

Cross-Border Delivery in Nigeria and Quality Assurance Issues

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Access to educational opportunities has witnessed significant facilitation, especially in developing economies where ethnic minorities and other disadvantaged groups abound. The global initiative anchored by COL (commonwealth of learning) in collaboration with institutions and agencies is helping to further reinforce the “global image” schema, since learning opportunities and services are now exported to consumers outside normal locational influence of participating institutions. There is no doubt that the scheme is making a huge impact and generating great enthusiasm among beneficiaries. This paper examines the challenge of quality assurance emerging from the fact that educational services may be provided in virtual learning environment which may be within or outside the immediate physical location of the provider agency. Drawing from experiences of the National Open University and other institutions that operate distance education in outreach centers, this paper recommends, among others, that as much as possible, internal and external moderation of course packages and resource persons should be done both in the regular and distance learning centers and ensure periodic review of programme performance and student learning outcomes to guide further action.

Keywords: cross-border, quality assurance, sandwich, satellite education

Introduction

Equity in access to education is a core provision of the MDGs (millennium development goals) which all subscribing nations are enjoined to pursue, because education is recognized as the key to the success of other human welfare enhancement endeavors. This global initiative to democratize access to education has stimulated enthusiastic participation of institutions, governmental and non-governmental agencies.

The COL (commonwealth of learning) prefaces its FSD (flexible skills development) initiative with the declaration that resolving educational inequity is a central philosophy that its “activity will positively discriminate towards the previously disadvantaged in order to deliver increased equity and inclusion”.

COL’s discriminatory philosophy becomes justifiable in the face of exclusion of large segments of society from government social/welfare programmes as a result of non-integration into mainstream society. Religion, ethnic politics and geographical location are key factors which are responsible for exclusion of people or groups from government welfare packages (Anderson & Roit, 1996).

Cross-border education programmes become an inevitable platform to bring the benefits of education to all people, regardless of time and space. The reality of McLuhan’s (1968) “global village” concept of the world has profound implications for human existence. It is becoming increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to live in isolation or to isolate others from one’s dealings. Thus, providers of educational services have to identify their

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target publics and reach them where they are, using all available supporting technologies.

Cross Border Education Delivery

Cross-border education is an educational service delivery that takes place in:

situations where the teacher, student, programme, institution/provider or course materials cross national jurisdictional borders and encompass a wide range of modalities in a continuum from face-to-face to distance learning... it is the movement of people, programmes, providers, knowledge, ideas, projects and services across national boundaries (Knight, 2006).

But for the purpose of this paper, the term “cross-border” shall be used to include educational operations that an institution, agency or organization carries on outside its immediate geographical boundaries or location, not necessarily in the sense of crossing a national territorial boundary.

Distance learning is explained as an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by someone far removed in time and/or space from the learner (Creed, 2001).

To Adebayo (2007), open and distance learning is the type of education that takes place outside the conventional school system which may be imparted without necessarily having personal interaction with students or learners. Adebayo (2010) added that the concept of open and distance learning suggests an educational approach designed to reach learners wherever they are located, providing life-long learning opportunities without attending formal classes.

UNESCO (2002) explained open and distance learning as approaches aimed at opening access to education and training provision which offer flexible learning opportunities to participants, and in the process, freeing them from the constraints of time and space.

Forms of Cross-Border Schemes in Nigeria

Two major factors responsible for the sharp increase in the operations of institutions outside their geographical location in Nigeria are the desire to meet the educational needs of those disadvantaged by distance from “college towns” and government directive that colleges seek for other legitimate means of boosting their internally generated revenue base outside government subventions. The latter factor has pushed many a college into unwholesome acts of prostituting with education, which have serious implications for quality assurance.

Federal government intervention in provision of cross-border education is expressed in the establishment of the NTI (National Teachers Institute) with more than 700 outlets scattered across local government headquarters in all 36 states of Nigeria. The broad goal of the initiative is to facilitate the training of teachers in the quantity and quality required to drive the nation’s UBE (universal basic education) compulsory nine year primary education scheme.

Resource persons are recruited from secondary schools and tertiary institutions (if any) in the area where the outlet is located. Reading materials are centrally produced and distributed to students enrolled in the programme.

National Open University

The NOUN (National Open University in Nigeria), though first launched in 1983, only became fully operational in 2001. With 23 study centers, its student enrolment stood at about 60,000, as in 2002, according to Adebayo (2010). Its course materials are a blend of multi-media packages that rely heavily on the new technologies.

