JOURNAL OF

PEDAGOGICAL THOUGHT

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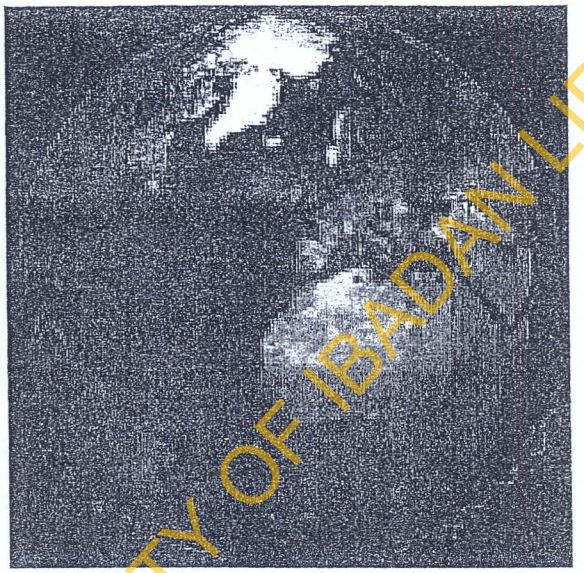
ISSN 1821-8180 VOLUME 9, NOVEMBER, 2012

JOURNAL OF PEDAGOGICAL THOUGHT



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ISSN 1821-8180

VOLUME 9, NOVEMBER, 2012

A PUBLICATION OF THE FACULTY OF EDUCATION
KAMPALA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY COLLEGE
DAR ES SALAAM, TANZANIA

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ENSURING QUALITY ASSURANCE OF THE TEACHING-LEARNING PROCESS IN AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES

Akorede, S.F.
Institute Of Education
University Of Ibadan, Nigeria
E-Mail Address:docserifat@yahoo.com

Abstract

Higher education is at the crossroads in most African countries. At one end there is high demand for access to higher education and at the other the quality of the skills acquired is questioned. In other to survive in the competitive world of globalization, all higher education institutions should therefore pay special attention to the teaching-learning process. This paper therefore engaged in extensive review of literature on diverse views of quality assurance, quality control and total quality management of university education. It compared quality assurance practices in some advanced and African countries. It answered the question of how quality of the teaching-learning process can be assessed and how to enhance the appropriate skills in our university graduates. The paper recommended that greater emphasis should be placed on the supervision and monitoring of the teaching-learning process, so that university graduates will acquire the appropriate skills required by the society.

Introduction

In a society full of diversity, ideologies and opinions, higher education means different things to different people. Higher education includes College and University teaching-learning towards which students' progress to attain higher educational qualification. Higher education imparts in-depth knowledge and understanding so as to advance the student to new frontiers of knowledge in different works of life (subject domains). It develops the student's ability to question and seek truth and makes him/her competent to critique on contemporary issues. It broadens the intellectual powers of the individual within a narrow specialization but also gives him/her a wider perspective of the world around.

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According to Ronald Barnett (1992), cited in NAAC (2006), there are four predominant concepts of higher education:

(i) Higher education as the production of qualified human resources. In this view, higher education is seen as a process in which the students are counted as "products" absorbed in the labour market. Thus, higher education becomes input to the growth and development of business and industry.

(ii) Higher education as training for a research career. In this view, higher education is preparation for qualified scientists and researchers who would continuously develop the frontiers of knowledge. Quality within this viewpoint is more about research publications and transmission of the academic rigour to do quality research.

(iii) Higher education as the efficient management of teaching provision. In this view, higher education institutions focus on efficient management of teaching-learning provisions by improving the quality of teaching, enabling a higher completion rate among the students.

(iv) Higher education as a matter of extending life chances. In this view, higher education is seen as an opportunity to participate in the development process of the individual through a flexible, continuing education mode. Interestingly, all these four concepts of higher education are not exclusive; rather they are integrated and give an overall picture of what is higher in higher education. If we look at the activities of colleges and universities, we will realize that teaching, research and extension form the three main functions of higher education.

