Research Article

Politics of Programme Accreditation Practices in Nigerian Universities: Implications for Quality Assurance

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Abstract

Accreditation is carried out to ensure that universities meet acceptable standards of quality in its programme offerings. This paper, which examined politics of National Universities Commission programme accreditation practices used descriptive survey design. The research covered universities in Akwa Ibom and Cross River States, Nigeria. Three research questions were raised to enhance the study. Purposive sampling technique was utilized to raise a sample of 85 current and former Heads of Departments for the study. A 21 - item instrument titled " Politics of Accreditation Practices Questionnaire (PAPQ)" was drawn, validated and tested for reliability using Cronbach Alpha. The index of reliability was 0.84 which indicated the fitness of the instrument for use. Data derived from the instrument were analyzed using means and standard deviation. Findings indicated that politics has been part of programme accreditation practices. Aspects of politics of accreditation identified were: politics of funding, borrowed books to boost library stock, borrowed facilities, window dressing of facilities, among others. The major challenges to programme accreditation as identified by the respondents were inadequate funding, inadequate and obsolete facilities and too much paper documentation. Suggestions to remedy the challenges to accreditation included that adequate funds should be made available to universities and internal mechanism for quality assurance should be strengthened within the universities.

Keywords: Politics, National Universities Commission, Accreditation Practices, Universities, Quality Assurance.

1. Introduction

Tertiary institutions in Nigeria have witnessed quantitative growth in the last two decades. This growth came as a result of the yearning for university education by many Nigerian youths who could not gain access into universities due to limited spaces. This later culminated in the granting of licenses to individuals and faith-based institutions to operate their own universities. As at the last count in May, 2015, Nigeria had a total of 156 universities, made up of 40 federal, 40 states and 76 private universities.

The rise in the number of universities also translates to increase in enrolment, competition for human resources, and for scare financial resources, especially among public universities. The growth has also brought new concerns for quality, especially as these universities offer diverse programmes, have varying capacities and delivery methods. Quality issues have been in the front burner of university education in Nigeria, with quality assurance being the mechanism put in place to ensure that programme offerings in universities meet acceptable standard. Archibong (2013) observed that Nigerian public universities have not fared well with respect to quality education delivery due largely to rapid expansion of universities within a very short span of time, inadequate funding, poor management culture, infrastructural decay, examination malpractice, increased students population and so on.

It is generally acknowledged that the quality of tertiary education is crucial to socio-economic and political development of any nation. It is also central to competitiveness in an increasingly globalized world. Otto and Musinguzi (2013), defines quality assurance as the mechanism put in place to guarantee that education is fit for purpose. Hayward

(2006) noted that "countries wishing to move towards the knowledge economy are challenged to undertake reforms to raise the quality of education and training through changes in content and pedagogy. He cautioned that without high quality tertiary education, nations lack the trained professionals to meet the needs of highly competitive markets and the challenges of knowledge societies" (p.12). Thus, to ensure quality in higher institutions, a 5-year accreditation regime has been developed to ensure quality delivery and improvements in tertiary education.

Accreditation involves the evaluation of programmes to improve upon excellence, to enable higher institutions face competition and attract client, to provide relevant profile for better result achievement, and to provide the rationale for funds granted by government and external donors. The three main objectives of accreditation as provided by the National Universities Commission, NUC (2012) accreditation manual are: to ensure that minimum academic standards are maintained in programmes; to ensure employers of labour (both local and international) that Nigerian graduates possess required competence in requisite areas of specialization, as well as, confirm to the international community that programmes offered in Nigerian universities are of acceptable standards and their graduates are adequate for further studies. Accreditation is presumed to be an evaluation of an institutions' offerings against the minimum academic standard and qualities of a certain status (Ibijola, 2014).

The benefits of accreditation as pointed out by Jack (2014) are: to identify the strengths and weaknesses of universities' programmes using external-based evaluation, to ensure quality assurance. Thus, it requires information on peer reviews, students' surveys and self evaluation that creates a sense of identity and purpose for institutions as they are involved in the evaluation process.

