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technical/vocational education and quality assurance in the 21st century

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Introduction
The indisputable right of all Nigerian citizens to education is put in a nutshell in the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Nigerian government at all levels sees functional education, not only as a tool for individual and social advancement, but also as a means of promoting the international recognition of the country. Even the foremost economic development policy document in Nigeria, the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) recognizes education as a vital instrument for achieving government development objectives as well as the accomplishment of the Millennium Development Goals. Consequently, the educational sector has been assigned the sole responsibility of generating the required personnel in the right quantity and quality. Specifically, the personnel so produced are expected to possess skills and knowledge that can propel and sustain the country’s development agenda as envisaged in the NEEDS initiative.

At the moment, there appears to be a disconnect between Technical and Vocational Education (TVE) which has the mandate of producing quality workforce in required quantity for Nigeria’s technological and industrial take-off. In a study by International Labour Organization (ILO) conducted in 2007 as a pre-requisite for a programme - Know About Business (KAB) - that focused on developing entrepreneurship education in Nigerian tertiary education, the ILO reported that:

Nigeria’s education system turns out hundreds of thousands of school leavers who enter the labour market each year. The formal sector (public and private,) absorbs only about 10 percent of these, leaving most of the remainder to the unemployment queues and the informal sector. In consequence, unemployment and underemployment, particularly among the youth, are now on a massive scale and poverty is worsening. The education system, on the whole, does not have in place, a programme to prepare its trainees for the new realities of the labour market, despite recent calls for policy and other intervention to ensure this.

Several reasons could account for this ugly situation. For example, the Nigerian labour market sees fresh graduates as not possessing the requisite knowledge and skills for employment in their areas of training and holds pre-
service training responsible. Specifically, employers of graduates from Nigerian institutions of higher learning, just like their counterparts at the lower levels of education, report that available graduates do not have adequate exposure to hands-on experiences in their chosen vocations.

Another handicap in the graduates produced in Nigerian educational institutions is that all but few go for paid employment. One is therefore tempted to agree that our quality assurance mechanisms in teacher education lack the ability to bring out entrepreneurship skills and spirit in the learners. Besides it could be a manifestation of systemic failure in quality assurance strategies in TVE to produce the needed generation of workers for the country’s industries, and to generate employment, create wealth and reduce poverty.

The goals of wealth creation, employment generation, poverty reduction, and value re-orientation can be effectively pursued, attained, and sustained only through an efficient, relevant and functional education system that has Technical-Vocational Education (TVE) in its proper place and shape. However, the delivery of education in Nigeria has suffered from many years of neglect, especially under the military rule. This was compounded by inadequate attention accorded to sustainable policy that will futuristically match manpower production to the emerging needs of the Nigeria economy. As a result, emphasis used to be placed on theoretical knowledge at the expense of technical, vocational and entrepreneurial education.

The Nigerian government, having realized this obvious flaw, has commenced working on ways to improve the productive capacity of Nigerian graduates through skills acquisition, entrepreneurship development, establishment of career and innovation centres and knowledge based enterprises development. The objectives are to foster an increasing vocational-technical education culture that helps students and teachers understand the fundamentals and feasibility of forming enterprises, to educate, encourage and support Nigerian graduates in their quest to establish and manage sustainable business ventures, including but not restricted to those arising from research.

Technical vocational education and quality assurance in the 21st century can facilitate the emergence of vocational-technical education models in the country that will catalyze the emergence of Nigeria as a giant in the field of vocational-technical education. This paper therefore dwells on quality assurance models available in the NCCE-supervised technical and vocational education and how they can promote enterprise culture among school leavers with the end result of stimulating the creation of economic activities and employment which are essential in the 21st century.
Quality Assurance Strategies in Colleges of Education

The major challenge facing Nigeria as a nation has been getting quality teachers (Afe, 2001.) None of the educational challenges that beset the nation is as compelling as the one relating to the training of competent teachers who directly or indirectly influence the quality and quantity of service provided by other professions. This is because, poor teachers tend to produce their own kind (Fafunwa, 1967).

