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Prof. Bright Chima Megbo
Director of Academic
Planning, Federal University
Wukari, Nigeria.

Godwin Ndubuisi Ahaotu
Academic Planning Unit,
Federal University Wukari,
Nigeria.

Sustaining university undergraduate programmes in Nigeria through annual performance management

Bright Chima Megbo, Godwin Ndubuisi Ahaotu

Abstract

Nigerian Universities over the years have lagged behind in the performance of its formidable task due to the nature and dynamics of leadership as well as the political and economic environment of these institutions. The paper gives a perspective of the education sector in Nigeria. It examines the term 'sustainable development' and the role of the National Universities Commission and Engineering programme as the fulcrum and force for the development and sustenance of economic growth. This paper further examines performance management as a tool for assessing and evaluating institutional programmes and the sustenance of educational, economic and social development. It also presents performance management system as one such tool that can enhance the performance of the public agencies such as the universities. Its use is therefore recommended for Nigerian universities in order to be able to attain sustainable development.

Keywords: Sustainable development; National Universities Commission; Undergraduate programme; Engineering programme; Performance management; Benefits of performance management.

1. Introduction

Universities in Nigeria are a complex institution. They facilitate a great deal of interaction among independent bodies, groups and individuals, with the aim of achieving the national educational goals. These bodies, groups and individuals who are seen as stakeholders are the government, the public, parents, teachers, teachers' union, religious bodies and voluntary organizations. Moreover, Nigerian universities are therefore seen as a dynamic whole having a set of dream to fulfil. This dream is reflected through the set vision, mission, objectives, and huge inputs into the university system in form of human and material resources. The vision is fundamentally geared towards nurturing men and women of character and good judgment who will lay the foundation of good leadership for this great country and set it upon the path of greatness. The Nigerian government, and the Public Private Partnerships, through delivering a world class University education will sustain development and salutary values in the society.

Concept of Sustainable Development

The term sustainable development has been tied down to economic prosperity, environmental quality, social equity and cultural diversity (Ogunyemi, 2005). A very crucial point of consideration when discussing sustainable development is the World Commission Report, where sustainable development is defined as the process of developing land, cities, business, communities, etc. to meet the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generation to meet their own need (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). In the same vein, Lehman, Christensen and Hansen (2007), stated that global sustainable development strategy should focus on satisfaction of people's basic needs without compromising the quality of life of future generations. The World Health Organization (2005) refers to the interdependent and mutually reinforcing pillars of sustainable development as socio-economic and cultural development, and environmental protection. Furthermore, the World Health Organization (2005), identified information, integration, and participation as the building blocks for countries to achieve development.

For more than three decades now, Nigeria has adopted education as an instrument par excellence for national development (FRN, 1977, 1981, 1998, 2004) and this is reflected in the National Policy on Education. Nigeria places much emphasis on education because of her belief in it, as a necessary condition for realizing the five national goals, which include; a free and democratic society, a just and egalitarian society, a united strong and self-reliant

Correspondence:
Prof. Bright Chima Megbo
Director of Academic
Planning, Federal University
Wukari, Nigeria.

nation, a great and dynamic economy and a land full of bright opportunities for all citizens.

Thus efforts are intensified in providing education at three major levels; primary, secondary and tertiary levels. The objectives of these levels of education vary but they complement one another.

From a global perspective, economic and social developments are increasingly driven by the application of knowledge and education in general. The tertiary (higher) education sector in particular is fundamental to the construction of knowledge economy and society in all nations (World Bank, 1999). Complimenting this, Hayward (2006) reiterated that, active participation in knowledge societies is essential to economic growth and higher education institutions are the potential engines for that growth.

The attention given to higher education by a nation determines the extent to which the dividends will be reaped. Saint, Hartnett and Strassner (2003) affirmed that, in recent years, the economic success of newly industrialized nations (e.g. the "Asian tigers") has been linked to substantial prior investment in human resources. The quality of graduates pushed into the workforce by higher education set pace for national growth and development. Higher education is now recognized as a major contributor to the solution of major problems facing the world today at the global, regional and local levels, such as removing inequalities, alleviating poverty and environmental degradation, improving health, arresting large-scale pandemics such as AIDS, etc (UNESCO, 2004, p. 6). It also plays a decisive role in building social cohesion and in laying the foundations of healthy civil societies, based on good governance and participatory democracy.

In the same vein, sustainable development would involve all citizens of the nation whose knowledge and skills are essential for solving today's problems and preparing for future challenges. Education is expected to play a central role in the production of these human resources. Particularly, university education is to intensify and diversify 'its programs for development of high level manpower within the context of the needs of the nation' (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004, p.38). In the light of this, for Nigeria to attain a sustainable political, economic, social educational and technological development, universities' operations must be in line with national goals and aspiration. Moreover, performance of units and departments should be properly managed in order to ensure efficiency and effectiveness

NUC and Undergraduate Programmes

In Nigeria, the performance of universities is evaluated by a group of external referees namely The National University Commission (NUC). This procedure has some merits and demerits. For instance, it allows for cross fertilization of ideas while it could be considered to be time-consuming and expensive. In view of this, a relatively fast, reliable and less expensive approach to measure the performance of the universities need to be adopted.

