

ASSESSMENT OF STUDENTS' PERFORMANCE AND SUPPORT SERVICES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN NATIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA IN SOUTH-SOUTH, NIGERIA

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Abstract

The main purpose of the study was to assess the quality assurance on student's performance and support services in National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) in South-South, Nigeria. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The population of the study was 27,621 respondents made up of the administrators, facilitators and students of NOUN programmes in South-South, Nigeria. A sample of 895 respondents was drawn from the population using multi-stage proportionate sampling procedure and simple random sampling technique without replacement. The instruments for data collection were expert validated questionnaire titled 'Distance Learning Assessment Scale for Quality Assurance'. An overall reliability index of .84 was obtained using the Cronbach alpha. Mean and standard deviation were used to analyze the research questions while ANOVA was used to test the null hypotheses at $p=0.05$. The findings revealed that the extent quality is assured in the assessment of students' performance in NOUN south-south Nigeria is high. Also, the extent quality is assured in the students support services in NOUN in South-South, Nigeria is high. A significant difference was found regarding the extent quality is assured in the assessment of students' performance, and students support services among the facilitators, administrators and students. The study therefore recommended that Federal Government should allocate more funds to NOUN Nigeria to build more study centers, and provide more support services like laboratories, halls for face-to-face contact examinations and resources in different states.

Keywords: Quality assurance, assessment, support services, NOUN,

Introduction

National Open University of Nigeria is a distance education programme necessitated by the inability of the conventional tertiary education system to cater for the teeming population of Nigerians. John and Ethelbert (2022) defined distance education as a programme which supports the idea that time and space should not be a constraint to learning. It is basically the type of education without restrictions where the facilitator is often not physically present with the learners, which makes the learning dependent on other means of communication, other than the regular face-to-face experienced in the conventional system of education. DE mode is a mode of providing flexible learning opportunities by overcoming the separation of teachers and learners using a variety of media including prints, electronic, online and occasional interactive face-to-face meetings (Madu, 2020). NOUN is one of the distance education institutions that awards a degree programme in Nigeria. Despite the provision of unlimited access to education by ODL, the issue of quality poses a problem.

Quality is a degree of excellence, worth or value possessed by something. Asiyai (2017) defined quality in higher education as a measure of how good or bad the products of higher education institutions in Nigeria are, in terms of their academic performance and meeting established standards. Quality has to do with conforming to stipulated standard. It also has to do with fulfilling requirements, needs or desires. Hence, quality here is seen as the ability of NOUN to make available useful, satisfactory and relevant programmes that will lead to the production of effective and efficient graduates. Quality assurance is the process of determining quality. Nwizu (2016) defined quality assurance in education as those actions that an educational institution

undertakes to ensure that they provide required standard of education in order to produce quality manpower for national development. Quality assurance is, therefore, a mechanism adopted by ODL institutions to ensure that their programmes are qualitative thereby producing quality graduates. Quality assurance are developed in open distance education through setting up of minimum standard that will guide the employment of quality personnel used in delivering their services, quality in material design and development, quality in the facilities/media utilization, quality in assessment of students' performance and quality in students support services (Commonwealth of Learning, 2019). This study focused on the assessment of quality assurance in students' performance and support services in NOUN programmes.

Assessment is the process of gathering information from variety of sources, observations, conversations in order to ascertain the quality or progress of something. Educational Reform (2015), defines assessment as a wide variety of methods or tools that educators use to evaluate, measure, and document the academic readiness, learning progress, skill acquisition, or educational needs of learners. Maheshwari (2017) defines assessment as the act or process of determining the value of something. It is a science of providing information for decision making. In the same way, Madu (2020) says assessment is to form opinion of the value of something after thinking or ascertaining it carefully. Hence, assessment is the determination of the worth and standard of these quality assurance frameworks for decision making. Assessment of students' performance is very important because it shows the extent to which the learning objectives are being achieved. It also shows the strengths and weaknesses of the students. How are the students assessed in NOUN? Their continuous assessment and their examination are questionable by people. People look down at this because they believe that students can give out their assignments to be written. By so doing it is believed their certificate is not their efforts, thus giving the public low image of their products, hence the discrimination and belief that their certificate is of low quality (Nwizu, 2016). Again, is the assessment and examination done under strict and secured condition? How is their assessment procedure? Madu (2017) observed that there were no adequate levels of security in testing procedures, and no explicit timing of the examination. Etudor (2017) asserted that these low rating made their products to find it difficult to secure employment as supposed, and also ineligible for compulsory youth service and their law students do not attend law school, not until recently.

