

National University Commission and the Challenges of Attaining Minimum Academic Standards in a Global Economy

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Abstract

University education is the zenith of academic pursuit and a knowledge factory where individual potential is identified, nurtured and developed for the benefit of the individual and the development of society. It is where the manpower needs of societies are built and honed for sustainable development. To achieve these laudable goals the National Universities Commission has the onus of not only ensuring the orderly development of universities in Nigeria but also determining the minimum academic standard among others. The study is to discuss the National Universities Commission and the Challenges of attaining minimum academic standards in a global economy. The influx of digital technology has caused a paradigm shift in the academic landscape with a vista of opportunities and challenges. Digital technology has transformed the educational system and for Nigerian universities to be competitive in the global economy, the managers of the education system need to be reskilled on the use of digital tools. The study examines some of the challenges of the National University Commission as the paucity of funds and inadequate personnel with professional knowledge among others. As a way further, the paper suggests a legal framework that will compel all levels of government to budget not less than 20% of their annual budgets to education to enable the managers of education to reskill the teachers, students and the university communities in digital technology and competency.

Keywords: Curriculum, global, economy, minimum, academic, standard, universities, education.

Introduction

Education is very fundamental for the development of any society, thus government encourages its citizens to acquire certain skills and knowledge that can enable its citizens not only to live a productive life but contribute to the development of society. University education is the zenith of academic pursuit and where intellectuals are built. It is a fountain of knowledge where learners are fed with certain capabilities and knowledge that can enable them to live not only a decent life but also provide the manpower needs of society. The Federal Government of Nigeria (2014), acknowledged that university education is geared towards expanding its programmes for the development of high-level manpower needs of society.

For the university to achieve the statutory roles of its existence, the curriculum must be examined to ensure that the contents do not only instil the ability and capability of nurturing the potential of the recipients but also help in the socio-economic development of society.

With the upturn of information technology and the interconnectivity of the economy, university education is challenged not only to provide the manpower needs of the immediate environment but also to contribute to the global economy. It has led to a paradigm shift in the traditional roles of teaching, research and community services to collaborative research, and analytic and innovative thinking. This has caused a shift in the contents of learning objectives and curriculum of study.

Curriculum according to Van Den Akker, (2010) is a learning plan. In the same vein, Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallance and Thomas (2006), state that curriculum entails all the learning materials, instructional materials and textbooks that are used in teaching and learning. Thus curriculum refers to what the teacher intends to teach the learners within a given period. To achieve a uniform and accepted standard, there is a need for harmonization of the content of the study and the learning objectives with an acceptable standard that will enable all universities in Nigeria to have a uniform standard irrespective of the owners and managers of the universities.

This brings to the fore the activities of the National Universities Commission (NUC) as a regulating body that regulates the orderly development of universities, the accreditation of private and public universities, and ensuring that certain minimum academic standards are maintained by the universities. It also ensures that learning objectives and learning outcomes are standardized. To ensure that university education is responsive to the needs of society, and following global trends to equip the students with the knowledge, skills and competencies needed in a global economy led NUC to jettison the Benchmark Minimum Academic Standard, BMAS for Core Curriculum Minimum Academic Standard, CCMAS. It is against this background that this study discusses the challenges of attaining minimum academic standards in Nigerian universities. The paper is divided into the following parts. After this general introduction, clarifications of related concepts, factors that inhibit the National Universities Commission from achieving its statutory roles, conclusion and way forward.

University Education

University education is a community of scholars with various degrees of specialization, skills and knowledge whose interest is to nurture the learner's potential and foster resources towards achieving educational objectives. It is the highest echelon in the education system where academic professionals are moulded for not only improving their well-being but for the development of society. (Okai and Wordu, 2019). The National Policy on Education states that a university education shall contribute to the development of society by producing high-level manpower needs of society. (FRN, 2014). University education is the focal point of knowledge that ensures that individuals are rejigged and transformed to navigate the world of uncertainty and make a great contribution to economic growth and development. (Marginson, 2010).