Since its establishment, the NCCE has been doing all within her capacity to see that the nation gets the best quality of teachers she deserves (generally in all fields of education and particularly in TVE). In carrying out this noble mandate, the commission has been in the forefront in the promotion of teacher education at the sub-degree level in the country. In matters of admission policy, for example, the commission structured her policy on admission into colleges of education in favour of TVE, Science and Technology. In addition to those statutory roles of NCCE, the commission holds consciously to the philosophy that the strength of any durable system lies in solid and firm foundation in teacher education. The philosophy motivates the commission to prepare academic programmes that ensure a smooth transition from basic education to post – basic education in teacher education. The commission perceives post – basic education as a means to improving the quality, quantity and equitable access to TVE, Science and Technology Education as a means to enhancing the country’s competitiveness in the emerging global economy. The commission’s perception underlying the post-basic education is to support the emergence of teachers who are capable of producing graduates in TVE, Science and Technology that can competently work to ensure science and technology driven economic growth that is sustainable through quality TVE.

To achieve this orientation in TVE teacher education, several quality assurance strategies are adopted by the commission to engender sustainable quality in colleges of education across the nation. These strategies include:

1. **Collaborative efforts in laying down and Reviewing Minimum Standards for all Colleges of Education**

For purposes of laying down minimum standards, the commission adopts a collaborative approach whereby universities which make varying scholastic demands on the NCE programme are involved. Similarly, due recognition is also given to academic and professional expertise that exists in the colleges of education, polytechnics and other NCE awarding institutions. Experts from these institutions and other stakeholders form the majority of the participants that serve in the panels that draw up draft document as well as those who participate in the NCCE minimum standards workshops that are hosted in different colleges across the country by the commission.
The evolution of NCCE minimum standards begins with a call by the Commission for colleges of education and other stakeholders to submit proposals in the areas of need or deficiencies in the existing NCE curriculum. These submissions are then collated by the academic programmes department and used as working papers for NCCE minimum standards Review workshops at different levels. At first level, the outcome of the workshop produces draft minimum standards document from subject panels. These drafts are subjected to a critique in a second stage review workshop attended by resource persons from the universities, polytechnics and colleges of education.

Deliberations at the workshop could result in a modification of the draft NCCE minimum standards in terms of contents and course description. At this workshop also, attention of pa could be drawn to the aspects of teacher education which need urgent evaluation. From these efforts, it is possible to evolve a curriculum that will not only guarantee parity among colleges of education but also meet the yearnings and aspirations of the wider Nigeria society. Additionally, the approach is a veritable strategy in assisting NCE graduates in transiting into B.Ed. degree programmes in the university without problems.

2. Accreditation of Academic Programmes in the Colleges of Education

As intended for all tertiary institutions in Nigeria, accreditation of NCE programmes in the Colleges of education by the NCCE is for quality improvement and to ensure that there is parity in all NCE programmes in accordance with the set standards. As a quality assurance strategy, the focus of accreditation is to:

a. Guarantee that the specific NCCE minimum standard for the award of NCE is not only attained but it is enhanced and sustained by all NCE awarding institutions;

b. Validate the quality of NCE graduates with respect to their areas of specialization; and

c. Certify to the employer and community that academic programmes in the Colleges of education are of desirable standard and their graduates are adequate for employment and further studies.

3. Monitoring of Academic Programmes and Infrastructure

This is a strategy by the Commission to ensure that the guidelines specified in the NCCE minimum standards documents are closely followed. During the monitoring exercise, the Commission determines whether and how the educational objective of the institution is achieved in line with the published NCCE guidelines. At site visit by programme officers, judgment is made about the objectives of the programmes, admission require and their implementation, physical facilities, personnel, mode of teaching as well as the application of
graduation requirements in the institution. Decisions about the above parameters inform the commission on the desirable academic status in between the accreditation exercise of the institution.

4. **Ranking of the NCE Awarding Institution on the Aggregate Quality of the Programme**

Another strategy introduced by the commission to bring about quality assurance in NCE Teacher Education and encourage healthy competition among the colleges is the ranking of Colleges of Education on the basis of aggregate quality of their programmes. Following this strategy, a total of aggregate scores of academic programmes offered by each NCE awarding institution is compiled and computed as the sum of the individual scores in each of the assessed programmes. The product of this computation yields mean quality index score which provides a conglomerate quality measure of the general strength of the NCE programmes offered by the institution. The result of this analysis and standing of each NCE awarding institution is then publicized.

