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PROGAMME ACCREDITATION EXERCISE IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES: ISSUES AND STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

This study examined programme accreditation exercises in Nigerian universities, with emphasis on the problems associated with the process and strategies for improvement. Programme accreditation is an important mechanism for maintaining quality assurance, ensuring academic standards, and promoting institutional effectiveness in higher education. Despite its significance, many Nigerian universities experience numerous challenges during accreditation exercises conducted by regulatory bodies such as the National Universities Commission. These challenges include inadequate funding, poor infrastructural facilities, shortage of qualified academic staff, insufficient instructional materials, weak research output, corruption, poor documentation, and excessive emphasis on physical facilities rather than academic quality. The study adopted a descriptive approach using relevant literature, reports, and empirical studies on accreditation practices in Nigerian universities. Findings revealed that these problems negatively affect the quality of university education, institutional reputation, and the achievement of educational objectives. The study further identified several strategies for improving programme accreditation exercises, including increased government funding, regular staff development programmes, provision of adequate infrastructural facilities, effective monitoring and evaluation, improved transparency in accreditation procedures, and enhanced collaboration between universities and accreditation agencies. The study concluded that effective and credible accreditation exercises are essential for sustaining quality assurance and global competitiveness in Nigerian universities. It therefore recommended that stakeholders in higher education should work collectively to address the identified challenges and strengthen the accreditation process for improved educational standards in Nigeria.

Keywords: NUC, programme accreditation, University, Accreditation Panel, monitoring

Introduction

University education plays a significant role in the social, economic, political, and technological development of every nation. In Nigeria, universities are expected to produce skilled manpower, promote research activities, preserve knowledge, and contribute to national development. To ensure that universities maintain acceptable academic standards and provide quality education, programme accreditation exercises are conducted regularly by relevant regulatory agencies such as the National Universities Commission. Accreditation is therefore regarded as an important quality assurance mechanism in the Nigerian university system. Programme accreditation refers to the process of evaluating academic programmes in universities to determine whether they meet established minimum academic standards. It involves the assessment of various aspects of university programmes such as curriculum content, quality of teaching staff, admission requirements, infrastructural facilities, library resources, laboratory equipment, funding, and students' performance. The main purpose of accreditation is to ensure that academic programmes offered by universities are relevant, effective, and capable of producing graduates who can compete globally. Accreditation also helps to promote accountability, improve institutional performance, and protect students and employers from substandard educational practices.

In Nigeria, the rapid expansion of university education has increased the need for effective accreditation exercises. Over the years, the number of public and private universities has grown tremendously due to the increasing demand for higher education. While this expansion has improved access to university education, it has also created serious concerns about the quality of academic programmes offered in many institutions. Some universities face challenges such as inadequate funding, shortage of qualified lecturers, poor infrastructural facilities, overcrowded classrooms, obsolete equipment, and weak research culture. These challenges often affect the quality of teaching and learning, thereby making accreditation exercises more necessary in ensuring compliance with minimum standards. The National Universities Commission is the major regulatory body responsible for carrying out programme accreditation exercises in Nigerian universities. During accreditation visits, panels of experts are sent to universities to evaluate the available human and material resources for different academic programmes. Based on the outcome of the exercise, programmes may receive full accreditation, interim accreditation, or denial of accreditation. Full accreditation indicates that a programme has satisfied the required standards, while interim accreditation suggests partial compliance that requires improvement. Denial of accreditation means that the programme has failed to meet the minimum academic standards.

Despite the importance of accreditation exercises in improving educational quality, the process is faced with several problems in Nigerian universities. One major problem is inadequate funding of the university system. Many universities lack sufficient financial resources to provide modern classrooms, laboratories, libraries, and instructional facilities required for effective teaching and learning. Another

challenge is the shortage of qualified academic staff, especially in specialized disciplines. In some cases, universities employ underqualified or insufficient lecturers, making it difficult to meet accreditation requirements.

