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The Open University of Tanzania
Faculty of Education
P. O. Box 23409
Dar es Salaam
Tanzania

Email: jipe@out.ac.tz
Website: www.out.ac.tz

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All correspondence should be addressed to:

The Chief Editor –JIPE
The Open University of Tanzania
P.O. Box 23409
Dar es Salaam, Tanzania

or

Email: jjipe@out.ac.tz

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Editorial

The Open University of Tanzania is celebrating its 20th anniversary this year. Being the first public Open University in Eastern Africa it has unveiled the best educational preference to many people in the region. The best learning process transcends the efficiency and ethics of a workforce. Through research and hard work, the university has been stirring social transformation evidently in the elevation of dependable approach in solving social problems consistently with the needs of the 21st century. Although the OUT doesn't brag for its learning output, its mission and vision attract many to share the reputation of belonging to such learning institution. The importance of this occasion inspires all university stakeholders to re-evaluate the contribution of the open and distance learning to the nation. The growth in delivering and expanding access to many students in Eastern Africa has been marked with increased knowledgeable workforce in the society.

Adult learning contributes in attainment of achievers of social reform and development. For 20 years, East African nations have absorbed graduates capable of transforming society dreams to reality. Learners' response in e-learning has proved that acquisition of knowledge and skills can be done in a non-tradition classroom setting. Deviating from conventional mode of delivery, learning becomes the source of interest and excitement to both students and scholars. The uniqueness of the Open University of Tanzania is realized in its attainable goals, and taking risks while embracing internal and external challenges. The opportunity to extend access and knowledge coincides with emphasis on andragogical learning methodologies. Mobilization of educational resources and guidance in the acquisition of new knowledge empower learners' confidence and sense of belonging to the institution. Inclusion of learners' background and experience has moderated the pace of learning whereby students are in control of what and when to take courses. An online learning method has encouraged students' inclination and motivation to engage in the 21st century technology. The OUT has adhered to students' quest for new knowledge through face to face sessions, virtual and physical libraries.

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has liberated many individuals from stagnation to active participant through e-learning. Learners appreciate their recognition and inclusion of their experience in the learning process. ODL acts as the remedy of many shortfalls of traditional system of education. ODL is also mentioned by Mushi in her article to create free critical and relatively independent thinkers capable of interrogating, interpreting and innovating. East African governments have welcomed the OUT move to create challengers of actions, goals, social structures, traditions and thinking. Higher quality of learning and achievable goals override society status quo. Although liberation is refined by social transformation, the OUT is still challenging its staff and students to be more conversant with emerging technologies.

Human capital has been a pillar of OUT for realization of its goals. Outsourcing innovators and those proven to excel the norm, has made the institution firm to the

present. Mbwette and Ngirwa emphasized the importance of human resource managers to increase diversity of employees. Inclusion of individual's contributions enables the institution to achieve multiple goals. Differences offer higher chance of growth but is also mentioned by Mbwette and Ngirwa to elevate chances of creating specific challenges. The institution is current in its delivering superior knowledge through qualified individuals and its initiative in sponsoring its workforce in acquisition of new knowledge and skills. The stability of the institution to its core values is affirmed in its unitary vision of all stakeholders.

Dr. John Soka
The Editor

Quality Assurance in Open and Distance Learning: The Approach of National Universities Commission of Nigeria

Yusuf Ismail

University of Maiduguri, Centre for Distance learning, Nigeria

Abstract: *The origin of distance education at the university level in Nigeria dates back to 1974 with the transformation of what used to be correspondence studies to distance education by the existing conventional universities thereby making them become Dual-Mode institutions. While a single mode open and distance learning at the university level was introduced in 1983, it became functional in 2001. However, the issue of quality assurance was not in place until 2009 when the National Universities Commission (NUC) in charge of the quality assurance in Nigerian universities established a unit to ensure quality in open and distance learning. Although NUC is specialised in regulating the activities of conventional universities, the unit convened a stakeholders workshop to develop guidelines for open and distance learning in Nigerian universities with resource persons from the Open University, United Kingdom. The outcome of the workshop was the development of programme evaluation form for open and distance learning programmes.*

This paper critically analyses the evaluation procedure by comparing it with critical areas that any framework for managing open and distance learning quality should address as proposed by the Common Wealth of Learning. The strengths and weaknesses of the NUC evaluation procedures were determined and suggestions were offered on how to improve the evaluation procedures by taking into cognisance of Nigeria's present technological and infrastructural challenges.

