process of certification in Nigerian universities has become elusive therefore the paper attempted to examine the role of quality assurance mechanisms in improving certification of outputs in universities.

2.1 Quality Assurance Mechanisms and Certification in Nigerian Universities

Different people hold divergent judgment about quality and quality assurance in Nigerian university education. Quality has been described as the process of producing perfection through continuous improvement by adopting Total Quality Management (TQM) to create a philosophy about work, people and human relationship built around shared values. Quality is therefore a concept, a philosophy, a journey and also what we practice. This implies that quality is ongoing process which provides the parameter for measuring all other achievements within the academic environment. Quality can also be conceptualized as performance that is exceptional; attainable only limited circumstances and only when very able students are admitted. Therefore, it ordinarily seeks to transform students on a continual basis and as a way of value addition to their knowledge and personal development. Hence, the need for awareness advocacy to provide academic and non-academic staff general understanding of quality and quality assurance in universities. Involving academic and non-academic staff in promoting the culture of quality infuses in them the sense of ownership and thereby aligns themselves not only to institutional goals but its achievement. Mishra (2006) have suggested that quality should be bottom-up approach and everyone should be conscious of why we should worry about quality of our teaching, programmes and institutions. Among the reasons advanced by the scholar were competition, customer satisfaction,

Journal of Education and Practice
www.iiste.org
ISSN 2222-1735 (Paper)   ISSN 2222-288X (Online)
Vol.5, No.33, 2014

maintaining standards, accountability, improve employee morale and motivation, credibility, prestige and status and image and visibility necessitated the need for quality to be all stakeholders concern within and outside the university community. In addition, the mobility of individuals and common markets has influenced universities renewed determination to meet international standards.

This is because according to UNESCO (1996) the four pillars of education of learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be   prepare students for research and teaching, provide highly specialized training courses adapted to the needs of economic and social life. At the same time , universities as non-discriminatory institutions are open to all to cater to the many aspects of lifelong education, and as well promote international corporation through internalization of research, technology, networking and free movement of persons and scientific ideas. Hence it becomes a matter of concern for university education to embrace change so as to respond to the increasing impact of technology and globalization on the delivery of education services.   Specifically, universities across nations must seek continuous improvement of their teaching and ensure efficient management of teaching and learning resources in order to attain higher completion rate among students.

The quantity of output in university is largely dependent on the quantity and quality of input, relevance of curriculum to societal needs, implementation and level of funding. However, Okebukola (2004) described quality assurance in Nigerian universities as a process of continuous improvement in the quality of teaching and learning activities achieved through the pathways of employing mechanisms, internal and external to the universities. This simply is to guarantee that certain provisions of the Benchmark for minimum academic standards document are attained, maintained and improved.   In order to promote quality assurance in universities, the qualification of academic staff members, employing and restricting academics in one full-time job and to one institution, appointment and promotion of academic staff based on merit, efficient and adequate physical and administrative support services remain ever imperative for attaining, improving and sustaining the quality of research and teaching to an acceptable level.

The level of investment and provision of input resources is a major prerequisite for implementing the curriculum and determines the end products in the university system. Tawari (1998) in analyzing the problems of curricula in tertiary education in Nigeria blamed the scope of the curriculum, the appropriateness of the learning experiences provided, adequacy of material and facilities, transfer of the knowledge to real life situations and quality of the outputs from the system. The above outlined precarious trends have indeed called for an effective implementation of quality assurance measures in order to restore the credibility of degrees and certificates award by universities. Thus, the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC, 2007) five core values of universities which include contributing to national development, fostering global competencies among students, inculcating a value system in students, promoting the use of technology and quest for excellence basically is what universities in the third world must do to improve quality of certification and change the perception of stakeholders in the education sub-sector. The pursuit of excellence in universities must be all inclusive and positively affects the entire development of the institutions.

Universities across the globe in recent times are setting up workable, realistic and achievable quality assurance mechanisms which enable them to consistently produce high quality and cost effective outputs. According to Enaowho (2004) quality assurance begins with the selection of inputs (students/resources) into the school set-up for processing in order to realize desirable output/outcomes. Peretomode (2008) developing quality assurance mechanism although helps universities to overcome challenges of ineffective input and processes, it improves the credibility of outputs and certificates awarded. For instance, universities are constantly involved in checks and balances to ensure standards and quality are maintained and sustained in such areas as minimum standards, accreditation, grading, credit system, moderation of examination questions and results, external examinership, scholarship awards and general funding of infrastructure.