Corruption and unethical practices also constitute major problems during accreditation exercises. Some institutions allegedly engage in temporary borrowing of equipment, employment of visiting lecturers during accreditation periods, and manipulation of records in order to satisfy accreditation panels. Such practices undermine the credibility and effectiveness of the accreditation process. Furthermore, excessive emphasis on physical facilities rather than actual teaching quality and learning outcomes has also been criticized by some scholars and stakeholders in the education sector.

Poor planning and inadequate preparation by universities equally affect accreditation exercises. Many institutions fail to maintain proper documentation of academic activities, staff records, and students' performance, thereby creating difficulties during assessment visits. In addition, frequent industrial strikes, unstable academic calendars, and poor government policies often disrupt academic activities and reduce the effectiveness of programme implementation in universities. In view of these challenges, there is a growing need for strategies aimed at improving programme accreditation exercises in Nigerian universities. Such strategies may include increased government funding, provision of modern facilities, recruitment and training of qualified academic staff, effective monitoring and supervision, transparency in accreditation procedures, and improved collaboration between universities and accreditation agencies. There is also the need for universities to develop internal quality assurance mechanisms that will ensure continuous compliance with academic standards rather than waiting for accreditation visits.

Therefore, programme accreditation remains an essential instrument for maintaining quality assurance and academic excellence in Nigerian universities. A credible and effective accreditation system will not only improve the quality of university education but also enhance the international recognition and competitiveness of Nigerian graduates. It is against this background that this study examines programme accreditation exercises in Nigerian universities, the problems associated with the process, and possible strategies for improvement.

Concept of Programme Accreditation

According to NUC, programme accreditation is defined as a system of evaluating academic performance in Nigeria universities as having met the provision of minimum academic standard documents. It is an ongoing process of quality enhancement. According to Chacko (2020) accreditation force an organization to meet and uphold high expectations, increasing public trust and faith in them. Accreditation is an exercise that assesses the quality and standard of material and human resources of institution of higher learning; it is a system of evaluating academic programmes in Nigerian universities as having met the provision of Benchmarks Minimum Academic Standard (BMAS) for the disciplines in Nigeria

university system. Obadan and Alaka (2013) defined accreditation as a process of self-study and external quality review used in higher education to scrutinize an institution and its programmes for quality standards and need for quality improvement (that is, to make sure that universities possess both human and material resources that would help transform the students positively. Iguodala and Enowoghomwenma (2022) asserted that improvement on quality assurance is a major pointer in higher education function during accreditation process.

There are two types of accreditation, programme and institution accreditation. Programme accreditation evaluate academic courses while institution accreditation evaluates the entire university.

Objectives of Accreditation of Academic Programmes

According to the manual of accreditation of NUC (2014), the following are the objectives of programe accreditation;

1. To ensure that at least the provisions of the minimum academic standard (MAS) documents are attained, maintained and enhanced.
2. Assure employers and other members of the community that Nigerian graduates of the programmes have attained an acceptable level of competence in their area of specialization.
3. Certify to international community that the programmes offered in Nigeria universities are of high standards and their graduates are adequate for employment and for further studies.

Criteria for Accrediting a Degree Programme

The following below are the criteria for accrediting a degree progrmme.

1. **Philosophy and Objectives of the Programme:** There shall be evidence that the programme to be accredited has clearly defined philosophy and objectives. Panel members will judge the quality of the programme in terms of the effort being made by the University to achieve the stated philosophy and objectives of the programme.
2. **Curriculum:** The curriculum of the programme to be accredited should be adequate to prepare practitioners at an appropriate level of the particular field. It should include adequate theoretical knowledge and skills to fulfill the requirements for specific job objectives, and to equip the graduates with adequate communication skills.
3. **Teaching Staff, Quantity and Quality:** Adequacy of teaching staff in numbers, competence and standard of instruction in all subject areas of the programme will be taken into consideration.
4. **Student Admission and Graduation:** The University should have policies on admission and graduation of students clearly spelt out in its annual Calendar or student handbook.
5. **Funding:** There should be adequate financial support to the University and the Department where the programme to be accredited is offered

as a measure of the management's dedication to the philosophy and objectives of the programme**.**

6. **Physical Facilities:** There shall be adequate physical facilities, classrooms, laboratories, studios, workshops and tools, instruments, machines, equipment, and provisions for updating the physical facilities to give students proper learning experiences essential to achieving the educational philosophy and objectives of the programme.

