



Review of the Process and Challenges in the Implementation of Academic Accreditation in Higher Educational Institutions in Nigeria

OBILOR, Ezezi Isaac (Ph.D.)

Department of Educational Foundations, Faculty of Education, Rivers State University
Nkpolu-Oroworukwo, P.M.B 5080, Port Harcourt
Isaac.obilor@ust.edu.ng

IKPA, Augustine Ikechukwu (Ph.D.)

Department of Educational Psychology, Guidance and Counselling, Faculty of Education
Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rumuolumeni, Port Harcourt
ikpaikechukwu@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper reviewed the process and challenges in the implementation of academic accreditation in higher educational institutions in Nigeria. Accreditation is a form of certification in which an independent body will verify that a school or academic programme meets minimum academic standards. It further implies external quality review created and used by higher education to scrutinize colleges, universities and programmes for quality assurance and quality improvement. There are two types of accreditation: organizational/institutional and programmatic. Institutional accreditation focuses on the overall quality of a school, including governance and administration, admissions and student records, financial stability, effectiveness, resources, and constituent relationships. Programmatic accreditation is concerned with individual programmes and all associated elements of such programme. The National Universities Commission (NUC) and National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE) accreditation is organizational and provide a benchmark for integrity, encourages continuous improvement, and ensures the quality of organizations engaged in higher education and training. The accreditation process consists of registration followed by an adequacy assessment, preliminary assessment and an initial assessment (Final assessment for the grant of Accreditation). The process is completed with the decision on accreditation. After the accreditation is granted, the post accreditation phase begins. The challenges confronting the accreditation process include; costs, funding, integration of the entire institution, staffing, insufficient numbers of academic staff, poor infrastructural facilities, educational facilities, research and publications among others. Conclusively, academic accreditation has created a significant improvement to the programmes by enhancing the quality of teaching and assessment. To ensure the appropriate and effective academic accreditation, the study amongst others recommended the training of faculty members to enhance their knowledge and raise their awareness of accreditation is very important, course and module design, including learning outcomes, teaching methods and assessment strategies is a significant area of training that should be offered to faculty members. This must include sessions on the importance of accreditation and the programme benefits that it can secure.

Keywords: Academic Accreditation, Challenges, Higher Educational Institutions, Implementation, Process.

Introduction

Today, higher educational institutions face more scrutiny and questioning about their performance, as a result of greater demands from citizens, who want to be sure that the doctors that treat them, the engineers that build their cities and the academics that propose their policies are good; the public sector, forced to assign with a given criteria resources for scholarships, credits and financial incentives; the very students as consumers; and the labour market, looking for benchmarks to incorporate graduates into their ranks. It is now pertinent and customary to face extensive accreditation processes by National Universities Commission (NUC) to assess the quality of institutions, researches, programmes, and others. Although it is an efficient way to boost quality and accountability, as it promotes an internal improvement process. Abraham (2011) asserted that no one really likes accreditation but no one knows what else to do. For that matter, we provide a series of internal challenges that are common to many institutions before, during and after they assess their quality by an agency.

In higher educational institutions, accreditation is defined as a process of external quality review used by recognized agencies to scrutinize higher education and educational programmes for quality assurance and quality improvement (Alice, 2012). In a similar view, Philip (2000) defined accreditation in higher education as a process based on self- and peer-assessment for public accountability and improvement of academic quality. This means that peers assess the quality of an institution or academic programme and assist the faculty and staff in improvement (Judith, 2011). In Nigeria, accreditation in higher education is carried out by the National Universities Commission (NUC) in order to provide quality assurance to the general public, students and their families, sponsoring bodies, governments, and employers. Accreditation is also important in the sense that it provides mechanisms for quality improvement in tertiary institutions and universities. The National Universities Commission (NUC) uses accreditation in reference to institutional and programme accreditation by promoting academic quality through formal recognition of higher education institutions and their academic and professional programmes.

Overview of Accreditation

Accreditation is a form of certification in which an independent body verifies that a school or academic programme meets minimum academic standards (Olivi, 2013). It ensures that the academic credential a student works so hard to obtain means something substantial, and that it will be recognized as such by employers and other institutions. Accreditation is a process of external quality review created and used by higher education to scrutinize colleges, universities and programmes for quality assurance and quality improvement. Accreditation in Nigeria emerged from concerns to protect public health and safety, as well as to serve the public interest. Accreditation is a process conducted by an external organization which grants approval to educational programmes that have demonstrated a specified level of quality and integrity in its operations (Kasozi, 2009). It is also a process that is entered into voluntarily by educational programmes and requires their self-appraisal and continuing improvement. Accreditation provides assurance to the general public, the educational community, governmental agencies,

potential students, and other organizations and individuals regarding the quality and integrity of institutions and programmes.