The importance of a university education cannot be overemphasized, it prepares the individual for a career and makes the person employable by training the individual capacity and instilling skills and knowledge that drive the development of society. It helps to cement the relationship between individuals cutting across ethnic and cultural boundaries and thus

enhances national cohesion. University education engenders the promotion and harmonization of cultural diversity, forges and cements national unity among others. These laudable goals can only be achieved if the curriculum is structured to capture the concerns and the manpower needs of society as well as integrate global competence into the course of study. University education through improved curriculum and educational research stimulates other levels of education and enhances the development of society. (Ade-Ajayi, 2001). This brings to the fore the role of curriculum as a catalyst for the attainment of educational goals.

Curriculum

Teaching in a university and any other formal educational settings are usually guarded and systematically defined on what to teach, how and the processes of teaching. This process is usually stipulated by the national policy on education where the goals of education are well-detailed. The attainment of these goals is usually powered by the curriculum (Mezieobi, 2016). The curriculum is the entire instructional and educational programme that the learners intend to achieve and it consists of the goals, ideas and aspirations (Audi, Alaku & Jatau, 2022). Thus, curriculum refers to all programmes or activities prepared to help the learners achieve specific goals and objectives. It also specifies what the learners should learn, why and how. (Achi & Onyema, 2022).

From the above definition, curriculum is the totality of instructional materials, and programmes within and outside the school environment where learning is taking place and it consists of the planned and unplanned experiences that the learners are exposed to. (Danga 2012). The essence of the plan learning and experiences is to ensure that the individuals acquire certain skills and knowledge not only for the development of individuals but for economic growth and development of society. To have uniformity of standards in universities' learning experiences, there is the need for setting a standard to which all universities must adhere strictly. The federal agency that is saddled with the responsibility of setting the standard is the National Universities Commission.

National University Commission

The history of having a university in West African colonies can be traced to the activities of the National Congress of British West Africa, (NCBWA) an anti-colonial pressure group established in 1922 by Joseph Casely Hayford. The association consists of four West African countries namely Nigeria, Gold Coast, now Ghana, Sierra Leone and the Gambia. The association was not comfortable with the activities of the colonial master sending delegations to the British Secretary of State for colonies, Lord Miller and demanded among others the establishment of a West African university and the general improvement of education. (Coleman, 1986). Unfortunately, the delegation never received the blessings of the governor, thus the activities never yielded substantial results other than the creation of awareness. It is imperative to know that the first higher education in Nigeria was the establishment of Yaba Higher College in 1934 which later produced the first set of students for the establishment of the University of Ibadan in 1948 (Lawal, 2008).

The financing of the University of Ibadan was deeply dependent on the colonial government and to ensure the standard was adhered to led to the establishment of "The Inter-University Council (IUC) to keep a fatherly eye on the curriculum, recruitment of staff and the question of recognition of local diplomas and certificates". (Fafunwa, 1971p158). Subsequently, the council in collaboration with the University of London conducted visitations, and recruitment of staff and provided advice on various administrative and academic matters. (Olaleye & Oyewole, 2016). Despite noticeable achievements of the IUC within the short time it existed, it acted in an advisory capacity.

In preparation for nationhood, in 1959 the government set up a high-powered commission under the leadership of Sir, Eric Ashby to conduct an enquiry into the country's manpower needs in post-Comm independence. (Okoroma, 2007). The commission was later named after the chairman- Ashby Commission. The Commission recommended among other things the establishment of regional universities to meet the post-independence manpower needs of the country. Adesina, (1988) observed that the advent of the first generational universities was partly a consequence of the 1959 Ashby Commission report. Thus, by 1962 due to the recommendation of the Ashby Commission, there were five universities: Ife, Lagos, Ibadan, Nsukka and Ahmedu Bello University Zaria.

In 1962, the National Universities Commission was established to replace the Inter-University Council as an advisory agency in the cabinet office. In 1974, the council became a statutory body with a governing council and the first Executive Secretary was Professor Jibri Aminu. (NUC, 2023). The commission has grown in limits and bounds as one of the federal agencies under the Federal Ministry of Education saddled with the responsibility to ensure quality in university education as well as carry out accreditation functions. It is incumbent to mention other similar agencies as the National Commission for Colleges of Education, (NCCE) and the National Board for Technical Education, (NBTE) whose mandate is to supervise polytechnic and colleges of education respectively.