Student support services is another important area where quality is needed. It is important because it bridges the gap of distance. Students support services include study centres, library, counselling and study kits. Are these student support services available and accessible to students? Do their student support services offer opportunity for tutor-student and student-student interactions? Osuji (2017) noted that NOUN programmes in Nigeria lack students support services, that the study kits are given late to the learners and sometimes not even accessible. The author added that counselling services which is necessary to monitor students' progress is not available to students, the few available ones are not so accessible by students. Etudor (2017) supported that support services available in DE programmer, Nigeria do not offer tutor student interactions. This is necessary because interactivity offers opportunity for discussion and clarification which leads to quality delivery of the programme (NOUN, 2018). Does NOUN south-south have counselling services which is necessary to monitor students' progress? If all these support services are not in place, students still feel isolated from their tutors and students, hence, poor performance and subsequent dropout. Hence, when these support services are not in place, effective interaction and communication between tutor-student and amongst students will be hampered thereby not bridging the gap of distance and time which is the major problem of DE programmes. When this gap is bridged the feeling of isolation that precedes dropout from the programme is being reduced. This is because in DE, the gap of distance and time if not bridged by interactivity and communication leads to feelings of isolation and subsequent dropout from the programme (Okop, 2015). All these affect the quality of NOUN programmes, hence its lowly rated to conventional schools. Based on the above observations, the researchers deem it necessary to

assess students' performance and support services in NOUN, South-South Nigeria to ascertain the quality of the programme.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study.

1. To what extent is quality assured in the assessment of students' performance in NOUN South-South Nigeria?
2. To what extent is quality assured in the students support services in NOUN South-South Nigeria?

Hypotheses

1. There is no significant difference in the mean responses of the administrators, facilitators and the students on the extent quality is assured in the assessment of students' performance in NOUN South-South Nigeria
2. There is no significant difference in the mean responses of the administrators, facilitators and the students on the extent quality is assured in student support services in NOUN South-South Nigeria.

Methods

This study used descriptive survey research. Ali (2006) stated that descriptive survey is one which seeks to documents and describe what exists or present status of existence of what is being investigated. The study was conducted at NOUN various study centres in the 6 states of South South region including Akwa Ibom, Cross River, Bayelsa, Rivers, Edo and Delta. Akwa-Ibom, the NOUN study centre is located in Uyo; In Bayelsa, it is located in Yenegoa; In Cross River, it is located at Calabar and Ikom; In Edo, it is located at Benin, Fugar, and Uromi community, while in Rivers, it is located at Port-Harcourt, and another one known as NOUN Special Study Centre, Nigeria Prisons Services, Port Harcourt. In Delta states it is located at Asaba, Emevor community, Sapele and Owhrode Community. Each study centre is coordinated by a centre coordinator.

The population of the study was 27,621 respondents. This is made up of 238 administrators, 914 facilitators and 26,469 students from 13 study centres in the six states that make up NOUN South South region, from 2018-2021 academic sessions (Planning, Research and Statistics Unit, NOUN South South, 2022). The sample size for the study was 895 respondents. This consist of 64 administrators, 162 facilitators, and, 669 students in three study centres in three states. A multi-stage sampling procedure which involved identification of clusters was used. The simple random sampling technique without replacement was used to draw the States which are Akwa Ibom, Rivers and Delta. The simple random sampling technique was used to avoid bias. The second stage involved selecting a study centre each from the selected states. The simple random sampling technique without replacement was used to draw the centres which were Uyo, Port Harcourt and Asaba. The third stage involved selecting 50 per cent of the eight (8) faculties in the chosen state, resulting to four faculties. To select the four faculties, simple random sampling technique by balloting without replacement was used to avoid bias. This gave the following faculties: Education, Arts, Management science and Health. The fourth stage involved the use of 10% of all the selected students in the four faculties of the three centers resulting to 669 students. The choice of 10% is based on the recommendation of Nwana as cited in Olori (2014) that if a population is in few hundreds, a 40% of the population or more could serve as a sample. But if the population is in many hundreds, a 20% sample is a good representative, if the population is in few thousands, a 10% sample will be appropriate; and if the population is several thousands, a 5% of the population or less will serve as a good sample. The breakdown of the 669 students' population shows that Uyo had 211 students, Port Harcourt had 221 students and Asaba had 237 students. Simple random technique by balloting without replacement was used to draw the required students

from the study centers to avoid bias. The fifth stage involved the use of the entire facilitators and entire administrators of the selected centres and faculties resulting to 162 facilitators and 64 administrators respectively. The choice of using all the administrators and facilitators in the selected centres is because the size is manageable.

