



Perceived Politics of Programme Accreditation: Implications for Effective Quality Assurance in Higher Education in Nigeria

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Abstract: The overall goal of higher institution is to provide quality education that would help the students build new skills and shape their careers for good. And to ensure that this goal of higher education among others is maximally achieved, there is need to emphasize on quality rather than just quantity. One of the first measures of ensuring quality in higher education is through accreditation process by the various regulatory bodies of higher education-National Universities Commission (NUC), National Board for Technical Education (NABTE) and National Council for Colleges of Education (NCCE). In carrying out programme accreditation in higher education, the process is not devoid of politics, which has the tendency of affecting credibility of the exercise. Therefore, this work is titled: perceived politics of programme accreditation: Implications for effective quality assurance in higher education in Nigeria. For proper organization, this work was divided into different segments. First, the concept of accreditation was extensively discussed; thereby highlighting its types and processes. This was followed by establishing the connect between programme accreditation and quality in higher education. Also discussed were the constructs-politics and politics of programme; giving detail explanations of practices that constitute politics of programme accreditation in higher education. The implications of politics of programme accreditation to higher education were also examined herein. Finally, conclusion and recommendations were offered too.

Keywords: Perception, Politics, Accreditation, Borrowing Syndrome, Quality Assurance and Higher Education.

Introduction

Higher education simply means a post-secondary school education which is aimed at equipping the learners with the right knowledge and skills needed to better their lives as well as contribute to the development of the society at large. In the same vein, the Federal Republic of Nigeria in its National Policy on Education (2004) cited in Adebisi (2014) defined tertiary education (higher education) as “the education given after secondary education in universities, colleges of education, polytechnics, mono-technics including those institutions offering correspondence courses”. Higher education is established in order to contribute to national development through high level relevant manpower training; inculcate in the learners proper values that would enable them survive in the society. It is also aimed at developing in the learners the intellectual capability to understand and appreciate their local and external environments etc.

Considering the enormous goals of higher education in Nigeria and beyond, there is need to ensure quality in it. The issue of quality in is very germane because the quality of outputs from any higher institution is a true reflection of the quality of the institution itself. Besides, the outputs of higher

institutions are the ones who become employees in the different sectors of the economy. Additionally, the level of proliferation of higher institutions in Nigeria in recent times indeed calls for the need to emphasize on quality. Just as higher institutions in Nigeria are increasing in their large numbers, so do new educational programmes increase too. Corroborating the above assertion, Matei and Iwinska (2016) maintained that the quality of higher education is reflected in the characteristics of its graduates such as their skills and professional capacity to act in the real world. If for example, higher education graduates are not capable of performing efficiently in their professions due to lack of quality; be it as engineers, doctors, public servants, secondary school teachers, etc, higher institutions would have failed in their mission.

Therefore, to ensure quality in higher education among others, the Federal Republic of Nigeria (FGN) in its wisdom established National Universities Commission (NUC), National Board for Technical Education (NABTE) and National Council for Colleges of Education (NCCE) to serve as regulatory bodies to universities, polytechnics and colleges of education respectively. One of their core functions is to carry out periodic accreditation exercise with a view to giving approval to higher institutions and or their academic programmes that meet the bodies' Benchmark Minimum Academic Standards (B-MAS). Nwakpa (2019) stated that accreditation of programmes in Nigerian higher education is a means to achieving the desired educational quality in Nigerian institutions through the implementation of government policies by the designated bodies such as NUC, NBTE and NCCE.

While regulatory bodies periodically subject the academic programmes of higher institutions to accreditation exercise, the process itself undergoes series of politics; which in a way may impedes the genuineness and credibility of the exercise. For instance, institutions going in for programme accreditation often engage in unhealthy practices such as borrowing offices from departments not going for accreditation, books for their libraries and departmental resource centers, facilities for laboratories as well as staff in areas they lack full manpower. Engaging in practices of this nature affects the credibility of accreditation process and the real essence of ensuring quality in higher education. According to Ekpoh and Aniefiok (2017), during accreditation processes in Nigerian universities, a lot of politics do come into play; thereby making it difficult for NUC to achieve its objectives in terms of quality assurance. Funny enough and more embarrassing is the fact that some academics who go for accreditation know all these sharp practices but often turn blind eyes to them.

