

The Role of Regulatory Bodies in Sustaining Educational Development in Nigeria: An Assessment of the National Universities Commission

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ABSTRACT

This study examined how regulation by educational regulatory bodies support educational growth in Nigeria, with particular emphasis on the National Universities Commission (NUC) the main higher education regulator in Nigeria. The study evaluated the NUC's contributions and difficulties in regulating higher education by critically analyzing its mandates, which include funding, quality assurance, accreditation, and licensing. The concept was based on governance theory, which emphasizes the value of stakeholder engagement, accountability, and transparency in governing educational systems. Using a qualitative approach, the study examined the NUC's regulatory function by consulting secondary sources such as reports, policy documents, and scholarly literature. The results showed that although the NUC has made great strides in standardizing academic quality, increasing access to higher education, and integrating information technology in universities, it still faces ongoing difficulties. These include insufficient funding, insufficient staff, inadequate capacity building, and all of which reduce its efficacy in practice than in theory towards national development. The study concluded that improving the NUC's regulatory competence requires tackling the challenging issues through greater funding, improved institutional autonomy, capacity building, and technology innovation. These changes are essential to guaranteeing the viability of Nigeria's higher education system and bringing it into line with international standards, for national development.

Keywords: Accreditation, Educational Development, Governance theory, Licensing, National Universities Commission, Quality assurance, Regulation.

INTRODUCTION

Regulation is a *sin quo non* in any establishment or institution. It formed the basis for guaranteeing quality outcome and sustainability. It is impossible to overstate the importance of regulation in the educational sector, especially in countries that are attempting to strike a balance between educational access, quality assurance, and sustainability for national development. Regulation provides the framework for educational institutions to function within, guaranteeing fair access, optimal use of resources, and maintenance of standards. Because education is a key factor in determining socioeconomic growth in a society that is quickly globalizing, efficient regulatory systems are now essential (Okwuokei, 2023; Imoni- Ogbe, 2024). They address structural issues like corruption, inefficiency, and inequality that are common in many educational systems, especially in developing nations like Nigeria, in addition to upholding academic standards.

The main authority governing higher education in Nigeria is the National Universities Commission (NUC). When the NUC was first established in 1962, its primary responsibility was to advise the federal government on the advancement of higher education (NUC, 2022). Its role has grown over the years to include duties like accrediting academic programmes, making sure that minimum requirements are met, and encouraging innovation and research in the higher education industry. Additionally, the NUC is essential in preventing quack universities to safeguard the integrity of Nigeria's university system. As a regulatory body, the Commission's function emphasizes how crucial it is to create an atmosphere that supports both academic success and sustainable development.

Given the ongoing difficulties in Nigeria's university system, it becomes clear how important it is to look at the NUC's regulatory structure. Inadequate facilities, overcrowded classes, and a lack of finance have all hampered the industry, casting doubt on the calibre of graduates produced (The Sun, 2024). Furthermore, governance issues have made matters more complex, such as political meddling and universities' lack of autonomy (Arikewuyo, 2013; Ofor- Douglas, 2022). Given that the NUC's policies and initiatives have a substantial impact on the course of educational progress in Nigeria, its efficacy as a regulatory body in this regard merits serious evaluation. As a method for quality assurance, the accreditation process, for example, frequently identifies differences in compliance among universities, pointing out areas that urgently need attention (NUC, 2022).

How has the National Universities Commission contributed to educational development in Nigeria, and what are the challenges and prospects of its regulatory framework? These are the main questions this paper aims to answer. The goal is to assess how well the NUC has fulfilled its purpose, find any weaknesses in its regulatory mandates, and make practical recommendations for enhancing its capabilities. By concentrating on important topics like governance, access, and quality assurance, this study hopes to add to the larger conversation on education reform in Nigeria. Additionally, it aims to place the NUC's initiatives in the global framework of higher education regulation, taking into account Nigeria's particular socioeconomic circumstances while also learning from other nations.

This study's significance goes beyond academia since it affects the public, educational stakeholders, and legislators. This paper seeks to promote a better understanding of the relationship between regulation and educational advancement by offering a thorough analysis of the NUC's role. In a world that is becoming more complex and competitive, these insights are essential for developing policies that not only address present issues but also foresee demands in the future. In the end, this study emphasizes how important strong regulatory frameworks are to attaining sustainable educational growth in Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Regulation

A set of rules, policies, guidelines, and actions created and implemented by governing bodies or agencies to guarantee a sector's efficient operation, are referred to as regulations. The intentional attempts by governing bodies to create, oversee, and implement the rules, guidelines, and procedures that control how educational institutions are run, are referred to as regulation in the context of higher education. This procedure includes several tasks, including maintaining quality control, guaranteeing institutional accountability, and bringing educational practices into compliance with both domestic and international standards (Marginson, 2016). National or regional accrediting bodies and government organizations that supervise university operations, finances, and academic standards are examples of regulatory bodies. Regulation in the higher education industry is a means of preserving academic programmes' legitimacy and integrity, stopping malpractice, and fostering an atmosphere that encourages innovation and growth (Miotto, Del and González, 2019; Durodolu and Okiki, 2023).

According to Marginson (2016), regulation is seen as a vital instrument for preserving the integrity of education, resolving inequalities, and guaranteeing that educational systems meet the social, cultural, and economic demands of communities. Regulation protects academic standards, shields stakeholders from unethical behaviour, and encourages accountability among educational providers in the context of higher education.

