

Topic:

Transnational Education and the Quality Assurance Imperative

Sub theme:

Relationship between quality assurance and cross border recognition of qualifications

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Abstract:

Transnational Education has become a customer-driven commercial venture, which is considered in some cases a form of exploitation of national system and culture. But given the increasing mobile, communications-driven world, the trend remains on the increase and calls for a greater recognition of ways to step up standards particularly with regards to delivery mode, student support and security of academic standards of awards/assessment of the achievement of those students. Quality assurance in the context of transnational education offers a means of verifying the provider's formalized accountability as an institution of higher education and therefore a useful indicator of quality. This paper examines the main drivers of transnational education, criticisms it faces in developing countries and how quality assurance can influence the acceptance and accreditation of transnational education whilst impacting on external quality monitoring of students learning.

The Global era has ushered in a predominance of liberal democratization and free trade models as well as an increase in Information and Communications Technology (ICT) as evident in the spread of Internet, World Wide Web, Virtual Learning Communities and Mass air travel. Free market policies granting increasing autonomy to individuals, groups, new providers and forms of education are also emerging and transforming the traditional face of higher education. Instrumental to this change in higher education is the General Agreement in Trade Services (GATS) negotiated in Uruguay which came in effect in 1995. GATS laid down a set of legally enforceable rules for its 144 member states. These 'unconditional obligations' binding on nation includes

- "Most favoured nation treatment": treating one's trading partners equally
- Transparency: procedures must be open and applied fairly and even-handedly
- Scope for exemption of services "supplied in the exercise of governmental authority"

(Reference : Observatory on Borderless Higher Education: www.obhe.ac.uk)

In effect, trade in education services includes the provision of higher education by private institutions where demand for higher education exceeds the places available. Where demand for higher education exceeds the places available and precipitates an influx of overseas providers and other forms of borderless education services, countries receiving applications for overseas awarding bodies or higher education requesting to operate within their jurisdiction may not apply discriminately procedures which they would not apply to their own institutions. Even though a country like Nigeria has endorsed these these conventions administered by World Trade Organisations (WTO), the government is still not amenable to joint degrees being awarded collaboratively or otherwise by overseas providers.

Borderless/transnational programmes often defined as 'Educational provision leading to an award, or specific credit toward an award, of awarding institution delivered and/or supported and/or assessed through an arrangement with a partner organisation' (QAA UK 2004), includes different forms of collaborative provisions and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning). The full import of this definition has generated different degrees of interests and criticisms. Proponents feel that it widens access by creating learning opportunities and providing home institutions with opportunities for improving their standing and reputation through links to prestigious foreign. Many employers especially in developing countries place economic value on foreign awards/degrees especially where it is obvious that huge demand for higher education and massification places a strain on infrastructure and quality provisions of local institutions. Economic prospects of transnational qualification are more strongly felt in places where in-country education continues to be at the receiving end of socio-political instability. An advantage expressed by Andrea Hope, Associate Academic Vice-president Hong Kong Sue Yang College, is that transnational program is cost saving since it enables nations to enhance their domestic capacity without concomitant infrastructure. Borderless education reduces on foreign exchange cost of studying abroad, providing for a self paced study, a convenient mode without foregone earnings thus enabling candidates to remain in employment whilst pursuing further educational pursuits. Undoubtedly borderless education could staunch the brain drain syndrome: permanent loss of local talent migration to developing countries.

Critics however have pointed out problems associated borderless education. Some of these involve the miscreants of non-official, unregulated providers who commercialise education thus undermining the public good approach. Inequity of access resulting from use of ICTs is another shortcoming and there are also difficulties experienced with degree mills and bogus institutions who exploit the public. There are also concerns about the competition posed to strictly regulated national institutions particularly in lucrative fields such as business and management studies. At a recent conference in Edinburgh, December 2004, other areas of concerns emerged. Kader Asmai, a former education minister in South Africa whilst addressing the conference remarked that the international providers of education need to be sensitive to local needs and not simply cherry-pick the most lucrative services, such as setting up business and management schools. Some institutions he argued used the 'snob value' of their reputation and did not always

maintain the high standards. He warned that the growing economic importance of education could lead to greater polarization between affluent and rich countries.

Nonetheless, the demand from consumers remain buoyant with cost, brand name of provider, convenience and nature of delivery, dissatisfaction of local delivery and employment prospects of the programme, being the main determinants.

