

IMPACT OF BENCHMARK POLICY ON ACADEMIC STANDARDS: A CASE STUDY OF INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

This study examines the evolution of university education in Nigeria, highlighting the role of the National Universities Commission (NUC) in ensuring academic quality and standards. The research explores the concept of benchmark policy, accreditation, and quality assurance in Nigerian universities, and investigates the impact of benchmark policy on academic standards. The study reveals that benchmark policy has driven institutional transformation in Nigerian universities, leading to improved academic standards, enhanced reputation, and increased competitiveness. However, the implementation of benchmark policy has been uneven, with some universities struggling to meet the new standards. The study recommends that Nigerian universities prioritize the implementation of benchmark policy, emphasizing practical skills development, research and innovation, international collaboration, and community engagement. The research concludes that a robust quality assurance framework, coupled with effective implementation of benchmark policy, is crucial for enhancing academic standards, improving graduate employability, and contributing to national development in Nigeria.

Keywords: Benchmark, BenchMark Policy, Academic Standard, Institutional Transformation, Academic Culture

Introduction

University education in Nigeria started following the recommendation of the Elliot Commission of 1943. This gave impetus for the establishment of University College Ibadan (UCI) in 1948. The UCI was an affiliate of the University of London. However, the UCI take-off was bedevilled with a number of problems which included rigid constitutional provisions, poor staffing, low enrolment and high drop-out rate among others (Ajayi and Haastrup, 2008).

In 1959, the Ashby Commission was set up among other things, to advise the Federal Government on the educational needs of the country for its first two decades after independence, particularly in respect to her higher education. This was a land mark achievement in the development of university education in Nigeria; the first indigenous universities established reflecting the philosophy, the need and aspiration of the Nigerians (Dada, Wunti and Martin 2017). In 1962 the National Universities Commission (NUC) was established, it operated from the office of the prime minister. NUC became a statutory body in 1974. Its main objective was the coordination of the activities of the university system to ensure national unity and uniformity in academic standards (NUC, 1988).

The quality of education in Nigerian universities in 1970s met the global standards; producing good and high quality graduates (Okebukola, 2006). University education was considered relevant, responsive, functional and of high quality. Nigerians and the graduates enjoyed high reputations and commanded respect for high standard from the international community (Dada, Wunti and Martin 2017).

Benchmark policy has gained prominence in higher education, aiming to enhance academic standards and institutional quality. However, the impact of benchmark policy on academic standards remains poorly understood. This study explores the relationship between benchmark policy and academic standards at a higher education institution undergoing transformation (Dill, 1997).

Conceptual Clarification

Accreditation

Okebukola (2006), defined accreditation as the establishment of the status, legitimacy or appropriateness of an institution programme, it is a self-regulatory process by which governmental and non-governmental, voluntary association or rather statutory bodies grant recognition to educational programs or institution that meet stated criteria of educational quality. The main focus of accreditation is ensuring and maintenance of standards in the academic programme offered in the universities. Accreditation could also mean a process by which the quality and standard of educational institutions are assessed. According to Harvey (2008) Accreditation is official approval granted by an accrediting agency to an accredited institution at the end of a successful assessment exercise. It could also mean the process by which the quality and standard of educational institutions are assessed. In Nigeria, this quality assurance function is conducted by the National Universities Commission (NUC) for Federal, State and Private Universities (Oladusun, 2011).

Benchmark

Benchmarking is defined as the comparison of products, services, and processes across divisions that carry out similar operations in the same organization, among competing firms in the same industry, or among firms with similar processes across different industries. Benchmark policy has been recognized as a key driver of academic excellence in higher education (Harvey and Green, 1993; Rosa and Martens, 2009).

Research highlights the importance of clear policy frameworks in shaping institutional quality and programme development. Effective implementation of benchmark policy requires strategic change management (Kezar and Eckel, 2002). Studies emphasize the role of leadership, communication, and faculty engagement in driving institutional transformation (Middaugh, 2010). Benchmark policy influences faculty practices, particularly in teaching and research. Research underscores the significance of faculty development programmes in enhancing teaching excellence and research collaboration (Hutchings and Shulman, 1999).