Accreditation is the independent, third-party evaluation of a conformity assessment body (such as certification body, inspection body or laboratory) against recognized standards, conveying formal demonstration of its impartiality and competence to carry out specific conformity assessment tasks (such as certification, inspection and testing). Accreditation bodies are established in many economies with the primary purpose of ensuring that conformity assessment bodies are subject to oversight by an authoritative body. Accreditation bodies, that have been peer evaluated as competent, sign regional and international arrangements to demonstrate their competence. These accreditation bodies then assess and accredit conformity assessment bodies to the relevant standards. An authoritative body that performs accreditation is called an 'accreditation body'. The International Accreditation Forum (IAF) and International Laboratory Accreditation Cooperation (ILAC) provide international recognitions to accreditation bodies. There are many internationally recognized accreditation bodies approved by the IAF and ILAC. In Nigeria, there are two called National Universities Commission (NUC) and National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE).

Interestingly, accreditation is not mandated by the Department of Education, but rather a voluntary option to have an independent body apply rigorous standards to evaluate an institution's policies, processes and resources, which must be met or exceeded to obtain accreditation (Garfolo & L'Huillier, 2015). There are two types of accreditation: organizational/institutional and programmatic. Institutional accreditation focuses on the overall quality of a school, including governance and administration, admissions and student records, financial stability, effectiveness, resources, and constituent relationships. Programmatic accreditation is concerned with individual programmes and all associated elements of such programmes (Olivi, 2013). To be clear, some Nigerian Colleges and Universities with specialized training programmes are involved in both types of accreditation. The National Universities Commission (NUC) and National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE) accreditation is both organizational and programmatic, and provides a benchmark for integrity, encourages continuous improvement, and ensures the quality of organizations engaged in higher education and training. The road to becoming an NUC and NCCE Accredited Provider encompasses the evaluation of nine categories:

1. The organization, responsibility and control
2. The learning environment and support systems
3. Planning and instructional personnel
4. Needs analysis
5. Learning outcomes
6. Content and instructional requirements
7. Assessment of learning outcomes
8. Maintenance of learner records
9. Evaluation of learning outcomes

Quality Assurance

Rapid growth in enrolment amidst declining budgets during the 1980s and 1990s, the proliferation of private provision of higher education especially in the last decade, and pressure from a rapidly transforming labour market have combined to raise new concerns about quality. Nigeria, like other countries has become conscious of the need for effective quality assurance and quality improvement. Quality assurance in education is the mechanism put in place to guarantee that education is “fit for purpose” i.e. is good and meets the purposes for its establishment. This involves planned and systematic activities implemented in a system so that quality requirements for education services are fulfilled. Since its establishment, after the enactment of The Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act 2001, NUC and NCCE have made significant progress in regulating the establishment and activities of Universities and Colleges of Education. The National Universities Commission (NUC) and National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE) were established to set standards and regulations to ensure that all public and private tertiary institutions in Nigeria will create, sustain and improve the relevance and quality of higher education. Quality assurance framework was developed to contain important benchmarks used for assessing quality of higher education. All higher education institutions must adhere to these benchmarks when they are ensuring quality of education. While NUC and NCCE use these benchmarks to determine the quality of education provided by higher education institutions which are accredited, will normally have met a set of minimum standards determined on the basis of these benchmarks provided in the quality assurance framework.

Accreditation Process

The accreditation process consists of registration followed by an adequacy assessment, preliminary assessment and an initial assessment (Final assessment for the grant of Accreditation). The process is completed with the decision on accreditation. After the accreditation is granted, the post accreditation phase begins.

Acknowledgement and Registration of Application

The International Organic Accreditation Service (IOAS) on receipt of application, the quality manual, other relevant documents and the fees, shall issue an acknowledgement to the Certification Body. After scrutiny of application for its completeness in all respects, a unique customer reference number shall be allocated to the particular application, which shall be used for correspondence with the Certification Body thereafter. International Organic Accreditation Service may request for additional information/clarification(s), if necessary from the applicant Certification Body. If, on the basis of documents and information provided by the Certification Body, IOAS is of the opinion that an assessment cannot result in accreditation, the applicant Certification Body shall be informed in writing giving reasons. An Authorized Officer under the supervision of Technical Manager of the accreditation scheme, will be appointed on behalf of

IOAS to deal with the application and the case file being maintained thereafter. All information of the Certification Body shall be kept strictly confidential.