Higher education could therefore be seen as the backbone of any society. It is the quality of higher education that decides the quality of human resources in a country. Higher education, as we see today is a complex system facilitating teaching, research, extension and international cooperation and understanding. This is why the NAAC (2006) (National Assessment and Accreditation Council (2006) for higher education system in India envisage; national development, fostering global competitiveness, including ethical values, promote use of technology and create an atmosphere and quest for excellence.

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In the same vein, university education in African universities have been structured to provide needed manpower for the development of the society. For instance, the goal of higher education in Nigeria as specified in section 6 of the National Policy of Education (NPE 2004) includes: "the development of individuals through high level relevant manpower training, inculcation of proper values for the survival of individuals, development of intellectual capacity of individuals to understand their environments, acquisition of physical and intellectual skills for self reliance, to promote national and international understanding and interaction.

The extent to which tertiary institutions in Nigeria have been able to achieve these lofty goals is a thing of concern to all stakeholders as a lot of research findings have revealed that there are different challenges on the relevance and quality of higher education in Nigeria (Ajayi, 1999; Oni, 2000).

Specifically, there is the public outcry that most university graduates in Nigeria are unemployable or that most of them did not have the relevant skills needed by the fact that most of them have to be retrained to acquire some skills before they could be useful to the society. This therefore calls to question the quality of skills acquired in the universities in Nigeria and other African countries. We therefore need to look inward into the quality assurance of the process variable (teaching-learning process) of the delivery of university education.

Defining Quality

The British Standard institution (BSI) defines quality as the totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs (BSI 1991).

Dhanarajah (1999) cited in Junaid (2010) opines that quality is a difficult and elusive term to define within the context of the provision of education. He further explains that performance/quality indicators are often the means of measuring the extent to which quality is achieved. For instance, the University of Nairobi performance indicators are:

- High completion rate
- Appreciable rate of admission
- Hyperactive Population of Distance Learning (DL) study materials

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- High employment of its graduates

Aworh (2005) also opines that quality is the standard of excellence that is in conformity to a given level of excellence which represents particular standard or specifications. He also states that quality can be defined in terms of teaching, learning and research environments well as with regards to quality of students, staff and the curricula. In a nutshell, quality of a programme can be seen from the perspectives of inputs, processes and outputs of the programme. Quality can only be achieved if those trusted with various functions perform them well.

Why Worry about Quality?

Quality, as we know was originally developed in the manufacturing industry. In the area of higher education, the adoption of quality control has been superficial and diluted by the exercise of academic freedom (Largosen et al, 2004). Further, the prevailing culture of universities is often based on individual autonomy, which is zealously guarded (Colling and of Harvey, 1995). Thus, it is usually difficult to apply the features of quality to higher education considering the fact that quality requires team work (Boaden and Dale, 1999). However, the quality of higher education is very important for its stakeholders. Notably, providers (funding bodies and the community at large), students, staff and employers of graduates are important (Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2003).

As teachers, principals, heads of departments, planners and policy makers in education, we should therefore be conscious of why we should worry about the quality of our teaching programmes and institutions. Some of the reasons are:

(1) Competition

This is significant because of globalization and the GATS (Global Agreement on Trade in Services), the educational environment will be seized by increased competition. In order to survive in such a situation, educational institutions need to worry about their quality.

(2) Customer Satisfaction

Students, parents or sponsoring agencies as customers of the educational institution are now highly conscious of their rights or getting value for their money and time spent. They are now demanding

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good quality teaching and receiving employable skill sets, and thus, we should constantly worry about the relevance of our courses and programmes to the needs of the labour market.

(3) Maintaining Standards

As educational institutions, we are always concerned about setting our own standard and maintaining it continuously year after year. In other to maintain the standard, we should consciously make effort to improve quality of the educational transactions as well as the educational provision and facilities.

(4) Accountability

Every institution is accountable to its stakeholders in terms of the funds (public and private) used on it. Concern for quality will ensure accountability of the funds utilized and inform the stakeholders about taking appropriate decisions. Thus, quality can be considered as a monitoring mechanism.