Ball et al. (2012) stated that regulation in education aims to balance institutional autonomy with public accountability, ensuring that universities fulfil their roles as centres of learning, research, and societal development. In this regard, regulation serves both protective and facilitative functions, protecting stakeholders by preventing malpractice and ensuring equitable access to resources while facilitating innovation and institutional growth through structured guidance and support. The concept of regulation can be understood within the framework of governance theories, such as public interest theory, which views regulation as a means of correcting market failures and ensuring that public goods and services like education are delivered

effectively.

Regulation is especially important in Nigeria because of the country's problems with underfunding, poor governance, and the growth of substandard universities – if allowed to operate freely without regulatory authority. The National Universities Commission and other effective regulatory frameworks work to solve these issues by accrediting programmes, enforcing minimum academic requirements, and advocating for legislation that improves access and quality. As a result, regulation becomes a dynamic process that adjusts to the changing demands of the education sector while upholding its core values of relevance, equity, and quality. This paper embraces regulation as a multifaceted idea that emphasizes how crucial organized supervision is to attaining long-term educational growth.

Educational Development

According to Okorosaye-Orubite (2019), education is a social construct that is structured to address the unique requirements of the community at any given period. Society determines its form, substance, methods, and clients. According to Nzewu (1985), education helps people become ready to live in society and, as a result, be able to carry out particular tasks for it. According to Clark, cited in Vikoo (2016), education is a teacher-student interaction in which the teacher's job is to influence the student's behaviour in the desired way. O'Connor (1957) added that a culture's educational system is a more or less complex apparatus that society has designed to instill in people particular attitudes or talents that are seen as desirable and helpful in that community. According to a related development, Adelowo (2010) envisioned education as an endeavour that aims to instill values, attitudes, and skills in society's members. Paulley and Buseri (2019), who view education as a socializing agent that gives all of its beneficiaries the knowledge, skills, attitude, cultural values, language, and social skills they need to comply with the demands of their society.

The concept of educational development is complex and includes a range of procedures meant to enhance the efficacy, accessibility, and quality of education in a particular setting. Academics have defined educational development in a variety of ways, frequently concentrating on particular elements like curriculum, pedagogical approaches, institutional frameworks, and the function of governance. To meet the demands of a population, educational development entails the methodical extension and improvement of educational services, according to Coombs and Ahmed (1974). By arguing that educational progress should accommodate a variety of demographic groups, which emphasizes the idea of inclusion and guarantees equity and accessibility for all members of the society. In this regard, educational development is seen as both a tool for individual empowerment and societal progress.

However, Tilak (2002) contended that educational development should be seen as a holistic process that encompasses the improvement of educational institutions, the development of human capital, and the establishment of an effective teaching-learning environment. This viewpoint highlights the significance of creating the policies and infrastructure required to maintain high-quality education over time; and Tilak argued that educational development is not just about expanding physical infrastructure or raising enrolment rates but also about improving the quality of education through curriculum reforms, teacher training, and administrative efficiency.

Taking a more comprehensive stance, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2005) viewed educational advancement as a catalyst for human growth. It connected the advancement of education to the accomplishment of more general developmental objectives including social justice, economic growth, and democratic engagement. This perspective emphasizes inclusive and sustainable development and holds that educational advancement is intrinsically linked to societal advancement.

Regulatory bodies in Nigeria

There are several regulatory bodies in Nigeria, cutting across professional practices, targeting different aspects of the country's national development and sustainability. These regulatory bodies include Pharmacy Council of Nigeria (PCN), Nursing and Midwifery Council of Nigeria (NMCN), Medical and Dental Council of Nigeria (MDCN), Council of Legal Education, Council for the Regulation of Engineering in Nigeria (COREN),

National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC), Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB), and Institute of Chartered Accountants of Nigeria (ICAN). The role of these regulatory bodies is to ensure compliance to the laydown guidelines for establishment, procedures and practices that guarantee developmental impact on the society and its sustainability.

For example, the regulatory mandate of the Pharmacy Council of Nigeria include regulating and controlling pharmacy education, training and practice in all aspects and ramifications, including regulating Pharmacy Technicians and Patent and Proprietary Medicines Vendors (PPMVs), issues pharmacists Oath and Code of Ethics, appoints pharmaceutical inspectors to ensure the enforcement of the provisions of the law by inspecting and monitoring of premises where pharmaceutical endeavours take place, and maintains a register of Pharmacy Technicians (PCN, n.d.). Also, the Council of Legal Education operates as the regulatory body for legal education in Nigeria. The primary mandate of the Council is to provide practical training for aspiring legal practitioners in Nigeria. This training is aimed at preparing law graduates for the Nigerian Bar (Duru, 2015).

National Universities Commission (NUC)

The National Universities Commission is a government agency that was set up to oversee Nigerian Universities. The law established the National Universities Commission as one of the commissions to supervise the universities' external management, and to ensuring quality in the Nigerian university system. Nigerian universities are developed under the direction of the National Universities Commission, and NUC helps to guide executives on issues about the advancement of higher education in Nigeria (Ogunode, Ukozor, and Ayoko, 2023).

The National Universities Commission began as a Cabinet Office advisory body in 1962. In 1974, it was incorporated as a formal entity - a parastatal of the Federal Ministry of Education (FME), and Prof. Jibril Aminu was named as its first Executive Secretary. The NUC's mandate has been characterized with supervisory and regulatory responsibilities. Adeoti (2015), for instance, emphasizes the NUC's crucial role in establishing rules that control university operations, such as curriculum creation, faculty standards, and resource distribution. Adeoti claims that the NUC makes sure Nigerian university education is of the highest calibre and adaptable to the socioeconomic demands of the nation. The NUC seeks to preserve uniformity and applicability among universities by defining precise standards for curriculum development and programme assessment.