Assessment Process

Appointment of Lead Assessor

The IOAS shall appoint a Lead Assessor from the pool of Assessors to carry out assessments on the System adopted by the applicant Certification Body. Other general criteria for the selection of Lead Assessor include his/her acceptance by the applicant Certification Body, free from any direct or indirect involvement with the particular Certification Body which may compromise his/her impartiality and independence, and availability during assessment process. The Lead Assessor shall have the overall responsibility of conducting the Assessment Process. As such he/she shall be responsible for evaluating the adequacy of the quality manual and conducting Preliminary Assessment and Initial Assessment on the Certification Body. The Lead Assessor shall preferably have technical expertise in one of the main disciplines for which the application has been made. However, in exceptional cases, a Lead Assessor belonging to a different technical field of expertise may be appointed considering his proven competence in evaluating Quality Management Systems.

Adequacy of Quality Manual

The Lead Assessor with the assistance of IOAS will commence the assessment process with an adequacy assessment document and record review based on the application submitted. The aim of the adequacy assessment is to determine whether the Certification Body is sufficiently prepared for a preliminary assessment and having a reasonable chance of getting Accreditation and to ascertain the compliance of the documents with the criteria specified in the APPLICABLE STANDARD/GUIDE. The adequacy assessment is also meant to obtain a clear idea of the intended scope of the accreditation.

The Lead Assessor, shall inform IOAS regarding the adequacy of the quality manual with a report indicating inadequacies (if any) in the quality manual which in turn should be communicated to the Client Certification Body. Based on this feedback the Certification Body shall amend the manual and also implement the quality system accordingly. If the Certification Body satisfies the relevant requirements at the adequacy Assessment stage or after the Certification Body has taken necessary corrective action based on the adequacy assessment, the assessment process will move into the next phase. If, on the basis of documents and information provided by the Certification Body, IOAS is of the opinion that an assessment cannot result in accreditation, the applicant Certification Body shall be informed in writing and the documents concerned will be returned to the Certification Body for necessary improvement. All information of the Certification Body shall be kept strictly confidential.

Appointment of Assessment Team

Towards the task of onsite assessment, the Lead Assessor shall be assisted by a team of Assessors/ technical experts who will be appointed by IOAS as appropriate with the scope of accreditation and in accordance with the criteria adopted for the selection of Lead Assessors. The IOAS shall propose the composition of assessment team. The Certification Body may lodge an appeal against specific team members. Such an appeal shall be motivated by clear reasons. If no replacement is available, it is possible that the visit will be postponed, or that a part of the scope will not be assessed until a suitable replacement is found.

Onsite Assessment Plan

The IOAS contacts the Certification Body to agree on the date(s) and schedule for the assessment. Based on this IOAS prepares the Assessment schedule (CB-PL-01) and the composition of the team and sends it across to the Certification Body well in advance.

Onsite Assessment

The Onsite Assessment will be carried out in two stages namely Pre-assessment and Initial Assessment (The Final Assessment for the grant of Accreditation). During both these stages witness assessment at the site of the applicant Certification Body's Client may be required. Although there are no strict demarcations for these two assessments, the objectives of these Assessments may be expressed in the following ways: pre-assessment, initial assessment, and conducting the assessment

Pre-assessment involves:

- a. Assessing the completeness of the documentation structure of the implemented system.
- b. Assessing the degree of preparedness of the Certification Body for the assessment.
- c. Studying the scope of accreditation so that the time frame, number of Assessors required in various disciplines and visits to sites, if applicable, for the assessment can be determined more accurately

Initial Assessment requires:

- a. Assessing the effectiveness of the implementation of the documented system.
- b. Certification Body's Competence in Performing Conformity Assessment.
- c. Taking a decision on the Recommendation for the Grant of Accreditation.

At the end of each assessment the Lead Assessor shall submit an Assessment Report as appropriate to the objective of the assessment (Roger, 2006).

Conducting the Assessment

The assessment team shall commence an onsite assessment with an opening meeting at which the purpose of the assessment, criteria, and the assessment schedule, and the scope for the assessment are clearly defined. During the assessment, the Team will assess the documentation

and implementation of the management system as well as the competence of the Certification Body (CB) in accordance with the APPLICABLE STANDARD/GUIDE and specific criteria (if any) of IOAS. The Certification Body shall provide the assessment team with a list of certified companies, scopes certified, certification files, list of auditors and experts, audit programme of each certified company and use of certification & accreditations logos. In doing so, the assessment team will take a representative sample in the areas within the scope of the accreditation. This process shall be extended to witness assessment activities also. The Certification Body shall demonstrate that it is competent in all the activities at all sites for which accreditation has been requested. With regard to the management system of the Certification Body, the assessment team shall be able to assess at least one complete cycle of the Internal Audit and Management Review. Under normal circumstances the onsite Assessment shall be terminated with a closing meeting. In the closing meeting the team discusses the results of the assessment with the Certification Body. The nonconformity reports are handed over to the Management of the Certification Body, so it can immediately proceed with the implementation of corrective action plan. The assessment should not proceed into next stage unless all nonconformities are satisfactorily addressed and closed.

