

# University management perspective of quality: A review of Nigerian universities

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to take a step back from the general debate surrounding the creation of a precise definition of quality in the context of university education. The paper investigates what principal officers in Nigeria universities perceived as quality from a rationale perspective rather than replicating the approach in a rationale environment. Rather, this paper investigates the reality as experienced by the principal officers who are involved in the day-to-day administration of their university. In view of this approach, a critical realist philosophy was adopted to help understand principal officers' view of the debate. Thus, the study involved 29 principal officers in 6 universities. All the respondents had key roles in formulating, administering, and implementing issues relating to quality. The study findings reveal that many of the principal officers find it difficult to define quality though they assume they can recognise quality when they see it; however, observation of the 29 respondents who took part in the study revealed that these principal officers had a strong background in quantitative philosophy, thus giving them the assumption that quality must be measured and making it difficult to investigate or identify causal and missing mechanisms regarding the components of what to measure.

**Keywords:** Quality, quality management, university, principal officer.

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the last 15 years, Nigerian universities have experienced a sudden growth in the establishment of new universities between 2001 and 2014. The establishment has seen about 50 more universities, with 42 unlicensed universities operating illegal in various part of the country in 2008. The numbers of unlicensed university have grown to 52 in 2014 (Adetunji, 2014). All these universities operate differently with different intensions, while government continued to create more universities for more accessibility. Private investors have also seen the opportunity as money making venture. As a result universities in the country have become more competitive just as old universities are interested in competing with the international universities, the new ones are in the process of competing with the old universities. These demands have raised a question of whether or not universities are providing a quality service to their students.

In a publication by Adelabu and Akinwumi (2008) they

debated extensively on the factors affecting Nigeria academic quality, Adeogun and Gboyega (2010) also made a strong claim following the result of their research work on Nigerian universities that quality is declining. In another work by Arong and Ogbadu (2010) they supported the work of Adeogun and Gboyega to explain major causes of declining quality of education in Nigeria. These 3 papers have observed the needs for quality in Nigeria university education but leave a gap unturned by not studying or investigating what quality is, and who take responsibilities for quality in the Nigeria universities. This paper covers these gaps by reviewing what quality is from Nigerian university management perspective.

The study of quality is now a universal practice as every individual and business is aware of the reasons for the need to improve their services in order to meet the demands of the competitive market in which they find themselves. University education is not in exception as universities also try to improve their services. Though the

sector involves multifaceted institutions, yet there is an awareness in these institutions that higher education is becoming more competitive, and if they wish to survive, they need to show their stakeholders/users, especially the students and the employers, that their graduates and their research can compete well in the global market. Although many authors and researchers, such as Hill et al. (2003), Hsieh (2005), Hesketh and Fleetwood (2006), Adeogun and Gboyega (2010) and Harvey and Williams (2010) have given conflicting statements regarding the definition of quality in higher education, they have defined or studied quality using a non-interactive approach, that is, not by examining the reasons behind what they perceive to be quality; rather, they try to measure quality in terms of assessment or outcome. Even part of their research criticises this approach to quality, but their debate about quality still seems to centre on the notion of measuring something. Apparently, Nigerian universities are faced with more challenging demands as their assessment cannot measure the true outcome of their transformation process. This was evident in reviews by Adelabu and Akinwumi (2008) and Adeogun and Osifila (2010), who mentioned that measuring quality in the Nigerian context will undermine the integrity of the institutions as the resources available for teaching and learning are not commensurate with university standards. In another work by Arong and Ogbadu (2010), they pointed out that strikes by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) or the Non-Academic Staff Union of Universities (NASUU) are a key factor that is hindering student performance and if that is the case, measuring outcomes would involve using the wrong techniques to determine quality. The most contentious issue of all is the different range of misconduct where staff engage students in immoral conduct, such as sex, collecting bribes, or receiving gifts in exchange for good marks (Adelabu and Akinwumi, 2008). Therefore, using such grades from students as an assessment tool will fail to measure the true value of student performance. Likewise, a few students' non-involvement in their own learning can affect the general outcome of the whole university if quality is to be measured by student outcome, performance, satisfaction or assessment.

