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Government Policies in Relation to Quality Management Implementation: A Review of Nigerian Universities Principal Officers

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Abstract: This article aims to identify key actors responsible for the implementation of government policies on university education in relation to quality management implementation. In order to do so, the study uses a critical realist approach to unveil the reality about who are involved and who takes responsibility for the process. The paper draws on the literature of educational conditions in the Nigerian university context and uses ethnographic methodology to carry out the research. The article uses this approach to investigate principal officers that is, those involved in the events that take place within the Nigerian university context. Six universities were connected with the study, within which twenty-nine principal officers took part. This paper revealed that principal officers, among other key actors, play a vital role in the transformation process; therefore, they must take more responsibility if quality is to be sustained.

Keywords: Government policy, Quality, Quality management, University, Nigeria, Critical realism.

Introduction

The recent sudden growth in the number of private universities in Nigeria in the last two decades has generated increased concern among stakeholders about the quality of the education being delivered. The academic management and institutional recognition of universities are in question (Obasi et al., 2010). A feature of this growth has been a relatively large number of private universities in some parts of the country which have different interpretations of government policies on university education. This situation has created problems for enforcing a common system for institutional and programme accreditation, which is not helped by the fact that private universities have to conform to the requirements of their founders as well as being obliged to conform with government policies on university education. Government policies are administered by the National University Commission to meet local students', communities' and industries' needs and expectations.

The principal officers in public and private universities in Nigeria are expected to offer a good quality of service to their users even though there is no common platform for assessing quality and implementation of government policies in university education. Additionally, the universities have made it difficult for students and the external community to assess which institutions best meet their expectations and requirements. In this context, and given the lack of research on quality in Nigerian universities, this study uses a critical realist approach to

answer questions about how this state of affairs has come about and to understand the situation of the university officials who are responsible for the implementation of government policy. The study focuses on examining principal officers' practical knowledge, behaviour and professional practice, interpretation of events and beliefs about what causes them (Easton, 2010).

Critical realism is a research philosophy associated with the work of the philosopher Roy Bhaskar (1986) and, in organisation studies, with the work of Norman Fairclough (Fairclough, 2005) and others. Fairclough argues that though social reality is communally constructed, it has a material existence. In this theoretical stance, ontology is layered into three strata: the "real", the "actual" and the "empirical" (Fairclough, 2005, p.922). The empirical is the realm of the observable objects and events that present themselves to the researcher. The actual is the underlying current of events and processes that give rise the phenomena that the researcher observes at the empirical level. However, underlying these is the level of the real which consists of the unseen social structures on which the observable world is built. The level of the real is difficult to study and requires painstaking examination of the evidence at the other two levels in order to bring about a progressive process of understanding. In this study, the researcher examines the empirical evidence in order to identify the underlying structure that has brought about the observable phenomena.

Thus, this study focuses its attention on those who are involved in the events that happen within the university. By "events" we mean the processes that are associated with intake, transformation and output, which are the main activities of a university; however, this paper, concentrates its attention specifically on the transformation process. According to the principles of critical realism, by analysing the empirical evidence gathered from the university officers it should be possible to penetrate to the underlying hidden structure beneath and understand it.

Pratasavitskaya and Stensaker (2010) have pointed out that many institutions throughout the world have implemented, or are in the process of creating, their own quality management systems. Their aim is to ensure a high level of quality in their transformation process by applying models developed from both the service and the manufacturing sectors. Some institutions have applied models only from the manufacturing sector and developed metrics for student grades and student satisfaction which they use as dimensions of quality in their institution. This way of thinking has created a lot of debate in the field of quality management in higher education and has caused researchers to use a scientific approach to study quality in the hope that by using quantitative measurements like this improvements can be brought about. However, there has been a lack of qualitative studies that address the need to gain a deeper understanding of the problems of the current quality management in Nigerian universities and it is this gap which this study addresses. Thus, this study adopts a qualitative approach by collecting and analysing the experience of the university administrators themselves to find out how they perceive the situation.

