Promoting Quality Assurance Practices for ODL Programmes in West African Higher Education Institutions: The Role of RETRIDAL

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Abstract

The growth of open and distance learning (ODL) in higher education institutions in West Africa has generated concern about comparability of standards and recognition accorded products of ODL institutions. There is also concern about adherence of newly established ODL institutions to prescribed quality criteria hence public skepticism about ODL. To address this challenge, the foremost single-mode higher institution in Nigeria, the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) was chosen to host the Regional Training and Research Institute for Open and Distance Learning (RETRIDAL) that was established by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) to build capacity in West African higher institutions in ODL. This paper reviewed the role of RETRIDAL at improvement of quality in NOUN and other ODL institutions in West Africa along a Framework involving quality policy and plan, identifying critical function, specification of standards, involvement of users, documentation, training and staff development, monitoring and cost. RETRIDAL organizes training workshops for single and dual mode higher institutions in West Africa. Research and Development activities of RETRIDAL include programme evaluation on various functional areas of distance education for systems development and improvement. The institutional, national and international training programmes with the help of RETRIDAL-NOUN resource persons and instructional delivery media facilities available at NOUN have continued to improve the quality of instruction for distance learners, aiming at ensuring zero-defects in ODL programmes, enhancing fitness for purpose.

Keywords: Quality assurance; Open and distance learning; Higher education institutions; West African Sub-Region; RETRIDAL

Introduction

Education has been identified as the antidote to ignorance and poverty, the lever for national development, the key for unlocking natural resources and the plank for economic development (World Bank, 2012; Okebukola, 2013). Major roles played by education have been said to include the development of skills and knowledge for growing the economy and spawning new industries, promotion of creativity, engendering research for new inventions, reduction of poverty, promotion of health, applying new technologies and advancing new knowledge, and so on and so forth.

Distance education globally has witnessed astronomical growth within the last decade owing to the increasing demand for higher education and training and rapid development of information super-highway (Mannan, 2009). Mannan asserts that while well-established single mode ODL institutions are expanding beyond their national boundaries...
and becoming global resource centre, newer players are emerging at both national and global levels. As a matter of fact, many of the conventional higher institutions are embracing the dual mode delivery of programmes in order to harness the opportunities for increasing demand for places and to augment their proceeds in the face of dwindling public funds devoted to education. Faced with extreme form of scepticism, each of the ODL higher institutions has to contend with lukewarm reception by stakeholders and sometimes outright rejection; all borne out of ignorance and conservatism. It has however become obvious that the ODL system of delivery has gone global and has come to stay as there is no known substitute to it in the face of limited spaces in the face-to-face conventional system of education to satisfactorily meet the demands of those seeking higher education.

For instance, in Nigeria, less than 20 percent of applications seeking admission into the entire Nigerian universities through the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) secured placement in each of the years between 2000 and 2006 (Okebukola, 2007). Even with the establishment of more universities in recent times, the situation has not changed much, as only about 30 percent of applicants got placement in the last admission according to the latest report from the Federal Ministry of Education. The main challenge facing practitioners of ODL, however is that of convincing stakeholders, sceptics and the general public the supremacy of the ODL system over the conventional system; and his where the issue of quality assurance comes in.

In Nigeria so far, there are only two single mode and six dual mode higher institutions but these numbers are grossly inadequate considering the teeming number of qualified applicants wishing to access university education. To this end, more conventional institutions would need to be assisted to come on board and embrace the ODL mode of education delivery, by their going dual mode.

The Open University Act came into effect on July 22, 1983. Other events prior to this act, both singularly and jointly, became a watershed for the establishment of the National Open University of Nigeria. The university now has some 52 study centres covering the length and breadth of the country. There five Schools in place with two new ones recently approved by the National Universities Commission (NUC), the supervisory agency established by Government, which has the responsibility accredit various programmes in conventional universities as well as the National Open University of Nigeria.

