QUALITY ASSURANCE PRACTICES IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

JANE NGOZI EKWUEME, Ph.D
Department Of General Studies Education
School of Education
Yusuf Maitama Sule Federal University of Education, Kano
Kano State, Nigeria.

Abstract

Quality assurance has become a central concern in higher education systems worldwide, and in Nigeria, it remains one of the most pressing challenges confronting universities. Despite efforts by regulatory bodies such as the National Universities Commission (NUC) to ensure minimum academic standards, Nigerian universities continue to grapple with issues of inadequate funding, poor infrastructure, rising student enrollment without proportional expansion of resources, and widespread academic corruption. These problems not only undermine the quality of teaching, research, and service delivery but also erode public confidence in the university system. Drawing on relevant literature, this paper examines the current state of quality assurance in Nigerian universities, highlighting critical issues such as weak governance structures, inadequate monitoring mechanisms, and the influence of socio-political factors on academic standards. It further analyzes the implications of these challenges for educational outcomes and national development. The paper argues that sustainable quality assurance in Nigerian universities requires a combination of effective regulatory oversight, institutional accountability, stakeholder collaboration, and investment in human and material resources. It concludes by recommending actionable strategies to strengthen quality assurance practices, including improved funding, transparent evaluation systems, capacity-building for academic staff, and the integration of technology-driven monitoring frameworks. By addressing these challenges, Nigerian universities can move closer to achieving globally competitive standards in higher education.

Keywords: Quality assurance; Higher education; Nigerian universities; Academic standards; Educational governance

Introduction

Universities are globally acknowledged as critical institutions for the transmission of knowledge, research, and national development. They not only prepare students for professional and civic life but also serve as incubators for innovation and drivers of social transformation. In Nigeria, universities occupy a central role in equipping citizens with the skills needed to address local and global challenges. However, the increasing concern about declining standards of education in the country has placed quality assurance (QA) at the forefront of higher education discourse (Okebukola, 2019). The focus on QA stems from the need to ensure that Nigerian universities remain competitive in a globalized educational environment where quality benchmarks determine the employability of graduates and the credibility of degrees.

The demand for quality assurance is not peculiar to Nigeria. Worldwide, higher education institutions are under pressure to justify their outputs in the face of increased access, reduced funding, and changing labor market requirements (Materu, 2019). In developed countries, QA systems have matured into rigorous mechanisms that monitor teaching

quality, research relevance, and student outcomes. In contrast, developing nations such as Nigeria still struggle with structural weaknesses in policy, funding, and institutional capacity. This disparity raises questions about how Nigeria can align with global best practices while addressing its peculiar challenges such as massification, inadequate infrastructure, and academic corruption.

The National Universities Commission (NUC) remains the regulatory body charged with ensuring QA in Nigerian universities. It performs oversight functions through accreditation exercises, monitoring of programs, and enforcing compliance with the Minimum Academic Standards (MAS). These efforts, however, face challenges of implementation. Reports of underfunded accreditation visits, inconsistencies in monitoring, and weak sanctions against non-compliance often undermine QA efforts (Ekundayo & Adedokun, 2018). Furthermore, the tension between access and quality has created a dilemma where universities admit more students than they can adequately serve, resulting in overcrowded facilities and overstretched human resources.

In addition, the globalization of education demands that Nigerian universities respond to competitive pressures beyond their borders. Many universities worldwide are adopting advanced technologies, artificial intelligence (AI) tools, and outcome-based education models to assure quality. Nigerian universities, however, are often slow to adopt these innovations due to limited resources and policy bottlenecks (Harvey & Newton, 2020). Consequently, the graduates of Nigerian institutions are sometimes perceived as less competitive compared to their counterparts in other regions, which raises concerns about the country's human capital development.

This paper therefore aims to provide a critical analysis of quality assurance practices in Nigerian universities, highlighting their strengths, weaknesses, and the challenges confronting effective implementation. By situating Nigerian practices within a broader global context, the paper seeks to identify strategies that can enhance the effectiveness of QA and ultimately improve the quality of higher education. It also emphasizes the roles of different stakeholders - government, regulatory bodies, universities, and academic staff - in building a sustainable quality culture.

Conceptual Clarification
Quality Assurance in Higher Education

Quality assurance in higher education refers to a systematic and continuous process through which institutions maintain and enhance the quality of their teaching, research, and service delivery. It is both preventive and corrective in nature, ensuring that universities not only meet minimum standards but also continuously improve their processes and outcomes. Scholars such as Harvey and Green (2019) argue that QA encompasses dimensions such as excellence, consistency, fitness for purpose, value for money, and transformation. In the Nigerian context, QA is viewed as a mechanism to restore credibility to a system plagued by criticisms of falling standards.

The core of QA lies in ensuring that educational programs align with societal needs while maintaining international credibility. It involves a cyclical process of setting standards, monitoring compliance, evaluating outcomes, and instituting corrective measures where necessary. For instance, curriculum reviews ensure that programs remain relevant in addressing emerging issues such as digitalization, climate change, and entrepreneurship. Accreditation processes, on the other hand, help institutions maintain accountability to both the state and the public (NUC, 2020).

