

# EXAMINATION OF EXTERNAL ASSESSORS LITERACY IN ACCREDITATION AND IMPROVEMENT OF TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS IN NIGERIA

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## **Abstract**

*This study examined external assessors' literacy in accreditation and improvement of tertiary institutions in Nigeria. For the purpose of the research, deans of faculties, heads of departments, polytechnic administrators as well as members of NUC and NBTE who serve as external assessors were the target population. The population count was 150 assessors who partake in accreditation in federal government universities and polytechnics respectively drawn by convenience sampling technique from four geo-political zones of Nigeria. A 33-item instrument titled "External Assessors Literacy in Accreditation and Improvement of Tertiary Institutions Questionnaire" was developed, validated and tested for internal consistency reliability using Cronbach Alpha. The reliability index was 0.89 which indicated the fitness of the instrument for the study. Mean and standard deviation were used in answering the research questions. Findings revealed low external assessors assessment literacy in accreditation which cannot guarantee improvement of tertiary institutions in Nigeria as there are variable levels of assessors' literacy in some aspects of accreditation and these aspects which require attention pertain to the evolving global procedures for quality assurance and acceptable criteria for quality tertiary institutions. Joint effort between proprietors and administrators of tertiary institutions as well as external assessors is needed to ensure good coordination and communications of current global best practices and standards so that tertiary institutions can adhere to quality assurance practices that ensure improved tertiary education in Nigeria.*

**Keywords:** External Assessors Literacy, Accreditation, Improvement and Tertiary Institutions

## **Introduction**

External accreditation of tertiary institutions for quality assurance is evidently global and Nigeria takes no exception to this process. The use of external examiners, external to the host institution for the purpose of quality assurance has been a distinguishing feature of accreditation. External examiners are viewed as highly valued and useful in accreditation. They are also generally understood to be fundamental to maintaining appropriate standards (Bloxham & Price, 2015) that are comparable across institutions, and are often a precondition of course accreditation in Nigerian tertiary institutions (Hannan & Silver, 2006). Indeed, the system has been recognised as a leading example of best practice around the world (Finch Review, 2011). While the National Universities Commission (NUC) and National Board for Technical Education (NBTE) tasked with safeguarding and enhancing quality and standards

produces guidelines for their external examiners for accreditation of universities and polytechnics respectively in Nigeria, these tend to focus on ensuring comparability and reliability of procedures (example, appointment, induction, reporting) rather than scrutinizing the quality of the underlying practice (Bloxham, 2009). This approach is argued to be grounded in the belief that standardized procedures will serve to uphold standards (Alderman, 2009), a view that appears to be propagated within the Finch Review (2011).

With the mass creation of the tertiary institutions in Nigeria, the call for increasing accountability, requirement for external audit, and changes to course structures, the task of the external examining system has doubtless become more complex (Brooks, 2012). As a result, the role of the external examiner has become increasingly multifaceted in nature, which is perhaps one of the reasons why scrutiny has been directed towards consistency of procedures rather than towards the quality of the underlying practices.

The concept of assessment literacy is also related to assessment expertise, the professionalism of assessors and assessment knowledge. For instance, while discussing the professionalism of assessors, Holroyd (2000) notes that assessment knowledge is having a detailed description of what to and how to assess developed practices through engagement and some reflection upon the process of assessing work and through assessment literature and research. Evidence of both subject expertise (Cuthbert, 2003) and assessment knowledge (Holroyd, 2000) within external assessors' practice have been identified to be very important components of accreditation. Holroyd (2000) emphasizes the importance of developing assessment literacy that is grounded within knowledge of the assessment literature and its relationship to practice. However, there is an abundance of evidence that highlights how weak alignment is between assessment-related theory and practice (Boud & Falchikov, 2007) and, as a result, a lack of assessment knowledge amongst the majority of assessors (Price, 2005).