3. Methodology

The research attempted to investigate internal quality assurance mechanisms operated in universities with particular reference to those in the South-South geopolitical zone and how the overall quality of certification of output can be improved. The survey instrument measured specifically the various aspects of quality assurance and strategies for improving the quality of service delivery.   The sample of 140 academic heads which consists of Deans; Heads of Department and Directors were sampled among the various universities in the zones. The sample was purposively drawn considering the fact those included in the sample were academic administrators in various universities provided the data in relation to the subject investigated. In doing this selection, we had considered equally both state and federal owned universities and those that have existed for not less than 10 years. The scale was drawn on the 5 point Likert scale having Strongly Agree – 5 to Strongly Disagree = 1. Although the instrument has been previously validated and considered reliable, we have equally done a reliability test to be sure that it has not been affected by context. Therefore, The reliability Cronbach alpha of 0.78 also affirmed the reliability of the instrument.

4. Data Analysis

The analysis of data for the study is primarily descriptive relying on mean scores and standard deviation and was based on 105 academic heads who completed their questionnaire. The choice of this analytical procedure is anchored on the research philosophy adopted which is the quantitative approach that guarantees contextualization of examined variables.

Result

Table 1:   **Descriptive Statistical Outcome on Quality Dimension in the Studied Universities**

Question Items	n	$\overline{X}$	Sd
Continuous infrastructural improvements in universities		3.72	1.0188
Effective students' support services		3.26	1.4802
Teaching expertise and communication		2.73	1.5446
Relevance of curriculum to the future jobs of students	105	2.64	1.4679
Effective delivery and presentation of lecture notes		2.50	1.3174
Handling complaints and solving problems		2.77	1.1148
Effective use of guidance and counseling services		2.55	1.5117

The above table 1.0 showed the mean responses on quality measures considered in the universities. The academic heads in the universities were more inclined to continuous infrastructural development as a quality aimed measure. This was expressed in the high mean score of 3.72 and followed by provision of student support service with a mean score of 3.26. Teaching and communication expertise had a mean score of 2.73. Effective use of guidance and counseling services which is the last in the measure with a mean score of 2.55 was also considered. The measures reflected in the statistical outcome supports ways of ensuring quality among educational institutions.

Table **2**:   **Descriptive Statistical Outcomes on Ways of Strengthening Quality Output in Universities.**

Question Items	n	$\overline{X}$	Sd
Pursuing clearly defined goals of academic programme		2.99	1.6818
Involving academics in entrenching the culture of quality		3.00	1.5118
Strengthening the admission procedure and post university examination		2.72	1.5886
Preparation and Submission of question papers, answer models and marking schemes by lecturers	105	3.03	1.5851
Submission and verification of answer booklets and others above		2.76	1.6476
Adherence to carrying capacity policy by universities		3.04	1.5392
Implementing report of internal accreditation (self-study)		3.63	1.4015

Table 2 indicates number of ways universities adopts to strengthen the quality of their output. From the responses, pursuing clearly defined goals of academic programme has a mean score of 2.99, involving academics in entrenching quality culture also has a mean score of 3.00, strengthening the filtering procedure for admission procedure and post university examination also had a mean score of 2.72. This responses no doubt affirms attempts at deepening quality practices. In addition, preparation and submission of question papers, answer models and making schemes by lectures were also rated high with a mean score of 3.03, submission and verification of answer booklets had a mean score of 2.76, adherence to carrying capacity had a mean score of 3.04 and finally implementing report of internal accreditation (self study) has a mean score of 3.63. From the response distribution, it can be inferred that the respondents are largely inclined to the different means of providing and strengthening quality of output by embarking on such ways as described especially adherence to capacity policies and implementation of report of internal accreditation.

Table 3   **Descriptive Statistical Outcomes Strategies for Improving the Processes of Certification by universities.**

Question Items	n	$\overline{X}$	Sd
Matching course content with the available hours per semester		3.33	1.4649
Supervision of curriculum implementation		3.24	1.4914
Enforcing students' class attendance by academics	105	3.29	1.4730
Adequate staffing in quality and quantity		3.55	1.4669
Creating quality assurance committees in faculty and department by senate		3.37	1.4944
Effective feedback of products from employers		2.98	1.5490

Table 3 outlined clearly, the additional strategies that are likely to enhance quality in the certification processes of universities. Adequate staffing in quality and quantity had much of the respondents support with a high mean score of 3.55 and this was followed by creating quality assurance committee at the faculty and departmental levels by senate having a mean score of 3.37. Further, matching course content with available hours per semester has a mean score of 3.33, enforcing students class attendance has a mean score of 3.29 and supervision of curriculum implementation had a mean score of 3.24. These response rates are indicative of how the strategies are generally seen as that which can practically ensure quality in certification processes in the universities. Finally, effective feedback from employers of graduands from these universities with a mean score of 2.94 is also considered an important strategies.