Higher Education in Nigeria

The key stakeholders in the Nigerian university transformation are students, non-teaching staff, teaching staff, government agencies, other funding agencies, accreditation bodies, employers, and the general community. These stakeholders are also agents who have a direct influence on the university events. They all have their individual understandings of how quality management occurs, as suggested by Hill, et al. (2003) and Ogbogu (2013). Among these key actors, the most important groups are those who have an influence on the process,

require results from the service or are directly involved in the process. ., The conclusion of the work of Telford and Mansion (2005) suggested that investigating quality from the point of view of these key actors has not been explored and there is a need to uncover what quality means to those who are directly involved in the university system and processes.

The concentration on university management as key actors in this study is not to play down the importance of other external bodies, such as families of students, the government and society, who have genuine interests in university output, while quality management models stress their importance, motivation and commitment to the development of the system. But rather considering principal officers because of the greater influence they have on the overall system of the universities, such as admission criteria, teaching styles, methods and techniques, including an appropriate blend of factors such as classroom infrastructure and curriculum design. This justifies the reasons for their selection.

It is consistent with the critical realist approach as it is applicable to this study claims that human values, such as social and personal identity (Vincent and O'Mahoney, 2014), should not be ignored in the investigation of matters that lead to the development of the nation (Njihia, 2011). Similarly, Hill et al. (2003) observed that key actors' knowledge, skills, enthusiasm and teaching styles are fundamental to learning, as they control to a great degree the overall experience of students and the outcome of their studies. These principal officers have certain practical knowledge, involvement and make a contribution as well as having needs and expectations in relation to government policies and quality management. Subsequently a study by Doherty (1994) suggested that the needs of principal officers must be met for the successful implementation of quality in the university context. In addition, Doherty pointed out that quality improvement is based on the principle that only those involved in carrying out a process are fully competent at measuring its features if the need to measure should arise. Doherty's statement here supports the contention that the adoption of quality metrics from other sectors is not appropriate.

In the Nigerian context, university education is seen as a starting point in the development of the nation, in that it moderates and influences national development (Ojerinde, 2010). In principle, Oko (2011) revealed that the principal officers of a university influence the country's social development, the life of the country and its economic growth. As a result, in developing the country, greater attention is being paid to how university principal officers are recruited and managed (Kaul, 2010). In light of this, it is agreed that the university education management of a country plays an important role in the overall development and outcome of the nation (Ogbogu, 2013).

Thus, it is evident that efficient management of the university education system is very important and has a vital bearing on how the quality of labour and manpower of the country are developed as well as on national economic growth (Peters, 2009). However, one can easily agree that the overall development of a nation is based on the development of highly skilled manpower which requires the university principal officers' involvement, efforts and experiences (Ekundayo and Ajayi, 2009). In light of these facts, university education in Nigeria is seen as a means of development, taking into consideration human input as an important aspect of management as well as the uniqueness of the national structure in general (Akinyemi and Abiddin, 2013). Likewise, in their review, Wheelen and Hunger (2011) hypothesized that management includes the putting into practice of business objectives (such as mission and vision statements), with the purpose of realizing business gains as a result.

In practice, the principles and processes of an institution of higher learning or a university are not expected to function for business gain or profit - as a matter of fact, universities are 'not for profit-making' (Oyewole, 2009, p. 324). In the light of this observation, researchers such as Dauda (2010) and Smart and Paulsen (2011) have hypothesized that institutions of higher learning, including universities, are predominantly for the business of moulding people into useful skills and capacities for improvement at individual, organizational and national levels and, therefore, the principles of commercial management, such as are described by Wheelen and Hunger (2011) are not applicable.

Ekundayo and Ajayi (2009) and Okechukwu and Okechukwu (2011) have stressed that university management efforts such as input (admission and recruitment), transformation (teaching, learning and research) and output (graduates, enterprise) are primarily aimed at increasing manpower development, survival, profits and gains, as well as avoiding wastage in terms of students failing to complete their courses. In the context of this study, university management is not about material management to maximise monetary profits but the administration of available resources towards sustainable quality management in relation to the implementation of government policies to develop socioeconomic benefits for the country (Okechukwu and Okechukwu, 2011). On the one hand, administration involves directing the day-to-day activities of the university towards achieving its mission and vision statements, or resetting objectives, goals and the formulation of policies (Akinyemi and Abiddin, 2013). On the other hand, from whichever way one looks at efficiency, the process of control in the university comes either from the method of administration or from the technique of management, which primarily involves the effort of administrators, who are also referred to in this study as principal officers. Administration should be used to ensure quality for the purpose of efficient manpower output and adequate development for the country (Okechukwu and Okechukwu, 2011).

