QUALITY ASSURANCE AND EFFECTIVE NCE EDUCATION: A CALL TO ACTION

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Abstract
The centrality of Colleges of Education and the NCE in the training of intermediate teaching manpower for the basic school cadre at a time when the NCE is, by policy, the minimum teaching qualification for anyone to practice as a teacher in Nigeria’s school system cannot be underplayed. The nexus between effectiveness and assuring quality is a fundamental requirement particularly for Colleges of Education where deficient graduates could infect the society with mis-education and corrupt further studies arrangement. Deriving from the NPE’s goals of tertiary education, the paper ex-rays the activities of NCCE as a quality assurance agency for the NCE and highlights some challenges to quality assurance at that level. The paper therefore offers recommendations among which are that each College should establish a special quality assurance office to monitor adherence to minimum academic standards; and a huge investment on knowledge and use of ICT. This would make College data accessible and College operations monitored as they are carried out.

Quality assurance connotes upholding the most acceptable standard in the execution of all manner of activities that constitutes educational institutions’ operations. While quality refers to adherence to the finest standard, assurance depicts freedom from uncertainty.

Okebukola (2010) describes quality assurance as an all-encompassing term that include a host of activities that are put together to facilitate the finesse of input, process and output of the tertiary education system. He states further that the major thrust of quality assurance covers activities an institution engages in ‘to assure itself
that it is on course to fulfilling its vision and mission in terms of quality of input, process and output’ (p.4).

The practice of quality assurance in tertiary institutions can be internal and external. Even though it can be seen that the external quality assurance is more visible and largely emphasized than the internal among Nigeria’s Colleges of Education. Quality assurance involves the process of monitoring, assessing and evaluating based on laid down best standard, and communicating value worth of existing order to concerned quarters as a way of ensuring standard and consistently making schools’ operations accountable and amenable to positive changes.

Tertiary institution refers to all forms of organized formal education obtainable after the secondary school. An effective tertiary education therefore bothers on the extent to which the system assures quality-by way of the willingness to norm that institution with others with compatible vision and mission; the degree to which the institution evaluate the efficiency and effectiveness of the stakes, procedures and product elements of its activities; and the ability of the institution to generate useful information to all interested ends on the worth of the tertiary education system (Okebukola, 2010).

Statutorily, three bodies are charged by the Federal Government of Nigeria to regulate, harmonize and set minimum academic standards for the core higher institutions in the country. They are the National Universities Commission (NUC) founded in 1964, National Board for Technical Education (NBTE) founded in 1977, and the National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE) established in 1989 for Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE), a certificate a little lower than degree, but highly qualitative professional certificate in education (Iliyas, 2004).

The NCCE is by law mandated to assure quality at the NCE level. This agency releases constantly revised and updated minimum academic standard for prospective NCE holders. It as well undertakes the process of various forms of accreditations of academic programmes. The supervisory roles of NCCE constitute a significant extrinsic quality assurance mechanism on the Colleges of Education system. The others in this category are the external moderation of the Colleges’ examinations, occasional visitation panels raised by visitors (President and State Governors as the case may be) of the various Colleges among others.

The concept school effectiveness has been variously described. Ayoku (2005) lists five scales used in measuring school effectiveness as employment satisfaction, professional development, student Carrier development and system openness. These scales, Ayoku compressed to moral dimension, academic dimension and external dimension. Ogunsaju (2005) identifies three parameters as the determination of school effectiveness, namely school achieving its goals, maintaining itself internally and adapting itself to the challenges of the host community.
However, Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) found that rather than the narrow concentration on test results in numeracy and literacy commonly found in studies, it points out the under listed as indicators of school effectiveness: Positive relationship with learning, development of self concept, sense of self-discipline and self worth, students living skills, the development of appropriate value system and the preparation of student for the next stage of learning.

However, for the NCE level of education to achieve its pre-determined objectives in relation to the National Policy on Education (NPE), there is the need for a quality assurance mechanism (Internal and external) that would be responsive, functional in real terms and that which would meet best international practices. This is germane to meeting the target of Education For All (EFA), National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategies (NEEDS) and the vision 2020.

The Goal of Tertiary Education
The following are the broad basic goals of tertiary education in Nigeria as contained in section 8 of the National Policy on Education (2004: 36):

a. Contribution to national development through high level relevant manpower training;
b. develop and inculcate proper value for the survival of the individual and society;
c. develop the intellectual capability of individuals to understand and appreciate their local and external environment;
d. acquire both physical and intellectual skills which will enable individuals to be self reliant and useful member of the society;
e. promote and encourage scholarship and community service;
f. forge and cement national unity; and
g. promote national and international understanding.

The NPE intend to pursue the actualization of these goals through teaching, research and development, robust staff development, and so on.

