

**ASSESSMENT AND EDUCATIONAL STANDARD IMPROVEMENT:
REFLECTIONS FROM NIGERIA**

BY

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Abstract

Educational standard has many dimensions and therefore pontificating on its falling can be misleading. This paper distinguishes between quality and standard and examines some perspectives in which standards have been conceptualized in the literature: standards of curriculum, teaching, teacher and student achievement, management, accreditation, among others. The standard enhancement approaches such as moderation, self assessment, equating to mention a few are presented. The author thereafter examines the extent some of these approaches have been applied in the Nigerian educational system and how assessment has failed to achieve its goals because of societal peculiarities occasioned by corruption in all facets of society. The author draws examples from their background to illustrate how standard has over the years been eroded in many areas of education. They consider how the Post University Matriculation Examination in Nigeria, a reform resisted by many, is opening a window of opportunity to enhance quality teaching and learning within the university system. In addition the introduction of students' evaluation of staff, though not novel, has helped to further shove up educational standard in one of Nigerian universities. The thesis that emerges from this paper is that proper assessment can *willy nilly* enhance standards of education.

Introduction

Quality as a concept focuses on the worth of something. According to Peters (1977) quality is the basic and indispensable feature of a thing which differentiates it from other things. The presence of the characteristic to high degree implies that the thing has high quality. In Nigeria, and indeed all over the world, education quality is jealously guarded. According to Afemikhe (2007:1) the quality of education is important to Nigeria as the products are expected to service the economy. In addition quality is necessary to be gauged as quality school graduates can be a source of capital inflow.

Maduewesi (2005) sees quality in education as multi-faceted and encompassing how learning is organized and managed, content of learning, level of learning, outcomes and the totality of the environments in which education

takes place. Consequently, one realises that education quality is a conglomeration of input, process and outcome factors (UNESCO, 2002).

Among the input factors are school related factors such as curriculum content, textbooks and learning materials, teachers, parents and the community. In particular students' characteristics such as aptitude, previous knowledge, ability, school readiness, nutrition and health are of importance. These are in addition to community and household characteristics like parental attitudes, household income, cultural and religious factors to mention a few.

The process factors include school climate and teaching/learning encounter which include expectation leadership, teachers' attitude, and environment that is safe and gender sensitive and autonomy among others. The teaching/learning encounter encompasses availability of sufficient learning time, active teaching, methods, integrated assessment and feedback methods, and appropriate class size and language use.

The outcomes are not only cognitive but includes affective and skills acquisition. To wit are literacy, good citizenship, healthy behaviour, formal completion, diploma acquired and desired outcomes. The input – process - outcomes components have to be considered within the existing contextual factors. In other words, what happens should be considered vis-à-vis operating internal and external environments. An implication is that quality education is tantamount to all components enumerated above being of an acceptable standard.

Determination of education quality requires the specification of standards of any quality dimension that is of interest. According to Afemikhe (1988:74) 'at a very elementary level, standard involves some attribute measurement and value attachment.' In that same paper, Afemikhe (1988) posited that standards and quality are relative to the particular purpose, place and time of the student clientele. Therefore at the apex of my discussion of standards, the different types observable in education have to be considered. Teaching is the hub of all educational processes. Therefore teachers must be accountable to students and parents and the community that have a stake in what goes on in education. Closely related to teaching standard is standard of care. This requires exercise of knowledge and skills in a competent manner. Thus as highlighted by Hazi (1986), the more definitive we are about what to teach and how to, and to what extent then is a definite care standard established.

Achievement testing plays a prominent role in determining the extant standards in education. Whenever used, a standard of performance otherwise called certification standard is used. This type of standard is relevant when selection into further education is of concern. Accreditation standards are equally important in education and in Nigeria these have been documented as minimum academic standards (MAS). The MAS contains input, process variables and outcomes expectations that programmes must meet to get accredited. In all the different types of standards enumerated, it is realised that information have to be collected to make useful and meaningful decision about the status quo of the quality of education which is an extension of education standards.

The process of collecting information for decision making in education about students, curricula and programmes and education policy is assessment (Nitko, 1996). Schooling and learning are intertwined and the different types of decision (management of instruction, placement of students, classification of students and guiding and counselling) are dependent on it. Good quality measurements are a necessity for better decision making but do not guarantee excellent decisions. Assessments are *sine quo non* for determining goal attainment and this can be pursued by two types of control: preventive and feedback (Afemikhe, 1998, 2005). Preventative control is most germane to quality assurance and this would be taken up later in this paper.

This paper presents a thesis that assessment can be used to enhance educational standard in Nigeria. It examines the thrust in this direction, using examples to illustrate where we are and future directions in standards improvement.