Introduction

The history of distance education in Africa, and Nigeria in particular, dates back to the 1940s when many Nigerians got enrolled in the correspondence colleges in United Kingdom such as the Rapid Results College, Exam Success and Woolsey Hall. By 1933, a handful of Nigerian graduates had obtained bachelors degree, mostly in philosophy and history. Such graduates were able in those days to overcome the barriers of distance to gain access to university education (Ojo,1988; NOUN, 2006). The first indigenous distance learning programme was the English by Radio programme of Nigeria Broadcasting Corporation that followed independence in 1960. The programme was primarily targeted at primary and secondary school levels and covered core courses at both levels with more emphasis placed on the teaching and learning of Science, Mathematics and English. In the last four decades, university education programmes in the country began to witness a lot of changes in terms of instructional delivery mode in some of our tertiary institutions. The Correspondence and Open Studies Unit (COSU) of University of Lagos that started in 1974, which later changed to Correspondence and Open Studies Institute (COSI) and now known as Distance Learning Institute was the first attempt made to establish a distance education unit as part of a University in Nigeria. It began initially to offer programmes in science education at first degree level in Biology, Chemistry, Mathematics, Physics and

Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) for degree holders who did not possess teaching qualifications (Ajadi, Salawu & Adeoye, 2008).

Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) also started its distance education through a training programme known as Teachers-in-Service Education Programme (TISEP) for Grades Three and Two teachers and later the Nigerian Certificate in Education (NCE). Also in November, 1976, the University established a University of the Air Programme for teachers in secondary schools and teacher training colleges. The Distance Learning Institute of the University of Ibadan which started in 1979 as External Degree Programme of the University is another institution which adopted the distance learning mode (Ajadi, Salawu & Adeoye, 2008). Another historical step in Nigerian distance education was the initiative of the civilian government of Shehu Shagari to establish an Open University, which was to be based in Abuja. However, for various reasons and considerations, the scheme was scrapped by the military regime of General Buhari. His Government favoured a dual-mode set-up at the University of Abuja. The Centre for Distance Learning and Continuing Education (CDLCE) was mandated to provide a distance education component for every course that the University of Abuja would provide. However, it was not possible to meet this mandate (Yusuf, 1999). This paved way to many conventional universities in the country to establish distance learning centres.

Thus, another milestone in the history of establishment of dual-mode institutions, that is, establishing distance learning centres within existing conventional universities. There are notable examples of distance education delivery forming part of a 'dual-mode' institution. Within this are varying degrees of formalization. For example, the Universities of Abuja, Lagos, Ibadan, Ife, Maiduguri and Yola operate structured dual-mode distance education. At Abuja, Ibadan and Yola the Centres are situated kilometres away from the main campus. The Lagos, Ife and Maiduguri distance learning centres are more fortunate in that they operate within the main campus. All these Universities have centres for distance education that are an integral part of the administrative structure of their respective universities. However, they operate with a reasonable degree of autonomy (Yusuf, 2007).

A key characteristic of delivery of distance education within a dual-mode institution is the location of such delivery within the systems and operations of predominantly face-to-face institutions of higher education. The implication of this is that distance education units tend to rely heavily on tutors and writers who are already employed as fulltime lecturers. As individual institutional reports illustrate, development of materials for distance education provision and tutoring relies predominantly on tutors who are already employed on a full-time basis as academic staff in face-to-face institutional settings.

Another implication of locating distance education facilities within the face-to-face tertiary institutions has relegated distance education to being regarded as what expert term as ‘poor brother’ of face-to-face education provision.