In Nigeria, where borderless education has not been legitimized by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies authorized to do so, satellite campuses by existing local institutions are not accredited. There are no official statistics to show for the proliferation of 'illegitimate' borderless providers and their students enrolment but academicians have postulated that the number of candidates in-country undergoing one form of borderless education or the other out-numbers figures of students mobility overseas.

Tables 1-2 below give the statistics of Nigerians who pursue British and Americans qualifications:

Table 1 Growth rate of Nigerian Higher Education and Further Education of Nigerians in the UK							
	1996/7	1997/8	1998/9	1999/00	2000/1	2001/02	2002/03
HE	1,834	1,900	2,019	2,130	2,381	2,934	4,134
FE	287	348	319	418	506		

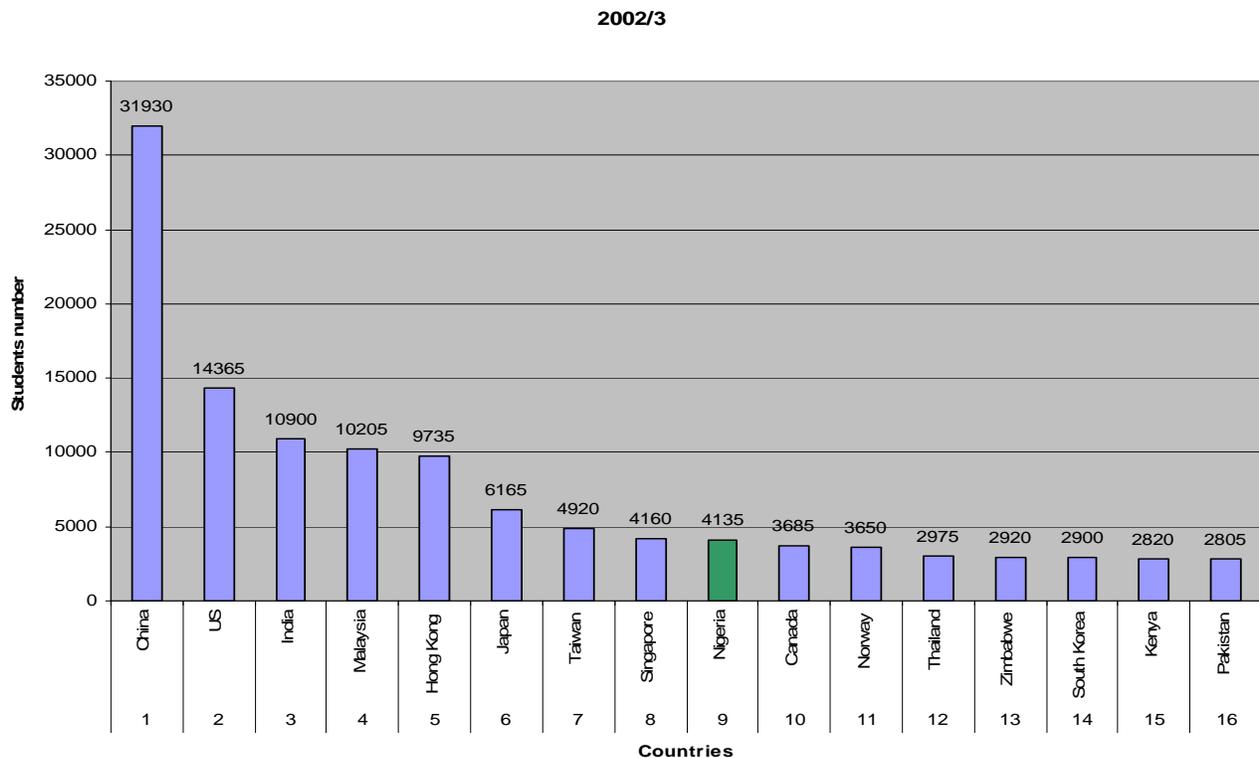
Table 2 Growth rate of Nigerian Students in USA						
Number of Nigerian Students in USA						
2001/02		2002/03		% Change		
4,499		5,816		29.3		
Nigerian Students in USA by academic level in 2002/03						
Undergraduate	Undergrad. %	Graduate	Grad. %	Other	Other %	Total
4,043	69.5	1,622	27.9	150	2.6	5,816

Table 3 below is an indication of how the existing universities cannot absorb a large percentage of eligible candidates seeking admission: 400,000 applicants apply, 75% are qualified and universities are only able to absorb 25%. In 2005, the NUC in the conference organized by QAARDAN in collaboration with the British Council and Pan African University declared that on the average only about 13% of those who apply for admission are able to secure placement. 13% represents about 700,000 students in 70 universities in the country who have been fortunate to gain admission. (Professor Ignatius Uvah, NUC 2005).