However, given the weakness represented by the quantitative approach to quality in universities, this research suggests a new approach to help reveal the reality about what quality is rather than simply measuring quality. The starting point the critical realist approach uses is that theory informs the knowledge about the way a quality is constituted; therefore, the knowledge of the quality should be obtained by examining the way the quality occurs or vice-versa.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Obasi et al. (2010) stated that there have been various

discussions on the decline in the quality of Nigerian public universities. They mentioned that the context in which public universities in Nigeria operate has experienced changes over the last two decades. There is an increasing demand for a quality service when technological advancements are low and the pressure on institutions to respond to the needs and aspirations of students and academic staff is greater. Similarly, Adeogun and Gboyega (2010) highlighted that it is good that universities are becoming global businesses when competitors around the world are now looking to sell their universities in a market that has traditionally been seen as belonging to Nigeria. For these reasons, many authorities, such as the Nigerian government, have introduced different policies, models, and theories in the past two decades; they have also used the strategy of privatization to improve funding, but only for private universities. The privatisation strategy was implemented as a way to solve the problems in public universities to some extent, but this created other quality issues, such as the decline in the quality of the student intake, transformation, teaching and output (Adelabu and Akinkunmi, 2008; Adeogun and Gboyega, 2010).

Ogundare (2009:3) expressed the view that "teaching quality is the ability of a teacher to effectively demonstrate exemplary knowledge and skill to learners". However, teaching quality needs to be regulated properly to foster greater development. He stated that it is assumed that good quality teaching will, in the long run, improve the society and increase the country's economic growth. However, the concern here is that the resources required for providing quality education are scarce, while students' desire for a university education has continued to increase. Salmin (2009) asserted that Nigerian universities were not effective in terms of national development and pointed out, for instance, that Nigerian universities produce graduate students in civil engineering and electrical engineering every year and yet there are no good roads, and the country still struggles to provide a constant power supply and many more essential facilities the country should benefit from as a return on the investment in education.

In an attempt to meet these demands and needs, the Nigerian government, in the timeframe covered by this paper, that is, 2000 to 2014, has increased the number of licensed universities from 45 to 132 (42 federal, 35 state, and 50 private universities, which includes religious, enterprise, group and sole proprietorship). These universities vary in size and quality with regard to capacity, infrastructures, library facilities, courses, and curricula (Salmin, 2009; Ojerinde, 2010). Likewise, Okogie (2009) highlighted that at present, there are 44 unlicensed private universities operating illegally in various parts of the country (NUC report, 2014). Surprisingly, Salmin (2009) and Ojerinde (2010) speculated that Nigeria is still likely to witness the establishment of more private universities as a result of

Table 1. Participants gird.

University owner	Participants				
	Vice-chancellor	Registrar	Bursar	Director of academic planning	Dean of faculty
Federal	*	*	*	*	*
State	*	*	*	*	*
Religious	*	*	*	*	*
Enterprise	*	*	*	*	*
Group	*	*	*	*	-
Sole Proprietorship	*	*	*	*	*

overcrowding in existing universities and the continuous demand for university education by applicants following the trend for long strike action by the academic and non-academic staff in Nigerian public universities. Blackmore (2009) convincingly established that there is a need for the universities to realise that their long-term survival depends on how meritorious their services are and the extent to which the quality of service sets one university apart from the rest. Likewise, Okogie (2009) and Ojerinde (2010) pointed to the implementation of elaborate measures, such as quality assurance, initiated by the government to regulate standards and improve the quality as an indication of the desperate need to bring about a fundamental improvement in Nigerian universities.

## METHODOLOGY

The paper collected data from 29 principal officers in six universities. This involved university principal officers, such as the vice-chancellor, registrar, bursar, director of academic, planning, dean of faculty, who are involved in implementing quality management. The data presented in this paper were derived from the perspective of the university management. Principal officers' knowledge was used to obtain very rich data to understand the issues regarding quality. A purposive sample method was used to identify interviewees across the six universities involved. Selections of these six universities were based on multidisciplinary involvement in sciences, agricultural sciences and social sciences. The study cut across all the universities in Nigeria with a representation of all major owners such as federal, state, religious group, enterprise and individual. The data from the survey are limited in that the paper only attempts to define quality in the universities without the intention of measuring any of the values, an approach, which is rejected by the positivist, and the interpretivist approaches to research. There were no existing data on the perception of principal officers in Nigerian university about what quality is. Therefore, the study adopted a new approach that fits in between the positivist and interpretivist approaches; this approach is interested in how principal officers perceive quality without adding any features or elements that can measure the study of quality.

## FINDINGS

The observation of the 29 participants who took part in the studies suggested 12 major findings of how principal officers in Nigerian university define quality. The

discussion with each participant lasted for 15 to 20 min. They were all asked similar questions, below are the findings.

In this study, participants are represented and coded with alphabet from A to E where: A = Vice-chancellor, B = Registrar, C = Bursar, D = Director of academic planning, E = dean of faculty (Table 1). The university owners are first re-arranged into alphabetical order and number serially 1 to 6, where 1 = Federal, 2 = State 3 = Religious, 4 = Enterprise 5 = Group, 6 = Sole proprietorship. A1.... A6 are vice-chancellors. A1 is the vice-chancellor from Federal owned university, while A6 is from a sole proprietorship owned university. E1 is the dean of faculty from a federal university while E6 is dean of faculty in sole proprietorship (Table 2).