The instrument for the study was questionnaire developed by the researcher titled Distance Learning Assessment Scale for Quality Assurance (DLASQA). DLASQA elicited information from the respondents on the extent quality is assured in the assessment of student's performance and student support services. The DLASQA was structured along a four-point scale of Very High Extent (VHE), High Extent (HE), Low Extent (LE) and Very Low Extent (VLE), and a weighted value of 4,3,2,1 respectively. The instrument was face validated by three experts. Two from the Department of Adult Education and Extra-Mural Studies and one from the Measurement and Evaluation Unit of the Department of Science Education, all from University of Nigeria, Nsukka. To ensure the reliability of the instrument, a trial test was carried out by giving out 40 copies of the validated version of the questionnaire to 20 facilitators and administrators and 20 students of NOUN in the study centres in the South South region that were excluded from the study during the sampling procedure. The centres were Calabar and Ikom. This is because the respondents possess similar characteristics with the ones that were used for the study because they run the same programme. Cronbach Alpha was used to obtain the overall reliability index of .84. This is an indication that the instrument is reliable and adjudged high enough to be used for the study. The data for this study was collected by the researchers with the help of two research assistants who were briefed on the objectives, modalities and techniques to be used in administering the questionnaires to the respondents, such as how to select respondents using simple sampling technique. Eight hundred and ninety-five copies of the questionnaire were distributed, while 850 were correctly filled and returned giving 95 per cent return rate. Information from the valid copies of the questionnaire were coded into IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23. The research questions were analyzed using mean and standard deviations. For research questions, the real limit mean of numbers were adopted to guide the interpretation of calculated mean as follows: a mean of 3.50-4.00 was accepted to a Very High Extent; 2.50-3.49 was accepted as a High Extent; 1.50-2.49 was accepted as Low Extent; and 0.05-1.49 was accepted as a Very Low Extent. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to test the hypothesis at 0.05 level of significance. The decision rule stated that if the p-value is ≤ 0.05 , the null hypothesis will be rejected, but if the p-value is > 0.05 , the null hypothesis will not be rejected which means is not significant.

Results

Research Question One: To what extent is quality assured in the assessment of student's performance in NOUN South-South Nigeria

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation Responses on the extent quality is assured in the assessment of students, performances in NOUN South-South, Nigeria

S/ N	Cluster A Items	Administrators (n = 58)			Facilitators (n = 156)			Students (n = 636)		
		Mean	SD	D	Mean	SD	D	Mean	SD	D
1	Applying variety of authentic assessment strategies in e-learning	3.62	.59	VHE	3.65	.48	VHE	3.47	.54	HE
2	Applying authentic assessment process such as anti-plagiarism soft-wares	3.59	.50	VHE	3.58	.50	VHE	3.56	.51	VHE

3	Aligning assessment with course objectives and learning modules	3.38	.49	HE	3.46	.50	HE	3.44	.56	HE
4	Providing timely information on assessment to students	3.41	.56	HE	3.34	.54	HE	3.41	.56	HE
5	Ensuring mechanisms for the right candidate to take online assessment	3.62	.52	VHE	3.42	.52	HE	3.47	.52	HE
6	Ensuring integrity of assessment process through appropriate security	3.59	.50	VHE	3.40	.51	HE	3.38	.54	HE
7	Promoting learning through immediate feedback on continuous assessment	2.47	.96	LE	2.37	.84	LE	2.47	.58	LE
8	Timely release of results	3.50	.57	VHE	3.50	.51	VHE	3.43	.54	HE
9	Timely handling of cases of examination malpractice	3.41	.50	HE	3.49	.53	HE	3.48	.53	HE
10	Explicit timing of exam and strict compliance to such timing	3.47	.50	HE	3.26	.48	HE	3.45	.53	HE
11	Protecting student's personal information in examination	3.48	.50	HE	3.27	.52	HE	.47	.52	HE
	Grand Mean	3.41	.56	HE	3.34	.54	HE	3.36	.54	HE

Data in Table 1 show a grand mean of ($\bar{x} = 3.41$, $SD = .56$) ($\bar{x} = 3.34$, $SD = .54$) and ($\bar{x} = 3.36$, $SD = .54$) for the administrators, facilitators and students indicate that the extent quality is assured in the assessment of student's performances in NOUN, South-South Nigeria is high. The standard deviation which range from .40 to .90 indicates that administrators, facilitators and students' responses were not far from the mean responses.