Weekend Programmes

These are designed specifically for such members of the public whose job demands preclude them from

enrolling in regular, full-time programmes. In other words, learners in this group are generally of working-class type and are willing to invest their free weekends in further education. Candidates who enroll in weekend programmes are required to assemble for lectures either at the campus of the provider institution or at designated locations outside the border of the donor institution. This factor has given rise to the outreach/satellite centre concept.

Satellite Centre Concept

As the name implies, learning services are available outside the environment in which the provider agency is located. In this situation, resource persons are drawn from either the provider institution or sourced from “qualified” persons who work and/or live within the satellite or outreach center.

On its own, the centre would usually be a public utility, such as a primary/secondary school facility or any suitable venue hired for the stated purpose. Students are expected to buy resource materials produced by faculty and/or individual course lectures.

The mode of operation usually includes lectures for a specified period, after which the students are invited to the home campus for about two weeks of “intensive” lectures and revision, after which examinations are conducted. Unfortunately, many rogue or low quality providers (Knight, 2006) have sprung up all over, are offering “quality” lectures and conducting examinations in blatantly inadequate environments, and in less time than that can assure effective learning.

Sandwich Programme

This educational package is “sandwiched” in the holiday/break period between terms/semesters. In other words, it comes up during holiday period when full-time students are away on end-of-term or semester break. Because it is during holiday period, candidates (who are drawn mainly from teaching staff of educational institutions) are also on holidays.

The length of learning time is usually a function of the duration of the holiday. Because of this, many institutions that operate sandwich programmes, target end-of-session break which is usually the longest break in the Nigerian school system, to allow sufficient time for teaching.

Sometimes, in order to avoid congestion on campus, Sandwich students are taken to locations outside college campus but within the city. Resource persons shuttle to and fro the out-of-campus centers to service their schedules.

Quality Assurance Challenge

A quality assurance programme essentially focuses on product or service quality both in the short and long run. In other words, it involves monitoring the quality of course delivery and assessment.

According to Knight (2007), it is the systematic monitoring and evaluation of the various aspects of a project, service or facility to maximize the probability that minimum standards of quality that are being attained by the production process.

The two key principles in any quality assurance programmes are as follows:

- (1) Fit for purpose: That is, the programme should be suitable for the intended purpose;
- (2) Right first time: This ensures that mistakes are eliminated from the process.

These principles are to assure quality of raw materials, assemblies, products and components, services related to production and management, production and inspection processes. The quality of end-product/service

is determined solely by production/service users/clients/customers, it follows that customer satisfaction, rather than cost, becomes a better objective reflection of quality of product/service.

Ensuring quality assurance in educational services may broadly include the following steps:

- (1) Review of existing curricular of intended programmes;
- (2) Review of current market demands;
- (3) Review of reports from employers of labor;
- (4) Development of harmonized curricular;
- (5) Streamlining entry requirements with new curricular;
- (6) Development of benchmarks for resource personnel.

Application of these steps, along with others not listed, engenders a behavior pattern in operators of the system, which invariably manifests in the following four operations (see Figure 1):

- (1) Planning;
- (2) Implementation;
- (3) Evaluation;
- (4) Feedback (and improvement).

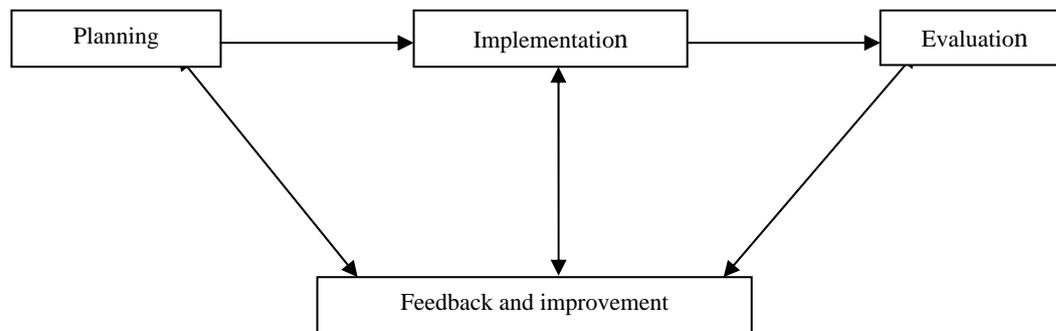


Figure 1. Flowchart showing system monitoring for quality.

The Role of Institutional Value in Quality Assurance

Divinity School (1992) suggested that institutions play a more explicit public role as a result of social changes. To be able to fulfill this expectation, institutions need to cultivate, reflect and market distinct values that the public can buy into.