Assessment in Nigeria education

Whenever there are discussions on assessment in Nigerian education what readily come to mind are public examinations epitomised in examinations conducted by the West African Examinations Council, National Business and Technical Examinations Board, and the other public examination bodies. There is usually a great demand for public examination to the extent that one loses track of the fact that there also school based examinations. Both examinations would be discussed in this section.

Public examinations in Nigeria, indeed all English speaking African countries “developed out of the need to provide a generally acceptable standard of education in the secondary schools” (Adeyinka, 2000). Thus in the early years external examinations and curriculum development went paripassu. With time it was influenced by the establishment of the West African Examinations Council (WAEC). It is no wonder that WAEC eventually took over the management and administration of British examination in West Africa. This was not without some problems such as public outcry about confidence in examinations conducted due mainly to examination misconduct and irregularities, long delay in release of results and certificates and unwarranted seizure of results (Daniel, 2005). There were therefore calls to relieve WAEC of some of its examinations.

The result was Acts No 69 and 70 of 1993 that led to the creation of National Board for Educational Measurement (NBEM) and the National Business and Technical Examinations Board (NABTEB) respectively. This action did not seem to result in greater efficiency in the conduct of the SSCE by WAEC and consequently the National Examinations Council was created in 1990 to conduct the SSCE for school and private candidates.

The public examinations conducted in Nigeria possess the quality of being concerned with large numbers of candidates, and assessment of product objectives, are formal, competitive and are high stakes tasks. They are equally conducted at a given stage of schooling and provide a terminal judgement on completed product (Urevbu, 1985). In addition to the above these examinations emphasize certificate as an end in itself and not as a means to an end, were a

prescribed syllabus and teacher's participation in examination development is minimal. This is the situation in Nigeria at the secondary school level.

The presentation so far concerns public examination as distinct from school based assessments or internal examinations. The school based assessments (SBA) to a large extent are a preparation for progression through school and ultimately for certification that one is qualified to take the public examinations. As part of the philosophy of education the National Policy on Education specifically indicated that:

Education assessment and evaluation will be liberalized by basing them in whole or in part on continuous assessment of the progress of the individual (FRN, 1998:8).

Government will look into the possibility of abolishing the primary school leaving certificate examination as soon as the processes for continuous assessment have been worked out and validated (p. 14).

Junior secondary school leaving certificates will also be based on the continuous assessment method (p.19).

The above quotations are Government's policy statements about assessment. Continuous assessment (CA) has become an integral part of the national education system from primary to tertiary levels. Unfortunately its implementation has been criticized (Afemikhe, 1985; Osokoya and Odinko 2005). At the senior secondary school level, CA is expected to be incorporated into certification examination scores but there are concerns as to how this is effectively being done. Most Nigerian Universities have also made CA a mandatory component of course assessment. Again problems of large classes and shortage of staff have not been helpful in proper implementation of CA.

In Nigeria, education is seen by many as an avenue to acquiring the good things of life. The result of this belief has manifested itself in massive examination malpractice. It was because of this that CA was seen as a welcome relief. Unfortunately, it has remained an albatross on the neck of the nation. Stakeholders including teachers, students and even parents have been implicated in this nefarious activity. Unfortunately as examination agencies try to reduce the scourge, the more determined the perpetrators are at devising out ingenious methods. Corrupt tendencies hold sway and many people operate without ethical considerations.

Many private secondary schools are now seen as 'miracle centres' as students who register therein for the public examinations are guaranteed success. Such schools and indeed many private schools are out flowing with students for public examinations at the detriment of public schools which are unable to get enough students to register for public examinations. The scenario is such that many students do not see the need to repeat classes. Progression through secondary schools is now seen by many as automatic and students move at will from one school to the other.

CA profiles that are supposed to be part of movement from one school to another have lost their value. As CA are required as part of entry schedule, proprietors of many a private school now fake same and control has become difficult. This ugly situation has a rob-on effect in tertiary level education.

The consequence is that Nigerians now describe products of the education system as unemployable as they are not fit for purpose. What then can be done to enhance educational Standards?

Educational Standards Control Mechanism

Standards are varied as mentioned earlier on in this paper. Assessment information are necessary to ensure compliance with standards. Though assessment information are varied, different approaches can be applied in ensuring that standards are maintained and possibly enhanced. In this paper, the role of moderation, self assessment and equating would be highlighted in this endeavour.