The National Universities Commission like the mustard seed planted in the Prime Minister's office in 1962 has grown in powers and functions. The National University Commission Bulletin (2023), outlines the functions of the commission as approving all programmes, granting approval for the establishment of higher institutions, ensuring quality assurance of all academic programmes and channelling all external support to the Nigerian universities. Other functions according to Okojie, Oloyede, and Obanya (2010), are the orderly development of university education, advising the government on the financial needs of universities and a channel not only to receive external aid to universities but also to receive and allocate federal grants to federal universities. To achieve these functions the council is divided into twelve directorates namely academic planning, inspection and monitoring, management of support services, the establishment of private services, student support services, research, innovation and information technology, finance and accounts, accreditation, open and distance education, liaison services and international corporate communications, and executive secretary's office. (NUC, 2023)

Minimum Academic Standards

In 1985 the commission acquired enormous powers and responsibilities, Act No 16 of 1985 and amended Act No 49 of 1988 among other things empowered the council to lay down the Minimum Academic Standard in all universities in Nigeria. At the same time, the power of accreditation of degrees and academic programs was removed from the university senate or the power was watered down and it became a prerogative of the commission to set the minimum academic standards (Okoroma, 2007; Okojie, 2008). In 1989 National Universities Commission developed the first content-based Minimum Academic Standards (MAS) after consultation with experts in various disciplines which provided minimum floor space for lecturers, minimum laboratory facilities for students, minimum staff-students ratio, stipulated curriculum as well as minimum entry and graduation requirement for each discipline. (Ibijola, 2014). By these Acts, the NUC became a federal government agency empowered to collaborate with university dons, and other professional bodies to develop and accredit the professional contents of programmes to ensure that they are in tune with international best practices. (Ibijola, 2014). According to Dada, Wunti, and Martin (2017), accreditation is a process of evaluating the quality of programmes and ensuring that they meet conditions in the minimum academic standard documents. The essence of accreditation is quality assurance (Okebukola, 2002).

Following the upturn of information technology in every facet of human development, there arose a need to revise the minimum academic standards to meet the needs of manpower development in a knowledge-driven economy. Also, because the minimum academic standard has lasted over a decade, there is a need to update the curriculum not only to be in turn with international best practices but to enhance socio-economic development. (Okojie, 2007). He also eluded other reasons for the review of minimum academic standards as to update the standard and relevance of university education, integrate entrepreneurial studies to enable university graduates to acquire skills and knowledge that will make them globally competitive, and introduce peace and conflict studies.

In cognizance of the above development, the Commission in 2001 initiated a move to review the minimum academic standards. The commission to jettison the prescriptive and content-based curriculum decided to organize professionals and experts and consequently developed a benchmark statement for each of the programmes taught in universities. Unfortunately, the benchmark statements were discovered not only inadequate for accreditation but also for meaningfully guiding the development of curricula. It is against this background that the commission merged the revised MAS with the benchmark statement into a new document called Benchmark Minimum Academic Standard (BMAS) (Okojie, 2008). It is enlightening to note that the BMAS documents were produced for the thirteen disciplines and general studies programmes taught in Nigerian universities. The essence was to equip university graduates with better skills and instil entrepreneurial skills suitable to the needs of the Society. The commission installed email facilities in some federal universities to improve the communication system. (NUC Annual Report, 1994).

Following the upsurge of information technology in teaching and interconnectivity and the interdependence of the global economy, the commission ensures that university education is responsive to the needs of society and reflects the 21st-century realities that are information-driven.

The NUC²⁰¹⁸ initiated the restructuring of the BMAS in its entity introduced Core Curriculum Minimum Academic Standards, CCMAS and added new disciplines and programmes in Nigerian universities to meet the exigencies of time. (NUC, 2022). Even though the newly redesigned curriculum is yet to be functional, CCMAS is a departure from the BMAS according to NUC in the following areas. The new curriculum is geared to produce teachers with 21st-century classroom skills, like literacy skills, and information technology skills among others. It also ensures that it not only addresses the deficiencies of BMAS but ensures that teachers are enriched with greater pedagogic knowledge and contents and new programmes are introduced to address teacher needs for emerging national and global issues. Other unique features according to NUC are that all programmes are provided with teaching subjects, more time for internship and teaching practices, and access to entrepreneurial skills to enhance the employability of graduates of university education. The commission ensured that the courses offered are not only culturally and contextually relevant to societal needs but also comparable to those offered in the ten-top education programmes in the world. ((NUC 2022). The essence is to equip university graduates with the global competence to navigate the global economy and contribute to the sustainability and development of society.