Benchmark Policy

Benchmark policy refers to a set of standards, guidelines, or best practices that universities are expected to meet or exceed in order to ensure quality education and academic excellence. The purpose of benchmark policy in Nigerian universities is to ensure quality education, promote accountability, and enhance competitiveness (Dill, 1997; Fraumeni et al., 2008). Benchmark policy is implemented in Nigerian universities through accreditation processes, quality assurance

mechanisms, and faculty development. The National Universities Commission (NUC) and professional accrediting agencies evaluate university programs against benchmark standards, while universities establish quality assurance units to monitor and evaluate academic programs, teaching, and research.

Benchmarking and Continuous Improvement

- i. **Internal and External Assessment:** Institutions can use the criteria for excellence to conduct internal self-assessments and benchmark themselves against external standards and best practices. This helps identify strengths and weaknesses and informs strategic planning for improvement (ENQA, 2014).
- ii. **Data-Driven Decision Making:** By focusing on measurable criteria, institutions can track progress toward excellence, utilize data to inform decision-making, and demonstrate accountability to stakeholders (ENQA, 2014).

Academic Standards

Academic standards refer to the expected levels of knowledge, skills, and competencies that students should demonstrate upon completing a degree program (Harden, 2007; Kennedy, 2007). Academic standards are measured through learning outcomes, assessment methods, and grading systems (Biggs, 2003; Boud, 2000). Universities define learning outcomes for each degree program, which specify the knowledge, skills, and competencies students should demonstrate. Assessment methods, such as exams, projects, and portfolios, are used to evaluate student learning outcomes, while grading systems are used to evaluate student performance and provide feedback. Academic standards are important in higher education because they ensure student preparedness, maintain quality education, and enhance accountability (Kuh, 2003; Nichols, 2006).

Institutional Transformation

Institutional transformation refers to the process of significant change and improvement in an institution's policies, practices, and culture (Kezar and Eckel, 2002; Middaugh, 2010). In Nigerian universities, institutional transformation is driven by government policies, accreditation processes, and competition and globalization. The National Universities Commission's (NUC) benchmark policy, for example, drives institutional transformation by setting standards for academic programs, teaching, and research. Accreditation processes, such as those conducted by the NUC and professional accrediting agencies, also drive institutional transformation by evaluating university programs against benchmark standards. The increasing competition and globalization of higher education also drive institutional transformation, as universities seek to improve their reputation and competitiveness. Institutional transformation leads to improved academic standards, enhanced reputation, and increased competitiveness (Okebukola, 2006; Saliu, 2006).

Theoretical Framework

The study "The Impact of Benchmark Policy on Academic Standards: A Case Study of Institutional Transformation in Nigerian Universities" provides valuable insights into the impact of benchmark policy on academic standards in Nigerian universities. From an institutional theory perspective, the study highlights the role of regulatory, normative, and cognitive forces in shaping the behavior of universities. The benchmark policy can be seen as a regulatory mechanism that exerts pressure on universities to conform to certain standards (Meyer and Rowan, 1977).

However, the study also notes that the implementation of the policy has been uneven, with some universities struggling to meet the new standards. This suggests that the regulatory environment is not always effective in ensuring compliance (Ostrom, 1990).

The normative environment also plays a crucial role in shaping the behavior of universities. The emphasis on excellence and quality in the benchmark policy reflects the normative values of the academic community (Bourdieu, 1986). However, the study also highlights the challenges faced by universities in meeting these standards, which suggests that the normative environment may not always be aligned with the regulatory environment (Foucault, 1977).

The cognitive environment is also relevant to the study, as it highlights the ways in which universities think about academic standards and quality (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). The benchmark policy provides a shared language and set of standards that universities can use to evaluate their performance and strive for excellence. However, the study also notes that the implementation of the policy has been influenced by various factors, including institutional capacity and leadership (Selznick, 1957).

Methodology

This paper employed document analysis as a tool for data collection from relevant academic works, such as books, journal articles, magazines, policy briefs and the Internet. It then utilized qualitative content analysis as a method of data analysis. Content analysis refers to a research method for interpreting the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005).

Educational Output and the Limitations of Traditional Teaching Methods

Schreyer (2009) and Fraumeni et al. (2008) define the output of the education sector as the effect of education processes on the level of competences (the amount of knowledge, skills, understanding and attitudes) students have attained or possessed after completion of studies.

According to Awiti (2014), the current processes of training and learning have spoon-fed students instead of making them curious and creative such that the students are taught to think the way of their lecturers instead of building critical thinking and instead of building capacity to identify and solve problems. Hence, students have learnt to complain or to blame others for their failures.