In keeping with this, Onyene, Uche, and Ikebude (2009) highlight the role that the NUC plays in degree programme accreditation. The NUC evaluates whether academic programmes satisfy requirements in terms of facilities, staffing, content, and overall institutional capacity through accreditation procedures. This guarantees that universities produce graduates who can make a significant contribution to the growth of the country in addition to being academically proficient. Additionally, the NUC is essential in encouraging cooperation among Nigerian universities and making sure they are sensitive to the objectives of national development. The commission promotes research that tackles regional issues including healthcare, technology, and agriculture, encouraging universities to match their academic endeavours with the needs of the Nigerian economy (Wordu and Nwanguma, 2023).

Theoretical Framework

Governance theory serves as the theoretical foundation for this study. It looks at the actors, institutions, and procedures that go into making decisions in educational systems. To ensure transparency, accountability, and alignment with national development goals, organizations such as the National Universities Commission (NUC) regulate and oversee university education. Governance theory aims to comprehend how these organizations operate. According to the notion, governance is not just the job of the government but also of several state and non- state players who work together to influence educational practices, policies, and results.

Scholars like Rhodes (1996), who introduced the idea of "network governance," have made significant contributions to the development of governance theory by highlighting the interdependent ties among state and

non-state actors in the policy-making process. A change from hierarchical, government-led control to a more cooperative, multi-actor approach involving several stakeholders, including the government, universities, private sector companies, and civil society, is what Rhodes says governance entails. Accordingly, government is viewed as a more dynamic, participatory, and decentralized process.

Governance theory has been used in the field of education to evaluate the management and reform of educational systems. Ball (1994) asserted that governance structures in education provide the efficient allocation of resources, the proper application of policies, and the constant maintenance of standards. The NUC is a crucial player in this governance structure in Nigeria, assisting universities with accreditation procedures, establishing academic standards, and encouraging institutional changes.

The potential of governance theory to examine the NUC's regulatory function in maintaining educational advancement makes it relevant to this paper. From the creation of policies to their execution, the NUC, as a regulatory body, must negotiate the difficulties of several levels of government. Maintaining quality standards across universities and ensuring that higher education is in line with national development needs depend heavily on its capacity to manage these partnerships. This study investigated how the NUC's regulatory measures support Nigeria's educational growth by applying governance theory.

METHODOLOGY

This paper's methodology mainly relied on secondary research, which entails examining previously published works, reports, scholarly articles, and policy documents about the NUC and its regulatory function in maintaining Nigeria's educational advancement. A thorough assessment of the body of existing literature from a variety of sources, including books, scholarly journals, government papers, and NUC publications, were part of the research process. Sources were chosen based on their authenticity, pertinence to the research issue, and depth of study on subjects including accreditation, regulation, educational governance, and the overall effect of the NUC in the Nigerian higher education system. It was especially important to comprehend the NUC's policy interventions, regulatory framework, and the effects of its activities on Nigerian university education. The use of secondary sources guarantees that the research is based on previously published empirical studies and theoretical viewpoints, providing a comprehensive and well-rounded examination of the function of regulation in the advancement of education.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The Role of NUC in Sustaining Educational Development in Nigeria

To ensure that the Nigerian university system properly contributes to the country's educational growth, the NUC plays a crucial role in its regulation. Its regulatory structure is based on its key mandates, which include funding policies, quality assurance, licensing, and certification. These requirements demonstrate its dedication to maintaining and raising the standard of higher education. The mandates of NUC in sustaining educational development in Nigeria include issuance of operational licence to newly approved universities, resource verification of learning facilities and staffing, accreditation of academic programmes, ensuring quality assurance of educational services, and ensuring proper funding of universities as further detailed below.

Licensing

The NUC has the power to authorize the founding of new universities and other educational establishments in Nigeria that offer degrees. This licensing requirement entails a careful evaluation of the suggested universities to make sure they have the academic resources, governance frameworks, and facilities needed for efficient operation. The NUC protects the integrity of the country's university education system by carefully screening applications to prevent inappropriate and illegal university education. Providing advice to "the President and State Governors, through the Minister of Commissioner concerned, on the creation of new universities and other degree-awarding institutions in Nigeria" is one of the NUC's duties, according to its website (NUC, n.d.).

The licensing procedure entails a thorough assessment of suggested universities to make sure they fulfil the

requirements in areas like staffing, governance, academic programmes, and facilities. The purpose of this stringent evaluation is to uphold the integrity and calibre of Nigerian university education. It is the NUC's mandate to advise the President and State Governors on the establishment of new universities and other educational establishments in Nigeria that grant degrees. The proprietor or founder receives a three-year provisional licence after fulfilling the requirements. Only good performance throughout this probationary period will result in the proprietor receiving a substantive licence, according to the NUC (NUC, n.d.).

To avoid substandard and illegal universities operation, the Commission periodically, through its oversight functions, identifies, publish and close down illegal universities (NUC Monday Bulletins, 2018, 2019, 2021). The NUC is essential to maintaining and improving educational growth in Nigeria since it carefully controls the admission of new universities through its licencing mandate. This procedure guarantees that only universities that can provide high- quality instruction are allowed to function, which advances the country's higher education system as a whole.

The growth of private universities and the rising demand for higher education, however, raise questions about the licencing process's long-term viability. Higher education providers have been allowed to diversify, thanks to the NUC's licencing requirement, but it also draws attention to structural issues including inadequate oversight of new universities during their probationary period. Constraints in funding and human resources frequently make it difficult to maintain the on-going oversight necessary to ensure compliance with licence requirements (Dada, Wunti and Tukei, 2017). Enhancing the ability to conduct post-licencing assessments is essential to preserving the system's integrity.

