Doctoral Research in Education and Quality Assurance Mechanisms
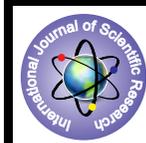
Education

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ABSTRACT   *The study assessed the status of quality assurance mechanisms in doctoral research in Education in the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. A total of 58 doctorate students randomly drawn from seven departments of the Faculty of Education, UNN constituted the sample for this study. The instrument was a quality assurance questionnaire (QAQ) that sought information on eight critical indices of quality assurance mechanisms in Postgraduate Education. Data were presented using Means and Standard Deviation scores. Results indicated that quality assurance mechanism was implemented to a great extent in the areas of introduction to doctorate studies for newly enrolled students and supervision. It was also found that the extent of implement of quality assurance mechanisms was not much in the areas of professional development, taught courses, refection to values and contribution to society as well as the learning environment conditions. It was therefore recommended among others that study environment should be improved upon to stimulate the students' creativity to guarantee quality in their research work.*

1. Introduction

Doctoral research is a key to developing Nigeria expertise in a variety of fields and to enhancing Nigeria competitiveness and innovation. The importance of a doctoral research rests on the fundamental principles that enable both self and national development. The purpose of doctoral research in education according to Murphy (2010) is for: 1) Career advancement. People offer to pursue doctoral degree because they have aspiration to become university lecturers and doctoral thesis is a perquisite for an academic position; 2) Personal growth. One of the greatest skills attained through the duration of a doctoral programme is confidence. One's self-confidence is improved by having completed a research inquiring that is largely self-directed; 3) Skill development. A scholarly doctoral research helps students' development of a set of skills beyond analytical and writing skills. Students are introduced to a wide range of kills, including technological application, creative talents and increased attention to details; 4) Finding solutions to particularly problems. Without scholarly inquiry, solutions that were taken for granted would not have been discovered; 5) Encourages further scientific researches. Doctoral research expands scholarly inquest and helps contribute to knowledge; 6) Acquisition and advancement of knowledge. Doctoral candidates participate in a scientific discourse by adding to scientific knowledge about a subject. Knowledge can be expanded, shared and discussed because scientists can build upon that other scholars have already presented.

A doctoral research in education is a demonstration of research competence. According to Petre and Rugg (2010), the following competencies are demonstrated through the research dissertation: mastering of the subject of research, research insight, respect for discipline, capacity for independent research and ability to communicate results and relate them to the broader discourse. Doctoral programme is designed to prepare students, teachers and leaders for academics and industry in contemporary education fields. Its primary component is independent, directed research leading towards a dissertation. A dissertation is a written thesis, essay or treatise often based on original research usually required for higher degree, especially on written by a candidate for the degree of doctor of philosophy. Research is simply the process of arriving at dependable solution to problems through the planned and systematic collection, analysis and interpretation of data. Research is the most important tool for advancing knowledge for promoting progress, and enabling man to relate more effectively to his environment.

Educational research is a systematic approach to the solution of educational problems. It involves the application of the scientific method in finding solution to educational problems (Nworgu, 2006). Educational research in other words should be expected to be concerned with important researchable and significant educational issues. Doctoral research in education, therefore, is a systematic scientific investigation involving identifying ways and means of teaching and learning efficiently and effectively so that the goals of education can be attained, at any given time and place. It also involves investigating what constitutes best practices and input necessary for enhancing educations as they relate to the content of instruction, infrastructures, method of teaching, learner characters, teachers personality, factors of the environment (Ali, 2006). From this definition, it is seen that quality assurance is an integral part to the process of doctoral research in education.

2. Quality assurance mechanism

In order to achieve educational goals through doctoral research quality assurance mechanisms must be brought into focus. Quality is defined as the level of value in a product or a level of achievement, a standard against which to judge others (Uvah, 2005). Quality assurance could also be defined in terms of both fitness for purpose and fitness of purpose. Fitness for purpose is related to the university's mission that is what the universities have set for themselves; fitness of purpose refers to their capacity to satisfy the national goals of higher education (Odejide, 2007). Quality assurance in the university system means the ability of the institution to meet the expectation of the users of manpower in relation to quality of skills acquired by their outputs (AJayi&Akindutire, 2007).

Quality assurance mechanisms in the doctoral research is said to be the ability of university to meet certain criteria relating to academic matters, such as, introduction to doctoral studies, personal development, supervision, relevant of taught courses; reflection and values and study environment (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), 2010). Eurodoc, (2005) identified the following as key factors in quality assurance of doctoral education:

2.1 Key factors for quality assurance in education
The general factors are:
- Clear rules on access to doctoral education and a transparent recruitment process;
- Procedures ensuring equal access for all, independently of gender, ethnic or social background, disadvantages and status;
- Foster internationalization by increasing mobility through offering portable grants, social security and mobility of person;
- A transparent administrative structure of the higher education institutions in which the administration of doctoral education finds its place and thereby can offer services and assist young researchers.