As a practical response to the growing demand for training and research, the Regional Training and Research Institute for Open and Distance Learning (RETRIDAL) was established in collaboration with the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), Vancouver, Canada to ensure the success of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system and fully maximize the benefits of distance education in the West African sub-region. RETRIDAL, established in August 2003, is an academic arm of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) with the specific responsibility and expertise to undertake training and development, and foster research in Open and Distance Learning. RETRIDAL is focused to provide training services and opportunities to other emerging ODL institutions, build a regional network of ODL trainers and researchers, undertake practic-based research within Nigeria and across West Africa sub-region, and network with other similar institutions globally. This paper gives an account of the role of RETRIDAL in the promotion of Quality Assurance practices for Open and Distance Learning programmes in single mode and dual mode higher institutions in West Africa.

Open and Distance Education in Perspective

Open learning is any form of learning in which the process enables individual learners to
exercise choice over any one or more of a number of aspects of learning while Distance education refers to an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and/or time from the learners. According to Dhanarajan (2001), this type of education is learner-centred as opposed to the face-to-face learning where it is teacher-centred. Distance Education is the means by which the teacher is taken literally to the student. The teaching-learning process has students separated from the teachers by physical distance, often bridged by the use of communication technologies. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is a concept made up of open learning and distance education. The Nigerian National Policy on Education (FME, 2007) refers to Open and Distance Learning (ODL) as a system which encompasses “Education for All”, education for life, life-long learning, life wide education and self-learning.

Advantages of Open and distance education include but not limited to alleviation of capacity constraints for economics, human resources and rural development; education for all especially to reduce or totally eliminate illiteracy and poverty; capacity building for human resource development, especially in areas of acute deficiencies such as vocational and technical education, science and technology; life-long and life-wide education in order to build a learning and knowledge-based society; access to, and capitalizing on, emerging market opportunities both within the African region and globally. It also includes transforming the higher education sector to make institutions respond to contemporary changes, developments and needs of Nigeria; providing the answer to the perennial problems of teacher education; appreciating, educating the citizens about, and using information and communication technologies (ICTs) to accelerate national and community development and provide an organised entry into the global information superhighway; generating spin-off effects on other sectors of national development such as raising development in telecommunications, information technology, industry, broadcasting, postal and informatics and the development of many education-related small-scale industries. Alleviating budgetary constraints as expenditure on open and distance education has been shown in other countries to be as low as 30 percent of the total cost of the conventional form of education beyond the take-off costs (Jegede, 2010).

Open learning is merely one of the most recent manifestations of a gradual trend towards the democratization of education. It is quite obvious that education and learning have traditionally been ‘closed’ by various barriers. These barriers range from entrance requirements, time constraints, financial demands, geographical locations, distances, social and cultural barriers, religious as well as those of gender. Therefore, an open-learning institution is one dedicated to helping individuals overcome these barriers to further their education. The rigid structures in face-to-face system such as duration of programme, age limitations, formal qualifications, place of study, curriculum and syllabus having time lag, methods of teaching-materials, evaluation, restrictions in attendance, admission, number of examinations, combination of courses among others are removed.

Characteristics of ODL include:

- The separation of teacher and learner: This is the central characteristic of distance education.
- The role of educational organization: This is an institutionalised kind of system and therefore different from private study.
- The place of technical media: Various types of technically advanced media like print, telephone, audio-video, broadcasting, computer/internet and different types of conferencing can be used.
- Two-way communication: Learners make responses through their tutor-
marked assignments and other information and communication technologies and receive feedback through the same channels. They are therefore in dialogue with the institution always.

- Separation of learner from their peer groups: This is the most highly individualized form of education, even though study groups may be formed, this is not compulsory. A learner is free to work on his own (Salawu, 2013).

The combination of open learning and distance education gives us a composite picture of the context of the ODL. It provides access to the remote, normally inaccessible and under-represented groups. It meets the specific and special educational needs of a wide variety of learners. It dwells and thrives on economies of scale.