## DISCUSSION

In terms of a definition of quality and its management, the 29 principal officers involved shared different views. As identified by Cheng and Tam (1997), it is pointless to identify a single best definition of quality particularly in the context of universities, and they noted that quality is best defined in terms of different criteria. Materu (2007) also commented that quality is difficult to define especially in the context of tertiary education where institutions have broad autonomy to decide their own visions and mission statements. This was evident as it was the opinion of twenty one principal officers that quality education would mean different things to different people depending on who they are, what they do, and what they want to achieve from the education system. The truth of this assertion can be seen in the Nigerian universities as every university has a different mission and vision statement that drives its operation. Harvey and Williams (2010) debated this assertion in their work; they reiterated that reliance on a single definition for quality can be a source of conflict and can result in communication problems. The eight principal officers were of the opinion that quality should be seen in a specific way and not be given a broad definition. Meanwhile, Townsend and Gebhardt (1990) were able to make a significant contribution to the definition of quality by bridging a gap not dealt with by many writers. They

**Table 2.** How will you define quality in your university?

Findings	Quality education would mean different things to different people depending on who they are, what they do, and what they want to achieve from the education system.
21 Participants	Quality in a complex to define. Quality in a multifaceted institution like university can only be useful if the objectives, standards, specifications, and indicators used for judging quality as well as for evaluating whether the prescribed objectives have been attained are clear and accepted by all involved. A1; A2; A4; A5; A6; B1; B2; B3; B4; B5; B6; C1; C2; C3; C5; D1; E2; D3; D4; D5; E6
Findings	Quality means everyone knows what to do, how to do it, and when to do it,
16 Participants	A1; A3; A6; B5; B6; C1; C3; C4; C5; D3; D4; D5; D6; E1; E3; E5
Findings	Quality constitutes desirable graduates by using assessment to determine the quality of education.
14 Participants	A1; A2; A4; A5; A6; B1; B3; B4; C4; C6; D4; D6; E4; E5
Findings	Quality education means the production of graduates who are fit for purpose
13 Participants	A2; A6; B1; B2; B5; B6; C1; C5; D4; D5; D6; E3; E5
Findings	Quality means planning to produce graduates that will be good in their careers and in character by using minimum benchmark set for every Nigerian university
10 Participants	A1; A4; B3; B5; C1; D3; D4; E1; E3; E5
Findings	Quality is defined as value for money
9 Participants	A6; C3; C4; D1; D4; D6; E1; E2; E3
Findings	Quality should be seen in a specific way and not be given a broad definition. Quality is anything beyond what the university is technically required to pass on to the students.
8 Participants	A2; A6; B2; C6; D2; D3; E5; E6
Findings	Good quality education will impart to the student the right kind of knowledge, that is, education that would have a positive effect on society
6 Participants	A1; A5; B4; C5; D4; D6
Findings	Good quality education is a balanced education, that is, when a balance is maintained between what is learnt and the learner's character. Definition involving fitness for purpose, that is when a graduate of chemistry from a Nigerian university can perfectly fit into another Nigerian university or into any part of the world. Quality mean there must be standardized roles of activity that are being fulfilled
5 Participants	A3; B4; C6; E1; E5
Findings	Quality of education in relation to standards and achieving the best outcomes. They further defined standards of education as a process where the recipient has been turned around, to reason, to think, to change situations, and then to manage.
4 Participants	A2; A1; B6; C6
Findings	Quality definition as Value for money assertion could be used by critics in defining the quality of education in relation to money
3 Participants	A2; B4; E5
Findings	Quality education must be universal, in that the teaching curriculum must be designed in accordance with what is applicable and acceptable globally. Defining quality education as value for money in the context that they were ignoring the environmental factor and concentrating on the core academic work itself.
2 Participants	A1; A4

defined quality in two parts: quality in fact and quality in perception. According to them, quality is to be determined by both the producer (in fact) and the consumer (in perception). The first phase of the definition was accepted by this paper in that it is assumed that uncovering how quality is defined in Nigerian universities will involve establishing facts before the impact of the facts can be perceived. With this in mind, the issue of what roles principal officers play in quality management was explored in order to examine principal officers' understanding of the features (objects) that lead to quality in the context of Nigerian universities.