Assessment Techniques

The IOAS Assessors use one or more combination of the following assessment techniques when conducting the assessment: document review, office assessment, interview, witnessing, testing and inspection.

Document review: Document review involves assessing quality manuals; procedures for compliance with the criteria already set; records at the Certification Body's location such as personnel files, quality control charts, audit reports, management review reports, audit files, and others.

Office assessment: Office assessment is an appraisal of the premises of the Certification Body in order to evaluate the implementation of the system;

Interviews: Interview is the evaluation of the expertise of the Certification Body's personnel via targeted interviews.

Witnessing: Witnessing involves observing and confirming audits and examination carried out by the Certification Body. For the purpose of witness assessment, the Certification Body may be requested to provide a list of suitable sites. However, the selection of the sites will be done at the discretion of IOAS. This particular assessment shall be either compliance audit or reassessment and if these are not possible the IOAS shall witness at least two surveillance assessments for each stage.

Testing and Inspection: Testing and Inspection is the determination of product and process characteristics including sampling in case of Product Certification

Corrective Actions & Follow-up of Assessment

The Certification Body shall take necessary corrective actions on nonconformance(s)/other concerns and shall submit a report on the action taken to IOAS within a maximum period of six months. If it deems necessary, IOAS should communicate with the Certification Body and shall ensure that all outstanding non conformities are available with and are well understood by the Certification Body. Next IOAS should monitor the progress and coordinate the activities with regard to the closure of nonconformities. The decision with regard to closure of nonconformities shall be taken by the Assessment Team. When there are significant non-conformities identified during the onsite assessment, the progress is monitored closely and in this regard the IOAS may arrange for a verification visit for the closure of the non-conformities. Whatever the case all nonconformities raised during the assessment shall be closed before consideration for the Grant of Accreditation (Alice, 2012).

Assessment Report

At the end of the assessment, an Assessment Report is prepared by the Lead Assessor. The assessment report prepared by the Lead Assessor in the formats prescribed shall be handed over to IOAS once the particular assessment phase is completed. The assessment report shall contain the evaluation of compliance to APPLICABLE STANDARD/GUIDE and relevant specific criteria (if any) and the non-conformances, if any. In case of initial assessment, the assessment report shall also provide a recommendation towards grant of accreditation or otherwise.

Accreditation decision

After satisfactory closure of all non-conformities, the IOAS prepares a report considering all relevant information gathered during the processing of the application, the assessment report prepared by the assessment team, additional information received from the Certification Body and the consequent verification activities. The summary report is placed before the Accreditation Committee which is appointed by the Governing Council of the IOAS. The Accreditation Committee studies the final report and the recommendation given by the team then makes its own recommendations on grant of Accreditation. The Accreditation Committee's recommendations regarding grant of Accreditation shall be submitted to the Council through Director/CEO, IOAS for approval. The IOAS informs the Certification Body in writing of the decision taken. If a positive decision is taken, the IOAS will draft the accreditation documents. In case of a negative decision, the IOAS will wait for a period of six months before accepting a new application from the same Certification Body. As soon as a decision is taken to grant accreditation, the International Organic Accreditation Service shall do the following:

- 1. Documents:** Prepare an Accreditation Certificate with a unique number for identification duly signed by the Director /CEO, IOAS. This certificate specifies the date on which the accreditation was granted, the standards on which the accreditation was based and granted, and the period of validity of the certificate.
- 2. A Schedule Referring to the Scope of Accreditation.** Prepare an Accreditation Agreement containing terms and conditions for maintaining the accreditation (This

contains the rights and obligations of parties; the party providing the accreditation and the party being accredited and signed by both parties). The applicant Certification Body must fulfil all the financial obligations due to IOAS, before receiving the certificate(s).