To the lay person, moderation implies operating within limits. Applied to assessment within the school, the focus is on students work. The interest is

to ensure that the marking is fair, consistent, accurate and of an appropriate standard. In this regard, we check to ensure that marking is in alignment with the marking scheme, all the students work has been marked and mark totals are correct”
(Afemikhe, 2007:19)

What is implied here is that the marking scheme has to be adequate in quality which is also an aspect of standards maintenance. Moderation could be internal or external; whichever form it takes it may ensure fairness in assessment of students’ performance. Through moderation confidence in marking may emerge and moderation may help to address some misgivings inherent in assessment. In Nigeria evidence abound for moderation only at the tertiary levels particular in the final year examinations. Nonetheless, aggrieved students may appeal and therefore their scripts automatically get the benefit of a second assessor.

Self assessment in a planned and systematic way is much undeveloped in Nigeria. What is prevalent is institutional self study particularly at tertiary levels for purposes of accreditation of programmes. Accreditation of programmes in Universities has as its focus quality improvement. Through it, one is able to state whether human resources for teaching and learning, material resources such as lecture halls, and laboratories are available. The accreditation programme has in recent year developed to the extent that universities now have to comply with their carrying capacity or face sanctions such as withdrawal of accreditation, denial of participation in the National Youth Service Corps or even registration to practice some professions.

To conclude on self study let us quote Akpe and Afemikhe (1991:125)

A spasmodic effort at self study in response to an internal crisis or to external pressure may seek to alleviate the immediate distress rather than to alter it in a fundamental way. When the only goal of a self study is the solution of a specific problem, the alleviation of pressure,.... attaining that goal often prematurely ends the self study”

Equating is another approach to ensuring standards. According to Crocker and Algina (1986) “the purpose of developing the equating function is to transform the scores of examinees who take instrument x to y^* scores so that these scores can be compared to the scores of examinees who took instrument y . Scaling becomes relevant when we have to compare scores from two sources: school based and scores from a public examinations. Ojerinde (1988) has elaborately explained how this would be applied particularly where population of externally papers will be higher than the school one, the external being the reference point.

This section has presented some approaches for the enhancement of standards. What efforts have we made in Nigeria to checkmate some of the problems highlighted so far in this paper?

Standards Improvement Efforts in Nigeria

In this section we outline some ways in which assessment implementation has been conducted so as to restore confidence in Nigerian education.

At the secondary school level, the greatest cankerworm is examination misconduct. The examination bodies have designed various ingenious methods. Among these is the fact that if examinations are suspected to have leaked, a substitute paper can be made available in about three days. Examination supervision is one sore area. The practice these days is to use a corps of supervisors who are rotated among a group of schools. Such supervisors are usually not aware of their location until the morning of the examination.

To ensure that only bona fide standards have an opportunity to take an examination, schools are usually requested to produce a photo album for all registered for the examination. Although this has helped to some extent, but observations show that some schools have started to abuse the procedure as the serial numbers on such albums may be at variance with those in attendance register. Most of the examining bodies now utilise on-line registration. One hopes that photo albums would be made from the online information provided by the examinees. Some universities are already doing this as part of the Post University Matriculation Examination programme.

To ensure that certificates award are for those who actually who took the examinations; a system of embossment of passports has been put in place. It is hoped that this will enhance confidence in secondary school output. The belief is that other sources of compromise of examination ethics would have been plunged.

At the tertiary level, one assumes that good quality students and lecturers would automatically lead to good quality graduates. Unfortunately, the university has equally not be spared of unhealthy practices. Even though admission into university programmes follow set down criteria, many candidates with disputable scores may get admitted. Generally this group of students would be weak; the consequence was that lecturers got compromised. Blocking and sorting prevailed and cult related cases became rampant. Confidence in products of the universities was thus lost. One reform effort of government that seems to be addressing the situation is the Post University Matriculation Examination (PUME). This examination is usually opened to those who pass the examination conducted by the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB). At the University of Benin, Benin City, the PUME has different versions for any day and its Senate has decree that admission must be strictly merit based. The last two years since the inception of PUME, have witnessed tremendous results. The pass rate for the students has improved and PUME students' involvement in examination related problems have not been found.

Universities are also trying to ensure that teaching human resources equally perform at their best. Consequently, students' evaluation of lecturers is

being introduced. The hoped is that attitude towards work may improved so that confidence in students performance may be enhanced.

Conclusion

This paper attempted to map out quality of education which is an extension of standards. Some standards improvement approaches were examined and we tried to show the extent some of them have been utilised. It also showed how the public examining bodies are attempting to fight unwholesome practices which erode public confidence in their certificates. The tertiary institutions are not left out as their Implementation of PUME gives a ray of hope that all may not have been lost. Thus assessment if appropriately implemented may enhance standard of education ceteris paribus.

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