Concept of Accreditation

The term accreditation is a relative construct which can be used in different context. Thus, in higher education context, it is the process of reviewing a higher institution and or its programmes by assessing their educational quality based on predefined standards. Pradeep, Balvinder and Don (2021) defined accreditation as "a process whereby an institution or programme undergoes an assessment process to determine the compliance of set standards/criteria, defined, reviewed and critically evaluated by experts/peer group to ensure the quality of higher education institution / programme". Obadara and Alaka (2013) defined accreditation as a process of self-study and external quality review used in higher education to scrutinize an institution and/or its programmes for quality standards and need for quality improvement. The process usually includes a self-evaluation, peer review and a site visit. Accreditation is the establishment or of the status, legitimacy or appropriateness of an institution, programme or module of study.

According to Poonam (2021), accreditation empowers higher educational institutions by helping them to analyze their loopholes, improve their academic structure, work on it and gain trust amongst individuals. It provides institutions an opportunity to design their education and head in the direction of continuous improvement. Lee (2004) cited in Michael (2018) defined accreditation as "the establishment or restatement of the status, legitimacy or appropriateness of an institution, programme or module of study". It is a process which is aimed at ascertaining whether the status of an institution and or programme meets specified minimum standards. It is a particular form of quality assurance which focuses on minimum standards.

Accreditation generally checks and ensures that educational programmes or higher institutions meet the set standards by their regulatory bodies. To this end, accreditation exists in two types (programme accreditation and institutional accreditation). Matei and Iwinska (2016) see the former (programme accreditation) as the process or practice of ensuring quality of new or existing academic programmes. Programme accreditation may be a one-time procedure which is to certify new and or existing programmes or a cyclical process which takes place every five years. King (2018) defined programme accreditation as the practice of promoting external quality assurance in an institution of learning which requires subjecting either new and or existing educational programmes to scrutiny for approval. While institutional accreditation on the other hand, is the act of assessing new or existing higher educational institutions with a view to giving approval by the appropriate regulatory body. Unlike programme accreditation, institutional accreditation exercise is more comprehensive, resources consuming and it tends to cover broad aspects of the institution. While variables such as: mission statement, vision statement, value statement, strategic planning practices, governance structure, manpower, resources and facilities of the institution, carrying capacity, teaching and learning capacities, learning outcomes and internal quality assurance strategies put in place etc. are specific to a particular programme, in institutional accreditation, it addresses all programmes in view within the institution.

Accreditation being a process can be divided into different stages. Matei and Iwinska (2016) categorized the process of accreditation into four main phases: i. Self-assessment. ii. External assessment (site visit). iii. Review and decision/judgment by accreditation body. iv. Follow-up (compliance and re-accreditation process). Akpan (2014) however divided accreditation process into three phases- self-study, site visit and peer review as well as reporting of outcome.

In carrying out programme accreditation, regulatory bodies usually give guidelines to be followed in assessing and rating variables to be considered such as: availability of physical facilities, how equipped the library (s) is, the teacher-students ratio, spread of lecturers per rank, level of funding, rating of the institution's outputs by employers and the richness and appropriateness of academic content. Akpan (2014) posited that at the end of accreditation exercise, the panel is expected to write a report and it is such report that would ascertain whether an institution's programmes examined merit full accreditation (70% and above), partial accreditation (60-69%) or is to be denied accreditation (below 60%). Even though accreditation exercise is carried every five years, an institution which its certain educational programmes fail to get full accreditation may be revisited within 1-3 years in order to give the institution time for improvement.