NUC/Programme Accreditation Panel

National Universities Commission (NUC) was established in 1962, as an advisory body and in 1974, it became a statutory body. The Ad-hoc accreditation panel of NUC is made up of Chairman and members who are experts, professors, drawn from institutions of higher learning and professional bodies, including one NUC staff who supplies the materials for the exercise and handover to the commission at the end. During accreditation exercise, the self-study form (SSF) is submitted to accreditation panel, containing information about the university to be accredited and department to be accredited on sections "A" and "B" respectively on the form.

Documents of Accreditation Exercise

The following are used for accreditation exercise:

a) Self-Study Form (SSF)

(b) Manual of Accreditation programme (NUC/MAP)

c) Programme Evaluation Form (NUC/PEF).

d) Accreditation Penal Report Form (NUC/APRF).

e) Accreditation Re-visitation Form (NUC/ARVF)

f) Bench Mark Minimum Academic Standards Document (BMAS) (NUC, 2012).

a) **Self-Study Form (SSF):** This form has two sections "A" and "B". "Section A" of the form, provides general information about the university that is to be accredited and requires the vice chancellor or a representative to provide it. "Section B" provides information about the programme to be accredited and is done by the Head of department of such programme(s).

b) **Manual of Accreditation Procedure (MAP):** This document provides detailed information on the objectives, processes and specimens of other forms that have been completed by the universities and panel members of each of the programmes (NUC, 2012).

c) **Programme Evaluation Form (PEF):** This form is to be completed by each member of the accreditation panel. It provides scoring columns for relevant comments (NUC, 2012).

d) **Accreditation Panel Report Form (APRF):** This form, is completed by the chairman of the panel, for each of the programmes being accredited. The summary of scores and accreditation status are entered in the space provided in the form (NUC, 2012).

e. Accreditation Revisitation Form (NUC/ARVF)

e) **Minimum Academic Standard Document:** The document contains the minimum course content in each degree programme, minimum physical facilities, minimum laboratory space, library and the staff/student ratio (NUC, 2012).

Types of Accreditation

According to the Manual of Accreditation by NUC (2012), below are 2 types of accreditation;

a) Programme accreditation

b) Institutional accreditation

a) **Programme Accreditation:** Programme accreditation refers to the evaluation of academic courses in a particular institution of learning (higher education) and it is carried out by specialized or professional accrediting body to ensure that the standards are maintained.

b) **Institutional Accreditation:** It refers to the evaluation of an entire institution, rather than programmes, to examine if it has both material and human resources to deliver educational services.

Status of Accreditation

a) Full Accreditation Status: A full accreditation status is earned by a programme when it has a total overall score of 70% and above. This is usually possible when the core areas of staffing, academic content, physical facilities and library score 70%. A programme of full accreditation status is re-visited after 5 years.

b) Interim Accreditation Status: A programme is awarded an interim accreditation status when it has an overall score of less than 60%. This status lasts for 2 years and after that, the programme is re-visited for accreditation. According to NUC, during the period of interim accreditation, universities may continue to admit students into the programme affected.

c) Denied Accreditation Status: A programme is denied accreditation, when its total score is lower than 60%. A denied accreditation status implies no further student enrolment until the programme is re-visited and re-accredited (Okojie, 2008). However, NUC has it that graduates within 2 years after the programme has been granted interim/ denied should not be denied recognition of his or her certificate.