As expected, this approach to quality assurance has introduced the spirit of competition that has encouraged the colleges to compete for enviable positions in the ranking which is not only necessary for quality improvement but it is also a balm for quality assurance to the Nigerian public. At least for now, parents, proprietors and other stakeholders have a ready document to consult for their quality assurance needs in NCE Teacher Programmes in the country.

5. **External Moderation System**

A major consideration in any quality assurance process in education, the world over, is the issue of parity. Parity in educational programmes is essential because stakeholders in the educational enterprise wish to be assured that a given level of education under one setting is the same as that which is undertaken in another setting provided it is the same level of education.

One way the commission is able to achieve this in the college of education system is to institute a veritable External Examination system. Under the arrangement, experienced and professionally qualified senior academic staff are made to moderate examination of all NCE awarding institutions across the nation. Thereafter, reports on the moderated papers are sent to the commission and the respective institutions which guides decisions about quality and the certification of the affected schools.

6. **Guidelines for Establishment and Mounting of New Programmes**

Another strategy for quality assurance by the commission is laying down of guidelines for establishing new institutions and mounting new programmes. Under normal situations, consideration of a new programme comes after an
accreditation exercise. In order to obtain approval for new programme or to establish a new institution, the institution must be able to:

(a) Provide, a justification for the new programmes in line with the National Policy on Education (NPE Rev. 1998)

(b) Indicate sources and projection of students’ intakes;

(c) Provide the curriculum (if the programmes is not in the minimum standards);

(d) Show evidence that it possesses the teaching personnel for the programmes; and

(e) Provide the requisite facilities for the programmes.

Until these conditions are examined and found to exist in an institution, no new programme or institution is approved to run an NCE programme.

7. **Train-the-Trainer Programmes**

To ensure continued relevance of NCE graduates, the NCCE organizes regular train-the-trainer workshops for academic staff in the Colleges of Education. The scope and spectrum of the workshops vary. However, such workshops provides relevant in-service needs of teacher educators in their respective specialized areas as well as in Methodology, Information and Communication Technology, use of virtual library, and so on.

**Enhancing Quality Assurance in Colleges of Education: Challenges and Remedies**

**Challenges**

There are several challenges in enhancing quality assurance in colleges of education in the country. A few of the challenges are discussed as follows:

1. **Gap between Learning Experiences provided in Education Programmes and Practices in the School System**

In all disciplines in teacher education, there are wide gaps between what is studied in such programmes and what is practised in the education industry. For example, the Nigerian Colleges of Education train their products in skills, methodologies and teaching aids that are hardly available in our public school system. A further complication to the situation is the entry of the private sector and the spirit of competition in the educational arena of the country. To date, parents and other stakeholders choose schools on the basis of the unique programme that such schools offer. Consequently, private entrepreneurs are constantly reviewing the programme they offer in such schools with hope that it could attract more students. These changes are providing serious challenges to the colleges of education that reviews their curriculum once in five years to provide
graduates who can meet the market demands. It is little wonder, therefore, that Nigerians are complaining about the relevance of NCE graduates in the school system.

2. Undue Adherence to International Standards

Colleges of education experts and stakeholders adhere unduly to international standards in selecting learning experiences for their prospective clientele. Right from the onset of what has metamorphosed into colleges of education system today; there has been the feelings that such education will be “no good” if it is not of the same standards as obtained in Britain and America. This is not helping the situation in our colleges of education.

Nigerians, and indeed, most countries in Africa have always looked to the two countries for academic and consequently human resource development. For example, the history of education in Nigeria (Fafunwa, 1991) indicates that universities of Ibadan and Ghana were reluctantly recognized and eventually accepted by Africans only because of their affiliation with the famous London University.

In addition to our pre-occupation for international standard in education, our concept of development is also inextricably linked to the levels of industrialized countries. Froth all indications our educational development is a matter of accelerating the provision of learning experiences in order to reach the levels of advanced countries as soon as possible. Hence, according to Ukoli (1985), we are a “nation in a hurry” striving to ‘catch up’ with advanced nations of the world. This approach to the development of colleges of education is putting a strain on the capacities of existing colleges with the result that thin and thinner resources are deployed over great and greater ‘imported values”. The net effect is less than accepted standards in colleges of education system.