Global Economy

The influx of information technology has changed the economic paradigm and the economic landscape in the production of goods, services and the supply of money. It has increased the interconnectivity of the economy, especially in the buying of goods and services, and increased the flow of information and ideas. It is against this backdrop that the world is referred to as a global village. Cambridge Dictionary defines the global economy as the development of the world economy and operating together as one system. It is an economy in which resources- goods, services, people, skills and ideas move across borders. (Nasrudin, 2022). It is an economy that has led to the interdependence between countries as a result of the sophistication of information technology, and increased flow in communication, people, knowledge, research, and capital.

Globalization is "the widening, deepening, and speeding up of the worldwide interconnectedness" (Held, McGrew, Goldblatt & Perraton 1999 p2). It is imperative to mention that for any facet of the educational system to be competitive in the global economy, the educational system must adapt to the currency of the global economy. The currency of the global economy is global competencies and it has to do with digital literacy, digital competency, qualitative skills, interpersonal skills, communication skills and information technology skills among others. The onus is on the National Universities Commission on setting the minimum academic standards in Nigerian universities to ensure that global competence is instilled in the students so that on graduation they should have the necessary

skills to make them global citizens. Given the above, the next section will explore the challenges of NUC in the attainment of minimum academic standards in a global economy.

The Inhibitors of NUC

There is no gaining saying that the advent of the National Universities Commission as the federal government agency established to ensure the orderly development of universities, accreditation of programmes and setting of the minimum academic standard, has recorded a landmark achievement, especially in the areas of accreditation of programmes and courses. NUC, with the proliferation of universities, has helped to maintain quality assurance and improvement of curriculum. But the greatest challenge militating against the commission is the perception of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU). ASUU is of the notion that the powers and responsibilities of NUC as an interloper and correspondingly an infringement on the autonomy of universities. (Olufemi & Kolade, 2016).

ASUU argues that the power of accreditation of programmes and courses is a subversion of the power of the university senate and that the accreditation of courses should be left to the university accreditation committees or professional bodies empowered to regulate professional education (ibid). This has resulted in an unhealthy relationship among the stakeholders that if not checked will undermine the essence of its existence. Closely related to the dearth of trust between the commission and ASUU is the perceived conflict or overlapping functions. For instance, the University Miscellaneous Act 2007 empowers the university senate to establish programmes in the university and NUC is also empowered to do the same. This, in no small measure, has watered the powers of the university senate.

Human capital is another problem militating against the realization of the statutory functions of the commission. It is incontrovertible that the development of any organization hinges on human resources and their capabilities in achieving organizational goals. According to the NUC online platform as of the first quarter of 2023, the total numbers of universities in Nigeria are two hundred and twenty universities, (220) of which are 50 federal universities, 59 state universities and 111 private universities. (NUC, 2023). Unfortunately, the commission does not have the personnel and professionals with basic prerequisite qualifications to discharge the responsibility of accreditation of programmes and courses in the universities hence they use ad-hoc staff drawn from universities (Dada, et al, 2017). It is in the same vein that the commission is unable to effectively monitor and ensure That the minimum academic standard is maintained in universities. (Dade, 2016). The essence of monitoring in any human organization cannot be overemphasized because it is through this process that quality is enhanced, challenges are highlighted and solutions provided.

In the mix of this deficit in human resources, the commission is saddled with numerous responsibilities among them are the accreditation of programmes and courses in universities, ensuring orderly development of universities, strategic planning and management of annual review meetings, development of physical infrastructure and facilities, setting the minimum academic standard in universities, facilitating linkages and collaboration with national and international development partners, and relating with the National Examination Council, (NECO) West African Examination Council (WAEC), and other examination bodies in Nigeria concerning placement and admission of students. (Oladusun, 2011). Like any other

federal agency, the commission does not have adequate finance to manage its responsibilities and more compelling is the administrative bureaucracy that has slowed down its activities concerning the disbursement of funds to universities and facilities.

