

Challenges of Entrenching Quality in Teaching and Learning in the Department of Geography, Taraba State University Jalingo, Nigeria

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Abstract

The declining quality of teaching and learning in higher educational institutions particularly in sub Saharan Africa and Nigeria inclusive have been a source of concern in recent times. Several studies have shown that the use of information and communication technology (ICT) and electronic devices have great potential of improving teaching and learning effectiveness. This paper examines the challenges of developing a guideline on innovative practices that will help improve the quality of teaching and learning in the department of Geography, Taraba State University, Jalingo, Nigeria. To understand the prevailing environment in which the department operates and identify the critical issues that need to be addressed, a situational analysis was carried out using the SWOT analysis technique. The result of the situational analysis revealed many weaknesses which range from inadequate appropriate and up-to-date teaching facilities and equipment, inadequate and poorly maintained physical facilities, poor ICT infrastructure and unstable power supply, high staff-student ratios to continued decline of funding to the department which makes it difficult to support quality academic programs. The study finding shows that the department has achieved little in its effort at entrenching quality in teaching and learning. These little efforts are in the areas of developing ICT facilities and staff development which was made possible by intervention fund from the Federal government. The challenges include the difficulty of getting staff to change their teaching methods, prevailing administrative policies, declining funding to the university, a decline in numbers of senior academic staff, increasing students enrolment, poor internet and ICT support facilities and unstable power supply. This study recommends the establishment of structures for quality assurance to

monitor teaching and learning at the department, faculty and university as a whole. Increased funding and placing premium on teaching and learning will facilitate the entrenchment of quality in the department and university.

1 Introduction

Taraba State University (in northeast Nigeria) was established in 2008 by the Taraba State Government as a state owned university. State owned universities are mostly funded from the percentage of the Local Government Area (LGA) annual statutory allocation from the Federal government. This makes it compelling for such universities to admit and employ students and staff from each of the constituent LGAs. Even at this, some states in Nigeria, including Taraba State are classified as 'educationally backward' or educationally disadvantaged areas, which implies that more students from such states are favoured in the admission and employment process.

The university started academic activities in September 2009 with about 500 students and presently, the students' population is over eight thousand (8,000). These comprise of 4,000 students for regular undergraduate degree programmes, 1000 sandwich students and 3,000 diploma students. The university has graduated its second batch of students and commenced postgraduate studies in some academic programmes.

The vision of the university is to be among the top high ranking universities to be reckoned with within and outside the country through the provision of modern state of the art teaching and learning facilities and competent academic staff. This was aimed at achieving the highest possible quality in teaching, learning and research. Unfortunately since its inception the university does not have any internal quality assurance mechanism or machinery in place and there have been no documents addressing the issue of quality in teaching and learning in the institution. The university depends on the National University Commission (NUC) Minimum Bench Mark for Academic Standard (BMAS) and related documents for reference when it comes to the issues of quality in teaching and learning. With this scenario, the university faces a big challenge of how to improve departmental and students performance and motivate students to graduate on time. Recently, the university has witnessed monumental demand for enrolment in degree programmes from the higher educational institutions within and outside the state. Most of the students from these higher educational institutions came in with lots of deficiencies at the lower educational level. This affects their understanding and performance in the degree programmes. Over the years, the number of students

withdrawing from the programmes and repeating a particular level has increased. This has affected students progression and timely completion of their study.

One of the means of overcoming these problems is to innovatively move from the old teacher-centred learning system to student-centred learning system. This will require the adoption of modern ICT based learning resources. Nwosu and Ugbomo (2012) observed that ICT has the potential for increasing access to and improving the relevance and quality of education in developing countries. Several studies have shown that the use of ICT and electronic devices in teaching significantly influences teaching effectiveness (Oludeyi et al, 2015, Torruam, 2012, Ozioma and Offordile, 2001). ICT is potentially a powerful tool for extending educational opportunities and providing remote learning resources (Toro and Joshi, 2012). ICT also encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning and offers problem-centered and inquiry based learning which provides easy access and information based resources. Thus, if ICT tools are well positioned, it could help to maintain and enhance education quality as new ways of teaching and learning, research and development, and acquiring and disseminating knowledge are made possible (Moges 2014). This informed the choice of this participant of the International Deans Course (IDC) Africa 2013/14 to develop a Project Action Plan (PAP) on entrenching quality in teaching and learning in the department. The PAP is aimed at developing a guideline on innovative practices that will help improve the quality of teaching and learning in the department. The specific objectives of the PAP include (1) to improve the quality of teaching and learning in the department through course content alignment that will be learner-centred, (2) to design a teaching curriculum based on clearly defined intended learning outcomes, (3) to develop clearly defined performance tasks for each course taught in the department, (4) to encourage innovative practices in lecture delivery through the use of ICT resources and (5) to establish clearly defined students' assessment guidelines for all courses taught in the department.