Another key aspect of QA is its role in assuring stakeholders - students, parents, employers, and policymakers - of the reliability of university

outcomes. Graduates of Nigerian universities must be employable not only within the local labor market but also globally. Therefore, QA systems must integrate international benchmarks such as those set by UNESCO or the African Quality Rating Mechanism (AQRM) to ensure cross-border recognition of Nigerian degrees (Materu, 2019).

Therefore, QA should not be viewed solely as an external imposition but as a culture embedded within the university system. When institutions internalize QA processes, they develop a culture of continuous improvement, where lecturers, administrators, and students see themselves as custodians of quality. This shift from compliance to commitment ensures that QA is not simply a box-ticking exercise but a transformative process aimed at improving institutional performance and societal relevance.

Internal Quality Assurance (IQA)

Internal quality assurance refers to processes initiated and managed within universities to ensure that teaching, research, and service delivery meet the required standards. Unlike external QA, which is enforced by regulatory bodies, IQA is a self-regulatory mechanism that places responsibility directly on the institution. It includes activities such as peer review of teaching, student evaluations, internal audits of academic programs, and staff performance appraisals (Ekundayo & Adedokun, 2018).

The effectiveness of IQA depends largely on the institution's leadership and its commitment to quality culture. For example, departments are expected to maintain course files, update teaching materials, and engage in regular curriculum reviews. Staff development programs such as workshops, seminars, and conferences are also part of IQA, ensuring that lecturers remain current in their fields. In Nigerian universities, IQA units often serve as the first line of quality defense before external accreditation visits take place.

A key strength of IQA lies in its flexibility and adaptability. Institutions can design mechanisms that suit their peculiar contexts while still aligning with national standards. For instance, some Nigerian universities have adopted plagiarism detection software as part of their IQA tools to promote academic integrity. Others rely on feedback from employers of labor to revise their programs, thereby ensuring that their graduates are workplace-ready.

However, IQA faces challenges such as weak institutional autonomy, inadequate funding, and resistance to change among staff. In some cases, IQA becomes a formality rather than a transformative process, with staff filling forms or attending workshops without genuine engagement. Building an authentic IQA culture therefore requires strong leadership, adequate resources, and consistent monitoring to ensure that the processes yield measurable improvements.

External Quality Assurance (EQA)

External quality assurance refers to processes carried out by independent bodies outside the university to validate the quality of academic programs and institutional performance. In Nigeria, this role is primarily performed by the NUC through program accreditation, institutional audits, and periodic monitoring. EQA is critical because it provides an objective perspective, ensuring that universities do not become complacent or self-serving in their assessment of quality (NUC, 2020).

One of the most common forms of EQA in Nigeria is program accreditation. During accreditation visits, NUC officials assess resources such as staff qualifications, curriculum relevance, facilities, and student outcomes. Based on this assessment, programs are awarded statuses such as full accreditation, interim accreditation, or denial. This process not only assures quality but also informs the public about the credibility of university programs (Okebukola, 2019).

EQA also plays a role in aligning Nigerian

universities with international standards. For example, the NUC benchmarks its MAS against global standards to ensure that Nigerian graduates are competitive in the global labor market. Universities that fail to meet these standards risk reputational damage, reduced student enrollment, and even withdrawal of licenses.

Despite its significance, EQA in Nigeria faces criticism. Some institutions reportedly manipulate data or engage in corrupt practices to secure accreditation. Moreover, the resource-intensive nature of accreditation exercises often limits their frequency and depth. Strengthening EQA requires greater transparency, adequate funding, and collaboration with international QA agencies to ensure credibility and sustainability.

Issues in Quality Assurance in Nigerian Universities

Quality assurance in Nigerian universities faces multiple systemic and contextual issues that limit its effectiveness. A central issue is the massification of higher education. With the rapid increase in student enrollment and the expansion of universities - both public and private - the capacity of institutions has been overstretched (Okebukola, 2019). The result is overcrowded classrooms, overstretched hostel facilities, and inadequate teaching staff, which compromise the delivery of quality education. This expansion, while laudable for improving access, has not been matched with proportional funding or resources, thereby diluting the quality of academic services.

Another issue lies in inadequate funding. Nigerian universities rely heavily on government allocations, which are often insufficient to meet their operational needs. According to Adegbesan (2018), limited financial resources affect the ability of institutions to invest in modern infrastructure, procure teaching materials, maintain libraries, and develop ICT capacity. Without adequate funding, both internal and external quality assurance mechanisms become

tokenistic, as universities struggle to meet even the most basic requirements for accreditation.

There is also the problem of weak institutional autonomy. Universities are expected to regulate themselves internally, but excessive political interference often undermines this autonomy. Governing councils and university administrations are sometimes politicized, leading to poor decision-making and misallocation of resources (Materu, 2019). Without autonomy, institutions cannot effectively implement innovative quality assurance measures tailored to their unique challenges.