2.2 Factors at higher education level.
At higher education institution levels, career development and structures, and offered programmes are important factors, as well as the researchers' awareness about the career opportunities after they graduate. Cooperation with external partners (Industry, NGOs, etc) should be developed to guarantee the employability of doctoral candidates on the one hand, and to work on applied fields and not only on fundamental research on the other hand.

2.3 Factors and Graduate/Doctoral/Research School Level
The objectives at the Graduate/Doctoral/Research School level can be divided into organizational objectives and framework conditions (that is, employment and working conditions, recruitment procedures, supervision, training for supervision and coaching for supervision).

The organizational objectives are related to the integration of the graduate school into the higher education institution, and the transfer of the higher education institution strategy into objectives and structures in the administration, which should build a supportive service culture based on doctoral candidates' needs. Concerning the framework conditions, the recruitment procedures are important. They should allow equal access for all to the graduate school, and be transparent and connected with the institutional strategy access. Then, supervision and training of supervisors are other important factors. Here, supervision agreements can be seen as a valuable tool usable for setting standards. In this respect, such agreements should include skills development, responsibilities of the Research Fellow and Principal Investigator (PI) and a timeline for the doctorate. Reviewing supervision, thus considering supervision as a recognized task for the staff, promoting human resource development, creating workload models for supervisors, and evaluating supervisors dedicated time are possible ways to quality assured supervision.

2.4 Factors at programme level
As the programme level is not distant from the top level (that is, the higher education institutions level), the interconnection of programme level objectives with the strategy of the higher education institution has to be assured. The question here is: how researchers' enhancement of skills and experience, the added value and duration of a doctorate, the assessment, expectations and outcomes of doctoral programmes are evaluated? After setting the right criteria, the process of evaluation should lead to improvement at programme level and should give feedback about the upper levels, if the quality of processes at these levels needs to be improved.

Doctoral research in education is strategic to national development and transformation. There has been a public outcry concerning the general fallen standard of education in Nigeria at all levels in recent times. There is this view from some quarters that even doctorate degree holders do not measure up to the expectations in their fields of endeavors. The conditions in which doctoral students conduct their studies and the way in which these are organized have a major impact on their quality. The purpose of the study was to highlight the quality assurance mechanism of doctoral studies in education from the perspective of doctoral students in University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

The study specifically sought to answer the following research questions:
1. What is the extent of awareness created on entry into doctoral programme?
2. To what extent are doctoral programmes tailored to professional development?
3. To what extent does the quality of supervision received meet global best practices?
4. To what extent are taught courses relevant to identified research problems?
5. To what extent do doctoral studies impact on values and society?
6. To what extent do the learning environment conditions meet global standards best practices?

3. Method
The research design used in this study is descriptive survey. The population of this study consisted of all doctoral students of the Faculty of Education, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The sample was made up of 58 doctoral students from the seven departments selected through simple random sampling. The instrument used for data collection was a Quality Assurance Questionnaire (QAQ) adapted from the European Association for Quality Assurance in Postgraduate Education (ENQA), (2010). The questionnaire was developed on a four-point rating scale of Very Little/Not at all – 1, Not very much – 2, To a great extent – 3, and To a very great extent – 4. The questionnaire was divided into eight parts. Part A, which has four items sought to find out the extent of awareness created on coming into the doctoral programme. Part B has four items on the quality of professional development received; part C has six items on quality of dialogue with supervisor; and part D has four items on quality of supervision. Part E has four items on the relevance of taught courses; part F and H has four items each on reflection and values, and contribution to society. Part G consisted of four items that sought to elicit information on learning environment. The mean scores were used in answering the research questions. A mean score of 2.50 and above represents 'to a great extent' and below 2.50 was considered 'not very much'. A mean score of 3.50 and above shows 'to a very great extent' and below 1.50 represents 'very little/not at all'.

4. Results
The results of the study were presented based on the research questions in the Tables below.

Research question one
What is the extent of awareness created on entry into doctoral programme?

Table 1: Response patterns of extent of awareness created on entry into doctoral programme

No	Items	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1.	The department's introduction for newly enrolled postgraduate students was satisfactory.	58	3.14	0.91
2.	You were adequately informed about your rights and obligations as a postgraduate student.	58	3.43	0.77
3.	The requirements for enrollment as a postgraduate student were clear.	58	2.21	0.93
4.	The prior information about postgraduate studies was satisfactory.	58	2.64	1.02
	Cluster A Total	58	2.85	0.61

Data presented in Table 1 reveals that respondents agree that the department's introduction for newly enrolled doctorate students, information about their rights and obligations, and prior information about doctorate studies were implemented to a great extent as shown by the mean scores of 3.14, 3.43, and 2.64, for items 1, 2 and 4. They feel that the requirements for enrollment as a doctorate student were not very clear as shown by a

mean score of 2.21. This indicates that the awareness created on entry into the doctoral programme was implemented to a great extent as shown by the cluster mean of 2.85.