The Challenges Associated with Open and Distance Learning

The United States Distance Learning Association presents Distance Learning as the acquisition of knowledge and skills through mediated information and instruction, encompassing all technologies and other forms of learning at a distance. In the same vein, Distance Learning as planned learning normally occurs in a different place from teaching and as a result requires special techniques of course design, instructional techniques, special methods of communication by electronic and other technology, as well as special organizational and administrative arrangements. These show that ODL imposes special demands on the personnel involved in the implementation of the ODL system. ODL staff members need to possess necessary passion and skilled teaching. The limitation and shortcomings associated with internet-based learning and the inability of the Distance Learner to devote time to learning while at work are reasons why distance learning is perceived as less effective compared to the full-time immersion in a learning community (Egbokhare, 2006). However, distance learning presents massive opportunity for learning, especially at the tertiary level. It is active and engaging-learning which mandates doing instead of watching. Even in situations where only printed text materials are used, complex instructional designs now make highly interactive and independent learning process possible.

The challenges of open and distance learning which can erode the quality of the programme according to Olubor and Ogonor (2008) include, but not limited to, epileptic or non-availability of power supply, poorly produced course materials where available at all, acceptability of the certificate issued from ODL institutions by the labour market, and affordability. In Nigeria, like many other countries, a good number of conventional universities run Distance Learning programmes alongside the conventional programmes for which they were originally established. Examples of these dual-mode institutions are: University of Ibadan; University of Lagos; Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife; University of Abuja; Modibbo Adama University of Technology-Yola; and University of Maiduguri. A few other conventional universities have expressed interest in going dual mode. The final approval can only come from the NUC for this intent to become a reality. The NUC accredits existing distance learning programmes and approves Universities wishing to start. Most of the dual-mode Universities use the same set of staff for conventional and distance learning programmes. These lecturers and other support staff have no background training and the required skills and experience in ODL. These developments demand that regulations, guidelines and criteria need to be put in place to ensure quality of materials, processes and ultimately, the product. Salawu (2013) also recommends that ODL staff need specialized training and re-training towards effective delivery of the ICT-driven instruction and
services and that the institutions should place due emphasis on the capacity-building of staff.

Each of these ODL institutions are passionately trying to convince the academics, stakeholders, and public in general about their supremacy over the others. The wave of growth of the ODL although washed away the skepticism about its quality, professionals still believe that same-time, same place interaction is central to the success of learning experience (Twigg, 2001; Muirhead, 2000).

In sub-Sahara African countries, provision and access to education generally and tertiary education in particular has been faced with serious challenge. These range from lack of infrastructure to lack of qualified personnel, poor funding to inadequate number of spaces for prospective students.

**Regional Training and Research Institute for Open and Distance Learning**

The Regional Training and Research Institute for Open and Distance Learning, which is housed in the National Open University of Nigeria, has a mandate covering the West African sub-regions with the overall objective of promoting the ODL system in higher institutions. RETRIDAL’s mission is to build a regional network of expertise in the West African sub-region that is highly proficient in the delivery of training, development and practice-based research in ODL. The following are its specific objectives:

- To undertake and provide staff induction, training and development in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) at NOUN.
- To conduct training, development activities and train-the-trainer for staff of other institutions of higher learning and ODL-related organizations in Nigeria and in the countries of the West African sub-region.
- To identify and provide training and development needs of different professional groups within the West African sub-region, networking with other similar institutions globally.
- To develop RETRIDAL as a Centre of Excellence and thus affirm and promote the Institute a leading provider of quality education, training and research in ODL.

**RETRIDAL’s Activities in the Area of Quality Assurance**

RETRIDAL is aware of the significance of Quality Assurance in ODL practice and for this singular reason has made it one of its cardinal points. Quality is of importance in terms of programmes as well as in terms of course material development. Because of the peculiar nature of ODL course materials relative those in the conventional system, care must be taken to ensure that only self-instructional materials that meet the quality requirements for any course that is put into use.