Issues in Accreditation Exercise

The accreditation of universities and programmes in Nigeria has been faced with several issues, these include the following:

Corruption: Corruption is part of human life and it is played everywhere, both at home, church, club, unions, industries and even in higher institutions during accreditation exercise. Corruptions are activities whereby an individual uses his power to make decisions to influence others to do what they could not have done ordinarily. It deals with authority, decisions and influence. Nnoli (2003) asserted that corruption is concerned with all activities that are directly or indirectly associated with the emergence of state power. The accreditation panel is made up of humans, who share feelings among themselves. In Akinkugbe (2001), corruption involved in accreditation exercise may include borrowing of lecturers, educational administrators not using the fund allocated to them judiciously for school facilities, instructional aids, appropriate equipments, libraries with recent books and classroom management for quality teaching and learning. All the members of any panel finished from a school whether within or outside the country and this has a major impact on the exercise. Most times, when the schools of these panel members are to be visited or accredited, there are some levels of bias that are shown by these members. They would want to favour their "alma mater",

even when they (institutions) do not meet the accreditation requirement in a situation. Where the aforementioned is the case, it affects the manpower quality of the society, because they are charged with the responsibility of producing the needed manpower for societal development. But this may not be achieved, because the required facilities are not on ground.

Window Dressing: Most institutions are involved in window-dressing during accreditation exercise. They try to reposition their institutions, some also take further steps to borrowing of facilities they do not have, in order to confuse the accreditation panel. However, the panel still go ahead to issue accreditation even when the criteria are not met, this is political due to the influence by the Department or institution (Akinkugbe, 2001). The sorry part of this act, is that, after accreditation exercise, some of the borrowed facilities are returned and these institutions also returned to their state of emptiness. The students that would be admitted into those programmes that were accredited based on window-dressing (make-believe), because the facilities that contributed to their accreditation have been returned to their rightful owners, the students are left to learn with almost nothing. Continuous allegation from stakeholders in the universities which always point to inadequate funding, shortage of manpower, poor facilities, unconducive working environment, no motivation etc.

Inadequate Infrastructure: To address the problem of inadequate infrastructure, institutions and governments must prioritize investment in educational facilities and ensure proper maintenance of existing resources. Adequate funding, strategic planning, and collaboration with stakeholders are essential for providing modern classrooms, laboratories, libraries, and ICT facilities. Improving infrastructure not only enhances the chances of successful accreditation but also promotes quality education, research, and overall institutional development.

Bureaucratic Delays: The prolonged administrative procedures, excessive documentation requirements, and slow decision-making processes that hinder the timely completion of accreditation exercises. These delays often arise from inefficient coordination among regulatory bodies, institutions, and accreditation teams, leading to postponed accreditation visits, delayed approval of reports, and slow implementation of recommendations. Consequently, such delays can disrupt academic programmes, create uncertainty for institutions and students, and impede the overall goal of maintaining and improving the quality and standards of education.

Mismatch with Industry Needs: The inability of accredited academic programmes to align their curricula, training, and skill development with the current demands and expectations of the labour market. This disconnect often results from outdated accreditation standards, limited collaboration between educational institutions and industry stakeholders, and inadequate incorporation of emerging technologies and professional competencies into academic programmes. Consequently, graduates may lack the practical skills and knowledge required by employers, leading to reduced employability

and raising concerns about the relevance and effectiveness of the accreditation process in ensuring quality education.

Inconsistent Monitoring: The irregular and inadequate follow-up activities carried out by regulatory and accreditation bodies to ensure that institutions continuously comply with established standards. This challenge may result from limited resources, insufficient manpower, or weak evaluation mechanisms, leading to situations where institutions fail to maintain the quality levels initially assessed during accreditation. Consequently, inconsistent monitoring can undermine the credibility of the accreditation process, reduce accountability, and negatively affect the overall quality and effectiveness of educational programmes.

Insufficient Qualified Staff: The shortage of adequately trained and experienced academic and administrative personnel required to meet the standards established by accreditation bodies. This deficiency may arise from inadequate recruitment, limited professional development opportunities, or the inability to attract and retain competent personnel. As a result, institutions may struggle to deliver quality teaching, research, and administrative services, thereby affecting their ability to achieve or maintain accreditation status and compromising the overall quality of education.

Malpractices: Accreditation results does not tally with the complaints. The physical capacity is over stressed considering the capacity of programmes. There is constant gap between the accreditation results and the actual reality. If a university is fully accredited one wonders why the continues allegation against government by various unions.

Underfunding: Under funding of accreditation exercise leads to poor infrastructure and multiplicity of functions performed by NUC, functions overlaps with other agencies, insufficient members of the academic staff, unhealthy relationship between the NUC and the academic staff union of universities (ASUU), universities to be accredited don't have control over the visiting panel are also challenges in the exercise.