Despite the long history and successful track record of distance learning in Nigeria, there wasn’t any framework to ensure or benchmark quality in open and distance learning in the country until 2008 when the National Universities Commission (NUC) in charge of quality assurance in Nigerian universities established a unit to ensure quality in open and distance learning. Although NUC is specialised in regulating the activities of conventional universities, however, the unit convened a stakeholders workshop to develop guidelines for open and distance learning in Nigerian universities with resource persons from the Open University, United Kingdom. The outcome of the workshop was the development of programme evaluation form for open and distance learning programmes .

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to critically analyse the NUC evaluation procedure by comparing it with critical areas that any framework for managing open and distance learning quality should address as proposed by the Commonwealth of Learning and thereby, determining the strengths and weaknesses of the NUC evaluation procedures with the aim of offering suggestions on how to improve the evaluation procedures by taking into cognisance of Nigeria’s present technological and infrastructural challenges.

Meaning of Quality and Quality Assurance

What is quality?

Crosby (1984) affirmed that quality means ‘free and zero defects’. Juran (1989) opined that quality means ‘fit for purpose’. Harvey and Knight (1996) suggested that quality can be broken into five different but related dimensions;

- Quality as exceptional, e.g. high standard.
- Quality as consistency, e.g. zero defects.
- Quality as fitness of purpose; fitting customer specifications.
- Quality as value for money.
- Quality as transformative; ongoing process to empower and enhance customer satisfaction.

Thus, suggesting that quality is not some kind of fixed, immutable target or destination that may be attained merely by striving sufficiently hard, but a dynamic or moving target whose attainment at each point in time is facilitated by a set of strategies that are themselves also dynamic (Ekhaguere, 2006).

What is quality assurance in education?

Menon (2004) asserted that quality in a higher education programme means quality of graduates it produces and quality of learning processes it provides for. Menon further stressed that *Quality assurance (QA)* is the set of activities that an organisation undertakes to ensure that standards are specified and reached consistently for a product or service. Quality assurance facilitates recognition of the standards of awards, earn greater public confidence, helps to inform students choice, contributes to improved

teaching, learning and administrative processes and help disseminate best practices with the objective of leading to overall improvement of higher education systems. Since higher education is becoming internationalised, however, setting common standards and evaluation criteria must take into consideration diversity and plurality of higher education within national, as well as regional systems. According to Menon (2004) *Quality Assurance* involves proactive measures taken to avoid faults while *quality control (QC)* involves reactive measures taken to remove faults and *assessment of quality systems* that include the monitoring, evaluation, and audit of procedures. A *total quality management - internal and external*, will be a combined mechanism of *quality assurance, quality control and continuous monitoring and evaluation (M&E)*.

Although the definition of quality assurance may differ, however, all quality assurance terminologies share a common purpose in ensuring that students receive a high quality and relevant education that has greater public confidence.

Quality Assurance in Open and Distance Learning

Open and Distance education have seen a remarkable growth in the last few decades owing to the increasing demand for education and training. This is because since its inception, distance learning has been increasing access to education. Look at how distance learning is providing access, for example, Anadolu University in Turkey provides access to 40% of all entrants to higher education in that country and the government of India aspires to reach a similar percentage of ODL students by 2012. In South Africa 4 out of every 10 students enrolled in Higher Education study at a distance (Kanwar & Daniel, 2009). It was opined that if access is increased, there is the danger of lowering quality. It is within this access to education paradigm that 'quality assurance' has become one of the fundamental aspects of managing and planning distance education provision.