An attempt to estimate the performance of Nigeria universities was the study carried out by the National University Commission in 2002. The study was coordinated by the University System Annual Review Meeting (USARM) to assess the performance of federal universities with special reference to teaching, research and service to the community. Ten universities were selected for study, and the

performance assessment was based on the stability of academic calendar, quality of teaching, research, funding, physical development, quality assurances, internal efficiency, staff and student union activities and elimination of vices. However, this study could be criticized on the grounds that each Vice-Chancellor was allowed to rate his/her university. This, therefore, calls for a radical departure from the traditional performance management practices adopted by the NUC to a contemporary university performance management strategies being adopted in various parts of the world. This is to aid sustainable economic development of the country – an objective which universities are founded to achieve.

Nigerian Universities have a common set of NUC prescribed programs to be implemented by both the academic and administrative staff of the universities. It is worthwhile to mention that the NUC was set up partly to establish and monitor the quality and standard in Nigerian universities.

Engineering Programme

Modern nations show great concern for education, especially education in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) for obvious reasons. STEM provide for the great need of the nation through the development of the social and economic infrastructure necessary for the growth of enterprise (Gemade, 2009), an antidote to poverty and leveler in the knowledge emerging society (Ajimotokan et al., 2009). Today, education has evolved as the primary agent of transformation towards sustainable development as it has proven to increase human capacities to transform their visions for society into reality (Oloyede, 2008; UNESCO, 2005). The literature is replete with numerous definitions of education based on philosophy of life, disciplines, past experiences, circumstances, environment among others.

Education, therefore, is the aggregate of all processes by which an individual develops values, attitudes, abilities and other forms of behavior that is of positive value to the society (Fafunwa, 1974). Also, it provides the theoretical knowledge in both basic and applied sciences, acquired through formal method designed for human capital development meant to serve national interest (Ibidapo-Obe, 2009).

Based on these definitions, engineering education (EE) entails education in science, engineering and technology (SET) for capacity building in engineering towards sustainable development. Thus, the aim of engineering education should be the integration of knowledge, skills, understanding, and experience (Padmanabhan, 2000).

The Nigerian government has made frantic efforts to encourage engineering education. From the mid-1980s, the first remedy introduced was diversification and specialization of the universities with a view to increasing their scientific, technological and agricultural contributions towards the transformation of the country. This initiative gave the basis for the formation of the following universities - Federal Universities of Technology (FUTO, FUTA, FUTMinna, FUTYola) and Universities of Agriculture such as UNIAGRIC Makurdi (Ajimotokan et al., 2009; Ekeh, 2009). The development of a viable engineering education is an indispensable tool in the various sectors of the economy if the nation hopes to develop and sustain development as well as attain its national vision and goals; be it the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS), Vision 20:2020, and the 7 -Point Agenda (Ekeh, 2009).

Meaning and Scope of Performance Management

Institutional organizations, be it public or private, exist to meet the needs of the society. A business is any activity that seeks to make profit by providing goods and services to others (Nickels, McHugh and McHugh, 1999). The fact that most of the universities, both large and small, in our communities are functioning below both NUC and world universities standards means that something is wrong somewhere. There is a plethora of studies on the declining state of education. In support of the foregoing issue, Esu (2003) and Abram (1981), argue that most public organizations failed because of ineffective and inefficient performance management system.

Drawing from the above statement, we opine that the reasons for the failure of most of the public institutions of learning in Nigeria are not because of its public or government ownership status. The Wall Street Journal (2003) quoted Michael Klein, the World Bank's Vice President for private sector development as saying that, 'now it doesn't matter so much whether infrastructure is in public or private hands'. The inference from Klein's statement is that what matters in business is not the ownership status but the quality of management. It is on this premise that this paper argues for the implementation of an effective performance management system as a tool for increasing efficiency of the Nigerian education sector.

The concept of performance management was first used by Beer and Ruh (1978). The concept was popularized in the mid-1980s (Akata, 2003). Armstrong and Baron (1998) and Armstrong (2004: 477) describe performance management "as a strategic and integrated approach to delivering sustained success in organizations by improving the performance of the people who work in them and by developing the capability of teams and individual contributors." Akata (2003:14) considers it as "a systematic and holistic process of work planning, monitoring and measurement aimed at continuously improving the teams and individual employee's contribution to achievement of organizational goals". Oladimeji (1999:51) defines performance management as "a means of getting better results from the organization, teams and individuals by understanding and managing performance within agreed framework of planned goals, objectives and standards".