(5) Improved Employee Morale and Motivation

Your concern for quality as an institution will improve the morale and motivation of the staff in performing their duties and responsibilities. If a quality system is in place, the internal processes would be systematic, making every department complementing each other's service domain and helping in developing internal customer satisfaction leading to high morale and motivation.

(6) Credibility, Prestige and Status

If you are concerned about quality, continuously and not once in a while, it will bring in credibility to individuals and your institution because of consistency leading to practice, status and brand value.

(7) Image and Visibility

Quality institutions have the capacity to attract better stakeholder support, like getting merited students from far and near, increased donation grants from philanthropists/funding agencies and higher employer interest for easy placement of graduates.

In summary, quality in higher education means the education process is such that it ensures students achieve their goals and thereby satisfies the needs of the society and helping national development.

How then do we ensure that the quality of our programme in the universities is maintained or assured? This then brings us to the issue of quality assurance in major developed countries and some African countries.

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Quality Assurance in Developed Countries

In the U.S, quality assurance in higher education institution is done through the accreditation process, which ensured that education providers meet and maintain minimum standards of quality and integrity regarding academics, administration and related services. There is no federal agency or ministry to control or oversee the post-secondary educational institutions in the USA. The accreditation is carried out by private, non-profit organizations designed and recognized for this specific purpose. Thus, external quality monitoring is the method of quality assurance in the USA.

In the UK, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for higher education is the centralised independent body funded by subscription from universities and colleges of higher education in the UK. Through its assessment of teaching in subject reviews, it has been instrumental in defining standards for teaching and enabling poor provision to be identified and eliminated (UKDES, 2003).

In the UK, the quality assurance is done primarily through institutional audit and subject reviews. The process of institutional audit is a detailed and comprehensive scrutiny of the internal quality assurance systems of the institution, study of the self-evaluation documents prepared by the institution and audit visits. The whole exercise is based on the code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (QAAHE, 2003).

Universities and higher education institutions in Australia are self-accrediting bodies. They typically have in place a system of formal, cyclical review involving external assessors, for evaluation of programmes and organizational units. In March 2000, the ministerial council on Education, Training and Youth Affairs (MCETYA) formally established the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) as an independent, not-for-profit national agency to promote, audit and report on quality assurance in Australia higher education.

So far, we have seen that the USA, the UK and Australia follow different systems of quality assurance in higher education but all are essentially doing external quality monitoring.

Developing Quality Assurance Culture in African Universities

Quality has been part of the university culture since the establishment of modern universities, even though quality assurance has only recently

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assumed greater importance worldwide. Universities had for long been distinguished by the quality of their products. With the establishment of quality assurance agencies in many countries, universities began to feel that quality assurance was a kind of imposition from the government, even though the institutions had inherent systems of maintaining quality.

In the effort to deepen and achieve the objectives of quality assurance, there is a need for the synchronization of the internal and external quality assurance activities in the universities. This therefore calls for the evolution and institutionalization of the quality assurance culture in the universities. Quality culture is more than a mere set of rules and procedures which can be mechanically negotiated, agreed upon and implemented. Quality culture encompasses a more implicit consensus on what quality is and how it should be maintained and promoted (Hunger and Skalbergs, 2007).

The development of a quality assurance culture requires that students are placed at the centre of the quality assurance activities. This requires partnership and cooperation, sharing of experiences and team work with the aim to support the individual student as an autonomous scholar (Rizk and Al-Alusi, 2009). Hence, since quality has historically been part of the university culture, members of the university community need to change their perception of quality assurance as an externally imposed process.

Quality Assurance in African Countries

Quality assurance activities in Nigeria are multi-dimensional. It includes formal recognition of state universities; the approval of individual university programmes; development of minimum academic standards for programmes taught in Nigerian universities and the accreditation of same; ensuring that private universities are established following laid down guidelines, resource verification; and the enforcement of carrying capacity for individual university programmes.