In the last two decades, quality assurance in distance education has gained serious attention by institutions, stakeholders and scholars. There are quality assurance frameworks and transnational qualification frameworks developed nationally and internationally to guide and regulate distance education programmes and institutions. These include:

- EADUTU-UNESCO,
- Guidelines for Distance Learning Programs developed by Commission on Higher Education, Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools,
- Guiding Principles for Distance Learning in a Learning Society prepared by the American Council on Education,
- ADEC Guiding Principles for Distance Learning by the American Distance Education Consortium,
- Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs drafted by the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications (WCET) and developed by eight regional accrediting commissions,

- Quality on the Line: Benchmarks for Success in Internet-Based Distance Education prepared by the Institute for Higher Education Policy (2000),
- The British Association of Open Learning,
- The Canadian Association of Distance Education and the Norwegian Association of Distance Education establish voluntary standards and accept a code of practice,
- The International Council on Open and Distance Education Standards Agency (ISA),
- The Distance Education and Training Council (DETC). DETC endorsement is viewed by the public as recognition of quality performance standards.
- Asian Associations of open universities (AAOU)
- The National Universities Commission of Nigeria (NUC)
- African council on distance education-quality assurance and accreditation agency (ACDE-QAAA).

It is worth noting that this is not an exhaustive list of open and distance learning quality assurance agencies. These National and International regulating authorities, professional bodies and distance education providers developed these policies and frameworks based on the inference drawn by them with respect to potential learners (Deshmuk, 2005). As a result ,a specific quality assurance strategy is not universally adoptable (Olojede, 2008) because distance education ‘outfit’ varies widely from institution to institution and one country to another.

Thus, quality improvement becomes imperative for distance education providers. This means distance education providers must pay close attention to quality in terms of products, processes, production, delivery systems, and philosophy (COL, 1997). Pressures for quality improvement have emerged from both internal and external parties. Internally, distance education institutions are being challenged to undertake continuous improvement from within. Externally, stakeholders (i.e., users, consumers, educational funders) are persistently questioning the quality, accountability, effectiveness and efficiency of educational endeavours in which they have interest. Moreover, for many distance education institutions funding and student enrolment levels depend on quality of their bottom line performance and the quality of the services they offer.

In response to the above quality assurance pressures , institutions have begun to re-define and re-orient their institutional missions and strategic visions to incorporate and address quality issues (Belawati & Zuhairi, 2007).This is because quality in Distance education covers a number of aspects, which along with the physical products, includes pedagogical processes, production and delivery systems, and philosophy (COL, 1997). Quality of products includes course materials, number of graduates, examination pass rates, admission in further studies, and so forth. Quality of processes covers areas such as learning and teaching processes, advising students, coordinating external course and test item writers, networking with regional offices, managing student information.

Quality of production and delivery systems includes course production, print and multimedia production, test item production, scheduling, warehousing and stock control, getting materials to students, and broadcast transmissions. Quality of philosophy covers such things as ODL vision, mission and policy statements, institutional culture, governance, corporate culture, and public image (COL, 1997).

In terms of production and delivery system, ODL may be likened to industrial management (Peters, 1983). Management is crucial in ODL, as management activities follow assembly-line procedures and some jobs require craftsmanship. Deadlines and schedules must be met. What goes wrong in one activity can have a domino effect on subsequent activities, oftentimes with devastating consequences. For instance, delays in meeting course development deadlines can result in delays in production, printing, dispatching, and even in whether or not students receive their learning materials on time. In extreme cases, students' examination schedules can be postponed, simply because they did not receive their learning materials in time. Producing learning materials – including tutorial services – requires quality professionalism (Belawati & Zuhairi, 2007).