Number of Applicants and Admissions into Nigerian Universities – Table IV			
YEAR	APPLICATIONS	ADMISSIONS	% ADMISSIONS
1995/96	508,208	32,473	6.4
1996/97	472,362	76,430	16.2

1997/98	416,807	72,791	17.3
2000/2001	550,399	60,718	11.0
Source: Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB)			

The chart below represents the ranking and number of students from 16 countries studying in the UK. It is important to note that even though Nigeria takes 9th position a rise from its 15th position in 1996/7, Nigerian students pay very high fees : £10,000 as tuition per annum on the average as opposed to other home bred students and students from accession country who pay £3,000 - £5000. This again is another indicator of the huge interest in students pursuit for overseas qualification at any costs.



With a ready market transnational education will continue to grow thus making the adoption of an applicable, acceptable quality assurance mechanism imperative.

Mindful of the need to find commonly agreed solutions to practical recognition problems within Europe and other regions of the world, academicians have proposed a number of positive attributes considered to be indicators of quality education. Acceptance of these attributes can influence reforms and accreditation of transnational education. Advocates who have made significant contributions along those lines take as their starting point the well-established essentials of institutional quality found in existing accreditation standards are applicable to these emergent forms of learning. Some guidelines include the Code of Practice for the assurance and academic quality in higher education produced by UK QAA September 2004. This guideline is advisory not mandatory, provides systematic advice and codifies generally accepted statement of what constitutes good practice in quality management of provisions. Altogether there are 28 precepts addressing collaborative provision and a further eight precepts addressing flexible and distributed learning, including E-learning. There is also available the publication of the New Zealand Academic Unit's "External Quality Assurance for Virtual Organisation (Butterfield et al, 1999), the Guide to Best practice for electronically offered degree and certificate programmes 2001 from WCET. Guidelines for Distance Education issued by the Higher Learning Commission (2000). UNESCO/CEPES and the Council of Europe have elaborated a Code of Good Practice in the provision of Transnational Education.

Part of the development process would be for quality assurance agencies to engage in early consultation with transnational programme representatives to determine ways by which the programme meets all the political and regularity requirements, overall policy, academic and administrative controls, effectiveness of the communication structures between the university and the off-shore campuses, teaching content/methods/assessment, students admission, staffing and students feedback. Agreement levels should be established on ways students can be protected reasonably from possible changes in operation due to insolvency changes in regulation and policies, termination of the relationship with offshore ventures etc. There is also a need to enter a partnership with in-country quality assurance agencies and agree on universality of quality principles. With the big financial advantage coming to exporting institutions, there is a need for practitioners to share best practices and come up with a quality assurance mechanism as Microsoft, Oracle and Cisco have done by developing a competency based model for IT certification.

Eaton 2001 as published in the CHEA monograph series stated that it is the responsibility of accreditation community to identify the distinctive features of distance learning, adjust accreditation scrutiny to reflect those features and pay more attention to students learning. Pond (2002) in volume II of the published online journal for distance learning proposes universal attributes of quality education and suggests that they provide for

- Continuity between advertising and reality
- Continuity between purpose and practice
- Preparation for external credentialing/further study
- Personal/professional academic growth for the learner
- Relevance
- Rich multi-directional interaction

- Functional, user friendly interface
- Adequate resources for instructors, learners, curriculum
- Appropriate assessment methods

All quality management systems must be students focused and must necessary impact on students experience of learning and the critical success factors being:

1. Commitment and political will (leadership)
2. Integrated quality planning
3. Customer orientation (internal/external)
4. Personnel management
5. Better documentation
6. Reputable performance indicators
7. Continuous and sustainable quality improvement mechanism

The challenge to quality assurance practitioners is to provide consumer confidence that would ultimately lead to recognition by local political and regulatory authorities and this can only come about if borderless education is proven to withstand the rigours of traditional methods of accreditation to a large extent.

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