The impact expected to emerge from the PAP application include (1) Adoption of innovative approaches to teaching. Geography is a course with too much description of abstract concepts and features. Therefore, the use of ICT resources will help to elicit the abstract features of the real world to enhance the students learning experience. (2) Adoption of an interactive approach to teaching and learning so as to improve the quality of teaching and learning in the department. (3) Re-alignment of the content of the curriculum towards an outcome based approach to teaching and learning, where all the intended learning outcomes are clearly

defined from the onset with well spelt-out target objectives. (4) Development of student performance tasks for all courses taught. This needs to be clearly defined and if need be discussed with the students instead of the former approach of ad hoc test and random assignment. (5) Development of student's assessment procedure with clearly defined and reference criterion established to ensure objectivity in student assessment. After one year of completion of the IDC course, the implementation of the strategic action plan has witnessed mixed results. This paper examines some of the efforts made and the challenges militating against the successful implementation of the plan in the department of Geography, Taraba State University, Jalingo, Nigeria.

2 Conceptual Framework

All over the world, there is increasing concern for improving the quality of higher education. Quality is often defined as “fitness for purpose” and “standard-based” (Cheserek, 2013). Quality is the ability or degree with which a product, service, or phenomenon conforms to an established standards, and which makes it to be relatively superior to others (Oladipo et al 2011). Quality in higher education can be regarded as a process of assessing how well and relevant the learning opportunities available to students help them to achieve their end result. It has to do with equipping students with the knowledge, skills and core transferable competences they need to succeed after graduation. Quality in higher education is about content and innovation. More specifically it is about ensuring that appropriate and effective teaching support, assessment and learning opportunities are provided to the student. Quality assurance is the mechanism put in place to guarantee quality education (CHE, 2008). Ajayi and Akintunde (2007) opined that quality assurance in the university system is the ability of the institutions to meet the expectations of the users of manpower in relation to the quality of skills acquired by their outputs. It can equally be said to be the ability of the universities to meet certain criteria relating to academic matters, staff-student ratios, staff mix by rank, staff development, physical facilities, funding and adequate library facilities (Oladipo et al 2011).

3 Department of Geography

The Department of Geography is one of the pioneer departments in Taraba State University. The department commenced academic activity in September 2009 with 21 students for degree programme. Today, the student population has increased to

over 400 students (both B.Sc. Geography and B.Sc. Ed. Geography). The department is administratively under the Faculty of Art and Social Science. Geography occupies a distinctive place in the world of learning, offering an integrated study of the complex reciprocal relationships between human societies and the physical components of the earth. The geographer's canvas is coloured by place, space and time: recognizing the great differences and dynamics in cultures, political systems, economies, landscapes and environments across the world, and the links between them (Quality Assurance for Higher Education, 2000). In Taraba State University, Geography is offered as a single honour and a combination with education.

4 Methodology

To understand the prevailing environment in which the department operates and to identify the critical issues that need to be addressed, a situational analysis was carried out using the SWOT analysis technique. A SWOT analysis committee was constituted to determine the possibility of developing a strategic plan that will enhance the quality of teaching and learning in the department. The committee first studied the draft format of the Project Action Plan (PAP) developed by the Head of Department and other relevant materials from sister institutions on best practices to quality teaching and learning. Finally a SWOT analysis of the departmental capabilities was carried out by the committee to ascertain our strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. This exercise helped not only in developing strategies for improving quality in teaching and learning, but also in enabling us to carry out an in-house quality assessment of our programmes. The SWOT analysis of the department revealed the following Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats.