Specifically, the goals of teacher education programme as enunciated by the NPE (2004: 39) shall be to:

a. Produce highly motivated, conscientious and efficient classroom teachers for all levels of our education system;
b. encourage further the spirit or enquiry and creativity in teachers;
c. help teachers to fit into social life of the community and the society at large and enhance their commitment to national goals;
d. provide teachers with the intellectual and professional background adequate for their assignment and make them adaptable to changing situation; and
e. enhance teachers’ commitment to the teaching profession.

In spite of the flowery tone and lofty optimism contained in this policy, realistic appraisal of what really obtains in the institutions manifest a mismatch
between plan (the policy) and what is practically implemented. The simple question therefore is why has the operations of these institutions not lead to the attainment of the noble visions enshrined in the national policy for that strata?

As a way of appraising the mismatch that has become endemic in tertiary level of education between policy and practice, one can point towards both internal and external factors. The internal factors would include strikes, inadequate employers’ motivation and weak accountability for educational performance. Some of the external factors comprise of prevalence of corruption among stakeholders, shortage of qualified manpower, inadequate funding, inconsistent government policy and compromise of merit in admission practice among several others (Olajuwon O. T, 2008). El-Rufai (2006) traces the pitiable state of Nigeria’s educational system to declining morale, flight of talent, ill-equipped libraries and laboratories, the open and shut syndrome, the scepter of violence and cultism, explosion in students’ enrolment and self-triggering re-direction of value system.

**Assuring Quality**

Making quality assurance a discourse as it relates to effective Colleges of Education focus would have to be sustaining effectiveness in the operations of the NCE programme of the Colleges in tandem with national aspirations for that stratum of the school system. For example, those of producing highly motivated, conscientious and efficient classroom teachers for all levels of the school system, and encourage further the spirit of creativity among teachers. Others include, help teachers to adapt into the social life of the society and further their commitment to national aspirations, and so on. To properly appraise the situation, it is apt to restate that at the moment external and internal measures are employed to assure quality in the College of Education system. The internal measures include moderation of examination questions and results by competent academic in relevant field outside the staff list of the College (Chief Lecturer), Departmental and Schools’ moderation of examination questions and results; and academic board perusal, moderation and confirmation of examination results.

However, external quality assurance measure is the exclusive preserve of National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE). This commission does this in two ways apart from setting out a uniform Minimum Academic Standard (MAS) that all Colleges are expected to meet and be guided by. The minimum academic standard contains programme of studies (courses) approved for the NCE programme, staff (academic and non-academic) entry requirement and mobility guidelines and basic plants required for effective operations of studies leading to the award of NCE among other things. The two NCCE’s quality assuring measures therefore are:

a. Routine re-accreditation of programmes; and
b. accreditation of new programme.
The routine re-accreditation of programmes has five year duration. A programme accredited and graded fully accredited would enjoy that clearance until the fifth year when such programme would be re-accredited. In the same vein, a programme given interim accreditation would have to be re-accredited after the second year. However, a programme denied accreditation would not admit new students and would wind up when already admitted students graduate.

The new programme accreditation of NCCE on Colleges is done when Colleges desire to mount a new academic programme. A resource visit is carried out to assess available human and material resources for the academic programme. Consequent upon this visit students are admitted and in the second year of study by the students full accreditation is carried out to generally evaluate the extent of compliance to specifications in the minimum academic standard with regards to staff, materials and plants.

An appraisal of the process of ensuring quality and effectiveness at the NCE level with relation to both internal and external bodies is that they should inspire and effect positive changes and sustain standard. Such processes, Obikeze (2003) describes as transformative supervision. He explains, it is a process through which change is initiated within existing forms. This view, according to Nwamwenda (1999), is the attainment of fundamental changes. He sees transformation as opening up to novel ideas and ways of purposeful seeing of the world with the determination of enriching that which has been inherited. Transformation entails creating something new or different through the remodeling or reconfiguration of the constituent elements of the old practice (Obikeze, 2003). It can be inferred that the various accreditation exercise and such internal procedures have become so stereotyped and thereby carried out as mere routine traditional rites. Hence, the constant manifestation of mismatch between policy and practice.

**Challenges to Quality Assurance at NCE Level**

A critical overview of the processes that constitute quality assurance at NCE level manifest quite a number of impediments that can be described as the sources of disconnect between the noble and inspiring goals of assuring quality and what really obtain. Okebukola (2010), identifies depressed funding, capacity deficit in College administration and governance, political interference, low carrying capacity of the Colleges and incidence of corruption as major areas of impediments to assuring quality through government agencies mandated to oversee minimum standard compliance over tertiary institutions (NUC, NBTE and NCCE).