In Nigeria, accreditation of universities' programmes is carried out by the National Universities Commission (NUC) which is the agency established by the federal government to maintain and enhance standards in universities. NUC accreditation system has been used over the years to maintain high standards in Nigerian Universities. Accreditation, according to the law establishing NUC is a process whereby academic programmes are evaluated every five years. In the accreditation process, the NUC sets the criteria, conducts the accreditation and also makes the final decision. The process of accreditation is usually done using the following criteria: Staffing (32%), academic content (23%), physical facilities (25%), library (12%), funding (5%) and employers rating (3%)   (NUC,2012). Using these criteria, the NUC teams visit the universities to carry out the exercise. The results of accreditation may be in three forms, based on the outcome. It could be full accreditation, interim/partial, or denied accreditation. Departments denied accreditation are asked to discontinue or stop further intake of students until identified deficiencies are rectified and the programmes revisited. Programmes granted interim accreditation are revisited after two years while those granted full accreditation are revisited after five years.

There has been a growing criticism of NUC programme accreditation practices in Nigerian universities. For instance, it has been alleged that during accreditation processes, politics come into play, such that NUC is finding it difficult to achieve its objectives in terms of quality assurance. Although NUC accreditation has been widely acclaimed as a useful tool for ensuring quality in Nigerian Universities, most of the exercises have been criticized as being quantitative rather than qualitative. For instance, there was a report where the Departments of Microbiology in three different universities were granted accreditation status with appalling ratios of microscope to students, viz 1:6, 1:22, and 1:25 respectively (Okwuofu & Aminu, 2013; Akinyanyu, 2012). Such accreditation exercise allows for the proliferation of ill-equipped and poorly funded programmes rather than few well-equipped and adequately funded programmes.

In the same vein, Ibijola (2014) submitted that the needs assessment report contradicted the regular 5-year NUC's accreditation exercise. The Needs assessment report indicated the dilapidated hostels and toilet facilities, high number of uncompleted projects, poor state of laboratories and so on, whereas, most federal universities enjoyed full accreditation status at about that same time that " Needs Assessment" exercise was conducted.

Okecha (2008) further alleged that some panels were found wanting in many ways, and he listed some ways in which the accreditation exercise was being abused, or grossly abused as follows:

1. Some panels do not insist on seeing physically all those listed as academic staff;
2. Some universities hire external academics for a day or two to improve their staffing position, just for accreditation;
3. Some departments fraudulently list professors of other universities (without their consent) as their staff;
4. Some institutions borrow equipments and chemicals from sister universities to satisfy accreditation requirements;
5. Some departments showcase borrowed books and journals from other institutions;
6. Some departments hire support staff only for accreditation;
7. Some panels see overcrowded lecture halls, and look the other way;
8. Some inexperienced academics are recruited to serve as members of accreditation panels;

9. Some panels receive bribes from institutions;
10. Some panels are always in a hurry to return to their bases and so try to do two days' job in a few hours (p.29).

Given the above scenario, one wonders the justification for NUC accreditation. The question that readily comes into focus is: Does NUC accreditation really guarantee quality in educational service delivery? Or is it merely a window dressing activity? The focus of this paper therefore is to examine the politics of NUC programme accreditation practices in universities in Akwa Ibom and Cross River States of Nigeria.

2. Politics of Accreditation

Politics has permeated every aspect of human life, the home, religious institutions, public and private organizations as well as educational institutions. Politicking has been part and parcel of Nigerian educational system. Hence we see politics of funding, politics of siting of institutions, politics of provision of facilities, politics of access and educational opportunities, and so on. Programme accreditation of Nigerian universities is not devoid of politics. Harold (2010) defines politics as a system of who gets what, when and how. Politics of accreditation in this paper may be said to revolve round some practices that are carried out in universities during accreditation exercise. They include, but not limited to the following:

1. Politics of panel composition: Usually four or five team members are assigned by NUC to assess a programme. Invariably, the fate of an institution's programme will obviously be in the hands of the panel. It has been observed by Utuka (2011) that in practice, some panel chairmen often usurp full control of discussions, thus reducing other members to mere listeners. Also given that some of the panel members can be influenced financially by the host university authorities; the decision of the panel members can be compromised in favour of the institution.

2. Politics of accreditation compliance to NUC Benchmark Minimum Academic Standards(BMAS): Irrelevant courses are thrust upon the departments with the revised bench mark curriculum provided by the NUC, whereas the major reason for accreditation is to institute quality. Utuka (2011) observed that some external quality assurance agency adopt compliance approach in their daily operations. He further submitted that compliance approach does not encourage the staff to become committed to quality process where they will see the process as developmental issue that will help them genuinely to find out how they can improve the programmes. They rather consider the process as a compliance issue in situations where they have to perform the task quickly because they have to. Thus placing the responsibility of ensuring quality assurance of higher institutions on NUC while individual universities are only made to comply with NUC directives. This process does not strengthen the internal structures for quality improvement. Thus Middlehurst and Woodhouse (1995) cautioned that compliance may be taken for improvement in the short term, but as soon as the need to show improvement has passed, old ways of doing things are likely to re-surface. Similarly, Utuka (2011), noted that current approaches stand the risks of failing to gain institutional commitment, a panacea for achieving desired quality outcomes. The NUC approach may not likely achieve the desired results of assuring the quality of education provided.