Additionally, academic corruption and unethical practices remain persistent issues. Cases of "accreditation fraud," where institutions prepare "cosmetic" arrangements only for accreditation exercises, undermine the credibility of the process. Issues such as sex-for-grades scandals, examination malpractice, and falsification of academic records also erode public confidence in the quality of Nigerian universities (Ekundayo & Adedokun, 2018). Collectively, these issues create an environment where QA exists in theory but is weakened in practice.

Challenges in Implementing Quality Assurance

One of the biggest challenges in implementing QA is the lack of adequate infrastructure. Many Nigerian universities operate with outdated facilities, insufficient lecture halls, and inadequate laboratories. Without the necessary physical and digital infrastructure, quality cannot be meaningfully assured. For example, science-based programs often struggle with obsolete laboratory equipment, which limits practical learning and undermines accreditation outcomes (Harvey & Newton, 2020).

The shortage of qualified academic staff also hampers QA implementation. While the National Universities Commission prescribes specific staff-student ratios, many universities fail to meet these requirements due to brain drain, poor

remuneration, and high retirement rates. As a result, lecturers are overburdened, leading to reduced research productivity, poor student mentoring, and burnout (Okebukola, 2019).

Another challenge is the inconsistency in quality monitoring. While the NUC conducts accreditation periodically, the intervals are often long, creating opportunities for institutions to relapse into substandard practices between visits. Similarly, internal QA units sometimes lack the technical expertise and resources to monitor programs effectively. This inconsistency contributes to the persistence of poor academic standards in some universities.

Finally, resistance to change among staff and administrators remains a significant barrier. Many lecturers view QA mechanisms as bureaucratic rather than developmental, leading to token compliance instead of genuine engagement. This attitude reduces the transformative potential of QA, making it more of a formality than a process of continuous improvement (Adegbesan, 2018). Unless this cultural resistance is addressed, even well-designed QA frameworks may fail to deliver meaningful results.

Implications of Quality Assurance for Nigerian Universities

The effectiveness - or ineffectiveness - of QA in Nigerian universities has profound implications for the nation's education system. First, it directly affects graduate employability. Employers consistently report dissatisfaction with the quality of graduates, citing poor communication skills, inadequate technical knowledge, and lack of problem-solving abilities (Materu, 2019). Stronger QA mechanisms could help bridge the gap between university curricula and labor market needs, thereby enhancing employability.

Second, QA impacts the global competitiveness of Nigerian universities. With the increasing globalization of higher education, universities compete for international recognition, research collaboration, and student mobility. Effective QA ensures that Nigerian degrees are comparable with international standards, facilitating student exchanges and boosting the reputation of local universities (Harvey & Newton, 2020). Without credible QA, Nigerian institutions risk academic isolation.

Third, the credibility of the education system depends on QA. When students and parents perceive universities as corrupt or substandard, confidence in the system diminishes. This undermines national development, as education is a key driver of human capital formation. Weak QA, therefore, translates to broader developmental setbacks for the country.

Lastly, QA has policy implications. Strong QA systems provide data that inform government decisions on resource allocation, curriculum reforms, and teacher training. Without reliable QA data, policymakers operate in a vacuum, leading to poorly informed reforms that may not address systemic problems. Thus, QA is not only about academic improvement but also about evidence-based policymaking.

Conclusion

Quality assurance remains a cornerstone of higher education and a non-negotiable requirement for Nigerian universities to achieve global relevance. While progress has been made through accreditation exercises and the work of the NUC, persistent challenges such as underfunding, infrastructural deficits, corruption, and weak institutional culture undermine its effectiveness. Addressing these challenges requires not just policy reforms but also a cultural shift towards embedding quality at the heart of university operations.

The paper concludes that QA is not an event but a continuous process that must be embraced by all stakeholders. For Nigeria to achieve its developmental goals, its universities must produce graduates who are globally competitive, employable, and ethically grounded. Stronger quality assurance practices, if effectively implemented, will restore public confidence,

enhance academic credibility, and position Nigerian universities as true engines of national and global development.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are proffered:

1. The challenges of QA in Nigerian universities require coordinated solutions. The government should increase funding for higher education and ensure timely release of funds to enable institutions upgrade infrastructure, hire qualified staff, and maintain modern libraries. It should also safeguard institutional autonomy by minimizing political interference in university governance.

2. The National Universities Commission (NUC) should strengthen its monitoring role by adopting digital tools for real-time quality tracking rather than relying solely on periodic accreditation. It should also collaborate with international QA agencies to benchmark Nigerian practices against global standards, thereby improving international recognition of Nigerian degrees.

3. University administrators must build robust internal QA systems by encouraging staff participation, investing in ICT-based QA tools, and promoting academic integrity. They should also foster a culture of continuous improvement by organizing workshops, seminars, and training sessions that emphasize the developmental role of QA.

4. Academic staffs have a responsibility to embrace QA not as bureaucracy but as a professional ethic. Lecturers should engage in self-appraisal, participate in peer reviews, and adopt innovative teaching methods that align with student needs. By doing so, they become active contributors to the quality culture.

5. Students and parents should be recognized as stakeholders in QA. Students should actively provide feedback on teaching quality, while parents should demand accountability from universities. This participatory approach ensures that QA becomes a collective responsibility rather than a top-down imposition.

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