The National Universities Commission (NUC) conducts accreditation exercise to ensure that the universities meet the provisions of minimum academic standards (MAS). The exercise involves three distinct steps:

(a) Self-study
(b) Site visit and peer review

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(c) Reporting of outcome

The accreditation criteria is made up of six broad areas of academic content: staffing, physical facilities, library facilities, funding of the programme and employers' rating of the graduates.

Ghana has two agencies responsible for higher education; the National Council for Tertiary Education and the National Accreditation Board. The latter has the vision "ensuring high standards in higher education" and was established following the enactment of National Accreditation Board Law, 1993 (PNDL 317), as a Public Service Institution with the responsibility for the accreditation of programmes and institutions in the country. It was established 'to contribute to the furtherance of the better management of tertiary education as the Quality Assurance Body'.

The Board defines accreditation as a system of according recognition to an educational institution for meeting satisfactory standards in performance, integrity and quality. The institution among other things must have well-qualified staff in adequate numbers, a well-equipped and well-stocked library, adequate number of classrooms, lecture theatres, laboratories, workshops, with the requisite equipment and adequate and reliable sources of funding.

The Board is empowered to set up committee and sub-committees with respect to;

(a) Institutional accreditation
(b) Programme accreditation
(c) Monitoring and supervisory roles to ensure the maintenance of acceptable standards and available facilities

Another responsibility of the Board is the evaluation of certificates and qualifications awarded by institutions in Ghana or any other country to establish comparability. It also determines the authenticity and comparability of both local and foreign educational certificates.

In Tanzania, the Higher Education Accreditation Council (HEAC) was established under the Education Act of 1995 as a government agency responsible for the promotion and quality assurance of higher education institutions, programmes, staff, students and awards. Ten

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years later, the Tanzania Commission for Universities (TUC) was established under the Universities Act of 2005, substituting HEAC.

The commission (TUC) is mandated to recognize and accredit the country's university institutions and their programmes to approve relevant examinations' regulations and determine equivalence and recognize awards given by higher education institutions inside and outside Tanzania. The TUC is a government agency responsible to the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology.

In Africa, three countries with quality assurance agencies have been examined. The three models examined revealed that the quality assurance agencies were statutorily set up by their respective governments. They coordinate quality assurance activities in the country and such activities involve both the public and private higher education institutions.

How to ensure Total Quality Care of Teaching-Learning Process in African Universities

One of the contemporary thinkers of higher education and total quality management, Ronald Barnett (1992) says "Quality in higher education demands the establishment of an institutional culture, not so much a matter of total quality management but rather one of total quality care, in which each professional is seized of his or her responsibilities and takes care over all his or her own professional efforts (p. 133). According to him, quality should be seen as a process of critical dialogue within an institution where course teams accept ownership and facilitate student engagement towards learning and development and there is a self-critical culture of continuous care for the students' quality course experience. Barnett suggested that there are four core activities that take care of quality in higher education and these are:

(1) teaching and learning;
(2) student assessment;
(3) staff development and;
(4) curricular courses.

This paper is however interested in the teaching-learning process as it is central to all the other core activities that take place in higher education globally. The Barnett's quality framework will be used to illustrate this.