3. Politics of facilities borrowing: During accreditation exercises, most institutions engage in unethical practices. Such practices involve borrowing books into the library and facilities/equipments are also borrowed into the laboratories. The borrowed facilities, if carefully scrutinized by accreditation teams, have labels of the real owners. Otokunefor(2013) reported that facilities are brought overnight to put in the department before accreditation and disappear immediately after the exercise, an indication that the facilities have been returned to the owners.

4. Staff politics: It is commonly observed that prior to accreditation, most staff do not want to release their curriculum vitae in order not to give credence to the universities. Those who do so often withhold vital information. This issue arises due to the fact that what most staff acquire to improve themselves comes as a result of personal effort as management rarely support staff attendances at conferences or publication costs. Ensuring quality academic programmes in universities depend on high quality lecturers because the quality of lecturers determine the quality of products. Lecturers, however, cannot give what they do not have. Recent recruitment into institutions are done without recourse to departmental input or due process. Thus such recruitment do not take into consideration staff mix. In most departments, academic staff population is bottom heavy with many lecturers below the rank of lecture 1. As a result, during accreditation external university professors are borrowed and listed as staff of some departments. Sometimes, part-time lecturers are also listed as full-time staff.

5. Politics of funding: Funding is a major challenge in higher institutions of learning. There is a continuous dwindling of funds made available to higher institution of learning. As a result, funds are made available mostly to departments whose programmes are listed for accreditation. During accreditation, university authorities often shift their focus more to departments due for accreditation and less towards other programmes. The issue is, who are we really deceiving? What happens to other programmes in the universities? Invariably, they are left to rot for another five years.

3. Statement of Problem

Every five years, academic programmes in Nigerian universities are subjected to accreditation process to ensure that minimum academic standards are maintained and that quality is guaranteed in Nigerian Universities. However, there is a general outcry among employers of labour that Nigerian universities are churning out low quality graduates. This is seen in the last ranking of universities in Africa, where only seven Nigerian universities were listed in Africa's top 100 universities (Obafemi Awolowo 25th, University of Lagos 48th, University of Ilorin 50th, Amadu Bello University 64th, University of Port Harcourt 70th, University of Nigeria 83th, University of Akure 90th and University of Benin 91st). Obafemi Awolowo University which ranked 25th in Africa was 2004 in world universities ranking (Webometrics ranking of World Universities, 2015). It is observed that in spite of the world ranking of Nigerian universities, most universities' programmes always scale through the NUC accreditation hurdles. It seems accreditation of academic programmes does not necessarily guarantee quality because most of the time, unethical practices are carried out during programme accreditation by NUC. This paper therefore intends to find out the dimension of politics of accreditation practices in universities in Akwa Ibom and Cross River States, Nigeria.

4. Research Questions

Three research questions are posed to guide this study.
1. To what extent is politics part of NUC programme accreditation practices in universities?
2. What are the challenges to NUC programme accreditation?
3. In what ways can the challenges to NUC programme accreditation be solved?

5. Methodology

Descriptive survey design was adopted to examine the NUC programme accreditation practices in Nigerian universities. This design was used since the study involved the use of representative sample from a population to draw inferences based on available data.

The population of the study comprised all former and current Heads of Departments who have been involved in programme accreditation in their various universities. The institutions used were University of Uyo (UNIUYO), University of Calabar (UNICAL) and Cross River University of Technology (CRUTECH). UNICAL and UNIUYO are federal universities while CRUTECH is a state university. Purposive sampling technique was used to draw a sample of 85 Heads of Departments(HODs) for the study. The sample consisted of 40 HODs from UNICAL, 30 from UNIUYO and 15 from CRUTECH. The study was conducted during the 2014/2015 academic session.