Post Accreditation Process

Post Accreditation Assessments

The IOAS accreditation certificate shall be valid for a period of three years. During the validity of the accreditation, the Certification Body must continuously comply with the requirements of APPLICABLE STANDARD/GUIDE and “terms and condition for maintaining accreditation”. In this regard IOAS shall periodically review the validity of accreditation. To this end, the IOAS carries out surveillance assessment annually and a re-assessment within three years. During the accreditation period, the scope of the accreditation may be changed.

Surveillance

IOAS shall conduct annual surveillance of all accredited Certification Bodies. Surveillance is aimed at examining whether the accredited Certification Body is maintaining all the requirements of APPLICABLE STANDARD/GUIDE and IOAS specific criteria (if any). IOAS shall inform the accredited Certification Body at least two months before the due date of accreditation for conducting the surveillance visit and the Certification Body shall confirm its readiness within 30 days. The Certification Body during the validity of accreditation may request to enhance the scope of accreditation for which they should preferably apply two months before the conduct of assessment/surveillance. The modus operandi for surveillance visit is similar to the initial assessment albeit it will cover only selected areas. The non-conformities, if any, shall be closed within three months of conduct of surveillance. The summary of the surveillance report along with other relevant information shall be submitted to the Director/CEO of IOAS him/her to make a decision on the continuation of accreditation or otherwise. IOAS shall inform the Certification Body, in writing, about the decision (Roger, 2006).

Reassessment and Renewal of Accreditation

The IOAS will intimate the Certification Body in writing on the expiry of Accreditation approximately four months in advance and the Certification Body has to respond at least one month before the expiry. The Certification Body may also apply for renewal of accreditation by submitting a new application in the prescribed application form (CB-FM(P)-01). Along with this a copy of the current Quality Manual of the Certification Body which describes the existing quality system in accordance with APPLICABLE STANDARD/GUIDE will be made available. The request shall be accompanied with the prescribed re-assessment fee. The Certification Body may request for extension of scope of accreditation, which should be explicitly mentioned in the application form. The procedure for processing of renewal of application is similar to that of first application except that no Preliminary Assessment is conducted and likewise the procedure for the onsite reassessment visit is similar to that of initial assessment. If the results of reassessment visit are positive and all nonconformances are closed before the expiry of the certificate, then the validity of the certificate is extended by a further period of three years

without any discontinuity. In case of renewal a new certificate of accreditation is issued while the certificate number is retained.

Supplementary/ Special Assessments

The IOAS may organize Supplementary/ Special Visits under the following circumstances:
Repeatedly finds nonconformities of category Major or large numbers of nonconformities of Category Minor during the surveillance/ reassessment.

Receiving complaints that are substantiated with facts or on instances where the Certification Body is found to be misusing the Certificate/ Accreditation Logo.

Based on public complaints, publications or information from interested parties and the government.

The Director/CEO of IOAS may decide to carry out Special Assessments at any time during the period of validity of Accreditation. The execution of special assessments may take place with no prior notification or with very little time between notification and execution. Special Assessment may also become necessary when changes occur in Accreditation Criteria, Organizational Structure and in Management/Ownership. However, in these cases the IOAS will give Certification Bodies sufficient time for preparation. All costs associated with special assessments will be charged to the Certification Body.

Changes in the Accreditation / Specific Criteria

If there is a change in the APPLICABLE STANDARD/GUIDE or in the accreditation criteria IOAS shall inform the Certification Body of this in writing indicating the transition period, which shall be a duration of at least six months. Upon receiving such information, the Certification Body must confirm to IOAS, its willingness in writing to modify its quality system in accordance with the changes. Upon receiving confirmation from the Certification Body, IOAS may conduct a supplementary / special assessment to assess the implementation of same.

Changes Affecting the Operations of the Certification Body

In the event of the Certification Body informing IOAS about any changes affecting the Certification Body's activities and operations, IOAS may organize a supplementary/ special visit. Certification Body shall communicate this with relevant documentary evidence along with the amended Quality Manual. The final decision is communicated to the Certification Body along with an amended certificate. The costs associated with the issue of amended certificate will be charged to the Certification Body.

Reduction of the Scope

During assessments by the IOAS, the accredited Certification Body shall demonstrate that it complies with all accreditation criteria regarding the entire scope and that it has complied with these criteria from the date on which accreditation was granted. If a Certification Body is of the opinion that parts of the scope no longer conform to the accreditation criteria, it is expected that the Certification Body will withdraw the relevant part of the scope itself. If during an assessment it becomes clear that it is necessary to withdraw accreditation for parts of the

scope, the IOAS will also review the validity of the remaining accredited scope. In order to demonstrate that a Certification Body has complied with and is complying with the criteria for the complete scope of accreditation, the Certification Body shall be able to provide records of the activities carried out. During IOAS assessments, these records shall demonstrate that the procedures for carrying out specific activities (product certification and system certification decisions) have been applied correctly by qualified personnel in the past year.