Accreditation is an assurance of quality; the process of giving public recognition to institutions which meet specific standards. Accreditation is a process of validation in which colleges, universities and other institutions of higher learning are evaluated. It is an assurance to the student that the school has qualified professors, offers approved programs of study, has adequate equipment and technology, operates on a sound financial basis, and utilizes approved recruitment and admission policies (Amaechina, Briggs & Inemesit-Edet, 2014). Accreditation is a term used to describe the process that institutions of higher education undergo to confirm they meet the strictest educational standards. It is earned through accrediting bodies. Accrediting agencies use a multi-pronged approach when it comes to vetting schools and programs to ensure quality standards are being met. First, schools must apply for accreditation and submit a packet of material outlining their processes and achievements. After that, several panels of experts visit the school to see various school features, standards and processes for themselves. According to Ibijola (2014), the goal of accreditation is to ensure that education provided by institutions of higher education meets acceptable levels of quality. It is the responsibility of accrediting agencies to conduct a continuous review of standards, policies, procedures, and issues and ensure that these standards are maintained by institutions accredited by that agency. Institutions accredited by the accrediting agencies must verify that their programs meet established standards and that their ongoing assessments are geared toward continuous improvement. Accredited institutions must demonstrate an adherence to the established standard and a dedication to continuous improvement during the periodic re-evaluation process. Accreditation pushes schools to continually improve. Although, it is a comprehensive process, it is not a one-shot

deal (National Universities Commission (NUC), 2012). Most accrediting agencies require schools to continually apply and improve their standards to keep their accredited status. Accreditation protects the interests of students, their parents, the academic institutions themselves, and potential employers, by ensuring that the educational programs offered have attained a level that meets or exceeds standards that were developed by experts in the field (Obadara & Alake, 2013).

As increasing attention is being paid to the monitoring and recording of standards (Bloxham & Boyd, 2012), the judgment and action of examiners are largely informed by experience and knowledge of their subject and very little informed by an equally pertinent body of knowledge about examination and the measurement of human performance (Bloxham & Boyd, 2012). In other words, there would seem to be two areas of expertise that underpin the role of the external examiner, subject expertise and assessment expertise, or assessment literacy as it will be referred to henceforth. However, the appointment of an external examiner is arguably based on their subject expertise. For instance, within the national criteria for the appointment of external examiners, competence, experience, qualifications, and sufficient standing, credibility and breadth of experience within the discipline to be able to command respect of colleagues are the most prominent criteria (Finch Review, 2011).

The external examining system is a form of professional self-regulation involving independent external assessors from accreditation bodies, whose role is to provide quality assurance in relation to identified modules/programmes/qualifications. This system has been a distinctive feature of higher education for many years now and is considered best practice internationally, being evident in various forms across the world. While the drive towards standardization across the system has resulted in a great deal of focus on the reliability, comparability, and transparency of procedures, far less attention has been paid to the quality of the underlying practice. Despite high esteem for the external assessor system, growing criticisms have resulted in a cautious downgrading of the role. One critique focuses on developing standardised procedures that emphasize consistency and equivalency in an attempt to uphold standards, arguably to the neglect of an examination of the quality of the underlying practice. Due to some unchallenged assumptions underpinning the external accreditation system, it is pertinent to examine the assessment literacy of external assessors who have, so far, been overlooked owing to their complex influences and judgement processes on standards in accreditation for improvement of tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Specifically, the objectives of the study were to:

1. Assess tertiary institutions administrative responsibility literacy of external assessors.
2. Determine tertiary institutions integrity literacy of external assessors.
3. Examine tertiary institutions academic quality literacy of external assessors.

### **Research Questions**

1. What is the extent of tertiary institutions administrative responsibility literacy of external assessors?
2. What is the extent of tertiary institutions integrity literacy of external assessors?
3. What is the extent of tertiary institutions academic quality literacy of external assessors?