3. Dearth in number of Applicants into NCE programmes

One unhealthy trend evolving over the years in Colleges of Education (COEs) is the serious dwindling enrolment in the colleges. This situation has led to a heavy reliance on the pre-NCE programmes for recruitment of entrants into NCE programmes. As a step to ensure parity, the commission has provided for a standardized pre-NCE curriculum to upgrade applicants with deficiencies who wish to secure admission into the colleges of education outside JAMB examination. However, students admitted under the pre-NCE programme are not the best that can be admitted into teacher education programmes. Consequently, the quality of NCE graduates produced is not as good as they should be.
4. **Continuous Decline in Appropriation for Teacher Education**

As it has been said time without number, "no educational system can rise above the standard of its teachers". Unfortunately, not much is done by way of appropriation in our national budget to support this axiom in the Nigerian Educational system. The net effect on colleges of education is that vital activities like monitoring, accreditation and other quality assurance strategies are suffering.

A further problem along the line of funding is that the colleges of education system depend on outside sources for funding. This can leave the colleges vulnerable to the holders of the resources and reduce their control under the NCCE.

**Remedies**

It is difficult to proffer universally accepted remedies to the myriads of problems in quality assurance strategies in NCE Teachers Education. However, the basic needs, aspirations, goals and values of the people could be enhanced if the nation could implement the following:

1. **Building Framework for Service-Learning**

   Service-learning is a strategy to link schools and communities as student performs community-service work that is integrated into and complements their classroom work. It promotes personal, intellectual, and social growth in students; helps them develop civic responsibility and civic pride; and gives them an opportunity for career exploration. Students learn to apply their skills and knowledge to identify and meet needs in school or in greater community.

   To incorporate service-learning in schools, legislators should enact a school-to—work transition Act that will establish a structure and a direction for a school-work system. Under the Act, student should be equipped with relevant academic knowledge, marketable skills and appropriate work-place behaviors.

   The Act could call for the revision of the current NCCE Minimum Standards to make its experiences tailor made to meet the challenges in the school system. These will no doubt, help student make connection between the "real world" and the world of classroom and textbooks. The framework must stress that student should have the opportunity to make connection between what they learn in the classrooms and their every day lives.

2. **Determination, Development and Transmission of Home-grown Values**

   It could be recalled that most institutions on the African continent were accepted because their standards compared favorably with standards obtained in similar institutions in developed countries. However, those standards have no relevance to the needs of the Nigeria people. Therefore, it is imperative that if Nigeria wants to provide learning experiences that are relevant to the needs of her
people, she has to develop structures and learning opportunities that are skewed towards her needs and stage of her development and not the so called international standards.

3. Improvement in the Condition of Service of Teachers

Nigeria has taken a bold step in the establishment of federal teachers’ corps during which graduates of NCE teacher education will not only be employed but will also obtain relevant professional training in their profession. An equally important addition to the professionalisation of teaching would be improvement in the condition of service of teachers. This improvement in the condition of service of teachers can take the form of enhanced teachers’ service scale, good working environment, better annual leave bonuses and recreational facilities, free tuition for teachers’ children (especially teachers who have spent over 20 years in service), permanent teaching benefit for retired teachers as well as assured post service retirement Homes for teachers.

4. Implementation of 26% Budgetary Allocation to Education Sector

Nationwide, contributors to debate about the education industry have always asked for enhanced funding of educational activities. While the author will not want to over-labour the issue, it is true that much of the teething problems common in the colleges of education system has been due to the dearth of funds in the colleges of education system. Funds are needed for the provision of personnel, facilities and staff welfare in areas such as health services, recreational facilities, electric power and water supply, transportation, communication and so on that are indispensable to the smooth running of academic activities in the various colleges of education.

Conclusion

The paper examines strategies for sustainable quality assurance in colleges of education (COEs). It traced the genesis of quality assurance in COEs and the assorted assurance strategies put in place by NCCE for needed parity at the NCE Teacher Education level. It is hoped that the ideas and insight in this paper will positively change future of quality assurance strategies in the nation. If the colleges of education me more e more people will opt and find training in the sector. This will not y improve our educational system and junior secondary level but also ensure sustainable human resource development in the rural area.
Bibliography