Resource Verification

The NUC ensures that the minimum requirements for the establishment of new programmes at either the undergraduate or postgraduate levels are in place before the commencement of such programmes by any degree awarding university. The Commission verifies the infrastructure, staffing, library and other learning facilities of the new programme to ascertain the university is qualified to commence such new programmes. The responsibility is normally carried out by the Commission through the Resource Verification team of experts as constituted by the NUC, under the supervision of its Resource Verification Unit, in the Academic Planning Division of the Commission. The unit draws up guidelines for analyzing application for the establishment of new academic programme, and process applications by universities for the establishment of such programmes.

Upon completion of the resource verification exercise, the outcome of the visit by the NUC determines further action on the part of the institution and the NUC. If approved by the NUC, formal letter of approval is sent to the university with a copy to the Federal Ministry of Education (FME), the JAMB, NYSC, relevant professional agencies, and other relevant agencies of government for noting and other necessary actions. But if approval is declined, the University would be required to rectify observed deficiencies for a re-visitation to be conducted by the NUC. Until these processes are concluded, no university is expected to admit candidates to any new programme (Iguodala, 2023).

The Executive Secretary of the NUC, Prof. Abdullahi Ribadu, while presenting an approval/recognition letter for the establishment of Ebonyi State University of ICT to the Ebonyi State Governor in Abuja in 2025, stated in affirmation that the approval and licencing of a university by the Commission does not automatically conferred approval on such university to commence academic activities without first passing the necessary resource verification certification (The Guardian, 2025).

Accreditation

One of the NUC's most important mandates is accreditation. Through this procedure, the Commission evaluates university academic programmes to ascertain if they adhere to set requirements in areas like research output, staffing, infrastructure, and curriculum. Stated differently, the purpose is to certify universities' degrees and other academic awards and to ensure that they meet the Minimum Academic Standards (MAS). This role is essential to preserving quality and guaranteeing that graduates have the abilities and know-how needed to

compete both domestically and internationally. According to Okebukola (2006), the accrediting procedure aids in bringing educational standards across universities into line, hence resolving differences in programme quality. Additionally, the periodicity of accreditation guarantees that colleges maintain accountability and adjust to changing professional and academic demands. However, obstacles including insufficient funding and some universities' unwillingness to comply may make this mandate less effective.

In 1990, the commission conducted its first major accreditation process for university programmes. The second thorough accrediting process took place in 1999-2000. In 2007, the commission accredited 942 programmes across 53 universities (Okojie, 2008). In 1999, the Commission started the process of accrediting the first set of private universities of its kind in Nigeria, following their registration and certificate presentation. Certificate of Registration was handed to each of the first three private universities in Nigeria, namely: Igbinedion university, Okada-Benin, Edo State; Babcock University, Ilisan-Remo, Ogun State; and Madonna University, Okija, Anambra State (Ajadi, 2010).

It is now more important than ever for undergraduate programmes in Nigerian Universities to be accredited. As of 2024, the Federal Government of Nigeria, through the National Universities Commission, has licensed 274 universities in the country, made up of 62 federal universities, 63 state universities and 149 private universities (Statista, 2024), expected to increase in subsequent years based on educational demand and quest for more qualified personnel for national development. The ultimate goal of producing high-level manpower would remain a pipe dream, and graduates of the system would not be able to compete favourably with their peers in other parts of the world without ensuring in place, the necessary requirements that are germane to quality education and manpower production for national development through proper regulation by the NUC and the relevant professional bodies. These universities' operations would be complicated by the lack of a regulatory body that accredits the programmes offered by the respective universities, hence, the justifications for a regulatory body like the NUC to oversee and regulate the activities of these universities (Dada, Wunti and Martin, 2017).

Nevertheless, obstacles like limited resources and non-adherence by some of the universities as a result of financial constraints compromise the quality assurance procedure. While resistance from some universities results in gaps in the enforcement of norms, inadequate financing makes it difficult for the NUC to carry out thorough accrediting procedures. These difficulties highlight the need for more funding and legislative backing to improve the commission's oversight capabilities.

As a means of encouraging responsibility, accreditation has also forced universities to give priority to raising the calibre of their learning facilities, staffing, research, and instruction. However, there are still differences in programme quality among the universities in one way or the other, which calls into question the uniformity and strictness of the accrediting procedure. Regardless of ownership or funding structure, addressing these gaps is crucial to guaranteeing that all Nigerian universities fulfil the same standard requirements.

Quality Assurance

Encapsulating the NUC's continuous endeavours to maintain and improve educational standards in Nigerian universities is quality assurance. This obligation includes monitoring and evaluation systems intended to gauge how well universities are performing in providing high- quality education. The NUC followed the Federal Government of Nigeria's pledge to uphold standards and guarantee the calibre of university education. To make sure that all facets of the university are up to national and international standards, the NUC required various universities to establish a Quality Assurance Unit (Ukozor, Ogunode and Ayoko, 2023).

Hornby (9th Edition), who defined quality assurance as the process of controlling how products are made or services are rendered to ensure they are maintained at a high standard, might be used to understand the NUC Quality Assurance methods. By incorporating both internal and external procedures into the tertiary education system, quality assurance is thus defined as a process of ongoing improvement in the quality of teaching and learning activities (Okebukola, 2004). The NUC has consistently strive to ensure that the Nigerian University System (NUS) takes the following steps, among others, to guarantee that high-quality academic programmes are established and taught, and that the system's outputs (graduates) are suitable for its intended use:

- the establishment of Academic Planning Units in Nigerian Universities;
- the resource verification visits to universities by Teams of experts from the university system along with representatives of professional bodies where necessary during the programme conceptualization stage;
- the introduction of the possession of a Doctorate degree as the minimum qualification for lecturers in the University system, and that Lecturers with lower qualifications are encouraged to undertake further studies or risk the consequences of being stagnated at the Lecturer II/Senior Lecturer level in career progression;
- encouragement of lecturers in the University system to utilize the training/funding opportunities provided by the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund) to attend local and international conferences, staff training, book publishing and development, research activities etc; and
- the annual accreditation of programmes using experts from the University system along with some professionals (where necessary) (cited in Iguodala, 2023).