It is crystal clear, that no Distance Learning higher institution can succeed without quality self-instructional materials, which are usually driven by its staff. It must be noted that the quality self-instructional learning course materials, whether manually or electronically, determines to a large extent the quality of teaching and learning that take place in a distance learning institution. Quality self-instructional materials remain the backbone for effective and efficient operations of any ODL or dual mode institution and are germane to the development and sustenance of Open and Distance Learning system of education. For quality self-instructional learning materials to evolve, the course material developers must be well-trained in the art of developing self-instructional learning materials. This is essentially the main objective of the training workshops organized by RETRIDAL. Such trainings take the participants through the rudiments of developing self-instructional learning materials, which is imperative to effective and efficient teach-
ing and learning in ODL system of education. For a course material to be regarded as one of good quality as self-instructional learning material for ODL students, its contents should be developed and written in such a way that an average intelligent person on the street can read and comprehend without assistance from a teacher.

RETRIDAL has ensured that academic staff of single mode and various dual mode institutions in Nigeria and other West African higher institutions are trained in the area of Quality Assurance through its various training workshops which have been organized in collaboration with the Commonwealth of Learning. Such trained had come about in form of capacity building for the various staff participating. Such training activities have always designed in the form of training-the trainer such that participating staff would return to their respective higher institution to train their colleagues.

One of the most important components of academic programmes of any higher institution is the maintenance of quality such that the various programmes adequately meet the minimum academic standards set by supervisory agencies such as the National Universities Commission (NUC) in the case of Nigeria. Presumably, every country has her own agency regulating her education sector. Expectedly, quality assurance mechanism in academic programmes in conventional higher institutions would differ from those in ODL and dual mode higher institutions. In other words, the QA mechanism being adopted for programmes in conventional higher institutions cannot be superimposed on those of ODL and dual mode institutions. The training of academic staff in open and dual mode higher institutions in Nigeria on QA mechanism is therefore seen as a serious matter.

A 2-day national workshop on quality assurance mechanism in ODL and dual mode higher institutions was organized by RETRIDAL in collaboration with COL and the National Universities Commission. It was held in Lagos, Nigeria during March 26-27 March 2013.

The main objectives of the training workshop were as follows:

a) To expose participants to the basic Quality Assurance strategies in ODL, national and international benchmarks for higher education as well as expose them to prevailing best practices and the various toolkits.

b) To train participants in the art of developing QA framework in ODL higher institutions.

At the end of the workshop participants should be able to:

a) Identify existing QA strategies (dual mode) in participating higher institutions.

b) Identify basic international standards and benchmarks especially the ACDE-QAAA developed by the African Council for Distance Education for QA standards in higher education.

c) Identify and explain roles of different stakeholders such as the NUC in higher education quality enhancement.

d) Train other practitioners in the art of developing QA framework in ODL and dual mode higher institutions.

e) Identify gaps in their existing quality processes for dual mode provision and outline corrective actions in the light of ACDE-QAAA benchmarks.

Participants were exposed to Quality Assurance best practices which were expected to increase competency among quality assurance practitioners in ODL and dual mode higher institutions.

Related to the above was the Quality Assurance Framework that RETRIDAL assisted the Government of The Gambia to develop in 2009. The ministry of Higher Education, Research, Science and Technology took a pragmatic step in drawing a Quality Assurance Framework in that year with the assistance of RETRIDAL and COL. The workshop on the validation of quality assur-
ance framework for higher education in The Gambia was held in Banjul, The Gambia in April 2012. Participants at the workshop were drawn from the academia, public service and other relevant sectors. Virtually all the participants were stakeholders in the higher education sector and were involved in the development and validation of the QA framework. Several technical sessions were held during which each of the Framework chapters was exhaustively discussed. It was concluded that no effort should be spared at ensuring that all the observations and amendments made on the draft document was implemented in the final document without delay so that the tempo can be sustained. The consensus opinion was that the QA framework, if put to use, will go a long way in ensuring a higher standard of higher education in The Gambia. At the end of the workshop, a validated national framework for quality assurance for Higher Education in The Gambia evolved and this important document was adopted. Actual use of the framework will be after it might have been presented and passed by the parliament of The Gambia.