5 Results and Discussion

5.1 Summary of the SWOT Analysis

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5.2.1 Strengths

The situational analysis report shows that the department and the university which is strategically located in Jalingo, the state capital (the only university in the town) has the advantage of attracting patronage from a wide geographical area. The university has a vast expanse of land for future expansion of the campus. The department enjoyed the collegial support of faculty members. The recent completion of the

integrated classroom with ICT support resources and multi-media facilities will go a long way in the realization of the objectives of the strategic plan.

5.2.2 Weaknesses

The result of the situational analysis revealed many weaknesses which ranges from inadequate appropriate and up-to-date teaching facilities and equipment, inadequate and poorly maintained physical facilities, poor ICT infrastructure and unstable power supply, high staff-student ratios to continued deterioration of funding to the department which makes it difficult to support quality academic programs e.g. fieldwork that has traditionally been the hallmark of the department. Other weaknesses include the fact that the department is understaffed, and bottom heavy with low proportion of PhD holders – the Head of Department (HOD) is the only PhD holder). There is weak staff mentorship and a lack of a sound orientation programme.

5.2.3 Opportunities

The opportunities for the department include high demand for departmental programmes which can be translated into more selective admission and potential for programme expansion through diploma, sandwich and postgraduate studies. The geographic location of the university and department affords opportunity to develop consultancy work. The Department enjoys the opportunity provided by the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund) intervention scheme which provides grants for staff development (pursuit of higher degree and attending international conferences) and conducting of research activities.

5.2.4 Threats

The SWOT analysis report shows that some of the threats to the department include lack of budgetary allocation and lack of enrolment control in the department. This has created demand that cannot be met and threatens the quality of our programmes with the potential to negatively impact on the desire for academic excellence. Other threats are poor funding which is limiting the scope of future growth and productivity and uncertainty in micro economic situation.

5.3 Changes Recorded

As indicated in the milestones of the PAP attached as appendix, an awareness of the strategic action plan was successfully created, the documentation was successfully done and a draft copy of the plan was produced. This section discusses the effort of the department in the last one year in line with the objective of the study.

Efforts to improve the quality of teaching and learning in the department through course content alignment that will be learner-centred have not yielded any fruit. A committee has been set up by the present HOD to review the teaching curriculum. Individual staff is encouraged at the moment to move a step further by defining the intended learning outcomes of the courses assigned to them. The staff is equally encouraged to develop clearly defined performance task for each course taught in the department by submitting their examination questions along with their marking scheme. The examination questions and marking scheme help in internal and external moderation of the student's assessment process.

In an effort to encourage innovative practices in lecture delivery through the use of ICT resources, the University through intervention of the Digital Bridge Institute has successfully conducted ICT training for all the staff of the department and university. This has contributed greatly in creating awareness on the need to go digital in all aspect of academic activity in response to the global trend. The university also completed the construction of 15 integrated classrooms well fitted with ICT and multimedia facilities through the TETFund intervention scheme of the Federal government. At the moment, a 500 seater capacity ICT studio is under construction. This is a Federal government assisted project which – when completed – will allow for internet online examination in the university.

Effort are also been made to improve the staff strength and quality in the department. Two staff of the department are now undergoing their PhD studies abroad (Sudan and Malaysia) and the third person will be leaving for Malaysia on PhD studies from TETFund staff development intervention. Also one of the staff of the department is rounding up MSc studies while two out of the four newly employed graduate assistants have enrolled for their Masters degree programme. In the area of research, three staff of the department have benefitted from the TETFund research grant and more are about to enjoy the privilege.