Principal officers are defined in this study as those who are responsible for decisions taken in the management of Nigerian university education. They are university employees and are sometimes called the university management, also referred to as agents in this critical realist study. However, Ojelabi (2004) and Okechukwu and Okechukwu (2011) argued that in Nigeria, university management can be seen from two dimensions: the internal and the external dimension. The external dimension is controlled by the regulatory body, such as the Federal Ministry of Education (FME) and the National Universities Commission (NUC), who are in charge of university management coordination and compliance with government policies. The activities performed by these external agents are evident in Peters' (2009) findings that the NUC's principal objective is to ensure the coordination and development of university education, maintain standards and ensure adequate funding for the management of university education in Nigeria. In line with this, Okojie (2007) stressed that NUC roles include ways to improve the quality of Nigerian university education, which include giving guidelines for setting up new universities, approval of courses and programmes, accreditation of courses, monitoring of universities and maintenance of minimum academic standards.

Researchers have made a number of findings about university principle officers and their power structures that are relevant to this study. Mgbeke (2004) argued that internal management in Nigerian universities is made up of principal officers who are primarily involved in the daily decisions of the university. This point was later supported by the work of Oyewole (2009), who claimed that the internal dimension in Nigerian universities is maintained and controlled through a committee system. He concluded that the committee reports directly to either the Council or the Senate. He pointed out that Nigerian universities are run by principal officers through the line of authority as required by their official

positions or job roles. Ojerinde (2010) found that in the organogram of the entire university, for example, authority flows directly down the line through a maze of authority, from the vice-chancellor through his deputies with him, or her, as principal officer. These are recognised as the agents that are driven by the structure of the Nigerian university system through their primary duties as principal officers. Okebukola (2002) highlighted that the Nigerian universities' organogram includes key actors in their setup, such as the vice-chancellor, registrar, bursar, university librarian and others who vary from one university to another, including heads of departments such as the dean of faculty, dean of student affairs, director of academic planning, university public relations officer, all of whom are also known as principal officers. Under them are several other categories of officers working as committee members, who exercise authority clearly at their respective levels as delegated to them. Among these committees are the finance and general purpose committee, the development committee, the appointments and promotion committee, the admissions committee, the academic planning committee, the committee of deans, the research grants committee and the ceremonies committee. All members of the committees are employees, most of whom are academic officers, with the exemption of the registrar, who must hold at least a Master's degree certificate with not less than ten years' working experience as an administrator, and the bursar, who must hold an accounting degree and be a fellow of the accounting body, depending on the university. These sets of university employees are referred to as university management, key actors, principal officers or agents, as in this study.

In agreement with Okebukola (2002), Ogundare (2009) explains that in the organogram for a university system, the Vice-Chancellor is the chief executive officer of the university: he is the number one academic officer of the institution. However, he claimed that the vice-chancellor cannot take decisions on very important matters, which affect all students and staff, without consultation. For example, in purely academic matters, all universities have a body called the Senate. The Senate includes all the professors of the institution, provosts, deans, institutes directors, and heads of academic departments who are responsible for any academic matters. The senate are also responsible for organizing and controlling admission, teaching and learning activities, graduation and student and staff discipline and determine prioritised areas of research (Arong and Ogbadu, 2010). The Senate's responsibility is to organize, control and direct the academic work of the university, to take measures and respond appropriately to the needs of the university as a place of education, teaching, learning and research. Its job is also to formulate and establish academic policies, advise the council on the provision of facilities to carry out the policies and regulate examinations and appoint deans and provosts (Babalola and Okediran, 1997; Okojie, 2007; NUC, 2010).

