Quality Assurance Mechanisms in Open and Distance Education in Nigeria

By,

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Abstract

The Open and Distance Education is a teaching and learning process in which students are separated from the teachers by a physical distance which is often bridged by communication technologies. It is also an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is done by someone removed in space and time from the learner. The National Teachers’ Institute (NTI), Kaduna Nigeria, is one of the institutions that operate Open and Distance Learning Programmes, unlike most other higher institutions in Nigeria. It was established by Nigerian Government in April, 1978. The Institute is charged by government to specifically “organize and provide programmes for the training, development, upgrading and certification of teachers; conduct postgraduate courses and examinations in education for graduate teachers; to carry out research in conjunction with other bodies on any matter relevant to educational development in the country; to formulate policies and initiate programmes at all levels of education designed to improve by way of research, the quality and content of education in Nigeria; to foster and enhance international cooperation in the education of teachers; etc; all through distance education”. This paper will generally explain what Quality Assurance in Open and Distance Education is all about and specifically highlight on the Quality Assurance Mechanisms of the National Teachers’ Institute being one of the Institutes that operates ODE in Nigeria; that is giving the programmes of the Institute its relevance, quality and prominence.

Introduction:

Many societies in the world have turned to Open and Distance Learning (ODL) to meet their academic, vocational, professional and training needs. Due to this fact, there is paradigm shift of concept of education from an elite based system to mass based system towards increase in educational access. In Nigeria today, there is improved development in Information and Communication Technologies, with the emergence of affordable, portable, personal computers laden with multimedia capabilities that have leveraged institutional to deliver distance learning programmes. Research findings have shown that ODL has potential to address the
shortcomings of traditional face to face institutions in more cost effective ways. There is increasing roles of ODL in providing access to meet societal needs. ODL in Nigeria is now a veritable training tool for corporate bodies like the oil and gas, finance houses, manufacturing, etc, and there are a number of programmes available for learners.

Due to ODL being perceived as inferior to the conventional system, early practitioners in ODL had always somehow included Quality Assurance (QA) to safeguard its operations, to ensure that the quality in question is present and maintained, thus the issue of Quality Control had always feature in ODL. To what effect then is Quality Assurance?

- Course materials recognized as the main feature of teaching in ODL
- It is open for others to read, examine and critique

The institution also should:

- Appoint coordinator(s)
- Invite experts
- Determine syllabus/curriculum
- Course team
- Provide House style template and other guidelines
- Manage process of writing
- Conduct peer review
- Pretest before release to the students (public)
- Collect feedback from students
- Improve
- Launch

The sequential process, though they vary in different institutions, have been an example of Quality Control (QC) in ODL delivery from early times (Peters, 2013).
What is Quality Assurance?

Quality Assurance (QA) refers to the processes and procedures that systematically monitor different aspects of a service, process or facility to detect, correct and ensure that quality standards are being met. QA furthermore, is often used interchangeably with quality control; it is a wider concept that covers all policies and systematic activities implemented within a quality system. QA frameworks include:

1. determination of adequate technical requirement of inputs and outputs
2. certification and rating of suppliers
3. testing of procured material for its conformance to established quality, performance, safety and reliability standards
4. proper receipt, storage and issue of material
5. audit of the process quality
6. evaluation of the process to establish required corrective response and
7. audit of the final output for conformance to:
   (a) technical
   (b) reliability
   (c) maintainability and
   (d) performance requirements (Meisinger & Wagner, 2006).

In education, QA is is the systematic actions taken to prove and improve the quality of an institution’s methods, educational products and outcomes. It also refers to the policies, attitudes, actions and procedures necessary to ensure that quality is being maintained and enhanced (Woodhouse, 1999 in Peters, 2013).

Quality Assurance (QA) further refers to the engineering activities implemented in a quality system so that requirements for a product or service will be fulfilled. It is
the systematic measurement, comparison with a standard, monitoring of processes and an associated feedback loop that confers error prevention. This can be contrasted with quality control, which is focused on process outputs (Feldman, 2005).