5.4 Challenges

The major challenge lies with the full implementation of the strategic action plan. At the end of the IDC programme, a comprehensive report of the writer's participation in the 3 phases of the IDC course, with the lessons learnt and draft copy of the strategic action plan was forwarded to the Dean of Faculty and the Vice Chancellor. The dean was appreciative of the experience and action plan produced

but never made any effort to push it further. Efforts to discuss the matter with the Vice Chancellor could not avail because of his tight schedule within the period. The writer waited for response to the submissions to no avail. There has been no response to the submission to date. Shortly after the IDC, a new HOD was appointed. This stalled the implementation of the action plan at the departmental level. This notwithstanding, other challenges of entrenching quality in teaching and learning in the department and the university are enormous and cut across many universities in Nigeria and Africa. These challenges include;

5.3.1 Difficulty of getting staff to change their teaching method

It is not easy to get the staff to change their way of doing things no matter how good and beneficial it could be to the institution or organization. This is more so when the proposed change requires some form of sacrifices on the part of the staff in terms of convenience, time and resources without any commensurate incentives to motivate them. The proposed change here requires that staff should take their time to prepare power point slides of their lecture by making sure that they acquire the relevant pictures and short video clip that will help to simplify the teaching task and enhance the students learning experience. This is really challenging under the prevailing environment of poor ICT connectivity, unstable power supply, heavy workload and large staff – students ratio.

5.3.2 Prevailing Administrative Policies

Every administrative leadership in universities places a premium on certain aspects of the university at different times which often affect other sections of the university system. In situations where there is no working document guiding what should be done at what time and how, some sections of the university life will certainly suffer neglect. The issue of developing the physical infrastructure engaged the attention of the university management after the writer's participation in the IDC programme. This is so because the university inherited physical structures that do not befit a university system. The University therefore decided to take advantage of the external intervention by the Federal Government and relevant stakeholders to ensure that modern physical structures such as lecture theatres, staff offices, laboratories and studios were put in place. Less attention was paid to recruitment of senior staff as funding to the University was fast declining. On the other hand, admitting more students was an incentive to boost the university internally generated revenue, thereby compromising quality of teaching and learning.

5.3.3 Declining funding to the University

Part IV of the law establishing the Taraba State University clearly state that the funding of the university shall be through the following sources:

- i. 50% from the State monthly statutory allocation.
- ii. Tuition charges and levies as may be proposed by the Council and approved by the Government.
- iii. 5% of the monthly statutory allocation from all the Local Governments in the State
- iv. 2% as state education levy from charges on guests in hotels in the State.
- v. 2.5% of contracts awarded by the State and Local governments.
- vi. 2% contribution from profits made by financial institutions in the State and
- vii. Other sources as the Council may from time to time determine (Taraba State of Nigeria 2008).

Implementing these policies which have been signed into law in the state has remained difficult. This could be as a result of the lack of political will on the part of the state government to enforce the policy. The university only received 3% of the statutory allocation to the 16 LGAs in the state which has declined to 2.5% and occasionally 2.3%. This money could hardly cater for the staff wage bill. The university has therefore relied heavily on its internally generated revenue to run the institution. This has affected both staff recruitment and purchase of essential teaching and laboratory equipments that are required for entrenching quality in teaching and learning. Lack of adequate funding has clearly impaired the performance and standard of Nigerian universities as the vicious circle of inadequate funds, helplessness, frustration and recriminations is continually fed in a mutually reinforcing manner (Kayode, 2002).

5.3.4 Decline in number of senior academic staff

A continuous decline in the number of professional academic staff is a general problem affecting the whole country. The number of senior academic staff with PhDs and in the ranks of professor/associate professors has been on the decline over the past two decades or more. Brain drain is a serious problem. This made it difficult to get these cadres of staff for employment. Most universities are forced to make do with younger academic staff. The younger academic staff struggle with their postgraduate studies and classroom teaching at the same time. Many of them lack mentorship as those that could mentor them have left the system. It has been observed that one of the reasons for the low level of quality assurance in Nigerian universities is the severe shortage of teaching staff (Oladipo et al, 2011). The Nigerian

National University Commission's report shows that only 16,856 out of 72,704 staff in the federal universities are academic staff (NUC, 2006). Many Nigerian universities are bottom heavy in terms of academic staff mix (Oladipo et al, 2011).

5.3.5 Increasing student enrolment

The demand for higher education has increased tremendously in recent years. Most institutions continued to admit more and more students without much effort to expand the physical infrastructures on ground. This has resulted in some students remaining outside the classroom while lectures are going on in a congested classroom. The large staff-student ratio makes it difficult to enforce standard or maintain quality in teaching and learning. This trend has been reported in other parts of Africa (Kimathi, 2014) as well.