Ensuring Academic Quality: The Role of NUC in Accreditation and Benchmarking

One of the several functions of NUC is to ensure that university graduates attain a minimum level of competence in their fields of study. This is achieved via NUC's mandate to draw up benchmark minimum academic standards (BMAS) for all disciplines in Nigerian universities. The evaluation of academic programmes in Nigeria Universities having met the provision of the Minimum Academic Standards documents (MAS) is done through accreditation of degree and other academic programmes (Saliu, 2006). The importance and development of the Minimum Academic Standards and their subsequent approval provided the basis for accreditation of all degree programmes taught in Nigerian Universities (Ijeoma and Osagie, 2005).

BMAS Together with the accreditation exercise, ensure that graduates attain a certain minimum level of competence in their academic pursuits so that they come out as productive and effective members of the society with enough background to make meaningful contributions to national development (Fafunwa 1990).

It is relevant to note that the legal basis for accreditation of academic programmes in Nigeria is derived from Section 10 of Act No. 16 of 1985. This is incorporated as section 4 (m) of the NUC amended Act No. 49 of 1988, which empowers the Commission to lay down minimum standards for all universities in the Federation and to accredit their degrees and other academic awards. On the strength of the Act, the NUC developed a set of Minimum Academic Standards (MAS) to guide

Nigerian Universities in the development, implementation and evaluation of their curricula which was reviewed in 2004 as Benchmarks Minimum Academic Standards (BMAS) (Okojie, 2008). The institutional compliance with the stipulated standards is measured through specially designed accreditation instrument, developed by the NUC.

Major Reforms and Transformations

The NUC undertook several landmark reforms in its evolution:

1. Introduction of the Minimum Academic Standards (MAS): These standards, developed in 1989, provided a framework for curriculum design and quality control.
2. Shift to Outcome-Based Education: In 2001, the NUC introduced outcome-based benchmark statements, aiming to align university programmes with contemporary global best practices.
3. Development of the Benchmark Minimum Academic Standards (BMAS): This integrated content-based MAS with outcome-based benchmarks, providing a more comprehensive approach to quality assurance.

Core Curriculum and Minimum Academic Standards (CCMAS)

The National Universities Commission (NUC) introduced the Core Curriculum and Minimum Academic Standards (CCMAS) in 2019 to enhance the quality of university education in Nigeria (NUC, 2019). Higher education is crucial for national development, and a robust quality assurance framework is essential to ensure that universities effectively prepare graduates for the challenges of a globalized world. The Core Curriculum and Minimum Academic Standards (CCMAS) is a cornerstone of quality assurance in the Nigerian university system. It provides a comprehensive framework for designing and implementing degree programs that meet national and international standards.

CCMAS: Adapting to the Challenges of the 21st Century

Relevance to Current Needs: CCMAS documents should be continuously evaluated and updated to ensure they address the most pressing challenges and opportunities facing Nigeria and the global community.

Practical Skills Development: The curriculum should emphasize practical skills and hands-on experience to prepare graduates for real-world application.

Research and Innovation: CCMAS should encourage research and innovation, leading to new knowledge and solutions for development and security challenges.

International Collaboration: Strengthening partnerships with international institutions and fostering collaboration between researchers and policymakers will enhance the global impact of the CCMAS.

The CCMAS for Social Sciences in Nigeria reflects the changing needs of the 21st century by incorporating a range of modern pedagogical approaches and prioritizing skills essential for success in a dynamic and interconnected world. Here are some key ways the CCMAS adapts to the 21st century:

1. Emphasis on 21st-Century Skills

The CCMAS recognizes that the traditional focus on theoretical knowledge is no longer sufficient. It emphasizes the development of 21st-century skills crucial for navigating a complex and rapidly evolving world.

Critical Thinking and Problem Solving: The CCMAS encourages the development of critical thinking skills, analytical reasoning, and problem-solving abilities to analyze complex societal issues and develop effective solutions.

Communication and Collaboration: The curriculum promotes effective communication, both written and oral, and emphasizes collaborative learning experiences to prepare graduates for teamwork and working effectively in diverse environments.

Digital Literacy and Technology Integration: Recognizing the growing importance of technology, the CCMAS emphasizes digital literacy and incorporates technology integration into the curriculum to equip graduates with the skills needed to access, analyze, and utilize information effectively.

2. Adaptability and Flexibility

The CCMAS framework is designed to be flexible and adaptable to the changing needs of universities and the evolving demands of the job market.