In addition, Ofoegbu (2002) and Ndirangu and Udoto (2011) emphasized that all members of the senate are principal officers and their roles are to ensure the day-to-day administration of the university. They also stressed that the vice-chancellor presides over the Senate, but even as comprehensive and well representative as the Senate appears to be, many of its decisions are based on recommendations from the various faculties and committees. In other words, committees are an integral part of Nigerian university organisation. In another review, Oyewole (2009) pointed out that in Nigerian universities, there are many kinds of committee, some of which are known by different names, such as boards or even panels. One of the most important committees of any university in Nigeria is the admission committee; this committee is one of the numerous committees of the Senate. It is made up of representatives of all the faculties, colleges, schools and institutes. It is headed by a senior academic, generally of the rank of professor, who is appointed by the vice-chancellor in consultation with the committee of deans and other principal officers of the university. The committee head functions solely on criteria that have been stipulated by the Senate. The admission

committee collates all the applications and recommends candidates' admission into the university program when they have met the institution and Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB) criteria (Okebukola, 2002).

Nevertheless, the Nigerian government still plays a central role in shaping the structure of the university systems, although other players also play a role. The government therefore demands accountability on the part of all Nigerian universities through the NUC, although it is now repositioning itself and forging new forms of relationship with Nigerian universities, by introducing different policies in order to continue to ensure some degree of harmony between national development goals and the operations of Nigerian universities (Ekundayo and Ajayi 2009; Dauda, 2010; Nakpodia, 2011). However, it is difficult to identify a particular policy operating universally in the Nigerian university system, which has created a serious debate on how quality is managed in the operation of Nigerian universities. The difficulty of identifying a particular educational policy operating in Nigerian universities is identified as a missing link in the operation of university education in Nigeria. No wonder Abubakar (2005) and Peters (2009) hypothesized that the story of university education in Nigeria and its management today has mostly been a story of mixed fortune. They stated that these institutions initially laid claim to the socio-political and economic advancement of the country. But it was surprising when Obasi et al. (2010) and Duze (2011) argued recently that Nigerian universities are finding it very difficult under their present conditions to lay any claim to be developing national capacity, or connecting with the new international knowledge system, as they have proved to be unable to respond to new technology.

Research Methodology

This paper is based on the critical realist research philosophy and qualitative data has been gathered. In-depth individual interviews have been conducted as the main research instrument to collect data for the study. There are 132 universities in Nigeria but due to the nature of the research and owing to the fact that all the universities cannot be studied, a purposive sampling technique was adopted using criteria such as location, age and size of the university to reduce the population, at the end of this selection process 18-universities emerged. A stratification sampling technique was latter used to select 6 universities from the 18 using criteria such as disciplinary balance and external involvement to reduce the sample to a smaller number that was viable for this research project.

Ishikawa (1990), claimed that quality is everyone's responsibility but for the purpose of this study, attention was paid only to the university management as the primary internal key actors. Therefore, the study focused on the educators (academic and management staff) who take responsibility for what occurs in the processes of the university education system on a day-to-day basis. The study was focused on 6 major principal officers in the university which were: vice-chancellor, registrar, bursar, director of academic planning, dean of faculty, university librarian, dean student affairs and their roles. 36 principal officers were approached to take part in the interview section but only 29 were available. The other 7 officers did not take part because they claimed to be too busy. This non-participation does not affect the validity of the data as the 29 interviews were sufficient.

The individual interviews with the 29 respondents provided a rich insight into the effect of government policies on university policies and quality management implementation based on respondents' roles and positions in the implementation of the processes under study. The use of in-depth interviews as a research tool for this study has the advantage of providing the researcher with an opportunity for in-depth questioning, enabling the researcher to better

understand the respondents' beliefs, perceptions, views, thoughts, feelings and experiences in relation to the areas covered in the study.