Allegations from Stakeholders: Continuous allegation of stakeholders in the universities points to shortage of manpower, poor facilities, unconducive working environment, poor motivation and many more.

NUC Plans for Accreditation

According to NUC (2026), the National Universities Commission (NUC) has plans to improve university accreditation in Nigeria. Here are some key points:

- **Accreditation Requirements:** Universities must score a minimum of 70% in four core areas: Academic Matters, Staffing, Physical Facilities, and Library.
- **Accreditation Process:** The process involves a rigorous evaluation by independent panels of professors, followed by internal review and ratification by the NUC Management Commission.
- **Goals:** NUC aims to ensure Nigerian universities produce competent graduates who can compete globally

and achieve full accreditation status for at least 80% of academic programs.

- **Recent Developments:** NUC has approved 33 new universities, expanding access to higher education and promoting specialized research and innovation.

NUC is also working to harmonize accreditation processes with professional bodies and regulatory agencies to ensure quality education.

Conclusion

Education as a social service organization cannot achieve its objectives without adequate provision of educational facilities and routine supervision. Proper accreditation exercise and quality improvement in universities will help promote sound knowledge. Some issues involved in accreditation exercise is a reason to worry bearing in mind that the consequences are great. Nigeria as a country is faced with many challenges begging for attention, and these challenges can be managed when the qualified manpower is provided, NUC must not compromise in her principles in ensuring that all the universities in Nigeria are of standard both in material and human resources.

Strategies for Improvement

Improving the accreditation process in higher education requires the establishment of clear and transparent standards that are regularly reviewed to reflect emerging trends and global best practices. Accreditation bodies should develop comprehensive guidelines and ensure that institutions fully understand the criteria and procedures involved. Transparent processes enhance accountability, reduce ambiguity, and promote consistency in the evaluation of academic programmes and institutions.

Another important strategy is the provision of adequate infrastructure and resources to support quality assurance activities. Governments and institutional administrators should invest in modern classrooms, laboratories, libraries, information and communication technology (ICT) facilities, and research equipment. Adequate infrastructure enables institutions to meet accreditation requirements and enhances the quality of teaching, learning, and research.

Strengthening collaboration between higher education institutions, accreditation agencies, and industry stakeholders is also essential. Regular engagement with employers and professional bodies helps ensure that academic programmes are aligned with labour market needs and emerging technological developments. Such partnerships contribute to curriculum relevance, improve graduate employability, and enhance the overall credibility of the accreditation process.

Capacity building and continuous professional development for academic and administrative staff are equally important for improving accreditation outcomes. Institutions should provide regular training, workshops, and opportunities for skill enhancement to ensure that staff members possess the competencies required to maintain quality standards. In addition, accreditation bodies should train evaluators and reviewers to ensure fairness, objectivity, and consistency during assessment exercises.

Finally, the adoption of digital technologies and continuous monitoring mechanisms can significantly enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of accreditation processes. Automated data management systems, online documentation platforms, and periodic quality assurance reviews can reduce bureaucratic delays and facilitate timely decision-making. Continuous monitoring ensures that institutions sustain the standards achieved during accreditation and promotes a culture of continuous improvement and excellence in higher education.

Suggestions

1. The government and the agencies responsible for accreditation should be more accountable to the quality assurance dealings and internal mechanism for quality assurance should be strengthened within the universities.
2. Regular Monitoring: Strengthen NUC's oversight and support.
3. The officials of NUC should be as objective as possible, when they are on accreditation mission. They should try not to compromise standard or quality for anything and be bold enough to call a spade a spade so that government will sit up. The society as a whole would benefit from their objective exercise and also suffer from their compromise.
4. The agency should try not to send panel members to their "alma mater" for accreditation exercise. This might help reduce compromise to its barest minimum.
5. Government should fund NUC adequately, so she can in turn pay her officials well as posited by Osagie (2012). This may go a long way to help the panel reject some gestures by the host institutions during accreditation and help to achieve the aim of the exercise.

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