Quality Assurance of ODL Programmes in Higher Educational Institutions

Quality could be defined as degree of excellence. The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary defines the term as the practice of managing the way goods are produced or services are provided to make sure they are kept at a high standard. According to Olubor and Ogonor (2008), quality assurance is a set of activities or procedures that an organisation undertakes to ensure that standards are specified and reached consistently for a product or service. The goal of quality assurance is to create reliable systems, anticipate problems and design procedures and avoid as many faults and errors as possible. Aworh (2006) states that quality assurance should be the concern of any establishment, worthy of its salt, that produces goods and services. Also, quality assurance is a systematic management and assessment procedure adopted by higher educational institutions and systems in order to monitor the performance based on specified objectives. Educational institutions pay attention to quality assurance through internal control mechanisms to remain competitive in the effective delivery of education.

According to Alonge (2006), higher education can be defined as the level of education offered and/or acquired by the students after secondary education. Higher education is the hub of socioeconomic development as the products control the private and public sectors of the economy. The synonyms of higher education include:

- Tertiary education
- Institutions of higher learning
- Post-secondary education.

Regulatory or coordinating agencies such as those set up by Government, for instance, the National Universities Commission (NUC) in Nigeria and professional bodies such as the Council of Registered Engineers of Nigeria (COREN) have the mandate for establishing academic standards in Universities. Apart from these, each University has its own self-validation tests and internal control mechanism to ensure quality. A major challenge that a Higher Educational Institution has to continually cope with is that of accreditation and re-accreditation of its proposed or existing academic provisions. These are referred to as licencing and re-licencing in some countries. Licencing or accreditation, however, does not automatically confer quality on the HEI’s academic programmes. Another major problem for an HEI is how to operationalize the notion of quality, which clearly must apply to the full range of its functions, processes, activities and infrastructure, as well as the entire academic environment. In order to assure that the products of the HEIs especially University graduates are employable, Alonge (2006) recommended
drastic change in internal efficiencies as well as external efficiencies, overhaul of the curricula, partnership between industry and the institutions and a critical look into the quality of the teachers.

Quality Assurance is regarded as planned and systematic activities implemented in a quality system so that quality requirements for a product or service will be fulfilled. Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia defines Quality Assurance (QA) is a way of preventing mistakes or defects in manufactured products and avoiding problems when delivering solutions or services to customers. Quality Assurance refers to administrative and procedural activities implemented in a quality system so that requirements and goals for a product, service or activity will be fulfilled. It is the systematic measurement, comparison with a standard, monitoring of processes and an associated feedback loop that confers error prevention. This can be contrasted with quality control, which is focused on process output.

Two principles included in Quality Assurance are: “Fit for purpose”, the product should be suitable for the intended purpose; and “Right first time”, mistakes should be eliminated. QA includes management of the quality of raw materials, assemblies, products and components, services related to production, and management, production and inspection processes. According to Ekhaguere (2000), quality may be characterized as any, and hence all, of the following attributes:

- Fitness of purpose – measured by the extent to which an institution’s provisions align with, or fit, national priorities, goals, objectives and aspirations;
- Fitness for purpose – measured by the extent to which each higher education product fits its envisaged purpose;
- Value for money – measured by achieving more with less in an efficient manner;
- Transformation – from one state to another with values added;
- Perfection – perceived as the attainment of a near flawless product;
- Excellence – viewed as the attainment of exceptionally high standards.