The concerned part of the scope shall be withdrawn if records do not demonstrate this. If this means that the entire scope is withdrawn, then the entire accreditation is withdrawn. However, the Certification Body concerned can again be granted accreditation for the APPLICABLE STANDARD/GUIDE and the scope involved, under the same registration number, if a new application is sent to the IOAS within two years after the withdrawal.

Extension of Scope

At any given moment, the Certification Body can request an extension of the scope. To this end, a written application shall be sent to the IOAS. An assessment for extension of scope will not be initiated if nonconformities are currently open in related parts of the scope or in the general management system of the Certification Body. The IOAS distinguishes between extension within and extension outside the scope already accredited. Extensions of the scope that fall within the framework of the same accreditation standard will be considered extension within the scope and if not it will be considered otherwise. Requests for accreditation involving a different accreditation standard shall be treated as a new application. Depending on the size and nature of the extension requested, the extent of the assessment needed for the extension will be determined by IOAS on a case by case basis. All costs for extension of scope will be charged to the Certification Body.

Transfer of Accreditation

If the ownership or name of an accredited Certification Body changes, the accreditation may be transferred to the new owner or to the new name if the Certification Body involved makes such request in writing. For such a transfer the following pre-conditions apply:

1. The Certification Body remains operating within the legal and regulatory framework of the country in which it operates.
2. The policy and management system remain unchanged.
3. The management and key personnel remain unchanged.
4. The former owner does not remain active in the same sphere of activity or a similar area under the old name or a related name.
5. The general composition of the Certification Body's personnel remains the same.
6. The basic infrastructure and other facilities are not compromised.

The Certification Body shall provide the IOAS with the necessary documents showing that the above conditions are met. The costs for reviewing the documents/conducting onsite review will be charged to the Certification Body. If all requirements are met, the new Certification Body retains the registration/accreditation number and receives the new accreditation documents. The surveillance and re-assessment schedule will remain unchanged.

Importance of Programme Accreditation

Accreditation of University and College of Education programmes is a process based on self- and peer-assessment for public accountability and improvement of academic quality. Peers assess the quality of an institution in terms of academic or professional programme and assist the faculty and staff in effecting improvement. The NUC and NCCE conduct a robust process of programme accreditation that starts with assessment by the institution itself and concludes with the approval by the Council of NUC or NCCE as the case may be. Therefore, assessing an academic or professional programme is very important because it gives assurance of quality to all stakeholders. After understanding what goes on during assessment of programme of study, one would appreciate the why NUC and NCCE should pay great attention to programme assessment in higher education institutions (Kajubi, 1992).

Every institution of higher learning is expected to have a quality assurance unit, which is supposed to provide quality check and control in the institution. By subjecting a programme to a thorough check right from the quality assurance unit in the institution until NUC and NCCE approve it, we ensure that what is designed to be taught is of quality and fit for public consumption. When a programme is submitted to the Council –usually through an office responsible for academic affairs, NUC and NCCE use these experts to do thorough assessment before evaluating for the purpose of accreditation. Normally the body draws experts from sections of society: academia, professional bodies, and industry specialists both nationally and internationally. Assessing these programmes normally involves looking at the following: the resolution of institution's Senate and Council approving the programme to be offered; the name of the programme; the full course outline with name of course, brief description of the course, objectives of the course, expected outcomes, duration of the course, year when it is taught, delivery methods and the methods of assessment; the full course contents with credit units and contact hours; the names of academic staff together with their qualifications; the resources available to assist in the teaching (library, IT, e.tc.); the infrastructure available (lecture rooms, library space, and office space for staff); and any other materials deemed useful. All these make it possible for NUC and NCCE to determine whether or not the institution will deliver a quality programme.

When a programme is assessed and report produced, the Accreditation Body reports and evaluates it. Programmes with positive evaluation are recommended to the Accreditation and Quality Assurance Committee of the Council for consideration. Therefore, without assessment, it is impossible to give full accreditation and without accreditation, it is illegal to offer any programme of study for which the public should enrol. The assessment of programmes also gives NUC or NCCE a good view of what is in the institutions. For example, in recent

assessments it was discovered that many programmes submitted for accreditation lacked certain important ingredients that should make them provide required quality. Therefore, NUC and NCCE organized skills development training for resources personnel in the institutions. This training was intended to equip all resource persons involved in programme development at higher education institutions with skills that should help in improving the quality of programmes in higher education institutions.