Innovation in distance education is essential in order to meet the students' demand flexibility, as students have increasingly diverse background and needs. Innovation in distance education assumes that new techniques will help individual institutions achieve their aims in terms of concrete access, cost, quality, and flexibility (Daniel, 1999). In this context, technology becomes a vital tool in distance education. For technology-based distance learning centres, the quality of teaching and learning is of critical importance, as distance learning materials are open to public access and scrutiny, and when the use of information and communication technology is involved, such access can often become global (Bates, 2000). Components of quality in technology-based educational materials include content, media production, instructional design, and delivery and student support (Bates, 2000). According to (Pirani, 2004), institutions must provide adequate and reliable technical infrastructure to support e-learning activities, instructors and student must possess the technical skills to use e-learning tools and instructors must redesign their courses to incorporate e-Learning effectively into their pedagogy. However the use of technology in distance education in developing countries like Nigeria is challenging looking at the e-readiness of the country. Nigeria was rated as the world's 139th e-ready country, the 23rd. in the African region and the 3rd in the Western African sub-region with e-readiness index of 0.2758 in 2005 (United Nations, 2006). More recent, according to the 2010 Economic Intelligence Unit, the world's e-readiness for the years 2009 and 2010 were assessed, and Nigeria was ranked 61 out of 70 countries. The most populous country on the African continent, South Africa ranks 39, Egypt 57 and then later followed by Nigeria, (Economic Intelligence Unit, 2010).

Another important element of successful strategies for benchmarking quality in online degree programs is recognition that quality can be conceptualized and measured at

different levels. Quality benchmarks can and should be measured at the institutional level, the program level, and the course level. Quality issues and considerations at these three levels are interrelated and there will be some overlap of them among the three levels. However, many quality assessment benchmarking strategies focus only on one or sometimes two of these elements, and the results are therefore incomplete and do not enable the programme to recognize all of the elements that should be addressed for comprehensive program improvement.

Quality is an incremental process (Daniel, 2005) involving continuous development along with the development of distance learning institutions. Quality assurance should not be viewed as an effort to create quality, but rather a systematic and comprehensive effort to improve quality. Quality assurance, therefore, is not a means to achieve particular target and develop procedures, but rather a continuous process of improvement. Quality assurance is based on the assumption that quality can be improved continuously. Systems and procedures that are developed for this purpose ensure that staff continuously and critically question the quality of ODL products and processes, and continuously attempt to improve it. This shows the importance of developing and strengthening the internal quality assurance mechanism in distance education.

The National Universities Commission and its Approach to Quality Assurance in ODL

The Federal Government of Nigeria through section 10 of Act No.16 of 1974, incorporated as section 4(a) of the National Universities Commission (NUC) amended Act No.49 of 1988 empowered the NUC to lay down Minimum Academic Standards (MAS) for universities in Nigeria and to accredit their degrees and other academic awards. Prior to August, 2006, the Department of Inspection and Monitoring of the NUC had not been created. It was in May, 2007 when the general reform in the public service took place and the National Universities Commission culminated in the creation of Department of Inspection and Monitoring that the Open and Distance Learning was created as one of the four Divisions of the Department (NUC/ODL). The Division was mandated with, among other things, to carry out the following functions:

- Regulating and ensuring orderly development of ODL in Nigeria.
- Monitoring and Evaluation of all institutions offering University Education via the ODL mode.
- Producing manual and conditions for offering ODL on quality assurance in Nigerian Universities.
- Monitoring and evaluating all universities offering Open and Distance Education in Nigeria with focus on such areas as academic brief and students and staff numbers, quality and mix, teaching and research quality; infrastructural input and other issues pertinent to quality assurance.

In pursuance of its mandate the division in 2008 carried out a two-day fact-finding and familiarization visits to four institutions of ODL namely: University of Ibadan,

University of Lagos, University of Abuja and National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) offering degrees via Open and Distance learning mode. Following the fact finding visit, the Division produced a draft model for ODL in Nigerian Universities. In 2009, the division convened a two-day stakeholder’s workshop with five academic staff from all institutions of ODL in Nigeria and resource persons from the Open University, UK for input and finalization of the draft practice guidelines for distance learning in Nigerian Universities. The outcome of the workshop was the development of programme evaluation form for open and distance learning programmes . Below is the evaluation form which contained detailed scoring schemes.