University Principal Officers' Responses

A starting point in this study is to clarify that the critical realist approach adopted does not support the idea of comparing situations because each discrete situation is unique and the cause of an event in one university might bear no relation to the cause of a similar event in another university. Therefore, rather than comparing situations in the data with each other this research directly relates them to the theoretical position. This approach is generally acceptable in critical realist studies of this nature, as mentioned by Blom and Moren (2011), who argue that theory should be employed throughout the whole research process. Likewise, the discussion is centred on re-description of the principal officer's responses to the researcher's own explanation, as supported by Vincent and O'Mahoney in Edward et al (2014). They argued that the critical realist belief is that research of this nature should involve combining theory identified in the standard literature review or immanent critique with observation conducted in the fieldwork to produce the most plausible explanation of the events. Constructionism, which is alternative research philosophy which was considered for this study was rejected because, approaches used by constructionists to develop their theoretical explanations often suggest activities that are inconsistent with their professed ontology.

In this paper, two distinct critical realist explanatory logics are adopted, in order to move from the empirical to reality through the use of retroduction and abduction, as suggested by Vincent and O'Mahoney (2014). Retroduction in this context seeks to explain the conditions in the universities for the conduct of quality management and for implementing government policies, while abduction serves to re-describe observable everyday objects and events of the university process. This is usually provided by the principal officers or observational data to identify irregularities in the pattern of events.

The survey results find consistency in principal officers' values, as identified in the interviews. Twenty-nine respondents participated in the study, each of whom was asked to explain his or her role in the implementation of government policies and quality management in the university. Although they all responded differently, the findings revealed strong congruence in respondents' views about their roles, duties, beliefs and values..

For example, a director of academic planning and a dean of student affairs were not interested in the position or the role they occupy in the university: rather, the director of academic planning was seriously concerned about teaching and learning, while the dean of student affairs placed more emphasis on student welfare, the environment where students study and after-class events, which are contributing factors to student outcomes. They both agreed that their position is not the issue: they were interested in discussing things that matter to the development and improvement of the Nigerian education system. These two groups of participants did not contribute to the discussion about who should be principal officers, for reasons that will be explored later in this discussion.

On the contrary, registrars and university librarians were more expansive in the conversation: the two groups each made a contribution. Both groups claimed to have more of a role in the administration of students in the university and to be involved in the transformation process. One of the registrars mentioned that his role is very important, because his office is the

custodian of university information. This may be one of the reasons why these respondents contributed more to the discussion. Meanwhile, three universities librarians attached more importance to their position, pointing out that if they are not present at management meetings, decisions cannot be reached for their offices.

The vice-chancellors' group and the deans of faculty, shared a very strong view that they are in the position to dictate what happens in their respective offices and they attached great authority to their. No wonder two vice-chancellors claimed that their overall duty is to be responsible for everything that takes place in the university, including responsibility for the management of staff, resources and funding for the product management of human and financial resources.

This was also in line with the findings of Ibukun (1997) that in the Nigerian university system, the vice-chancellor is the chief executive officer of the university, although he/she is the number one academic officer of the institution, he/she cannot make unilateral decisions on very important matters that affect all students and staff. This was also supported by three principal officers, who emphasised that although the vice-chancellor is the chief executive to whom all other principal officers report on every matter, even though they all have a stake in taking decisions on matters arising in the university. The statement was also supported by the work of Ofoegbe (2002), who explained in detail that the university management is made up of principal officers involved in the day-to-day administration of the university. It is not surprising that Mgbekem (2004) referred to principal officers as the internal management of Nigerian university committee systems, which are responsible to either the Council or the Senate. This contribution also testified to the ego displayed by the deans of faculty as key members of the decision-making body in the Nigerian university context.

One of the criticisms put forward by this study is that past research into university has applied models borrowed from other sectors, such as the manufacturing or service industries, in the education sector, whose services are multifaceted, making it difficult to understand the reality about how government policies on university education and quality management occur or should be implemented. Their roles, positions and involvement in the transformation of university education of principal officers are considered as important criteria, as supported by Bendell (1989), who concurs with Feigenbaum's view that quality is a way of managing a business organisation. This is consistent with the findings of the present study, in which three different respondents (registrar, bursar and dean of faculty) agree that principal officers are the key decision-making body in the university, and are also referred to as the management body.