Challenges of Accreditation

(i) **Cost:** Accreditation is costly and very involving. A quality assurance process is only worthwhile if its benefits exceed its costs, both financially and in terms of their institutional capacity. A process of accreditation is long and involves the entire institution, so the investments must be regarded as part of a long-term improvement.

(ii) **Funding:** Funding has been an outstanding challenge to higher education institutions in Nigeria, like the rest of sub-Saharan Africa, as pointed out in different studies (Kasozi, 2009). Many Universities rely heavily on students' fees, which are not always sufficient to run Universities activities. Virtually all institutions in the country get less money than is needed for producing a graduate. That is, most of them get less than the unit cost. Only a few have diversified sources of income such as endowments, loan schemes, and many more.

(iii) **Integration of the entire institution:** Different faculties, centres, and academic units tend to work independently from the University's highest authorities, even though they might have prepared a mission, a vision and a set of common practices, lining up an extensive administrative and academic body of a given institution under the same framework and management model. Not only does it involve permanent personnel, but also teachers and collaborators who work part time, and a student body who is still adjusting to their entry into higher education. At the same time, human resources, finance, teaching, and research are units that normally work in isolation. As an accreditation process looks for integration, to achieve collaboration can take a while.

(iv) **Integration of self-evaluation and regulation culture:**
In a cycle of permanent improvement, accreditation programmes promote the development of constant performance reports and curricular improvements. Thus, accountability can become an extra burden for staff and teachers, who must invest an important amount time in management duties. Although these issues promote the generation of academic communities, those institutions with isolated projects can be threatened with the dissemination of indicators that are contrary to a particular faculty's sense of independence.

(v) **Institutional autonomy:** The process itself can put to the test how an institution defines its vision, mission, and goals. A University founded and created under a set of principles and values, as well as a specific vision of society can see this strategic revision as a threat to the very pillars of its existence. To adapt an educational framework in self-evaluation, institutions must look at a difficult balance between standardization and differentiation, to continue reflecting their unique sense of identity.

(vi) Outreach with the labour market: A common issue in today's global education reforms is the transition from a knowledge-intensive institution to a skill-intensive set of academic programmes. The job market is concerned that today higher education is not fully preparing its graduates with essential skills that are needed in the workforce. That is why it is important to review career profiles and curriculum, so they reflect the skills and attitudes required by a given industry. Therefore, it is key to improve the relationship and outreach with the labour market and intensively keep in touch with alumni, in order to explore and benchmark how they are adjusting to the workforce, what are their advantages and what skills are they lacking.

(vii) Academic management: An accreditation puts to the test the relationship of an institution and its academic body. On one hand, it looks to improve the curriculum of its faculties; on the other hand, it demands higher accountability from them. This requires a higher commitment from professionals who work both as faculty and provide services to the private and public sectors. At the same time, as long as institutions look for synergies, a larger amount of teaching faculty is encouraged to increase their level of research, and a larger amount of research faculty is encouraged to go into the classroom. This involves an important investment in internal qualification programmes for teachers and researchers.

(viii) Auditing vs permanent improvement: Many can mix up an accreditation with a regular audit, assessing and certifying the good use of financial resources and the accountability of their management. A higher education accreditation is an intensive catalyser of internal changes, as it looks to certify standards that are to be monitored constantly.

(ix) Innovation and academic freedom: Some teachers are concerned about accrediting their work, as they fear it would boost a standardization and homogeneity in their curriculum, to improve the attainment of common learning outcomes. People fear that this fails to give credit to generating new knowledge and the important value that particular faculty members give to their discipline both in the classroom and through their research. This may not be the case, as accreditation provides generic standards that do not threaten a faculty's individual framework.

Others include:

1. Staffing of the Accrediting Agency has remained small - hence relying on experts from outside. This jeopardizes the uniformity of the assessment and brings in bias from those with divergent beliefs.
2. Staff qualifications are lower than benchmark requirement. This is because of reduced and insufficient funding. Universities need more highly qualified staff. In the study by National Council for Higher Education (2010), staff with doctorate degrees were only 11%, meanwhile those with Masters and Bachelors as the highest qualifications were 38% and 34% respectively, the rest of staff members have various types of Diplomas ((Alice, 2012).