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (UK) (2004:1) defines academic quality as "*how well the learning opportunities provided to students enables them to achieve their award*". This definition was in agreement with the principal officers' understanding of quality, as they pointed that good quality education will impart to the student the right kind of knowledge, that is, education that would have a positive effect on society. Another five principal officers thought that a good quality education is a balanced education, that is, when a balance is maintained between what is learnt and the learner's character. However, ten of the participants were of the belief that many Nigerian universities should be planning to produce graduates that will be good in their careers and in character. A participant expressed that quality education refers to:

"when learners are exposed to good academic standards as well as to good character and so develop into people of integrity who will add value to the society" (vice-chancellor, A1).

These statements reflect the conclusion of Townsend and Gebhardt's work (1990); they also support the work of Ishikawa (1985) that quality is everybody's business including the business of the consumer. Similarly, Ishikawa believed that quality should not be left in the hands of professionals alone, but everyone in the organisation should be involved. He defined quality as "not only the quality of the product, but also of after-sales service, quality of management, the company itself and the human being" (Gilbert, 1992 cited in Beckford, 1998:32).

It is worth evaluating Ishikawa's opinion that everybody should be involved in the quality of service they receive. This statement has given way to the view of critics who have investigated quality from the customer's point of view; some had even viewed students as customers in trying to investigate the quality of the service they received or from the grade they obtained in class assessment. In contrast, this paper suggests that the fact that students, and indeed, everybody has arguably been investigated in past research makes it difficult to actually define what quality means from everyone's point of view. Though the definition was

assumed to have integrated very well with the generally accepted tenet of service quality, that is, employees and customers are active participants of the service delivery process, and although there is considerable debate about students as customers from Williams (2002) and Hill et al. (2003), their transformation does require a very active and joint participation between students, staff, and the university itself. The opinion also supports the assertion that everyone is involved but what has not been discussed is at what level or at what stage everyone should be involved.

Six participants agreed that many students do not have time, are not sufficiently well informed, or lack any pre-knowledge of what is expected of them in the university, making it difficult for them to actually identify the quality of what they receive in terms of lectures and other criteria. This debate was in line with the views of Cheng and Tam (1997) and Cullen et al. (2003) that, in reality, where the product or service is complex, such as a university, defining the purpose is a complex issue and any assumptions can weaken the product or outcome. Twenty-one of the participants thought that appreciating quality in a complex and multifaceted institution like a university is useful if the objectives, standards, specifications, and indicators used for judging quality as well as for evaluating whether the prescribed objectives have been attained are clear and accepted by all involved.

Sixteen participants referred to quality as the trend that everyone should know what to do, how to do it, and when to apply it, as a way of maintaining standards, as identified by Cullen et al. (2003).

It was highlighted by one of the participants that a university operates within the standards established by the National University Commission, an approach referred to as the minimum benchmark (A4).

The understanding of quality as involving everyone was reflected in another ten participants' observations; they explained that the minimum benchmark is what every Nigerian university is based on. They claimed that if universities are in line with the benchmark set for universities, then the universities are rendering a quality service. In support of this notion, another five principal officers clarified that before there is any discussion about quality, there must be standardized roles of activity that are being fulfilled. The point the participants were making here is that quality must be quantified and it must be above the standards set by the National University Commission. This was surprising, as these principal officers clearly thought quality could be measured even though they could not define what quality is.

A clear picture of what to measure and what not to measure was identified in the work of Lomas and Tomlinson (2000), they claimed that standards are

measures of outcome that provide clear and unambiguous judgments about whether the outcomes are satisfactory. Lomas and Tomlinson (2000) stated that the standards set for a programme of study are inevitably linked to the outcomes and ensure that a certain level of knowledge and skills is achieved by the graduates of that programme. However, a key characteristic of standards is that they are never static, thus making them difficult to measure, but Morley and Aynsley (2007) highlighted the issue that standards imply standardisation or homogenisation with tacit and explicit understandings of what constitutes desirable graduate qualifications and characteristics. Currently, the increasing focus on student satisfaction and the massification of universities has led to increased assertions of falling academic standards and grade inflation, as observed by Clayson and Haley (2005), which may render invalid the yardstick for measuring standards or quality. Fourteen of the participants, regarding the claims about what constitutes desirable graduates, argued that using assessment to determine the quality of education could undermine the integrity of a university as it could be the case that students do not take their studies seriously, and therefore, determining quality from such an outcome would only mean that quality was being measured wrongly.