A 21 - item instrument tagged "Politics of Accreditation Practices Questionnaire (PAPQ)" was used for data collection. The instrument was subdivided into three sections. Section A sought personal information about the respondents. Section B consisted of 16 items that measured accreditation practices on a 4 - point response option of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD). The respondents were required to tick one option to indicate the extent of their agreement or disagreement with an item. Section C included two open-ended questions on challenges to programme accreditation and possible remedies to the challenges. The instrument was validated by three lecturers in the Department of Educational Administration and Planning. Their suggestions were used in revising the instrument. The reliability indices of section B of the instrument were 0.84, using Cronbach Alpha reliability method. The reliability value obtained was considered good enough to justify the fitness of the instrument for data collection.

The instrument was administered on the respondents in their various universities with the help of trained research assistants. All the 85 copies of the instrument were retrieved, ensuring 100% return rate. Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) were used for data analysis. An item with a mean rating of 2.50 was regarded as significant, while a mean rating below 2.50 was regarded as not significant.

6. Data Analysis and Results

6.1 Research Question 1

To what extent is politics part of accreditation practices?
The statistical technique used for data analysis was means and standard deviation. The result is as presented in Table1.

Table 1: Mean and standard deviation of the responses on politics of NUC academic programme accreditation practices

Items	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Decision
1. Books are borrowed to boost departmental library stock	85	3.25	0.69	Agree
2. Lecturers are borrowed to satisfy staff mix.	85	1.75	0.65	Disagree
3. Part-time lecturers are listed as full-time staff	85	1.62	0.62	Disagree
4. Sufficient funds are released to departments to prepare for accreditation.	85	1.94	0.58	Disagree
5. Funds are only released during accreditation.	85	2.92	0.52	Agree
6. Accreditation team takes time to scrutinize documents.	85	3.39	0.66	Agree
7. Only few departmental facilities are checked by accreditation team.	85	1.82	0.64	Disagree
8. Equipment are borrowed for the laboratories	85	2.82	0.64	Agree
9. Panel members insist on seeing all facilities	85	2.16	0.57	Disagree
10. Deficiencies identified during accreditation are remedied immediately.	85	1.92	0.64	Disagree
11. There is window dressing of facilities during accreditation.	85	2.73	0.59	Agree
12. Identified deficiencies are swept under the carpet after accreditation	85	2.06	0.47	Disagreed
13. Accreditation panel do not insist on seeing physically all those listed as staff in my department.	85	2.94	0.45	Agree
14. Some staff are temporarily excluded from staff list to satisfy staff mix	85	2.06	0.58	Disagree
15. Only staff offices that are adequately furnished are allowed to be visited by accreditation team	85	3.39	0.66	Agreed
16. Cash gifts are given to influence the report of accreditation	85	2.06	0.54	Disagree

Expected mean = 2.50

Table 1 shows the responses from current and past departmental heads who have previously hosted NUC accreditation teams, on the accreditation practices. It was seen that items 1, 5, 6, 8, 11, 13 and 15 which are 7 out of 16 items obtained higher mean score than the expected mean of 2.50. This indicates high extent of response with respect to the items used to measure politics as part of NUC programme accreditation practices. It also shows through the responses that universities usually beef-up their facilities during time of accreditation programme, through such measures which include: borrowing of books, prompt release of funds to purchase facilities for the programme, borrowing of equipment to satisfy laboratory requirements, window dressing of facilities and taking of accreditation team to only well-furnished offices. Thus, some universities do virtually everything, ethical or unethical, to secure accreditation for their programmes, which may not reflect the true situation. The remaining 9 items obtained lower mean score than the expected mean. This shows low extent of application of the items as part of the politics to gain accreditation by the institutions.

6.2 Research Question 2

What are the challenges to NUC programme accreditation?
This question which is an open ended question asked the respondents to enumerate the challenges to NUC programme accreditation. The constraints as indicated by the HODs are highlighted in Table 2.

Table 2: Statement of challenges

- Inadequate funding for the departments
- Delay in the release of funds for accreditation by university management.
- Inadequate physical facilities
- Lack of office accommodation for academic staff
- Poor library facilities
- Lack of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) facilities
- Team membership often not adequate for all departments in the faculty
- Insufficient time for preparation
- Too much documentation that is time consuming and staff are always stressed-up.
- Poor attitude of lecturers to accreditation

6.3   Research Question 3

What in your opinion are the remedies to challenges of programme accreditation?
The suggested remedies to challenges of NUC programme accreditation are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Suggested remedies to enhance programme accreditation