Hypothesis one: There is no significant difference in the mean responses of the administrators, facilitators and the students on the extent quality is assured in the assessment of student performance in NOUN South-South, Nigeria.

Table 2: ANOVA analysis of null hypothesis of no significant difference in the mean responses of the administrators, facilitators and students on the extent quality is assured in assessment of students' performance in NOUN South-South, Nigeria

	Sum of squares	Df	Mean Square	F	p.value
Between Groups	3.58	2	1.79	61.19	0.001
Within group	24.76	847	.03		
Total	28.33	849			

The analysis of data in Table 2 shows that the probability associated with the calculated value of F (6.19) for the null hypothesis of no significance difference in the mean responses of the administrators, facilitators and students on the extent quality is assured in assessment of students' performance in NOUN South-South, Nigeria is 0.001. Since the probability value of 0.001 is less than 0.05 level of significance ($p < 0.05$) the null hypothesis was rejected. This implies that there is significant difference in the mean responses of the administrators, facilitators and students on the extent quality is assured in assessment of student's performances in NOUN South-South, Nigeria.

Research Question Two: To what extent is quality assured in the students support services in NOUN South-South, Nigeria.

Table 3: Mean and Standard Deviation, Responses on the extent quality is assured in the students support services in NOUN South-South, Nigeria (n = 850)

S/N	Item Statement	Administrators (n = 58)			Facilitators (n = 156)			Students (n = 636)		
	Items	Mean	SD	D	Mean	SD	D	Mean	SD	D
1	Ensuring availability of support services such as study centres (face-face teaching) library and counselling	3.74	.48	VHE	3.14	.87	HE	3.47	.54	HE
2	Regularly arranging learners' satisfaction surveys for appropriateness of the support mechanism provided	2.43	.94	LE	2.33	.81	LE	2.38	.64	LE
3	Providing the accurate profile of learners for appropriateness of suitable support for different learners	2.43	.60	LE	2.14	.78	LE	2.27	.68	LE
4	Providing timely feedback on assignment for effective learning	2.50	.92	HE	2.37	.83	LE	2.44	.84	LE
5	Reflecting areas of student's weaknesses and strengths in assessment feedback	2.42	.94	LE	2.37	.84	LE	2.40	.82	LE
6	Ensuring the availability of staff advisers for information assistance	3.51	.50	VHE	3.24	.61	HE	3.30	.60	HE
7	Monitoring of students' progress by counselling services	3.47	.50	HE	3.31	.57	HE	3.31	.58	HE
8	Offering opportunities for tutor-student as well as student-student interactions	3.62	.52	VHE	3.50	.50	VHE	3.58	.59	VHE
9	Making support service accessible to the students	3.31	.47	HE	3.23	.52	HE	3.32	.61	HE
10	Improving the effectiveness of the students support services	3.51	.50	VHE	3.29	.51	HE	3.35	.63	HE
	Grand Mean	3.09	.63	HE	2.89	.68	HE	2.98	.65	HE

Data in Table 3 indicate that the grand mean of (\bar{x} = 3.09, SD = .63) for the administrators, (\bar{x} = 2.89, SD = .68) for the facilitators and (\bar{x} = 2.98, SD = .65) for the students shows the extent quality is assured in the students support services in NOUN South-South Nigeria is high. The standard deviation which range from .40 to .90 indicates that administrators, facilitators and students responses were not far from the mean responses.

Table 4: ANOVA analysis of null hypothesis of no significant difference in the mean responses of the administrators, facilitators and students on the extent quality is assured in students support services in NOUN, South-South, Nigeria

	Sum of squares	Df	Mean Square	F	P-value
Between Groups	7.66	2	3.83	40.39	0.001
Within group	80.29	847	.10		
Total	87.95	849			

The analysis of data in Table 4 shows that the probability associated with the calculated value of F (40.39) for the null hypothesis of no significance difference in the mean responses of the administrators, facilitators and students on the extent quality is assured in student support services in NOUN South-South, Nigeria is 0.001. Since the probability value of 0.001 is less than 0.05 level of significance ($p < 0.05$) the null hypothesis was rejected. This implies that there is significant difference in the mean responses of the administrators, facilitators and students on the extent quality is assured in students support services in NOUN South-South, Nigeria.