The NUC has set standards for research, education, and infrastructure development as a result of its emphasis on quality assurance. By ensuring that universities follow these standards, routine audits and inspections, there will be the continuous promotion of an atmosphere of development in the higher institutions for national advancement. Additionally, quality assurance forces university administrators to prioritize achieving academic excellence by encouraging accountability.

Notwithstanding these initiatives, the NUC still has difficulties carrying out its quality assurance duty in its entirety, mostly because of financial limitations. To properly manage the universities that fall within its purview, the NUC's Deputy Executive Secretary emphasized the necessity for increased finance (Dada, 2024). The NUC needs sufficient funding to carry out the comprehensive accreditation, oversight, and assessment procedures required to maintain educational standards. A situation where the NUC now shares its financial burden with universities, such as the provision of accommodation, transportation etc by the host universities to the NUC accreditation team for programme accreditation or re-accreditation as a result of limited fund, leaves more to be desired, and could influence undeserved advantage outcome for the host universities.

Furthermore, the use of external assessments for quality assurance systems has drawn criticism since it does not adequately account for the particular difficulties and possibilities faced by different universities. The integration of external monitoring and internal quality assurance methods may result in a more thorough framework for maintaining academic standards (Paintsil, 2016). Furthermore, the focus on quality assurance needs to transcend beyond assessments conducted at the programme level to encompass more extensive institutional governance and management procedures (Ekpiken and Abang, 2015; Abiodun-Oyebanji and Faremi, 2024).

Funding Policies

The NUC is essential to the development and execution of university finance policy in Nigeria. It oversees the equitable distribution and effective use of financial resources by coordinating the distribution of public monies to universities. Stated differently, the National Executive Council and Federal Ministry of Education set a formula for the NUC to use when distributing block funding from the Federal Government to federal universities (Adeoti, 2015). The goal of this allocation method is to guarantee fair resource distribution, which will support balanced growth in all of the country's universities. Given its importance to the prosperity of the country, they also support more funding for higher education (The Guardian, 2025).

The NUC is the main organization responsible for directing external assistance to Nigerian universities in many situations, mainly to public universities, in addition to internal funding. The NUC seeks to increase universities' financial ability so they can strengthen their academic programmes, research capacities, and facilities by organizing international aid (The Guardian, 2025).

Nonetheless, Vanguard (2024) argued that persistent underfunding continues to be a major barrier, impeding universities' ability to modernize their buildings, recruit and retain skilled personnel, and fund research projects. The NUC has pushed for timely distributions of fund to public universities and larger budgetary allocations to remedy this issue. The Commission stresses that increased funding is necessary for universities to successfully carry out their responsibilities, especially in areas like teaching, research, and community service.

The NUC has also requested a review of its Establishment Act to improve its operational effectiveness and tackle urgent issues facing Nigeria's higher education system (The Guardian, 2025). Reforms of this kind are thought to be required to enable the Commission to carry out financing plans more successfully and guarantee that universities obtain sufficient funds to uphold and improve educational quality. The Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund) is one of the funding tools that the NUC has to implement, fill resource gaps and augment public funding despite its challenging obstacles.

Therefore, taken as a whole, the NUC's mandates provide a strong foundation for controlling and maintaining Nigeria's educational growth for national development. The commission encourages uniformity and excellence throughout universities by making sure universities fulfil accreditation requirements. While quality assurance promotes an excellence culture, licencing protects against the creation of inferior universities. Notwithstanding the difficulties the NUC encounters, especially with funding, its strategic objectives show a dedication to resolving these problems and enhancing the state of university education in Nigeria. These requirements are in line with governance theory, which emphasizes how crucial strong regulatory bodies are to promoting stakeholder cooperation, accountability, and openness in educational systems.

Achievements of the NUC

Through several measures aimed at improving accessibility and quality, the National Universities Commission (NUC) has had a considerable impact on Nigeria's higher education system. The creation and implementation of Minimum Academic Standards (MAS) at Nigerian universities is one of its main accomplishments (Adeoti, 2015; Akpan, 2021). By establishing these standards, the NUC guarantees consistent educational quality, which raises the legitimacy and acceptance of Nigerian degrees both domestically and internationally. To preserve academic achievement and promote a competitive learning environment, this standardization has proven essential.

Academic programme accreditation is another noteworthy achievement. To determine if university courses comply with the required MAS, the NUC performs thorough evaluations. This procedure offers a framework for on-going institutional reform in addition to ensuring the quality of education (Akomolafe and Adesua, 2020). The NUC promotes an excellence and accountability culture by identifying areas requiring improvement through routine accreditation exercises and working with universities to address weaknesses.

Additionally, the NUC has played a key role in the deliberate growth of Nigeria's university system. The commission has enabled greater access to higher education by authorizing the founding of new universities (Omogbolagun, 2024; Okah, 2025). By meeting the rising demand for post-secondary education and advancing the development of human capital (Adedeji and Campbell, 2013; Isuku, 2014), this growth is in line with national development goals. By ensuring that new universities fulfil the requirements before starting operations, the commission's supervision preserves the integrity of the university system.