Relevance of Programme Accreditation in Higher Education

Is there really any connect between programme accreditation and quality higher education? Basically, the role of accreditation in ensuring quality in higher education cannot be down played. Accreditation remains an important process of ensuring quality in higher education; as the quality of outputs from any higher institution to a large extent depends on the quality of its academic programmes. In the opinion of Pradeep, Balvinder and Don (2021), accreditation is a powerful tool of quality assurance in higher education; as it serves as a quality stamp, which ensures that an institution and or its programmes meet the predefined standards/principles and complies with the minimum requirements. In the same vein, Huu and Thi (2018) stated that "accreditation contributes significantly to enhancing the quality of teaching, learning, research and management in higher education".

Thus, programme accreditation is relevant to higher education in several ways but not limited to the following:

i. Transfer of credits: This is a practice whereby a student transfers from one institution to another. Hence, before a student can be accepted in the new institution he/she transferred to, both the academic programme and the institution the student was must be accredited. According to Bay Atlantic University (2020), having a degree from an institution that is fully accredited speaks not only to its credibility and quality of education but it can also mean a student can receive assistance in transferring credits between two accredited institutions. However, moving from a non-accredited

institution and or programme to an accredited one means that the credits earned in the initial institution will not be recognized; thereby making the student to start all over again.

ii. It ensures that prescribed standards are met by institutions: Programme accreditation usually carried out by regulatory bodies ensures that an institution meets the approved standards; thereby strengthening educational programmes for quality improvement. In the same vein, National Assessment and Accreditation Council, India (2019) maintained that programme accreditation provides an assurance of basic level of quality standards to relevant stakeholders. Ekpoh and Edet (2017) posited that in order to ensure that minimum academic standards are maintained and that quality is guaranteed in Nigerian universities, academic programmes in Nigerian universities are subjected to accreditation every five years.

iii. Programme accreditation facilitates quality in higher education: Programme accreditation does not entirely but partly contributes to quality in higher education. According to King (2018), programme accreditation is not quality itself but serves as one of the strategies by regulatory bodies to ensure quality assurance in higher education. Similarly, Nwakpa (2019) stated that accreditation of programmes in Nigerian higher education is a means to achieving the desired educational quality in Nigerian institutions through the implementation of government policies by the designated bodies such as NUC, NABTE and NCCE. Thus, since programme accreditation is periodically carried out, it gives room for institutions to improve on their lapses; thereby complementing and strengthening other quality assurance practices in higher education.

iv. It promotes institutional reputation: When an institution's academic programmes are accredited, it brings national and international reputation to such an institution. And when the public considers an institution to be reputable, the value and demand for its outputs in industries increase. It also helps an institution to easily attract funding and other assistance from NGOs and philanthropists. The same view is shared by Pradeep, Balvinder and Don (2021) who maintained that programme accreditation in higher education enhances an institution's academic reputation, improves academic processes, promotes internationalization and increases funding. It also proves useful in obtaining recognition of the degrees of students seeking admission for advanced study outside the country.

v. Programme accreditation increases public confidence in an institution and stimulates enrolment capacity: Since programme accreditation gives approval to higher institutions to run the accredited programmes, it makes parents and the general public to have confidence in an institution and its programme thereby resulting in increase in admission of students. According to National Board for Accreditation, India (2019), the impact of accreditation goes far beyond enhancing quality in higher education; as it leads to increase in demand for higher education as well as improvement in enrollment of prospective students in higher education.

vi. It guarantees the employability of higher education outputs: To a very large extent, when an institution's academic programmes are accredited, it creates confidence in employers of labour about the outputs from such system; thereby increasing the demand for the institution's outputs. This is supported by Poonam (2021) who posited that through programme accreditation, employers can determine the programmes' credibility and the knowledge level of the students when being employed. Pradeep, Balvinder and Don (2021) observed that programme accreditation helps higher institutions to develop and run programmes that are relevant to industries; thereby making the employment of outputs from such programmes a bit easy.