Harvey and Green (1993) identified five major approaches to quality. The list includes: exceptionality, consistency, fitness for purpose, value for money and transformation. Exceptionality implies distinctiveness, excellence and passing a set of minimum standards. Consistency is associated with ‘zero defects and getting it right the first time’. Fitness-of-purpose approach to quality is judged by the extent to which a product meets a stated purpose while value for money is about accountability. Transformation approach views education as an ongoing process and is measured by the extent to which the learning experiences enhance knowledge, abilities and skill of the students. It also takes interest in transforming the student into a flexible thinker (Ewell, 1997; Osasona, 2006). These ideas reveal some degree of overlap with those presented by Ekhaguere (2000). Ekhaguere (2006) further asserts that the characterizations of quality are at the core of institutional quality management, leading to various quality indicators and quality assessment pathways within each institution. This requires a self-evaluation process which should cover what the institution is trying to do, how it is trying to do it, how it knows that it is meeting set objectives and the changes being made towards improvement. Such process helps the institution to continually improve the quality of teaching, learning, research activities, management and administrative functions and processes, policies and strategic plans, internationalisation process and indeed, response to social demands.

A wide range of literature identified two purposes of quality assurance which are inter-related. These are accountability and improvement. While Thune (1996) argued that the two purposes are mutually exclusive because there is a conflict of method between them, Middlehurst and Woodhouse (1995)
suggest that both are linked and could even be well integrated, one into the other. In the case of RETRIDAL, the purpose of quality assurance efforts is that of improvement. It disseminates research reports, reviews and assessments carried out by individual or group researchers in the area of Open and Distance Education. This is achieved through the publication of two editions of WAJOFEL every year with copies distributed at affordable costs apart from the complimentary copies sent to institutions and officials of ODL institutions in Nigeria as well as other countries of West Africa. The Institute also coordinates research activities on ODL and considers research proposals for NOUN- and COL-sponsored research grants which are released annually.

The Regional Training and Research Institute for Open and Distance Learning (RETRIDAL) was established in August 2003 at the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) as a practical response to the growing demand for training and research in ODL in collaboration with the Commonwealth of Learning in Vancouver, Canada.

**Adopted Framework for Quality Assurance**

The Robinson’s (1994:190) framework for quality assurance was adopted for analyzing the role of RETRIDAL in quality assurance. The basic elements of the framework are:

a. Quality policy and plan  
b. Identification of critical function  
c. Specification of standards  
d. Involvement of users  
e. Documentation  
f. Training and staff development  
g. Monitoring  
h. Cost

**a. Quality policy and plan:**
The framework presumes that open and distance learning organizations should develop a policy on quality. All level of staff should have opportunity to shape its development and goals agreed upon, and the policy needs to be translated into a practical plan. In this regard, RETRIDAL’s vision is to become a globally acclaimed one-stop solution for ODL training, development and research needs in the West African sub-region. The mission is to build a regional network of expertise in the West Africa sub-region that is highly proficient in the delivery of training, development and practice-based research in ODL. Activities of the Institute has continued to revolve round the vision and mission as indicated by the planning and successful organization of staff training at the National Open University of Nigeria; at the national level involving selected staff of NOUN and dual-mode institutions in Nigeria; as well as at the regional level involving staff of ODL institutions in West African countries. These programmes follow annual strategic plans which specify training programmes, stakeholders and venue and these are strictly adhered to.

**b. Identification of Critical Function:**

In the framework, critical functions targeting goals need to be identified, procedures for the implementation of the critical functions need to be analysed, mapped out and must match reality. The procedures also need to follow good practices. RETRIDAL activities are goal-oriented. For instance, each training programme has set objectives which are measured both before and after the training exercise. Also the resource persons are carefully selected based on expertise and experience in the field of ODL.