The NUC has also encouraged the incorporation of ICT (Information and Communication Technology) into academic delivery and university management such as Online Distance Learning (ODL), E-learning, Management Information System (MIS). Initiatives to improve ICT competency have modernized the Nigerian University System, increasing staff and student access to a wider range of educational resources and improving efficiency (Archibong, Ogbiji and Anijaobi-Idem, 2024). Nigerian universities now have a stronger competitive edge in the global academic market because of this digital change (Asaju and Ogar, 2022; Ukpé, 2023).

In the final analysis, the growth and sustainability of Nigeria's university education system have been greatly aided by the NUC's accomplishments in standardizing academic excellence, accrediting programmes,

increasing access to higher education, and encouraging ICT integration. These successes highlight the commission's function as a driving force behind innovation and constructive change in the provision of high-quality higher education in Nigeria, as a regulatory body for university education standard and growth for national development.

Challenges faced by the NUC and the way forward

The NUC has faced several obstacles that have hindered its ability to successfully oversee and improve Nigeria's university education. These difficulties include inadequate funding as a result of subpar budget release, rapid expansion of universities, lack of sufficient staff, inadequate capacity building of staff, resistance from labour unions, corruption and strikes.

Inadequate Funding

Inadequate finance is NUC's biggest challenge, which is also common with other regulatory bodies. The Commission's limited funding makes it difficult for it to carry out a more thorough accreditation procedures, put quality assurance plans into place, and provide universities with efficient support. The overall federal education budget, which has been deemed insufficient, provides the NUC, a regulating commission, with its yearly budgetary allotment (Ogunode, Ikozor, and Ayoko, 2023). According to Adewale (2017) in Ogunode & Ahaotu (2021), the lack of funding is the biggest obstacle to the growth of public commissions and agencies that the federal government established to carry out important tasks for the nation. He continued by saying, "The difficulties in obtaining funds are the reasons why many commissions that were constituted in Nigeria are not working up to par".

According to Ogunode & Ahaotu (2021), the federal government's funding for education administration in Nigeria is insufficient to carry out all of the university's programmes, including monitoring. For the NUC to fulfil its duty as outlined in the laws creating the commission, the federal government has to fund the commission sufficiently. Inadequate university financing makes it difficult for department heads, directors, deans, and other management teams to oversee education at the university level adequately.

The lack of proper funding has contributed greatly to the poor recognition and ranking of Nigerian universities globally by the Webometrics. At the January 2025 edition ranking of world universities, the highest ranked Nigerian University is Covenant University, ranked 1573 (Webometrics, 2025), and the University is a Private University. The ranking of the university was credited for its reasonable impactful educational outcomes in terms of visible scholarly activities and for industry, vis-à-vis national development. The major contribution to its ranking can be predicated majorly to appreciable funding and judicious use of the available resources to the university - Covenant University.

It has been argued that the Federal Government of Nigeria has never met the UNESCO recommended annual budgetary allocation for education in the developing countries since independence of Nigeria in 1960 upto 2023 (Ohaegbulem and Chijioke, 2023). There have been clarion calls on the government of Nigeria across the levels of government - local, state and national to give priority attention to education, for enhanced and rapid growth and development of the country, particularly in the area of annual budgetary allocation for the financing of the education needs of the nation. One of such calls is that of the Minister of Education (2015-2023), Prof. Adamu Adamu, that the FGN should invest about N1 trillion yearly, and an increase revenue allocation to the education sector to about 15 per cent of its annual budget, for the nation's educational interest (Premium Times, 2017).

Rapid Expansion of Universities

The NUC's ability to regulate is seriously threatened by the swift growth of Nigerian universities. The country's university population has expanded rapidly during the last 20 years due to rising demand for higher education. Both public and private universities are included in this wave, with many of them being founded to close the access gap to post-secondary education. The NUC's capacity to efficiently oversee, assess, and regulate these higher institutions has been under tremendous strain, even while this expansion has increased

access to higher education. Due to the commission's limited financial, human, and technological resources, it is unable to carry out thorough inspections in every university (Wordu and Nwanguma, 2023). As a result, there is a growing concern that the rapid proliferation of universities may compromise educational quality, resulting in improperly educated graduates for national development, if the NUC is unable to enforce its regulatory standards desirable (Vanguard, 2020; Ogwo and Salau, 2024).

The NUC's operational capacity is further strained by the complicated regulatory environment that has resulted from this increase. According to analysts such as Ogwo and Salau (2024), the commission seems to be losing authority over university regulation because it is becoming more and more difficult to timely conduct rigorous and consistent monitoring due to the large number of universities. A lot of recently founded universities, especially private ones, frequently lack sufficient governance structures, faculty, and infrastructure, making it more difficult for the NUC to enforce adherence to its Minimum Academic Standards (MAS).

Additionally, the NUC has not been able to adjust its regulatory frameworks or increase its resources in time with the rapid formation of universities (Ogwo and Salau, 2024). To improve compliance and accountability, this difficulty highlights the need for creative solutions, such as utilizing technology for remote monitoring, boosting commission funding, and fortifying partnerships with academic institutions. Unchecked university growth runs the risk of jeopardizing the viability and quality of Nigeria's higher education system if these systemic problems are not addressed. One of the ways to addressing the rapid expansion of universities is for the government, as a matter of policy, make adequate, projected and incremental resources available to the Commission.