Two principles included in QA are: "Fit for purpose", the product should be suitable for the intended purpose; and "Right first time", mistakes should be eliminated. QA includes management of the quality of raw materials, assemblies, products and components, services related to production, and management, production and inspection processes.

Suitable quality is determined by product users, clients or customers, not by society in general. It is not related to cost and adjectives or descriptors such "high" and "poor" are not applicable. For example, a low priced product may be viewed as having high quality because it is disposable where another may be viewed as having poor quality because it is not disposable.

**Company quality**

During the 1980s, the concept of "company quality" with the focus on management and people came to the fore. It was realized that, if all department approached quality with an open mind, success was possible if the management led the quality improvement process.

The company-wide quality approach places an emphasis on four aspects:

1. Elements such as controls, job management, adequate processes, performance and integrity criteria and identification of records
2. Competence such as knowledge, skills, experience, qualifications
3. Soft elements, such as personnel integrity, confidence, organizational culture, team spirits and quality relationships.
4. Infrastructure (as it enhances or limits functionality).
The quality of the outputs is at risk if any of these aspects is deficient. QA is not limited to the manufacturing and can be applied to any business or non-business activity:

- Design work
- Administrative services
- Health care
- Consulting
- Banking
- Insurance
- Computer software development
- Retailing
- Transportation
- Education

QA comprises a quality improvement process, which is generic in the sense it can be applied to any of these activities and it establishes a behavior pattern, which supports the achievement of quality.

This in turn is supported by quality management practices which can include a number of business system and which are usually specific to the activities of the business unit concerned.

In manufacturing and construction activities, these business practices can be equated to the models for quality assurance defined by the International Standards. In the system of Company Quality, the work being carried out was shop floor inspection which did not reveal the major quality problems. This led to quality assurance or total quality control, which has come into being recently.
The **Open and Distance System of Education** is guided by the educational philosophy of:

i. Giving learners choices about media, print, on-line, television or video

ii. Place of study, whether at home, in work places or on campus

iii. Pace of study, whether closely paced or unstructured

iv. Support mechanisms, whether tutors on demand, audio conferences or computer assisted learning

v. Entry and exit point (Commonwealth of Learning, 2000).

**Nature and Purpose of Quality Assurance**

Peters (2013) explains that QA serves two (2) major purposes: **Improvement** and **Accountability**.

**Accountability.**

- Accountability refers to rendering of account of what one is doing in relations to goals that have been set or legitimate expectations that others may have of one’s products, services or processes, in terms that can be understood by those who have a need or right to understand the account.

- Quality procedures for accountability purposes are therefore based on criteria set by external authorities and institutions.

- QA for accountability purposes implies the use of a summative approach

- They aim at strengthening external insight and control, with possibility of understanding external corrective action, if necessary.

- Accountability is therefore, though not always linked to explicit public information and to judgements on outcomes about the fitness, the soundness or level of satisfaction achieved by the accountable.
Improvement

The purpose of QA would seem to lead to improvement if the procedures lead to ends that are specifically in the interest of the higher education institutions and towards the specification of quality according to goals and criteria that are internal or may be made internal by the institutions.

Quality Assurance for improvement purposes implies a formative approach: the focus is not on control but on improving quality. Quality procedures for improvements purposes therefore are aimed at promoting future performance rather than making judgements on past performance. The criteria and procedures used are therefore intended to strengthen the conditions, motivations, scope and levels of information of the institution towards quality improvement.

Discussion on Quality Assurance Mechanisms (QAM) in some key ODE Institutions in Nigeria

Some of the key Institutions that run single mode Open and Distance Education in Nigeria include the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) and the National Teachers’ Institute (NTI). Others that operate dual mode include:

i. Modibbo Adama University of Technology Yola,
ii. Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU),
iii. University of Abuja,
iv. University of Ibadan,
 v. University of Lagos, and
vi. University of Maiduguri.