Research question two
To what extent are doctoral programmes tailored to professional development?

Table 2: Response patterns of extent to which doctoral programmes are tailored to professional development.

No	Items	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
5.	Acquiring knowledge of scientific or scholarly methodology.	58	2.17	0.88
6.	Acquiring knowledge of scientific theories.	58	2.04	0.67
7.	Acquiring the ability to carry out your own research independently.	58	2.05	0.83
8.	Acquiring deeper insights into research ethics.	58	1.86	0.76
	Cluster B Total	58	2.04	0.58

Respondents in Table 2 indicated that the extent of quality assurance mechanism in doctoral studies involving acquiring knowledge of scientific or scholarly methodology, knowledge of scientific theories, ability to carry out research independently and deeper insight into research ethics as shown is not very much implemented by the mean scores of 2.17, 2.07, 2.05, and 1.86 for items 5, 6, 7, and 8 respectively. This indicates that the extent to which doctoral programmes are tailored to professional development is not very much implemented as shown by the cluster mean of 2.04.

Research question three
To what extent does the quality of supervision received meet global best practices?

Table 3: Response patterns of quality of supervision received and global best practices.

No	Items: Dialogue with Supervisor	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
9.	To what extent has your supervisor displayed interest in your postgraduate studies?	58	1.97	0.77
10.	To what extent has your supervisor provided constructive criticism of your research?	58	2.21	0.87
11.	To what extent has your supervisor discussed methodological issues with you?	58	2.24	0.96
12.	To what extent has your supervisor discussed theory with you?	58	2.36	0.95
13.	To what extent has your supervisor discussed your plans for the future with you?	58	2.52	0.96
14.	To what extent have you had the opportunity to take part in general discussions about your subject area with your supervisors or other researchers?	58	2.55	0.82
	Cluster C Total	58	2.31	0.65
	Supervision in Action			
15.	To what extent have you experienced shortcomings in your supervision that have hampered your research?	58	2.47	1.01
16.	To what extent have you seriously considered switching supervisor?	58	3.16	1.01
17.	To what extent have you been offered supervision to the desired extent?	58	2.71	0.97
18.	To what extent have you found yourself in a situation of dependence on your supervisor which made you feel uncomfortable?	58	2.74	1.04
	Cluster D Total	58	2.76	0.59

As can be observed from Table 3, the respondents indicated that the extent of quality of supervision received in meeting global best practices was not very much regarding supervisor displayed interest in doctorate studies, provision of constructive criticism, discussion of methodological issues with students and experience shortcomings in supervision as shown by the mean scores of 1.97, 2.2., 2.24, 2.36, and 2.47 for items 9, 10, 11, 12, and 15 respectively. The respondents indicated that the quality of supervision received in meeting global best practices was implemented to a great extent in areas of supervisors discussed plans for the future with doctorate students, opportunity to take part in general discussions, considering switching supervisor, supervision offered, and of dependence on supervisor as shown by the mean scores of 2.52, 2.55, 3.16, 2.71, and 2.74 for items 13, 15, 16, 17, and 18. This indicates that the extent of dialogue with supervisor is not very much as shown by the sub cluster C mean of 2.31. However, it indicates that the extent of supervision in action was implemented to a great extent as shown by the sub cluster D means score of 2.76.

Research question four
To what extent are taught courses relevant to identified research problem?

Table 4: Response patterns of relevance of taught courses and identified research problem.

No	Items	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
19.	The courses offered fit in my wishes and needs	58	2.09	0.94
20.	The courses are relevant to my thesis	58	2.05	0.78
21.	The quality of the courses is consistently high	58	2.31	0.75
22	The balance between the credit points for course work and my thesis is a good one	58	2.34	0.85
	Cluster E Total	58	2.20	0.65

Data presented in Table 4 show that the extent to which taught courses are relevant to identified research problem is not very much regarding student wishes and needs regarding the thesis, quality of courses and balance between the credit points for courses and thesis as shown in the mean scores of 2.09, 2.05, 2.31, and 2.34 for items 19, 20, 21 and 22 respectively. This indicates that the extent of relevance of taught courses to identified research problem is not very much as shown by the cluster mean of 2.20.

Research question five
To what extent do doctoral duties impact on value?