Human Resource Constraints

The efficiency of the NUC has also been hampered by a lack of resources, such as staffing shortages and insufficient supervisory materials. Employees are hired to assist in carrying out the mission of the commission. The amount of staff available to organizations has somewhat aided in assessing how quickly they are fulfilling their mandate. Employees are the most important resource that an organization needs to achieve its objectives. Inadequate staffing is an issue that most supervisory commissions in Nigeria encounter, impeding their ability to function effectively. According to Adewale (2017), who conducted a study on the issues facing Nigeria's public commissions and agencies, reported that many of them are understaffed, hitherto affecting their ability to carry out their statutory duties. According to Ogunode & Ahaotu (2021), one major issue impeding the efficient oversight of Nigerian tertiary education is the lack of qualified supervisors (staff) in sufficient numbers.

For Ogunode et al. (2023), Professor Abubakar Adamu Rasheed, a former Executive Secretary of the National Universities Commission (NUC), stated that "the Commission's staff numerical strength as of 2018 was 688 and that it dropped to 642 in 2019 and 628 by the year 2020 due to retirement of some staff and movement by others." According to Mark (2013), as reported in Izokor, Peter, and Ogunode (2023), the National Universities Commission is finding it increasingly difficult to efficiently regulate and oversee Nigeria's universities. This is as a result of the continued inability of the staff of the commission to adequately oversee all of the nation's universities. The more of the universities in Nigeria, the more the challenges of oversight functions for the NUC in the area of its regulatory functions.

The commission's ability to carry out comprehensive assessments and give universities the assistance they require is hampered by these restrictions. These limitations on resources have been recognized by the NUC as major barriers to accomplishing its goals. To reverse this trend of shortage of manpower in the Commission, there should be a policy in place for manpower increase in the Commission in quality and quantity as and when due to avoid a lacuna that hitherto hinders its smooth regulatory functions of ensuring that the graduates from the universities are well positioned to make effective and efficient contributions to national development.

Ineffective Capacity Building

Ineffective capacity building is one of the major issues facing the National Universities Commission (NUC), making it difficult for the commission to effectively oversee and govern Nigeria's quickly growing higher

education industry. Training, skill development, and institutional improvement are all components of capacity building, which is necessary to making sure that regulatory organizations like the NUC can adjust to changing needs. However, the NUC has been unable to invest in frequent and thorough training programmes for its employees due to a lack of funding. Because of this, there are staff members who are not familiar with modern quality assurance procedures, technology developments, and international best practices in the regulation of higher education. Lack of regular opportunities for professional growth reduces their ability to carry out important regulatory tasks including programme monitoring, accreditation, and compliance assessment. The commission's problem with insufficient funding, which has a direct influence on its capacity-building programmes, makes this issue worse (Ogunode et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the fast expansion of Nigerian universities has outpaced the NUC's institutional capability. With more than 274 universities to manage, the commission's current infrastructure and staff cannot handle the needs of this growth. Inadequate supervision materials and a lack of staff make it further harder for the NUC to carry out its task (Ogunode et al., 2023). These flaws make it more difficult for the NUC to carry out its mandate, which could result in supervision and quality assurance failures, impacting negatively on the nation's developmental gain. To increase the NUC's regulatory competence and guarantee the sustainability of Nigeria's higher education system, addressing this challenge calls for a significant investment in capacity-building efforts, such as personnel recruitment, professional training at national and international levels, and institutional growth.

Opposition from Labour Unions

A significant challenge to the effective oversight of Nigerian universities by the National Universities Commission (NUC) stems from the opposition of certain labour unions within higher education. According to Ogunode and Ahaotu (2021), resistance from academic staff unions has emerged because this group contend that university autonomy inherently negates the need for external regulatory bodies. The Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) of Nigeria has long maintained that universities, as autonomous institutions, should govern themselves without interference from outside agencies. This debate has intensified with the NUC's expanded role in accreditation programmes.

Historically, accreditation matters were managed exclusively by the internal Senates of individual universities, which were responsible for maintaining academic standards and ensuring quality education. However, as noted by Olaleye and Oyewole (2016) and reiterated by Ogunode and Ahaotu (2021), the NUC has now been mandated to assume the accreditation authority that previously rested solely with university Senates. In other words, while universities traditionally exercised self-governance regarding academic accreditation, the NUC is now charged with centralizing this responsibility. This shift is intended to promote uniformity in accreditation standards across the country; however, it has been met with criticism by some labour unions.

The resistance is primarily driven by concerns that the transfer of accreditation responsibilities from internal university structures to an external agency undermines institutional autonomy. ASUU and other stakeholders argue that such a shift may lead to a standardized, top-down approach to academic quality control, which does not take into account the unique contexts and needs of individual institutions. This opposition poses a substantive challenge to the NUC, as it must balance the need for nationwide quality assurance with the preservation of university autonomy - a balance that remains contentious in the Nigerian higher education landscape.

According to the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), the authority given to the NUC to accredit programmes and courses in universities, and professional bodies with the authority to oversee professional education, is a subversion of the university Senate's authority or university accreditation committees in-charge of accrediting courses (Olufemi & Kolade, 2016). The dissatisfaction poses unhealthy relationships among the stakeholders, which may threaten the Commission's oversight functions in the future if left unchecked.

The conflict of overlap functions between the Commission and ASUU is closely linked to the lack of confidence between them. For example, the University Miscellaneous Act of 2007 gives the university Senate the authority to create programmes within the university, and the NUC has the same authority. This, in no

small measure, has watered the powers of the university Senate (Izokor et al., 2023). Going forward, there should be checks and balances and universal standard for university operation in Nigeria for national interest and development as currently obtainable. However, government and policy-makers should make ASUU to fully support the regulatory functions of the NUC aimed at making university education better, in order to have a global competitive edge in the overall interest of the nation.