Nevertheless, as all-encompassing as Okebukola’s identified impediments are, it may yet be apt to give concise illustrations of those points as a way of contextualizing the impediments as found at the Colleges of Education level. A gloomy situation pervades the Colleges when in some cases management have to augment government subventions to meet monthly overhead cost (particularly among
State Government owned NCE institutions), zero allocation for capital projects, dearth of consumables and ancillary resources (vehicle, furniture, office equipment, etc) and epileptic power and communication network among several others suffice as evidence of depressed funding. Instances of perversion and compromise in staff recruitment, misplace of priority in allocation of fund, personnel and College materials; disparity in emoluments of same cadre staff among states and between Federal and States owned Colleges and brain drain as manifestations of capacity deficit in College administration. Other common cases of impediments to quality assurance procedures include hijack of management duties by government constituted governing council, undue meddlesomeness by Ministry of Education officials, and outright disregard for provisions of the College enabling laws – political interference. Low carrying capacity affects attempts at ensuring quality in Colleges of Education the most. This is attributable to the stiffer admission procedure into the Universities which leave the too numerous tertiary education seekers with relative ease of admission. In this connection, most Colleges of Education admit students far more than the available human personnel and material resources can reasonably sustain.

However, of all the impediments appraised earlier, none is as daunting and highly responsible for quality assurance compromise as a high level of corruption in the system. For the external (NCCE) quality assurance accreditations, the process of appointing accreditors has been reduced to whom you know among qualified academic than a rigorous screening process. The various accreditations processes have become a season of unholy harvest for the accreditors. Suspicion thrives that officials of the supervisory agency and invited academic accept different forms of ‘hospitality packages’ from Colleges on accreditation apart from legitimate allowances offered by the NCCE. The ongoing accreditation of programmes of some private Colleges of Education in Nigeria raises serious concern on the quality of the NCCE accreditation itself. The fear is if some measure of integrity is not restored to the exercise, too many mushroom Colleges would have been granted full accreditation and they would constitute what Okebukola (2010) calls ‘certificate mills’ for want of anything genuine and transparent in their NCE programmes.

Even for the few internal quality assurance measures, moderation of examination questions and results has become mere rites to be fulfilled rather than bring leverage to the process. Only very few external examiners do reject, objectively comment and take time to really examine graded scripts and scores allocated. This is due to reasons not unconnected with the process of appointing them (mostly friends of the examiners or exchange of external moderation appointment); and the abnormally high number of students’ scripts and results presented to moderators.

Conclusion
Quality assurance involves the process of monitoring, assessing, and complying with standard and communicating judgments to all concerned to guarantee effectiveness in teacher education. Even though the duties and mandate of NCCE as
The custodian of quality assurance is germane and quite desirable, an overhaul of the entire process is necessary. Within the Colleges, formidable and reliable quality assurance structure should be instituted so that cases of window dressing and compliance only during NCCE accreditation would be eliminated. And that the NCCE accreditation should genuinely assure quality like it used to be at its earlier years of establishment and it should ignite transformation in its supervision of NCE teachers’ education in Nigeria. It is only when impediments to quality assurance are confronted by a consideration of suggestions offered and many more that the nation could attain effectiveness in its teacher education programme.

**Recommendations**

As long as there would be continuous need for holders of NCE in the nation’s educational system, it is imperative that enduring mechanism is put in place to constantly assure quality in the operations of Colleges of Education in Nigeria. This becomes quite necessary now than ever before for the geometric rise in students enrolment, over stressed facilities, abnormally high students-teacher ratio and the seeming wide spread official endorsement of compromise among other salient challenges to school effectiveness at that level. The following are suggested as measures that can broaden quality assurance in Colleges:

a). Establishment of a special quality assurance office/committee/unit by management of each College of Education. This committee should be adequately mobilized and consist of officials of proven integrity renowned for fairness and quite impartial. Members of the committee should not be unduly large to make it effective. This committee would serve as internal watchdog of operations and ensure strict compliance to the minimum academic standard as constantly reviewed by the NCCE. When this committee effectively carries out its task, the routine accreditation would become a mere formality and less tortuous for the Colleges and the NCCE.

b). Investment in the knowledge and use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in all Colleges. This, when well done, would make students to benefit from modern trends of learning and knowledge; and would ease the process of monitoring quality for both internal and external agencies. With ICT College data could be accessed easily, teaching and assessment of learning can be followed as they are carried out.

c). Immediate restoration of institutional autonomy. Cases of political interference and such external influences on College administration should be checked by way of strict adherence to the statute establishing and guiding their operations. Only men and women of integrity and vast related experience in tertiary education should be appointed into College Governing Councils.

d). Improved financial allocation and funding of teacher education. Cases of compromise of standard occasioned by lack of fund and instances of
dilapidated infrastructures constitute great obstacles to effective teacher education. Prolong absence of capital projects and augmentation of subvention by Colleges to pay staff salary clearly contravene World bank recommendations of 26% national budget allocation to education and the fact of education being a social service.

e). A review of NCCE operational strategies. The NCCE should evolve such internal checking mechanism that would make its assignments on Colleges devoid of any nepotic and corrupt tendencies. Since the verdict of NCCE is taken as sacred as to what institution is qualified to run NCE certificate, compromise of any form is a great disservice to the nation because of the implications of half baked teachers. NCCE should device means that would make its accreditations thorough, fair, and impartial. Its verdict should truly be reflective of what abounds in Government owned and especially privately owned Colleges of Education in the Country.

References


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