The programme evaluation form for open and distance learning programmes (NUC/FEF/ODL), later known as Guidelines for Open and Distance learning in Nigerian Universities , comprise 36 'best practices' under 12 main components (Table 1), and reflect the NUC’s comprehensive needs to operate quality ODL programs:

Strengths of the NUC Approach

The manual further stressed that, in order for a programme to earn full accreditation status, it must score at least 70% in component 4, 5, 6, 7 & 8 (Table 1). A cursory look

Table 1
Quality Assurance guidelines for ODL Programs

S/NO	QUALITY ASSURANCE	(%)
1	Philosophy and objectives (3 best practices)	3%
2	Admissions (1 best practice)	3%
3	Curriculum (1 best practice)	5%
4	Pedagogy/learning resources (9 best practices)	30%
5	Evaluation and assessment (4 best practices)	10%
6	Staffing (5 best practices)	10%
7	Academic learner support (5 best practices)	15%
8	Information advice and guidance, IAG, (2 best practices)	10%
9	Administration (3 best practices)	5%
10	Efficiency (1 best practices)	4%
11	Employer feedback (1 best practices)	3%
12	Viability (1 best practices)	3%

Source: *National University Commission (2009).Guidelines for ODL in Nigerian University.*

at the main components/attributes especially 4, 5, 6 & 7 in which a programme must score at least 70% before it earns full accreditation will reveal that the quality assurance exercise of the NUC has the following strengths:

1. Pedagogy/learning resources (9 best practices) score 30%: The literature review revealed that quality in ODL is frequently judged in terms of learning materials because student learning is at the centre of the ODL experience. Success depends

on how effectively course production, delivery and student support sub-systems operate, underpinned by academic standards and management processes. However, a course is more than just the materials. It is the total experience of the learner, which the NUC approach acknowledged by adding pedagogy to this component. Therefore, allocating 30% of the total marks of the evaluation to the pedagogy and learning resources are in order.

2. Evaluation and assessment (4 best practices) score 10%: Assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning, in open and distance learning assessment should be seen as a process that drives learning than assessing learning. Thus, an independent learner is isolated, always at the brink of frustration. He therefore needs instant feedback to bridge the gap of isolation. The best practices under this component (in NUC assessment) emphasised the use of computer based assessment (CBA) and constant feedback. The literature reviewed had discovered the potentials of computer based assessment (CBA) in the enhancement of distance learning. Computer based assessment offers significant potential to the student. It is always available and its use is free from personal embarrassment. It can offer immediate feedback on progress and advice on future learning. If well designed, it can be engaging. From the perspective of the teacher, it allows class size to be scaled without an increase in effort and a simple means of monitoring progress. Assessment audit frameworks demonstrate that computer based assessment is capable of meeting the criteria for assessment that supports learning. The formative capabilities of computer based assessment are of particular importance in distance learning where flexibility in timing and geography are of particular importance. Therefore ensuring that a programme must score 70% of the total marks (10%) allocated to evaluation and assessment before it earns full accreditation is another strength of the NUC's approach to quality assurance in ODL.
3. Staffing (5 best practices) score 10%.The best practices under this component emphasises the training and re-training of academic and non-academic staff and specified the qualifications and experience required of administrative and teaching staff. It went further to specify the minimum number of staff required for programmes and study centres. This is in line with staff support requirement in ODL as contained in the COL's document for quality assurance in ODL. Therefore allocating 10% of the total marks of the evaluation procedure indicate the strength of the NUC's evaluation procedure.
4. Academic learner support (5 best practices)score 15% and information advice and guidance IAG (2 best practices)score 10%) This is one the major components of support in distance learning. Distance learners are dispersed and physically separated from the institution as well as their peer groups. They may not get immediate clarifications for their doubts that come up during their studies. It is a fact that the learning packages (print materials, audio cassettes, videocassettes, etc.) used by open and distance learning institutes are not enough for the distance

learners. Most of the open and distance learning institutes in the world have established student support service centres and/or regional/study centres to cater to a large number of students on various matters like, admission, courses, examination schedules, materials dispatch, counseling and so on. It is a fact that the success of distance education depends largely on student support services provided to distance learners. Therefore, ensuring that a programme must score 70% of the total marks (20%) allocated to learner support before it earns full accreditation is in tandem with world best practices in distance learning and it shows the strength of the NUC's approach to quality assurance in ODL.