The Way Forward

In an information-driven global economy, technology has transformed the educational landscape with more significant opportunities and every university education is expected to integrate into the digital revolution. It is interesting to note that the digital revolution needs more technological manpower that will drive the system. Therefore, the need to restructure the entire education system to reskill the manpower needs of the university to fit the digital revolution and at the same time assimilate the increasing number of people seeking education opportunities in university education. The influx of information technology into the educational system has also prompted different challenges that query traditional teaching methods. Studies have revealed that using traditional teaching methods in the 21st century will be a disservice in this digital era not only to the individuals but to the development of society.

It is pertinent to mention that in the technologically induced economy, people are learning with the aid of technology, children are using video games in learning, workers are interacting with simulations through artificial bits of intelligence, and students are taking courses online while adults consulting Wikipedia. (Collins & Halverson, 2009). They also opined that the world is gradually moving from the traditional school system to homes, libraries, internet cafes and workplaces where they decide what they want to learn, when and how they want to learn. (ibid.).

This is the hallmark of digital technology allowing the learners to learn at their pace and time and making education available and accessible even to the vulnerable in society. In this knowledge-driven era, education that is confined to a particular place at a given time is not only disinvesting students in the benefits of collaborative learning using digital technology but discouraging lifelong learning. It is imperative to note that all facets of human enterprises are more and more reliant on information technology, therefore, it is incumbent on the National Universities Commission and stakeholders in university education to harness the power of technology in research, innovation, interpersonal skills, organization and collaborative skills. The use of digital literacy and competence will reposition the Nigerian educational system and increase its visibility and competitiveness in a global world.

The inadequate funds for university education is another impediment to the integration of digital technology and therefore it becomes necessary to establish a legal framework that will ensure that budgetary allocation to the education sector is not below 20% of the annual budgets in all tiers of government. With adequate funds, the focus will be on the accruing of digital technology and the digital competence of lecturers to enhance learning outcomes and the attainment of educational goals. Other factors that will enhance digital technology in the school systems are the availability and accessibility of digital technology, awareness, literacy, and competence among teachers, students and administrators. (Yushau, 2022).

One of the challenges militating against the performance of NUC is too many responsibilities without enough experts and personnel to help in the effective monitoring of standards,

accreditations of programmes, and courses. It becomes necessary to curtail some of the powers of the NUC, especially in the areas of accreditation of courses and programmes and allow the university senate, university committee and other professional bodies that are empowered to regulate the education profession. Again, considering the peculiarity of various environments and the endowment of resources in various universities, coupled with variations in digital technology and competence, it becomes incumbent on the university senate to determine 50% of course contents to reflect the manpower needs of the immediate environment. For effective performance, there is a need for a rethink and moderate the powers of the commission and enhance institutional autonomy.

Conclusion

University education is the apex in the ladder of educational pursuit and a knowledge factory where professionals are identified, and their potentials nurtured for the benefit of the individuals and the development of society. It is also where the manpower needs of the society are built. To ensure the orderly development of universities and ensure that quality assurance is maintained, the federal government established the National Universities Commission to help regulate the activities of universities. Since the inception of the commission, the powers and responsibilities of the commission have increased from what used to be an advisory body attached to the office of the prime minister in 1962 and has grown to the point of ensuring that minimum academic standards are maintained, accreditation of courses and programmes, determine carrying capacity of university and decide whom to admit and what to teach among others. Though the commission has tremendously achieved some goals but not without challenges among them are inadequate personnel and unhealthy rivals between ASUU and the commission on the perceived encroachment on the university's autonomy among others. The influx of digital technology has not only sprouted opportunities like effective communication, digital learning, collaborative skills etc. but also challenges of reskilling of competence of teachers and procurement of educational resources that will enhance learning outcomes. For global visibility and competitiveness, the paper suggests that the government should institute a legal framework that will ensure that all levels of government allocate 20% of an annual budget to the education sector able managers of education to restructure, and improve digital skilling and reskilling students, teachers and school administrators.

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