Table 5 Response patterns of doctoral studies and impact on values & society

No	Items: Reflection and Values	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
23.	Reflection over your own values; understanding of social and cultural (differences based on gender) issues	58	2.28	0.89
24.	Involvement in the development of society	58	2.21	0.86
25.	Acquiring greater understanding of people from another cultural/ethnic background	58	2.07	0.92
26.	Broadening your general education	58	2.00	1.01
	Cluster F Total	58	2.13	0.55
	Contribution to Society			

31.	Problems in the educational system	58	1.66	0.71
32.	Problem in industry	58	2.09	0.88
33.	Problems in cultural issues and integration	58	2.03	0.88
34	Problems in global technology	58	1.94	0.99
	Cluster H Total	58	1.94	0.69

Table 5 shows that the respondents indicated not very much impart of doctoral studies on values and society. This is seen in the mean scores of 2.28, 2.21, 2.07, and 2.00 for items 23, 24, 25, and 26 respectively and a cluster F mean score of 2.13. They also indicated not very much impact of doctoral studies on societal development. This is seen in the mean scores of 1.66, 2.09, 2.00, and 2.03 for items 31, 32, 33, and 34 respectively, and sub cluster H mean score of 1.94.

Research question six
To what extent do the learning environment conditions meet global standard/best practices?

Table 6 Response patterns of learning environment conditions and global standard/best practices

No	Items	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
27.	To what extent have you experienced the environment of your department as creative	58	2.10	0.95
28.	To what extent have you felt that you were an accepted member of the research collective	58	2.29	0.92
29.	To what extent have you experienced your postgraduate studies as positive and stimulating	58	2.05	0.85
30.	To what extent have you had the feeling that you could exert influence in your department	58	2.00	0.84
	Cluster G	58	2.11	0.57

As can be seen in Table 6, the respondents did not see very much concerning environment conditions meeting global standard/ best practices. This is seen in the mean scores of 2.10, 2.29, 2.05, and 2.00 for items 27, 28, 29, and 30 respectively. This indicates that not very much extent of implementation of the learning environment conditions meet global standard/best practices as indicated by the overall cluster mean score of 2.11.

4.1 Discussion
The results of the study reveal that a great extent was done on the area of introduction of newly enrolled students in the university. However, there is need for improvement as students' responses show that not very much was done in the area of requirement for enrollment as well as prior information about the doctorate studies programme. A satisfactory and sound introduction to doctorate studies can provide much benefit in terms of study techniques and from a social perspective. Introduction enables the students to become part of the school more rapidly. It enables the students to understand their rights and obligations, as well as make them more secured and avoid potential problems.

Results also reveal that not very much is done in the area of professional development relating to the content area of a career in research. Knowledge about scientific methodology and scientific theories constitutes the main object of doctoral study and it is a necessary requirement for independent research work. The acquisition of professional ethics is core quality issue of research (ENQA, 2010).

The respondents were not satisfied in the area of supervisors' display of interest in the doctorate studies, provision of constructive criticism, methodology issues and the extent of discussion of theories with the students. However, the respondents were satisfied with the extent of participation in general discussions. The commitment of supervisors to student's progress and future career plans and supervision that takes the form of dialogue provides adequate support to the student. Constructive criticism makes for quality and helps students in the successful completion of their work.

Responses of students to taught courses were not satisfactory. Doctoral programmes in the Faculty of Education, University of Nigeria consists of both taught courses and thesis work in some departments and on thesis in some other departments. The aim of the taught courses in doctorate programme is to provide students with more advanced knowledge in their subject area and also to provide sufficient specialized knowledge to enable the completion of their thesis. Those departments where taught courses were offered, the students' responses are that they do not very much apply it to their programme goals.

With regard to reflection and values, the respondents were not satisfied. According to the majority of doctorate students, the programmes do encourage involvement with the community and contribution to society is minimal. One element in personal development involves increasing the capacity for reflection over one's own value and another is greater education breadth (ENQA, 2010). The important goal of doctoral education is that it should contribute to the development of society.

The responses with regard to study environment are not satisfactory. Most of the doctorate students feel that the environment at their departments is less creative and they are not accepted as members of the research community. It was not positively stimulating and they could not exert influence in their department. The relationship between individuals sharing the same environment has a strong influence on how creative the environment will be considered as a work place (ENQA, 2010). Influence can be a quality factor in many operational areas.

4.2 Conclusion
The introduction of newly enrolled students into doctoral programme and supervision in action were satisfactory. However, there is more needed to be done on the areas of dialogue with supervisors, relevance of taught courses, reflection and value, contribution to society, and study environment to improve quality.

4.3 Recommendations
Doctoral research is key to national development. Therefore, it is recommended that professional development regarding acquiring knowledge of scientific methodology and theories as well as ability to carry out research independently should be improved upon with more university commitment.

It is also recommended that the study environment should be improved upon to stimulate the students' creativity to guarantee quality in their research work.

Taught courses where applicable should be tailored towards specialized knowledge that will contribute to the successful completion of students' research work.

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