Weaknesses of the NUC Approach

- 1) The evaluation procedure is expected to clearly spell out the level at which it assures quality. This is because quality can be conceptualised and measured at different levels. Quality benchmarks can be measured at the institutional level, the program level, and the course level. The NUC's evaluation form is for which of these levels?
- 2) Is the NUC procedure designed for comparative or competitive purposes, in order to provide some ranking of programs to the public, or is it for continuous improvement? There is need for the commission to clearly state to stakeholders the purpose for the exercise.
- 3) The evaluation procedure has not clearly stated the review period of the exercise. Is it once a programme got accredited and then continuously reviewed or is there a period for review?
- 4) The evaluation exercise has no provision for students' ratings of the programs. None of the performance indicators seek feedback from students. Research findings indicate that students are the most qualified source to report on the extent to which the learning experience is productive, informative, satisfying, or worthwhile. While opinions on these matters are not direct measures of programs effectiveness, they are legitimate indicators of student satisfaction, and there is substantial research linking student satisfaction to effective teaching.
- 5) Another weakness of the NUC approach is that in all the best Practices, it emphasises the use of ICT, while this is desirable, the commission should take the countries e-readiness into cognisance. Nigeria was rated as the world's 139th e-ready country, the 23rd. in the African region and the 3rd in the Western African sub-region with e-readiness index of 0.2758 in 2005 (United Nations, 2006). More recent, According to the 2010 Economic Intelligence Unit, the world's e-readiness for the years 2009 and 2010 were assessed, Nigeria was ranked 61 out of 70 countries. The most populous country on the African continent, Nigeria ranks below South Africa and Egypt – which rank 39 and 57 respectively (Economic intelligence unit, 2010).
- 6) NUC is an external assessment force. External audits are not only needed to assure external stakeholders that an institution is performing well, but also provide an valuable feedback to the institution on whether or not they are, in reality, achieving their set goals.

Recommendations

The NUC quality assurance procedure should be developed in order to ensure quality at the institutional level, programme level and course level. Quality issues and considerations at these three levels are interrelated and there will be some overlap of them among the three levels. However, the NUC's assessment benchmarking strategies focused only on one of these elements, and the results would be therefore incomplete and would not enable the program to recognize all of the elements that should be addressed for comprehensive program improvement. All of these levels of analysis must be addressed simultaneously for maximum opportunity for program improvement.

The purpose for evaluating the programme quality should be clearly stated. Is the overall framework designed for comparative or competitive purposes, in order to provide some ranking of programs to the public, or is it for continuous improvement? The answer to this question will determine much about how the process of benchmarking quality is implemented, how open the process will be, and how readily program staff, students and others will be able to locate targets of improvement.

The NUC guidelines for ensuring quality should clearly state the period for which review will be carried out, for example is it every 3, 4 or 5 years the programme will be evaluated to ensure quality. Current NUC's guidelines call for the perspectives of employers to be considered, but do not stress including students as major players in the benchmarking strategy. While this may not be a requirement for all programs, nevertheless most programs have external constituencies whose needs should be considered and represented. Therefore the procedure should include students (customers) perspectives. In the 21st century, education has become a commodity. It can be bought, sold, and transferred just like any other commodity.

The NUC emphasises the use of ICT in all the best practices in ODL, while this is desirable, the commission should take the country's e-readiness into cognisance. It is recommended that for now the emphasis should be on the use of asynchronous ICT components like CD's, USB stick etc, as the country's e-rating improves then emphases should be on synchronous ICT component.

Conclusion

This paper critically analyses the National Universities Commission of Nigeria procedure for ensuring quality in open and distance learning by comparing it with critical areas that any framework for managing open and distance learning quality should address as proposed by the Commonwealth of Learning. The strengths and weaknesses of the NUC evaluation procedures were determined and suggestions were offered on how to improve the evaluation procedures by taking into cognisance Nigeria's present technological and infrastructural challenge.

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