In addition, six respondents highlighted the leadership role of university management as custodians of rules and regulations as they affect students, staff (both academic and non-teaching) and other areas of the university. This was consistent with the work of Gabor (1992), who established three perspectives on the phenomenon under study and explained that quality can be measured through quantification and achievement through management leadership, and that prevention is better than cure. The second and third perceptions are consistent with the findings of the present study, and in agreement with this statement, four registrars, two bursars and three directors of academic planning stated that the leadership of the university is in the hands of the principal officers because they take decisions on everything that happens in the university (Crosby 1996). Crosby placed considerable emphasis on the need to get it right first time as a way to improve quality, which will result in increased market share, rather than incrementally improving quality.

Though all quality management models stress the commitment and motivation of staff, the role of university management and academic staff as key actors having a direct influence on the overall process and outcome of universities cannot be over-emphasised. In addition to the appropriate blend of factors such as curriculum and classroom infrastructure, the enthusiasm, expertise and teaching style of instructors are vital to learning, as they determine, to a great extent, the outcome and the overall experience of students. It is well established that the enthusiasm and motivation of lecturers translates to high levels of student motivation and learning (Hill et al, 2003). Anderson (2000) emphasises the role of lecturer and student interaction and the passion and enthusiasm conveyed by the lecturer in enhancing students' engagement with the subject. High levels of staff motivation also correlate positively with professional satisfaction and the overall quality of services offered (Konidari and Abernot, 2006).

However, Lammers and Murphy (2002, cited in Hill et al., 2003) find that while lecturers have a role in disseminating information, they do not necessarily stimulate thought, change attitudes or develop behavioural skills that are necessary for the complex interactions that are essential in university. Hence, in order to be effective, educators must use their judgement, rationality and decision-making abilities rather than rely on routine (Hill et al., 1996). This statement is important, as it established the reason for this research to investigate the effect of government policies on university education and quality management implementation, having identified the right set of respondents who could be instrumental in uncovering the reality of the cause of the two events.

Research Limitations and Implications

This study comprised a comprehensive in-depth study that was conducted in six universities in Nigeria. To achieve the objective, the principal officers were identified and interviewed on their beliefs and perceptions about those responsible for the management of the events. Although the qualitative approach was extensive and informative in identifying the right set of people to get information from in order to understanding the cause of the event in question, it could be criticized for the lack of literature discussed, and a quantitative component could have been beneficial to the study, as it would have extended the research findings in some areas, albeit not necessarily uncovering the reality, which was the major aim of this paper.

Furthermore, as the study focused on three public and three private universities in Nigeria, it may lack applicability to other university environments, especially in the northern part of the country. The focus of the study was on identifying principal officers as the key internal stakeholders among employees: thus, it does not consider the views of other external stakeholders such as the MoE, NUC, ETF and many more who have a key regulatory role in the university sector but are not involved directly in the transformation process, which is the main activity of a university. While the case institutions' uniqueness is a hindrance to validity, insights have nonetheless been gained. An example is the discovery of the roles and duties performed by principal officers in the implementation of the events and the responsibility involved in implementing quality management constructs: two independent dimensions of the implementation of quality management in the university context. This finding should be investigated by further research with other institutions.

Originality and Value

This study makes a contribution to knowledge about the Nigerian university system. It does so through reviewing relevant literature and empirical research related to the effect of

government policies on university education, quality, and quality management in the university. The study also contributes to knowledge through reviewing the relevant literature using a critical realist approach and empirical research related to who takes responsibilities for quality management in Nigerian universities, an approach that was taken in order to identify why principal officers behave in a certain way. This study also makes a contribution to practice through exploring how principal officers approach government policies and quality management in universities. The study has uncovered the reality by identifying the importance of principal officers' roles and duties in the implementation of government policies on university education and quality. The study steps back to investigate the objects that cause the major barriers to quality implementation facing principal officers in the Nigerian university context, namely the failure to take responsibility for actions that promote students' development. The study also explores the sources of information that principal officers need to deliver quality. However there is further need to investigate other aspect of the event that happen in the university such as intakes and output.

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