1. Poor internet and ICT support facilities

Most of our universities still suffer inadequacies of internet connectivity. Most often the bandwidth is low to cover the entire campus and at some other times they are very inefficient to serve the teaching and learning needs of the department and institution (Moges, 2014). It has been observed that Sub-Saharan Africa is still lagging behind in ICT development due to poor quality services (Global ICT Chart Report: Guardian, April, 2012 p.6). The report also ranked African countries on the global ICT Chart. While Nigeria was ranked 112th on the global ICT Chart, other countries in the African continent like Mauritius, South Africa, Rwanda, Botswana, Kenya and Senegal were ranked 53rd, 71st, 82nd, 89th, 93rd and 100th respectively (Guardian, April, 2012 p. 6 cited in Adesote and Fatoki, 2013). The report indicated that African countries suffer from severe weaknesses in all components of the index of ICT which ranges from poor connectivity caused by expensive and poor quality ICT infrastructure to very low levels of basic skills and a weak framework for technology (Guardian, Friday April, 2012 p. 6).

5.3.6 Unstable power supply

Unstable power supply has remained a source of concern to many higher educational institutions in Nigeria and Africa (Moges 2014). The erratic and low shed of electricity often hamper academic and administrative functions in the institutions. The university management often had to grapple with high expenditure on fuel purchase to run the generators amidst competing needs. All ICT equipment, infrastructure and terminals depend on electricity. Unless this vital source is always available and reliable, it will not be possible to enjoy the benefits that digital revolution offers.

6 Key to Success

The key to success in implementing the PAP is determined by a number of factors such as;

- i. The role of the Vice Chancellor is vital in any decision or project implementation. Without the understanding and cooperation of the Vice Chancellor, it is difficult if not impossible to get any project implemented in the university.
- ii. The leadership role of the Heads of Departments (HODs) and Deans of Faculties is very essential to the successful implementation of any action plan. Although the writer got the approval of the HOD and Dean of Faculty, the will to push for the implementation was not there.
- iii. Cooperation and understanding of academic staff in accepting changes that could impact positively on the system is of paramount importance to the successful implementation of an action plan. However, this cooperation can only be assured if it is backed up by incentives and it is less tasking and demanding to the staff.
- iv. Conducive teaching and learning environment where facilities such as ICT support facilities and stable power supply are available will go a long way in enhancing successful implementation of an action plan.

7 Conclusion

This study has examined the challenges of entrenching quality in teaching and learning in the department of Geography, Taraba State University, Jalingo, Nigeria. The study adopted the SWOT analysis technique to understand the prevailing environment in which the department operates and to identify the critical issues that need to be addressed. The result of the SWOT analysis revealed many weaknesses of the department which range from inadequate appropriate and up-to-date teaching facilities and equipment, inadequate and poorly maintained physical facilities, poor ICT infrastructure and unstable power supply, high staff-student ratios to continued deterioration of funding to the department which makes it difficult to support quality academic programs. The study findings show that the department has achieved little in its effort at entrenching quality in teaching and learning. These efforts are in the areas of developing ICT facilities and staff development which was made possible by the intervention fund from the Federal government (TETFund). The challenges of entrenching quality in teaching and learning in the department include difficulties of getting staff to change

their teaching methods, prevailing administrative policies, declining funding to the university, decline in numbers of senior academic staff, increasing student enrolment, poor internet and ICT support facilities and unstable power supply. This study recommends the need to establish structures for quality assurance to monitor teaching and learning at the department, faculty and university as a whole. Increase funding and premium on teaching and learning will facilitate the entrenchment of quality in the department and University.

8 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are hereby presented;

1. University should establish a directorate of quality assurance to monitor the quality of teaching and learning.
2. Faculty and department need to entrench mechanism for monitoring teaching and learning activities.
3. Establishment of a committee on teaching and learning.
4. Funding should be provided as incentives to attract people to avail themselves of the opportunity of reflecting on what they have been teaching over the years.
5. University has to set out a premium on teaching and learning.

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