Griffin (1990) stated that maintenance of quality instruction and mentoring growth of students towards their full academic potential should be at the heart of an institution's value ethos. A strongly stated institutional value system will act as a check against derailing of both institution's administration and the students. For instance, Olin College in the United States has the following as a part of its core values:

- (1) Quality and continuous improvement;
- (2) Student learning and development;
- (3) Institutional agility and entrepreneurship;
- (4) Striving to minimize bureaucracy, cost and institutional inertia... accepted appropriate risks in pursuit of opportunity;
- (5) Quality assurance indices.

Wikipedia suggests consideration of the following checklist of indices which should serve as a guide to the

ensuring quality in cross-border education services:

- (1) Use of ICT (information communication technology);
- (2) Continuous further training of staff (both teaching and technical);
- (3) Labor-market-oriented training curriculums (to ensure that products are equipped with appropriate skills and knowledge to satisfy market needs);
- (4) Comparison of the pedagogical efficiencies of teachers for the same course (with a view to using the best);
- (5) Teaching by feedback system;
- (6) Improvement of information and communication processes;
- (7) Planning tools for teaching/assignments and course schedules;
- (8) Course evaluation vis-à-vis customer feedback;
- (9) Interview/interaction with staff and course participants.

Wong (2005) identified a number of areas in which problems were easily manifested in pursuit of quality.

Two of such areas particularly describe the situation in Nigeria. They are as follows:

- (1) Misleading or dishonest information relating to course content, teaching, resources, staffing and status of recognition of courses by government and professional bodies;
- (2) Poor quality of courses, which is seen in:
 - (a) Lower standard of course, especially in the area of reduced or shortened content;
 - (b) Poor or inadequate teaching resources, use of unqualified or inexperienced staff, teaching by proxy, etc.;
 - (c) Lower entry and exit requirements;
 - (d) Unsuitable teaching methods;
 - (e) Shortened course duration or fast-tracked progression.

In Nigeria, the NUC (National Universities' Commission), NBTE (National Board for Technical Education) and NCCE (National Council for Colleges of Education) are quality assurance regulatory bodies. Among other duties, they are empowered to: (1) set out clear procedures for assessment of regular and non-regular programmes; and (2) supervise and or implement the procedures.

Quality Assurance in Auchi Polytechnic

Concerns for quality assurance and standards led to the creation of the directorate of academic planning in Auchi polytechnic. The office answers directly to the rector of the institution and handles all issues relating to creation of new academic programmes, accreditation and re-accreditation of existing programmes, allocation of courses, deployment of learning facilities, equipment and other academic matters.

The directorate ensures that courses are allocated to resource persons on the basis of primary qualification/specialization, teaching experience and other quality assurance indicators.

Courses in the institution's regular, part-time and Sandwich programmes are taught by the same resource persons to follow standard. Besides, common examination questions are used in classes that run on the same levels, even where they are taught by different lecturers.

Moreover, the Academic Planning Directorate, in conjunction with the academic division of the school's registry, ensures that the same entry and exit requirements apply to all applicants for admission. In addition, it liaises intensively with the NBTE (National Board for Technical Education), the supervisory body for TVET (technical, vocational education and training) in Nigeria, on "global" issues of quality and standard.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Cross-border education enjoys global recognition especially against the background of EPA (education for all) by the year of 2015 initiatives declared at the World Education Forum in Dakar 2000 (Adegun, 2010). The rush to bring educational opportunities within the reach of disadvantaged segments of society has naturally posed certain quality assurance challenges.

As stated earlier, in the Nigerian context, it is nearly impossible to draw a line between genuine and noble desire to increase access to education and plain pursuit of profits. Provision of educational services has become big-time business and an all-comers affair.

To ensure quality and standards in the educational offerings by institutions and other donor agencies especially in Nigeria, it is suggested that:

- (1) Content of cross-border education programmes be designed as response to specific observed needs of society, instead of the current mass production mentality;
- (2) The programmes be designed and implemented to positively impact the beneficiaries and society at large;
- (3) A monitoring team be put in a place at national, regional and international levels to ensure compliance with agreed upon standards and quality. Where such teams already exist, they need to be further strengthened to deliver on their mandates;
- (4) Institutions and donor agencies should evolve core values by which their products/services will be judged;
- (5) To curtail abuse, let limits be set for borders, outside which institutions may not “export” their educational services;
- (6) Resource personnel and materials should be of the required quality and standard to right the absurd wrongs in equity in access;
- (7) Lectures and learning packages for outreach/satellite programmes should be prepared by course lecturers in the accredited regular programmes. This ensures uniformity and standards.

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