3. Infrastructure situation in almost all Universities in Nigeria has remained bad in the last five years. For example, Kajubi (1992) opined that University lecture rooms space dropped from average of 0.78m^2 to 0.34m^2 and library space 0.28m^2 to 0.13m^2 both falling below the standard set by the NUC ((Alice, 2012).
4. Educational facilities, including computer and internet access, books, etc. have been improving but have not yet reached the level required by NUC.
5. Research and publications have dwindled in most of the Universities in Nigeria mostly due to funding gap and lack of motivation for research. There is a big problem in scholarly communication skills and language issues within the higher education institutions in Nigeria (Alice, 2012).
6. Management crisis is still a challenge in most Nigerian Universities, religious based or not. There are lots of internal wrangles because of poor management practices. The tales of intrigue and fights among the University staff contributes to low quality of education.
7. Large enrolment of students has impacted badly on academic quality in most Universities in Nigeria. Since most of these institutions rely heavily on funds generated through fees, they have resorted to increasing numbers of students without corresponding facilities and staff upgrade.
8. Methods of delivering knowledge are rapidly changing from dependence on traditional ink and paper, chalk and blackboard to the digital form. This poses great challenge in the sense that many are forced to adopt the new methods in which they are not competent hence leading to inefficiency and quality drop due to improper use of these new methods
9. Students' background knowledge is one of the factors that are affecting quality of education in Nigeria higher education institutions. The quality of teaching at lower levels of educations have largely dropped such that most of the students joining Universities are not competent enough to effectively and meaningfully cope with admissions in Universities and Colleges of Education. Most of the students depend largely on teachers due to the type of teaching that is done at lower levels.
10. Equal opportunities for access remain a big challenge in some institutions. Whereas these institutions would like to have only particular type of students, administrators and teachers and yet the national accreditation requirement stipulates equal opportunities for all who qualify for higher education to access it.

With these challenges, it is key to prepare in advance an institution for accreditation, in order to communicate and promote the entire institution about the principles of a given quality assessment and how it will improve their work in particular.

Conclusion

The astronomic quantitative growth in the higher education subsector in Nigeria has necessitated the roles of a national regulatory agency for higher education in Nigeria. Although accreditation has specific challenges that need to be specifically addressed, need for accreditation for higher education in Nigeria must not be overemphasised. In this paper, we have highlighted that higher education institutions have specific missions and objectives that differ from the main national objectives of higher education subsector. Thus, higher institutions face a lot of challenges in trying to get full accreditation from the national regulatory agency given that the requirements set for accreditation conflict with the core missions of the founding bodies of these institutions. This paper discussed the efforts put up by the government through the regulatory agency to address the issue of quality assurance and accreditation of universities. We hope that this can form the basis for useful discussions by different stakeholders to help improve the situation as much as possible. The education sector is looking at academic accreditation as a quality assurance tool. The accreditation procedure aims to enhance not only quality control but also the accountability and transparency of the learning process. Programmes and institutions must use accreditation as a development tool to encourage the production of action plans for change and to embed the process into normal business. A range of best practices has been highlighted that academic accreditation helps to enhance, such as institutional quality, improvement in the teaching and assessment methods of faculty members, development of curricula and align learning outcomes with the labour market.

Conclusively, academic accreditation has created a significant improvement to the programmes by enhancing the quality of teaching and assessment. In addition, by fulfilling the NUC and NCCE requirements, quality assurance ought to be maintained in programmes. However, resistance within a faculty becomes an obstacle for any programme. This occurs where there is lack in knowledge and staff duties are not clearly identified. Future research may explore how to develop the quality of faculty members, especially the older generation, in order to deliver better education. In addition, it is important to note there is a need not only for the procedure that is taking place with the current system but also for tools to measure programme quality.

Recommendations

Based on interviews, observation and personal experience during the academic accreditation process for programmes, this paper sets out the following recommendations to enhance the process and reduce the challenges:

1. Training of faculty members to enhance their knowledge and raise their awareness of accreditation.
2. Properly preparing NUC and NCCE forms and documents to expose issues to faculty members.
3. Course and module design, including learning outcomes, teaching methods and assessment strategies is a significant area of training that should be offered to faculty

members. This must include sessions on the importance of accreditation and the programme benefits that it can secure.

4. Involving all faculty members in the academic accreditation process is very important to developing knowledge of the process. This will provide staff with a sense of belonging and that they are part of decision-making. In addition, it will enhance the working environment in departments and faculties.
5. Enhancing quality assurance is a series of actions that never stops. This means that academic accreditation is not an end in itself, it is a process.
6. Accreditation should ensure that all academic programmes keep their programme content updated, implement new teaching assessment techniques and produce graduates that will meet market demands.
7. The NUC and NCCE should revisit their forms and documents and simplify the language to make it easy to understand. It should also help to provide examples of the forms and evidences to support the Universities and Colleges of Education in understanding the requirements.

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