This paper will generally explain what QA in ODE is and specifically focus on the QAM of NTI, being one of the institutions operating ODE system in Nigeria; as explained in the abstract.
The National Teachers’ Institute (NTI), is one of the world’s largest institutions for teacher education at distance, provides an excellent model for countries wishing to increase numbers of trained teachers rapidly within a national policy framework (John S. Daniel, 2010). It was established in 1976 to **provide in-service education for teachers** through **Distance Learning System (DLS)**. It is one of the few Institutions allowed and mandated to run Distance Education Programme in Nigeria. Based on its mandate, the Institute runs programmes in retraining and upgrading unqualified primary school teachers and refresher courses for teachers at all levels. NTI is making a major contribution to the development of education in Nigeria, having trained nearly a million teachers since inception. Currently, the Institute runs the following programmes by Open and Distance Learning System:

- Nigerian Certificate in Education (NCE)
- Post-Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE)
- Advanced Diploma in Education (ADE)
  - Guidance & Counselling
  - Early Childhood Education
  - School Supervision & Inspection
- Pivotal Teachers Training Programme (PTTP)
- Continuing Professional Development (CPDs), for teachers on demand by states, other organizations and other agencies, example of such CPDs is **Strengthening Mathematics and Science Education (SMASE)**.

**Quality Assurance Mechanisms**: The National Teachers’ Institute has a number of mechanisms built in its distance learning programmes to ensure quality and high standards. The students enrolled are usually screened to ensure compliance with the stipulated entry requirements.
The programmes are subjected to rigorous periodic evaluation and accreditation. Staff of the Institute always goes out to monitor the programmes to ensure strict compliance with its policies at the zonal, field and study centres. At regular intervals, the Institute works in conjunction with the Institutes of Education of some Nigerian Universities to give more professional touch and thus credibility to its programmes. There is a special independent monitoring team consisting of the Federal Inspectorate Service, Nigerian Union of Teachers (NUT), States Universal Basic Education Boards (SUBEBs), and States Ministries of Education. There are also independent assessors drawn from Nigerian Universities and Colleges of Education who monitor the programmes and report directly to the Director General and Chief Executive of the Institute. In addition, the course materials are reviewed from time to time and the examinations are conducted under stringent examination conditions.

To ensure good results, the monitoring exercises embarks upon by the Institute, are categorized under the following:

i. Administrative monitoring
ii. Subject monitoring
iii. Teaching practice monitoring.
   - (The programmes are regularly monitored).

The students’ Management Information System is fully computerized. The Institute has a working relationship with nine (9) Nigerian Universities referred to as “Cooperating Universities”. Through this mechanism, the Institute ensures that the products of its programmes are comparable to those trained by the conventional Institutions. The Cooperating Universities are as follows:

i. Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria
ii. Bayero University, Kano
iii. University of Benin
iv. University of Ibadan
v. University of Jos
vi. University of Lagos
vii. University of Maiduguri
viii. University of Nsukka, and recently

The general Quality Assurance Mechanism in NTI programmes includes the following:

- Collaborating with Nigerian Universities in the implementation of the NCE programme.
- Accreditation of Institute's NCE programme by the (NCCE).
- Rationalization of Study Centres that fall below the minimum requirements for teacher training.
- Strict adherence to admission criteria.
- Regular consultation with all stakeholders such as SMOEs, SUBEBs, sister parastatals of the ministry.
- Affiliation of NTI PGDE programme with Usman Danfodio University, Sokoto (previously) but now with National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), Lagos.
- Constituting of State Programme Monitoring Teams that include FIS, NUT, SMoE, SUBEB in each state.
- Partnership with Development Partners and international educational institutions and NGOs for best practices.
Strict adherence with the above quality assurance mechanism gives the Institute its fame, relevance and continuous qualitative programmes to date.
References