Politics of Programme Accreditation

Generally, politics is the practice of using one's position and or power to influence human activities in a particular setting. It could be in school, work environment, church and the larger society etc. Nwakpa (2019) defined politics as the practice and theory of influencing societal activities and practices. The Nigerian factors (who knows who, ethnicity, tribalism, religious affiliation etc) that usually characterize recruitment in work places, admission in schools and political appointments etc have also found their way into educational system. Indeed, politics permeates every aspect and level of education (higher education inclusive) in Nigeria; ranging from establishment of educational institutions, formulation of educational policies, funding, staffing, admission of students to

leadership etc. The same view is shared by Nwakpa (2019) who believed that political factors have from time to time determined the place of education in ordering the national priorities. Similarly, Ekpoh and Edet (2017) stated that politicking has been part and parcel of Nigerian educational system.

Thus, the process of programme accreditation in Nigerian higher education is not isolated from politics; as politicking may be carried out by regulatory bodies (NUC, NABTE and NCCE), accreditation teams and even institutions undergoing accreditation. Therefore, politics in the context of programme accreditation is the practice of using position and or power to manipulate and influence accreditation process.

What then are those practices that constitute politics of programme accreditation? As stated earlier, accreditation team list may often be constituted on the basis of who knows who, friendship, ethnicity, religion etc. Besides, some institutions going in for programme accreditation often engage in borrowing syndrome and practices like borrowing facilities for laboratories, borrowing staff in areas they lack full manpower, borrowing offices from departments not going for accreditation, borrowing books for their libraries and departmental resource centers among others. Accreditation teams and their reports are sometimes influenced by the kind gesture they receive from institutions visited. Hence, even when accreditation team notices some of the borrowing practices, they pretend not to be aware; thereby compromising the real essence and credibility of accreditation process. Some of the practices that constitute politics of programme accreditation have been briefly discussed below.

a. Staff Politics: All departments in higher education do not have the same number of lecturers. And considering the spread in ranks in each department, the number of Senior Lecturers, Associate Professors and Professors are usually fewer than other lower ranks. Thus, during programme accreditation; some departments do hire one or more professors from other departments or institutions to make up their staff-rank ratio. Besides, laboratory scientist (s) and technician (s) are sometimes hired too just for the purpose of accreditation. According to Olutola and Olatoye (2020), during accreditation exercise, some universities usually hire senior staff for the purpose of the exercise. These staff will go back to their different universities after the accreditation exercise. Additionally, some departments may resort to accepting adjunct staff and lecturers on sabbatical leave just for the purpose of boasting their staff strength during accreditation. Even though accepting adjunct staff and lecturers on sabbatical leave by an institution is a legitimate practice, targeting accreditation period before accepting them would negatively affect the institution since their stay is within a short period of time.

b. Politics of Borrowing: The practice of borrowing syndrome is one of the major aspects of politicking during programme accreditation exercise. Considering the paucity of funds for managing higher education in Nigeria, some higher institutions going for accreditation do borrow offices from departments not going for accreditation. They also borrow books for their libraries and resource centers as well as facilities for laboratories. The same view is held by Ekpoh and Edet (2017) who stated that most institutions engage in unethical practices of borrowing books and facilities for their libraries and laboratories respectively.

c. Politics of Composing Accreditation Team: The way and manner in which regulatory bodies compose accreditation team members involves a whole lot of politics. Some academics often times lobby for their names to be included for accreditation exercise. In some cases, academics are usually part of an accreditation panel because they have someone who works with any of the regulatory body or knows someone who knows someone working with the regulatory body. One may be selected to be part of an accreditation panel on the basis of religion, ethnicity or even being membership of the same professional body.

d. Politics of Panel leadership: Even though every accreditation team member is meant to independently score the programme (s) assessed during accreditation, the team leader may sometimes try to influence the decision of other members. May be he/she knows the head of department or a professor in the department undertaking accreditation. The team leader may even

know the vice chancellor and may not want the institution to fail accreditation. Accreditation team leader in conjunction with some members may collect bribe from the host institution and try to persuade other members to score the programme (s) assessed above 70%. Utuka (2011) cited in Olutola and Olatoye (2020) observed that some panel chairmen usually dominate discussions and can be influenced financially by the host university authorities. As such, the decision of the panel members can be compromised in favour of the institution.