- Improved budgetary allocation to departments.
- Adequate provision of facilities.
- Internal quality assurance mechanism should be enhanced
- Guidelines for accreditation should be revised to reflect modern challenges and circumstances.
- Universities libraries should be equipped with current books and journals.
- Deficiencies identified during accreditation should be rectified promptly

7.   Discussion of Results

The findings of research question one indicated a mixed outcome for accreditation practices. Findings of this study indicated that during accreditation, the following practices are observed: books are borrowed to boost the departmental library stock, only few departmental facilities are checked by accreditation team, sufficient funds are not released to departments to prepare for accreditation, only staff offices that are adequately furnished are allowed to be visited by accreditation teams and that, there is window dressing of facilities during accreditation. The outcome of this study is not totally surprising as there is consistent outcry about the dwindling funding of higher education in Nigeria as evidenced in the incessant strike actions by the various university unions. The finding of this study corroborates the assertion of Okecha (2008), that the NUC accreditation panels in recent times have not lived up to expectation. The high accreditation scores obtained by many academic programmes cannot, in anyway, be justified. Similarly, Jack (2014) observed that a look at facilities in most universities reveal that the results of the accreditations are not compatible with what is on ground. The physical facilities in most public universities are grossly inadequate and in a state of disrepair.

Responses to research question two provides insight to the major challenges faced by academic departments during accreditation exercises. The most common challenges as cited by respondents in this study were inadequate funding, inadequate infrastructural facilities and insufficient time for preparation. The findings of this study corroborates the observation by Akuegwu (2014), that as it stands today, our higher institutions lack infrastructural facilities such as classrooms, furniture, books, laboratory equipments, among others, and even available ones are obsolete. The present finding is consistent with previous research by Gaharan, Chiasson, Foust and Mauldin (2007) who also cited the most common challenges to include, lack of financial resources, extensive time requirement and large amount of paper work and planning required.

In research question three, respondents were asked to suggest remedies to accreditation challenges. As would be expected,   the most prominent suggestion among the respondents was funding, followed by provision of not just adequate facilities but modern facilities that can compete with other world class universities. Inadequate funding has been a major set-back in educational development in Nigeria. This has hindered the provision of adequate facilities in institutions of learning and has often resulted in strike actions by various unions in educational institutions in Nigeria.

8.   Implications for Quality Assurance

The importance of NUC programme accreditation in enhancing quality assurance of universities' programmes cannot be overemphasized. It has been acknowledged by researchers that NUC programme accreditation has played a significant role in enhancing quality improvements in academic programmes (Obadara & Alake, 2013; Ibijola, 2014). It has helped to identify deficiencies in programme offerings which are subsequently rectified. Programmes that do not meet the expected minimum academic standards are brought to the knowledge of the public thereby protecting would be students from enrolling in such programmes.

Subjecting programmes' offerings in Nigerian Universities to NUC accreditation with the intention of ensuring minimum standard was a lofty idea with immense practical benefits. Therefore, politicizing the process through unethical measures by departments in their desperate effort to secure accreditation will have serious implications for quality assurance in programme offerings in the universities. It will not only result in the continued low ranking of Nigerian universities among world class universities, but also in non-recognition of some of our universities' degrees, lack of

employability skills by our graduates and lack of high-level manpower. In order to achieve the goals of high-level manpower development through tertiary education, NUC accreditation exercises should be taken seriously by all stakeholders, devoid of politics and complacency. To this end, funding of universities should be given serious and adequate attention so as to discourage the observed "sharp practices" that could negate the very essence of NUC programme accreditation. Improvement in funding to universities is very imperative if quality is to be guaranteed and sustained in Nigerian higher education. In this regard therefore, the   minimum budgetary allocation of 26% as recommended by UNESCO should be implemented.

9. Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it   is concluded that politics has been part and parcel of NUC programme accreditation practices. Such practices center around   poor funding, borrowed   books, facilities and equipments. Obstacles to accreditation exercises are inadequate funding and facilities. The identified challenges, if not rectified, may compromise quality assurance in   Universities, which is a necessity in enhancing the global competitiveness of Nigerian Universities.

From the results of the ranking of world universities, no Nigerian Universities has entered the league of world class universities. Given this ranking therefore, there is   an urgent need for improvement in accreditation practices which should match with internal quality mechanism within the universities. As succinctly pointed out by Archibong (2013), the undeniable fact remains that except   external efforts are matched with a purpose driven internal quality assurance mechanism, the entire effort may be fruitless. Thus, to ensure global competitiveness of universities in Nigeria, quality education delivery is imperative and cannot be compromised.

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