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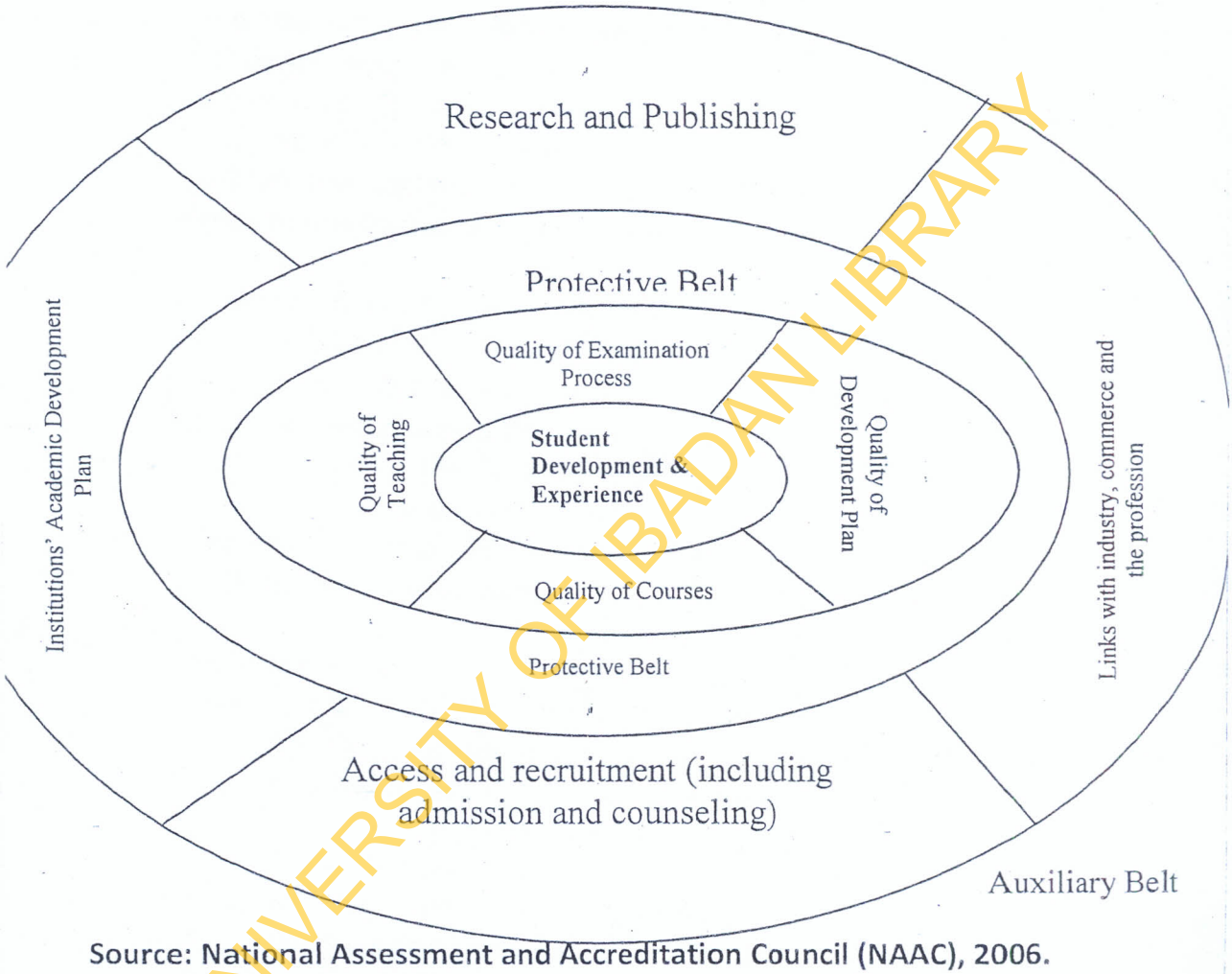
FIG 1: BARNETT'S QUALITY FRAMEWORK



Source: National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), 2006.

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The Barnett's Quality Framework is a display of how the focus of university education is the student development and experience. The protective belt includes the quality of teaching, quality of examination process, quality of staff development and the quality of courses run. All the above can be realized through effective teaching-learning, so that students will develop the necessary skills and attitude through experience. Though the activities within 'auxiliary belt' are important, they have less direct bearing on the quality of students' experiences. Within the Barnett's framework, quality in higher education can be seen in qualitative and quantitative terms.

Conclusion and Recommendation

In conclusion, in order to ensure quality in higher education, there should be a bit of shift towards teaching-learning process, so that students will develop the appropriate skills and attitudes required by African society. The focus of total quality care should therefore be an emphasis on supervision and monitoring of the teaching-learning process, so that graduates of our universities will acquire the necessary skills for the development of their society.

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