Despite the above perceived politics of programme accreditation in higher education in Nigeria, regulatory bodies on their part have not relented in their efforts toward ensuring the credibility of accreditation process; as they have put in place different strategies to that regard. One of such strategies is emphasizing on professionalism. That is, ensuring that accreditation team members are selected and sent to examine programmes in their area of specialty. Also, regulatory bodies do ensure that accreditation team members are not sent to their institutions of engagement (whether full-time, sabbatical leave or adjunct). In addition, regulatory bodies do ensure that accreditation team members' transportation fare and remuneration are paid in order to motivate their commitment to the exercise.

Implications for Quality Assurance in Higher Education

Allowing politics to infuse programme accreditation process has serious implications for quality assurance in higher education. For instance, when a regulatory body composes accreditation team members on the basis of who knows who, religion or ethnicity rather than competence and expertise knowledge of the assessors, the credibility of the process is being compromised; thereby affecting quality of the programme (s) assessed and the quality of outputs from such institutional programme (s). When politics is applied in selecting accreditation team members, the likelihood to select someone who is inexperienced in a particular discipline is there. And having an inexperienced accreditation team member could affect the thoroughness, diligence and inputs the person would offer in the exercise.

When host institutions/departments engage in borrowing syndrome just for the purpose of accreditation, it means that the students who are meant to constantly and continuously make use of the books, facilities and equipment etc borrowed would have to study without them after the borrowed items are returned to the institutions they were borrowed from. This unhealthy practice ends up affecting the quality of outputs from higher education and the consumers of such outputs.

Influencing the outcome or report of programme accreditation exercise; by either awarding full accreditation to a programme instead of partial or denial would rather spells grave danger to the institutional outputs, their employers and the country where the institution is established. The outputs from such system cannot compete with their counterparts from other institutions where there is quality. Even in terms of putting the knowledge and skills acquired into practice, their employers cannot get the best from them. And as a result of internationalization in higher education, both outputs and the institution would be lacking behind in global competitiveness.

Conclusion

The intent of this work was not to indict institutions, accreditation team or regulatory bodies but to draw their attention to perceived issues (politics) that may jeopardize the genuine essence of accreditation exercise in tertiary institutions. Considering the value of higher education to an individual and the society at large, the need for quality is inevitable. Therefore, quality in higher education is needed to guarantee quality outputs and outcomes. And to facilitate quality in higher education outputs, one of the major things that regulatory bodies must periodically undertake is thorough and quality accreditation process. When accreditation is genuinely carried out in higher education without any form of politics, prescribed standards would be followed and quality to a large extent would be guaranteed. Besides facilitating quality in tertiary institutions, programme accreditation helps in ensuring progressive and continuous improvement in an institution's infrastructures, learning contents, facilities etc.

Recommendations

The following recommendations have been offered herein to improve the quality programme accreditation in higher institutions in Nigeria.

- i. Regulatory bodies should ensure that the composition of accreditation team is based on the credibility and profile of members rather than who one knows, religion or ethnicity.
- ii. Academics who go for accreditation exercise should in the spirit of honour, integrity and patriotism to Nigeria and higher education refuse to compromise standards. Quality should not be sacrificed at the alter quantity. Institutions with clear evidence of borrowing syndrome and not meeting the set requirements should be denied accreditation.
- iii. Regulatory bodies should always embark on unannounced visit few weeks after accreditation exercise to ascertain if the books, facilities and equipment used during accreditation were still available.
- iv. Regulatory bodies should try and pay accreditation team members' transportation fare and remuneration before going for accreditation. This may help accreditation team members not to collect bribe.

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