**c. Specification of Standards:**

Robinson’s quality assurance framework specifies the need for critical function standards to be clearly specified, communicated and stored in written form for easy reference. To this end, RETRIDAL documents aims, goals and objectives of its activities right from the level of proposal-writing for such programmes. These proposals are sometimes prepared for submission to the Common-
wealth of Learning (COL) or to the Management of NOUN depending on the scope and sponsorship of such programmes. Concerning WAJOFEL, standards to be complied with by Authors who may wish to submit articles for publication are also specified and disseminated through RETRIDAL website as well as in already published editions of the journal. These leave no one in doubt as to the rationale, goals and requirements of every single aspect of RETRIDAL activities.

d. Involvement of Users:
This deals with the requirement that any quality assurance approach must ensure that students, tutors, course developers, operational service units and other stakeholders are involved in setting appropriate standards and formulating procedures. RETRIDAL carries out situation analysis, identify areas of need for improvement, prepares proposals, source for materials and facilitators and actually plans and implements activities in conjunction with relevant stakeholders. This has made RETRIDAL to continue to be relevant in the entire West African sub-region when it comes to the realm of ODL.

e. Documentation:
The adopted quality assurance framework specifies that all procedures for achieving standards must be clearly documented and explicitly too. These documents must be reliable, user-friendly, accessible and up-to-date and reviewed when necessary. Here, RETRIDAL produces printed training manuals in addition to electronic versions as well as power-point slides used for the delivery of lectures, papers and instructions. The diversity of materials helps the individual participant to derive maximum benefit from the programmes organized as attested to by reactions of participants during the usual closing remarks and review of activities at the tail end of each programme.

f. Training and Staff Development:
It was suggested that adequate provision should be made for the training and development of staff towards standards achievement. It was also required that proper mechanism should be put in place to assess training needs of staff on a regular basis and resources allocated to meet them. In fact, this is the main focus of RETRIDAL and it has continued to play a key role in this area. Induction training for newly employed staff of NOUN to integrate them into the ODL system and associated peculiar requirements, regular National and Regional workshops for staff of ODL institutions across West Africa, coordination of research activities and publication of peer-reviewed research findings.

g. Monitoring:
There is also the need for systematic and routine monitoring mechanism for critical function and ascertaining extents to which standards are being met and procedures followed. RETRIDAL performs this function in NOUN, covering all the study centres across Nigeria. Staff members of NOUN and other ODL institutions’ are also encouraged, through annual NOUN- and COL-commissioned and funded research work into various aspects of ODL delivery system across the West African sub-region. This would continually raise issues of quality and level of adherence to standard practices which the community of practice in ODL will collectively proffer solutions to.

h. Cost:
It is a requirement in the Robinson’s quality assurance framework that there should be a strategy for monitoring the cost of implementing and maintaining quality assurance activities. This covers both human and financial cost and a review process for costs and benefits. For RETRIDAL, the benefits of the quality assurance activities reflect in the development of skills, expertise and encourage the sharing of experience among various ODL institutions in West Africa. This is quite enormous and justifies the cost of planning and implementing the programmes.
The role of RETRIDAL based on its activities can be likened to the ‘Control objectives for information and related technology’, (COBIT) first released in 1996; and published in the current version as COBIT 5, in 2012.

COBIT aims “to research, develop, publish and promote an authoritative, up-to-date, international set of generally accepted information technology control objectives for day-to-day use by business managers, IT professionals and assurance professionals”

COBIT defines a set of generic processes for the management of IT. The framework defines each process together with process inputs and outputs, key process-activities, process objectives, performance measures and an elementary maturity model.

The entire activities of RETRIDAL are summarised in Figure 2.

![Figure 1: COBIT 5 Model (Adopted from International Systems Audit and Control Organisation, ISACA, 2012)](image)

RETRIDAL plans and organizes its activities, goes on to acquire both human and material resources, delivers and provides support during implementation and then monitor and evaluate based on the objectives.