The three definitions show that performance management has the following characteristics; strategic (concerned with the broader issues facing the business), systemic, systematic and holistic. It is integrated in four ways: vertically aligning business teams and individual objectives; functionally integrated; human resource integration and integration of individual needs. To increase our understanding of performance management, we draw from the definition of the word performance by Brumbach (1988) that: performance means both behaviour and results.

Behaviour emanates from the performer and transforms performance from abstraction to action. As instruments for result, behaviours are also outcomes in their own right as they are the product of mental and physical efforts applied to tasks and can be judged apart from results.

Performance is broader than performance appraisal. Performance appraisal according to Fajana (2002:283) "focuses on the extent to which an individual is carrying out assigned duties, as well as joint actions that can be taken by both the supervisor and the subordinate to manage observed variances between set standards and actual performance".

Performance management deals with the processes and activities of the organization that enhance the design, development, implementation of performance technologies. It embraces all formal and informal methods adopted by an organization and its managers to increase commitment and individual and corporate effectiveness. Performance appraisal is reactive while performance management is proactive. Performance Management System individualizes each component of the work task to suit the particular needs of the department. It involves three steps: performance planning, performance coaching and performance summary. Hall (2002), reports that most American counties have institutionalized approaches for improving organizational performance. Performance management is one tool that provides idea for implementing Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA). GPRA is a law that focuses on interpreting strategies and resources to get the outcomes needed for unique missions. The focus of the GPRA through the President's Management Agenda (PMA) is a citizen-centered government that is accountable for results. Reports from an Australian organization revealed that Performance Management System (PMS) had a more positive impact on the performance of certain groups of employees than it did on others. The work groups that were already performing well benefited from PMS whereas those that were not had a more negative attitude to PMS and were less positive about its impact on performance (Harper and Vilkinas, 2005).

Expected Benefits of Effective Performance Management System (Pms)

Performance management facilitates the implementation of business strategy by indicating what to measure, determining appropriate means of measuring, setting targets and linking the measure with organizational performance (Scheiner, Shaw and Beatty, 1991).

- Performance management improves the organizational performance (McDonald and Smith, 1995)
- Improves processes within the organization (Rummler and Brache, 1995)
- Improves employee performance (Egan, 1995; Longenecker and Fink, 1999)
- Improves team performance (Kenett et al., 1994; Lawler, 1994)
- Eases implementation of change in the organizational culture (Wellins and Schultz Murphy, 1995)
- Gives the organization a competitive advantage, improves customer satisfaction and quality of supervision (Bilgin, 2007)

A performance management system enables individuals and the organization to achieve strategic ambitions through processes that are both systemic and systematic (Watkins, 2007b). Performance improvement management systems in the public and private sectors have no differences between them. This is because they both seek to achieve goals – micro or macro. Performance management focuses on future performance planning and improvement rather than on retrospective performance appraisal (Armstrong, 2004).

Discussion

Indeed, there are many confronting and challenging issues that have deprived and continued to threaten the entire performance of Nigerian universities undergraduates. However, it is important to recognize the ongoing and very significant endeavors in Nigerian universities development

today based on President Goodluck Jonathan's impeccable contribution to the educational sector. Educational and economic reforms introduced through his 7-point agenda have brought about a new ray of hope to the Nigerian education sector.

No doubt, institutional weakness and capacity constraints continue to limit the consolidation of performance evaluation to guarantee good governance in our tertiary institutions. The prevailing crises in some Northern parts of the country still threaten to derail university academic programmes calendar. Despite the flaws observed, one can be positive to report that there is a strong wave of performance indicators measures in Nigerian Universities put in place towards ensuring that Nigerian university graduates measure competitively well in content and expertise with their counterparts globally.

Conclusion

Performance management within the university system is a wholesome strategy for planning, evaluation and sustaining improvement in the performance of university graduates so as to meet the standards and societal demands. In order to achieve the objectives of sustainable development of undergraduate programmes in Nigeria, performance measures/indicators need to be outlined and vigorously pursued. These performance measures if carefully followed will positively influence the performance of university graduates which will in no small measure facilitate the much desired attainment of sustainable development in Nigeria. Notwithstanding how fantastic the university undergraduate programmes may be planned, it is certain that their ineffective execution will lead to the production of graduates of poor quality. Subsequently, these graduates with inadequate skills and knowledge will bring about poor performance of institutions, organizations and the society in general.

On that account, for effectively resolving graduates quality issues, the selection of performance management indicators should be considered very important. This paper recommends that, in order to effectively sustain university undergraduate programmes, the following recommendations should be adhered to. Student admission and enrolment processes into Nigerian universities should be properly managed and scrutinized to ensure quality. Teaching and research activities in the university system must be properly monitored in order to ensure that students receive the right course work/programmes and high quality education in the universities. Further, this paper recommends that, for the sustenance of undergraduate programmes in Nigerian universities, frequent performance assessment on the management, staff, students and the entire system should be carried out on regular basis for sound results.

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