4.1 Discussion of Findings
Increasing demand for university education must be followed with quality culture. Quality as a concept, orientation and philosophy is action-oriented. Chaffe and Sherr, (1992) have argued that if an organization stops working to achieve quality, it begins to move away from having quality.
The results showed a number of quality dimensions for assessing overall quality of university education. Some of the quality dimensions include continuous improvement of infrastructure, equipment and facilities, support services, expertise teaching and communication, relevance of curriculum and content, effective presentation, handling complaints and solving problems and effective use of guidance and counseling services. According to Peretomode (2008) facilities, infrastructure, instructional laboratories must be higher than prescribed minimum standard, smaller class size to stimulate and enhance teacher and student interaction. These internal quality assurance elements are critical to universities determination to contribute to national development, fostering globally competitive competencies among students, inculcating a value system in students, promoting the use of technology and quest for excellence.

The pursuit of excellence in universities must be all inclusive and positively affects the entire development of the institutions. Therefore, universities must continue to seek ways of attaining, improving and sustaining quality production that are internal and peculiar to their vision and mission. For universities to be globally relevant they pursue well-defined goals that enable them maximize their human, financial and material resources in the teaching and learning, research and enterprise. In addition to pursuing and achieving specified academic goals, management of university must involve academics in promoting quality assurance, strengthen internal filtering and admission procedure, implement policy that mandate lecturers to prepare and submit question papers, answer model, marking schemes, and verification of the answer scripts at all levels to deepen the culture of quality assurance in university.

Experience has revealed over the years that most universities carrying capacity is abysmally low and have consistently disobeyed the enforcement of the policy. The uncontrollable increase in student admission and enrollment witnessed across Nigerian universities has outweighed the process of teaching and learning and overstretched available infrastructure. Carrying capacity must be the concern of all in universities. The various admission boards must strengthen their filtering procedure and ensure students satisfy basic entry requirements in various specializations. According to Peretomode (2008) the selection process of candidates into higher education institution of learning should be quite selective devoid of any form of dishonest acts-sales of admission to highest bidders, ethnicity and political factor in order to get into the university materials that can be processed and get the required refined output. Thus, the admission standards must be higher to prevent entrance of faulty candidates but admitting only finest candidates meeting mandatory selection criterion.

The quality of input resources are major determining factor towards attaining the minimum standards and producing quality output that can meet the expectations of consumer. Input resources which include academic and non-academic staff, curriculum, funds and students eventually determine the output. Aderounmu and Ehiametalor (1985) have subscribed to the observation that the inputs into the system are directly related to the quantity and quality of output. Quality assurance can be better sustained through adoption and implementation of report of internally organized accreditation (self-study) by universities. The self-study form provides universities an avenue for performance assessment. The academic planning and control unit monitor the compliance level to prescribed relevant parameters. Institutional self-study as voluntary efforts of the system should be used to monitor the extent of compliance of programme and policy which must be of high standard.

Again, the study has outlined additional strategies universities can maximize to increase improvement of the processes of certification.   It is therefore imperative that management of universities organize seminar and workshop to educate and expose academic staff to modern pedagogies, methodologies of teaching. According to Omoregie (2005) to tutor them how they can match course content with available contact hours, review course contents in order to add new information from recent researches, how to set specific and performance objectives and modern way of setting questions and prepare marking scheme. The quality of lecturers in the system must be high enough in order to produce high quality research output. No doubt, the status of teaching quality has both personal and intellectual consequences within the system hence the need for continue regular training and re-training to increase their capacity.

The availability of adequate and qualified academic and non-academic staff, nevertheless, the quality of teaching among other things has a direct relationship with quality of teachers, teacher qualifications, teaching experience, and availability of instructional materials and well-equipped library which provide supplement to the teaching process. The fact remain that the quality of teaching which include transmission of knowledge, skills, ideas and attitudes has since declined in recent times hence supervision of the curriculum cannot be overemphasized. Teaching as a core function of the universities when assessed at the end of every course and incorporated as major criteria for promotion. Effectiveness of this approach will also depend on the level of student class attendance and participation.   Therefore, universities must develop and enforce policy that place greater emphasis on students' class attendance and discourage unnecessary boycott of lectures and step up feedback mechanism to track trace their products from employers. As a way of internalizing the culture of quality, quality assurance unit must be set up in all faculties and departments where major academic activities are conducted with the responsibilities to supervise curriculum design, content and organization, periodic assessment of human and material resources available in every programme.

5. Conclusion/Policy

In this write-up, we have examined descriptively quality assurance mechanisms for improving certification output in public universities in Niger Delta States. The need for quality oriented approaches for ensuring quality output in terms of certification by the universities has been underscored especially when viewed against the backdrop of increased global competitiveness and best practices. In order to critically examine this, we raised three pertinent research questions in relation to underlying theoretical conceptualization on quality practice. From the data obtained and descriptively analysed, there are clear-cut findings that first stressed continuous infrastructural improvement alongside student support services, handling of complaints and solving problems thereof. The need for improving communication and teaching expertise as a means of promoting quality culture in the universities is also underscored.

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