Continuous Improvement Programme Evaluation Quality Assurance Research and Training

**Figure 2: Inter-relatedness of RETRIDAL's Activities**

These 4 key aspects of RETRIDAL activities follows COBIT 5 five key principles:
- Principle 1: Meeting Stakeholders’ Needs
- Principle 2: Covering the Entire Institution/Region End-to- End
- Principle 3: Applying a Single, Integrated Framework
- Principle 4: Enabling a Holistic Approach
- Principle 5: Separating Governance from Management.

RETRIDAL is an academic arm of NOUN with the specific responsibility for undertaking training and development activities and foster research in ODL. RETRIDAL’s main purpose is to provide training services and opportunities to other emerging ODL Institutions; build a regional network of ODL trainers and researchers; undertake practice-based research within Nigeria and across West Africa; and network with other similar institutions globally. It was also established to ensure the success of the ODL system and maximize the benefits of distance education in the West-Africa sub-region.

1. RETRIDAL has three broad objectives which include: To undertake and promote staff training.
2. To engage in and support systematic research activities in open and distance education in order to build for and provide quality distance education in West Africa.
3. To build capacity of West African universities in open and distance education. Specifically, RETRIDAL has the mandate of meeting the training and capacity building
needs of NOUN and other Open Universities in the West African sub-region; offering training services and opportunities to other emerging ODL institutions within and across educational sectors of Nigeria and other West African countries; building a regional network of ODL trainers as well as to establish a centre of excellence in training and development.

RETRIDAL has instituted a journal titled: West African Journal of Open and Flexible Learning (WAJOFEL). The journal publishes peer-reviewed research-based papers in ODL twice in a year i.e. January and June. Also, between 2004 and 2013, RETRIDAL has organized over twenty-five workshops in Nigeria, Ghana, Cameroon, Sierra Leone, The Gambia and Tanzania. Some of these, especially those that significantly impacted on quality assurance include the First Sub-Regional Stakeholders’ Planning Meeting held in Lagos in May 2004. In 2005, one hundred and eighty NOUN staff were trained in induction and orientation programmes while another fifty benefitted from a similar training between 2005 and 2009.

Since 2006, more than two hundred NOUN staff received RETRIDAL-organised advanced orientation in e-learning content development and skill and about eighty NOUN staff received specialized training in instructional designs during the same period. In addition to these, some three hundred and thirty-nine non-NOUN course material writers from other institutions of higher education in Nigeria and other countries were trained in open and distance learning.

In 2010 alone, two major workshops on new trends in Teacher Education and professional development and on flexible and blended approaches to skills development for TVET Institutional Heads were organized by RETRIDAL. Also, in 2011, a leadership training workshop for female academics in West Africa and another workshop on research development workshop held in Lagos and the Gambia respectively. Workshops on tutoring and effective management of feedbacks in ODL, course material development for Open and Distance Learning and on Open Educational Resources were all held in 2012 towards sharpening the skills of instructional delivery and management of the ODL system in the sub-region. Of great significance is the workshop on Quality Assurance mechanism in ODL and dual mode institutions in Nigeria as well as the Regional Workshop in ODL Research Methods and Tools in 2013. These and many more have continued to benefit individual staff members of ODL institutions in West Africa as well as the ODL institutions which they serve.

Conclusion

Quality assurance in ODL institutions in the West African sub-region is a very critical instrument through which consumers and stakeholders’ confidence can be developed in the relatively new open and distance education system. With RETRIDAL’s efforts so far in that direction, every ODL institution, academic units and individual staff member need to take advantage of the opportunity. Other stakeholders also need to make concerted efforts towards ensuring quality in the delivery of open and distance education in the sub-region. In the final analysis, RETRIDAL has continued to play a leading role at the institutional, national and international levels with the use of experts from NOUN and other ODL institutions in the sub-region. It uses training packages designed and developed under its coordination for training of staff in quality learning environments especially NOUN study centres, where modern ICT facilities are available and functional. The sole aim of RETRIDAL’s contributions to quality assurance, aimed at zero-defects in ODL programmes, has continued to ensure effective take-off and smooth-running of ODL in Higher Education Institutions in West Africa.
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