Although Gallifa and Batelle (2010) argued that other characteristics of quality, including excellence/high standards, fitness for purpose, efficiency and effectiveness, are simply part of the views of quality as transformation, Beckford's (1998) query about what if it does not satisfy the consumers, still stands. The statements of four of the principal officers who defined the quality of education in relation to standards and achieving the best outcomes supported this. They further defined standards of education as a process where the recipient has been turned around, to reason, to think, to change situations, and then to manage. Yorke's (1999) findings can be linked to these participants' view that while quality is the totality of all the aspects that influence the students' experience, academic standards refer to the set of expectations about the students' programme of study. Another eight participants made a clear statement that quality is anything beyond what the university is technically required to pass on to the students. One of the participants commented:

"I know there is a syllabus, and you go to class as a lecturer with the aim of covering the syllabus but beyond that, what does the student take out of the class?" He finalised his statement by saying, "I think standard is a subset of quality." (A3)

Expressing another view, 13 participants also defined quality education as that which produces graduates who are fit for purpose. Five of them agreed that the definition involving fitness for purpose is when a graduate of

chemistry from a Nigerian university can perfectly fit into another Nigerian university or into any part of the world; this demonstrates the quality of the education that has been provided. Two of the participants articulated that quality education must be universal, in that the teaching curriculum must be designed in accordance with what is applicable and acceptable globally. These two opinions were in accordance with Watty's (2005) opinion about the fitness for purpose definition of quality, but he added that this definition can also accommodate all other views of quality; for example, Gibbs and Simpson (2005) stated that the fitness for purpose definition may be identified as excellence, value for money, or transformation, all depending on who is involved. A clear picture was included in eight principal officers' view of quality as 'value for money'. However, when they were questioned further, it transpired that they all had different reasons for defining quality as value for money. Three of the respondents explained that the value for money assertion could be used by critics in defining the quality of education in relation to money. They stressed that it has an environmental implication, that is, what you can achieve with one dollar in Nigeria is different to what you can achieve with one dollar in the United Kingdom. Therefore, they argued that in the Nigerian context, it will be difficult to define the quality of university education as value for money.

Likewise, nine participants expressed an opinion similar to the above statement; they mentioned that if quality is defined as value for money, then the students paying the highest fees should be guaranteed a high quality education irrespective of their contribution to the class activities. However, two participants did not support this argument but established that they were defining quality education as value for money in the context that they were ignoring the environmental factor and concentrating on the core academic work itself. They mentioned that money is not all that education can achieve or vice-versa, but that it is the value placed on the education that matters rather than the value placed on the money.

## CONCLUSION

From the discussion of the twenty-nine principal officers involved in the study, one will rightly agree that quality have different meaning to different people depending on who is involved and what you what to achieve considering what the environment can offer. The perspective of these principal officers established the fact that how quality is viewed in the Western country might not be applicable to Nigeria environment. I support the assertion of everybody must be involved in other to achieve quality in higher education, if the starting point to quality is getting it right the first time and replicate the approach in all levels, the most important time everyone needs to be involved. The biggest question that arises

from this study remains unanswered, the question is at what stage/level should everyone be involved in quality?

Finally, defining quality from non-rational will not be fit for university education, that is quality should be study from those who are involved in daily activities of the university. The new approach suggested by this paper is that quality is best fit if it is defined by those who are expected to implement any part of quality especially those who hold the position to improve the organisation and they need to carry others involved along at all stages. This approach to quality needs to be documented, so that it is easy to understand and it cannot be confusing nor misinterpreted for something else.

## PRACTICAL IMPLICATION AND LIMITATIONS

It is clear that defining quality from a single point of view will mean that quality is defined wrongly. This paper offers the clear and practical perceptions of those directly involved in the formulation and implementation of quality management in Nigerian universities. Therefore, one might assume it would be a straightforward task for them to define what quality means to them. Likewise, one would presume that they would share a common view as all the participants were from the same country so there should be a common practice for quality implementation.

However, reading through the different lines of debate shows that there is little agreement in the principal officers' understanding of and knowledge about the quality of the education they provide. Therefore, much work needs to be done in the field of quality in higher education in order to understand what quality is. The strength of this piece of work is that it has begun to involve those that matter in the discussion of what quality means rather than borrowing knowledge from other sectors whose activities are not same as those of universities. Another practical aspect of this paper was the use of the opinions of rational thinkers to investigate quality in a multifaceted institution, an approach which has not been considered in any depth in research into the quality of education. Therefore, the paper not only covers all aspects of the definition of quality but also defines quality from the perspectives of Nigerian university management. The paper does not claim that the study can be replicated in other institutions, but advises that the implementation of any paper of this sort should be treated with care.

Furthermore although this study can be said to have generated useful results, it is not without its limitations, which are here acknowledged. The paper was qualitative, and the sample was necessarily small, particularly with reference to the population of principal officers, which means that it is difficult to generalise the results of this study.

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