Discussion

The results of the findings showed that the extent to which quality is assured in the assessment of students' performance in NOUN South-South Nigeria was high. The finding was not expected, thus surprising because people look down on DE programmes believing majorly that their assessment processes are not qualitative. People believe that students can stay at home and write their assessments with all sorts of examination malpractices since they are not seen. Dharanajan (2002) asserted to this poor image of DE programmes by noting that the public have low image of DE programmes and their DE products because they believe their certificate is discriminated and believed to be of low quality. The findings of this study is in support of Peter (2016) that asserted that for quality to be assured in the assessment of students' performance in DE programmes, there must be appropriate security and measures to ensure the integrity of assessment processes; and effective assessment strategy that is valid and reliable must be employed. Again, the finding supports Okop (2015) as she noted that for quality to be assured in assessment of students' performance, variety of authentic assessment strategies and processes must be employed. Extent quality is assured in the students support services in NOUN South-South Nigeria. The results of the findings indicated that the extent to which quality is assured in the students support services in NOUN South-South Nigeria was high. Results from the findings showed that support services such as study kits, online and physical libraries, halls for face-to-face contacts, laboratories and counselling services were made available and accessible to an extent. The findings of this study was not expected thus, surprising as support services is also a variable that makes the public have low rate of DE programmes to be less qualitative when compared to conventional system of education. People believe that DE students do not have access to libraries, laboratories and counselling services. Salih (2004) affirmed to these poor image of support services in DE programmes when she noted that most DE programmes in Nigeria lack students support services; that the study kits are given late to the learners and sometimes not even accessible. Minteberg et al. (2008) asserted to this also when they noted that the counselling services which is necessary to monitor students' progress is not available to students, the few available ones are not accessible by students. The study is in support of the observation of Moore (2015) that support services should offer opportunity for student-student interactions and tutor-students interactions such as counselling services, halls for face to face meetings and access to calls. The view of Ahmed (2011) also supported the findings that availability

and accessibility of support services can improve the quality of DE programs because it enhances interaction which is necessary for the success of DE programme,

The result of the findings on Table 2 indicated that the extent to which quality is assured in the students support services in NOUN South-South Nigeria was high. The findings of this study was not expected, thus surprising as support services is also a variable that makes the public have low rate of DE programmes to be less qualitative when compared to conventional system of education. People believe that DE students do not have access to libraries, laborites and counselling services. Salih (2004) affirmed to this poor image of support services in DE programmes when she noted that most DE programmes in Nigeria lack student support services; that the study kits are given late to the learners and sometimes not even accessible. Minteberg et al. (2008) asserted to this also when they noted that the counselling services which is necessary to monitor students' progress is not available to students, the few available ones are not accessible by students. The study is in support of the observation of Moore (2015) that support services should offer opportunity for student- student interactions and tutor-student interactions such as counselling services, halls for face-to-face meetings and access to calls. The view of Ahmed (2011) also supported the findings that availability and accessibility of support services can improve the quality of DE programs because it enhances interaction which is necessary for the success of DE programs.

Conclusion

Extent quality is assured in assessment of students' performances in NOUN South-South, Nigeria was high. Integrity of assessment processes is put in place. Well-structured mechanism to check examination malpractices are upheld. These all make the quality of assessment of students' performances to be qualitative. Extent quality is assured in students support services in NOUN South-South, Nigeria was high. Support services such as halls for face-to-face contacts and examinations were available, online and physical libraries were available. Counselling services to monitor students' progress and assist students were also available though not adequate. Laboratories were also available though not adequate; students also have access to these support services. These support services are necessary since they also enhance interactions and bridge the gap of distance, thereby improving the quality of the programme.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

1. The Federal Government should allocate more funds to NOUN Nigeria to build more study centers in different states, provision of more support services like laboratories, halls for face-to-face contact examinations and resources.
2. Administrators of NOUN should arrange learner's satisfaction surveys regularly for appropriateness of the support mechanism provided.

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