Corruption

Corruption, according to Ogunode & Ahaotu (2021), is a widespread issue that hinders efficient oversight of Nigerian higher institutions. Corruption is deeply ingrained in education ministries as well as various commissions, departments, and agencies that fall under the Ministry of Education. The money that is released for programme supervision is not effectively and efficiently used; some of it is embezzled or misappropriated. To influence university programme accreditation, some National Universities Commission employees occasionally make concessions to university administrators. It is not peculiar to the education sector, but also endemic in other sectors.

The Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project (SERAP) conducted a public survey in 2019 and found that corruption in Nigerian public universities has been at an absurd level over the previous five years. The power industry was found to be the second most corrupt in the nation, while the police were the most corrupt of the five major public organizations polled. Seventy per cent of Nigerians surveyed said that the Ministry of Health, education, and the judiciary are also corrupt. According to the survey, there has been no change in the degree of corruption during the last five years (Premium Times, 2019). High levels of corruption in educational institutions have an impact on system quality and supervision.

To reduce corruption to the lowest level, a workable measure must be put in place by the government to ensure transparency and accountability of financial dealings in the education sector by tertiary education administrators, and erring practitioners brought to justice and on time to prevent a reoccurrence and to ensure sanitization of the system.

Strike Actions

The various unions' strike actions in Nigeria's tertiary universities are also hindering the efficacy of the regulatory bodies of these universities because most, if not all, academic and administrative operations are halted during the strike. According to Ogunode, Ukozor, and Jegede (2022), the accreditation programme of numerous universities in Nigeria is being impacted by strike actions. A unique programme for all universities is the accreditation of academic programmes. Various higher education regulatory authorities must periodically verify that new programmes are accredited and that existing programmes are also evaluated for suitability. The suspension of academic programme accreditation at the universities is a consistent result of strikes by various union groups. The various labour unions' strikes at Nigeria's universities have also had an impact on the universities' ratings. One of the factors used to evaluate the effectiveness of universities is a consistent academic curriculum. To reverse the striking trend, efforts must be consistently and proactively made by the government to avert causes of strikes in the university, mainly linked to finance.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

The results and evaluation of the NUC's regulatory function point to important changes to strengthen the NUC's ability to maintain Nigeria's educational advancement. Addressing the systemic issues the NUC faces requires effective policy solutions. Below are actionable recommendations derived from the analysis.

The NUC must continue to provide efficient oversight function while bolstering the autonomy of Nigerian universities. This equilibrium will enable universities to make choices about staff training, financial management, and academic content; encouraging creativity and adaptability to the regional and international demands of higher education. Universities must have accountability systems in place to make sure they follow national regulations and standards in addition to institutional autonomy. This strategy is in line with governance theory, which highlights how crucial decentralized yet coordinated systems are to the efficient

management of education.

For the NUC to successfully carry out its duty, more financing is essential. The NUC's operations, such as accreditation, quality control, and monitoring, require sufficient funding from the government. To augment government funding, the commission should also look at alternate funding sources such as collaborations with the commercial sector and foreign contributors. The NUC will be able to improve its operating scope, fortify its regulatory frameworks, and solve resource limitations that impede its efficacy with increased financial capacity.

For its staff to become more knowledgeable and effective in performing regulatory duties, the NUC must make investments in capacity building. Training curricula ought to emphasize contemporary methods of quality control, educational technology developments, and new developments in higher education administration. Staff at NUC will be prepared to handle the demands of a quickly evolving educational environment, thanks to ongoing professional development.

The NUC should also implement technology-driven solutions to improve its review and monitoring procedures. Using digital platforms can help with data collection, accreditation procedures, and real-time communication with universities. The commission will be able to handle the difficulties of managing a quickly growing university system while maintaining quality and compliance - thanks to such advances.

Lastly, the success of the NUC's regulatory interventions depends on cultivating cooperative partnerships with universities and other stakeholders. To foster trust and match its goals with those of universities, the commission should provide platforms for discussion and consultation. The NUC will be able to successfully carry out its plans and aid in the growth of a strong higher education system in Nigeria, thanks to collaborative governance.

The NUC can improve its regulatory ability, deal with systemic issues, and make a substantial contribution to maintaining Nigeria's educational growth by putting these suggestions into practice amongst others.

CONCLUSION

In Nigeria, the NUC continues to play a key role in the growth and governance of higher education, producing dependable graduates personnel for national development. The commission has made a substantial contribution to upholding academic standards, encouraging institutional accountability, and increasing access to higher education through its mandates, which include funding policies, accreditation, licensing, and quality assurance. However, obstacles like insufficient finance and budgetary allocation, resource shortages, and the quick growth of universities have made it more difficult for it to carry out its duties. These problems highlight the necessity of specific adjustments to strengthen the NUC's ability to maintain Nigeria's educational advancement for national development through applicable research works to support socio-economic and political advancement of the nation.

Actionable suggestions include boosting funding, enhancing institutional autonomy while maintaining oversight functions; investing in staff capacity training, and using technology-driven solutions to overcome these issues and optimize the NUC's core mandates. To guarantee that the commission's regulatory activities are impartial and significant, it is equally important to strengthen the legislative structure protecting its independence. The NUC can better fulfil its function as a catalyst for sustainable educational development by putting these reforms into practice. This will help to meet local socio-economic demands and bring the Nigerian higher education system into line with international norms, where continuous research and applicability drive and positive impact on industry and socio-economic development of the nation. This strategy would, to a reasonable extent guarantee that Nigerian universities generate graduates who are capable of making significant contributions to both national and international development in addition to being academically proficient.

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