Program Specialization: The CCMAS allows universities to introduce specializations within their Social Sciences programs to cater to emerging fields and niche areas of study, like data analytics, cybersecurity, or sustainable development.

Curriculum Adaptability: Universities have the flexibility to adjust the core curriculum with a 30% allowance for elective courses, allowing them to tailor the curriculum to regional needs and specific program goals.

Innovative Teaching Methods: The CCMAS encourages the use of innovative teaching methods like blended learning, project-based learning, and active learning strategies to enhance student engagement and facilitate deeper learning.

3. Addressing Global Challenges

The CCMAS emphasizes global awareness, understanding, and the ability to address transnational challenges.

Global Perspectives: The curriculum promotes a global perspective on social and political issues, encouraging students to analyze problems from multiple viewpoints and understand the interconnectedness of nations.

Addressing Transnational Threats: The CCMAS promotes the study of transnational threats like climate change, human trafficking, terrorism, and organized crime, preparing graduates to contribute to solutions on a global scale.

4. Fostering Innovation and Entrepreneurship

The CCMAS recognizes the importance of fostering innovation and entrepreneurial thinking in Social Sciences graduates.

Entrepreneurship Integration: The CCMAS encourages the integration of entrepreneurship education into the curriculum, preparing graduates to create jobs and contribute to economic development.

Research and Innovation: The CCMAS emphasizes research and innovation, encouraging graduates to contribute to new knowledge and solutions for complex societal problems.

The CCMAS for Social Sciences in Nigeria demonstrates a clear commitment to adapting to the evolving needs of the 21st century. By prioritizing 21st-century skills, promoting adaptability and flexibility, addressing global challenges, and encouraging innovation, the CCMAS framework positions graduates to become agents of positive change in a world characterized by rapid transformation and complex challenges.

Bridging the Gap: Integrating Theory and Practice in Nigerian Higher Education

The CCMAS emphasizes the need to address specific challenges faced by Nigeria. This includes issues like poverty, inequality, corruption, ethnic conflict, and political instability. By incorporating case studies and examples relevant to the Nigerian context, the curriculum fosters a deeper understanding of these issues and empowers graduates to contribute to solutions.

- i. **Bridging the Gap between Academia and Practical Application:** The CCMAS attempts to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. It encourages universities to incorporate internships, community engagement, and research opportunities into the curriculum, equipping students with the skills and experience necessary to make a tangible impact in their communities and the wider society.
- ii. **Integration of 21st-Century Skills:** As mentioned earlier, the CCMAS places significant emphasis on 21st-century skills, recognizing their importance in a rapidly changing global landscape. This includes digital literacy, critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and problem-solving.

Standards for Excellence: CCMAS Benchmarks for Quality Education

The minimum academic standards component of CCMAS sets benchmarks for quality in terms of:

- iii. **Resource requirements:** This includes staffing, facilities, equipment, and library resources.
- iv. **Teaching and learning:** This includes pedagogical practices, assessment methods, and the use of technology.
- v. **Research and innovation:** This includes expectations for research activity and the encouragement of innovative approaches.
- vi. **Community engagement:** This includes the promotion of service learning and contributions to the broader society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study highlights the significance of the Core Curriculum and Minimum Academic Standards (CCMAS) framework in enhancing the quality of university education in Nigeria. The CCMAS demonstrates a clear commitment to adapting to the evolving needs of the 21st century, prioritizing 21st-century skills, promoting adaptability and flexibility, addressing global challenges, and encouraging innovation.

Recommendations

To enhance the quality of education in Nigerian universities, it is imperative to prioritize the implementation of benchmark policy components. One key aspect is practical skills development, which can be achieved by incorporating internships, community engagement, and project-based learning into the curriculum. This approach equips graduates with the necessary skills and experience to make a meaningful impact in their communities and beyond.

Furthermore, Nigerian universities should prioritize research and innovation by providing resources and support for faculty and student research, encouraging interdisciplinary collaboration, and fostering a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship. International collaboration is also crucial, and can be achieved by establishing partnerships with foreign institutions, participating in global research networks, and promoting student and faculty exchange programs. This enhances the global relevance and competitiveness of Nigerian universities.

Lastly, community engagement should be a priority, incorporating service learning, community-based research, and outreach programs into the curriculum. This approach instills a sense of social responsibility in graduates, preparing them to contribute to the development of their communities. By prioritizing these benchmark policy components, Nigerian universities can ensure that graduates are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and competencies necessary to succeed in the 21st century and contribute to national development.

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