## Methodology

The descriptive survey design was adopted in this study as it aimed at collecting data to describe in a systematic manner external assessors' literacy who engage in accreditation of tertiary institutions in Nigeria. The study covered two universities and two polytechnics each from four geo-political zones, as well as NUC and NBTE which are the accreditation bodies for universities and polytechnics respectively in Nigeria. The population of this study comprised all the academics and instructors in federal government owned universities and polytechnics respectively and members of NUC and NBTE who serve as external assessors and convenience sampling technique was utilized in sampling 150 external assessors from four geo-political zones (North Central, South-South, South-East and South-West) of Nigeria. A 33-item instrument titled "External Assessors' Literacy in Accreditation and Improvement of Tertiary Institutions Questionnaire (EALAITIQ)" was developed by the researchers and used for data collection. The instrument consisted of two sections. Section A had items on demographic variables of the external assessors such as gender, area of specialization, years in accreditation. Section B had 10 items on tertiary institutions administrative responsibility literacy, 11 items on tertiary institutions integrity literacy and 12 items on tertiary institutions academic quality literacy. The items in section B were structured in a 4-point Likert type response of Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree and Strongly Disagree. The instrument was construct validated by experts in measurement and evaluation. The internal consistency reliability index of the instrument was tested using Cronbach Alpha method. The reliability index was 0.89 which indicated the appropriateness of the instrument for the study. The instrument was administered to the sampled external assessors in their respective universities/polytechnics by the researchers. The researchers explained to the participants the purpose of the study and the need for them to give their candid response to the items on the instrument. All the 150 copies of instrument were appropriately responded to and returned to the researchers. Mean and standard deviation were used in analyzing the collected data. An item with a mean rating of 2.50 and above was regarded "Yes" an indication of assessors' assessment literacy while a mean rating below 2.50 was regarded "No" an indication of lack of assessors' assessment literacy.

## Results

**Research Question One:** *What is the extent of tertiary institutions administrative responsibility literacy of external assessors?*

**Table 1:** Mean rating of external assessors' literacy on tertiary institutions administrative responsibility

S/N	Items	Mean	SD	Decision
1	Facilities are in place for effective management of TI	2.04	0.81	NO
2	Qualified staff are available for effective service delivery	2.68	1.08	YES
3	Educational values and ethics are maintained by TI	2.11	0.83	NO
4	Permanent quality control measures are put in place in TI	2.23	0.85	NO
5	Continuous improvement measures are put in place in TI	2.34	0.87	NO
6	Clear quality assurance frameworks are in place in TI	2.02	0.80	NO
7	Missions of TI address the needs of society	2.16	0.89	NO
8	TI exercise authority to ensure realization of mission/purpose	2.26	0.90	NO
9	TI produce policies that solve societal problems	2.55	0.93	YES
10	TI provide environment supportive of academic integrity	2.58	0.94	YES

TI = tertiary institutions, N = 150, Expected mean = 2.50, X = mean, SD = standard deviation, YES = assessors' assessment literacy, NO = lack of assessors' assessment literacy



The result shows that 3 items record a mean of 2.50 and above while 7 items have a mean less than 2.50. The standard deviation ranges from 0.80 to 1.08 indicating that the external assessors were homogenous in their responses. This result implies that external assessors' literacy on tertiary institutions administrative responsibility is very low in accreditation which cannot guarantee improvement of tertiary institutions.

**Research Question Two:** *What is the extent of tertiary institutions integrity literacy of external assessors?*

**Table 2:** Mean rating of external assessors literacy on tertiary institutions integrity

S/N	Items	X	SD	Decision
1	There is veracity of information in tertiary institutions	2.54	1.12	YES
2	Admission procedures are transparent in tertiary institutions	2.18	0.90	NO
3	Tertiary institutions maintain their legal contracts with partners	2.59	1.15	YES
4	Tertiary institutions are involve in a lot of community service	2.13	0.85	NO
5	TI appropriately deliver postgraduate services	2.40	0.90	NO
6	Programmes adequately address curriculum requirements	2.12	0.84	NO
7	Programmes adequately address competency standards	2.10	0.81	NO
8	Truthfulness/clarity/fairness characterize TI relations with constituencies	2.36	0.90	NO
9	TI make adequate provisions to ensure academic honesty	2.15	0.83	NO
10	Policies/procedures are equitably ascribe to all students/staff in TI	2.38	0.86	NO
11	TI uses non-discriminatory procedures in delivering services	2.43	0.91	NO

TI = tertiary institutions, N = 150, Expected mean = 2.50, X = mean, SD = standard deviation, YES= assessors' assessment literacy, NO = lack of assessors' assessment literacy

The result indicates that 2 items have a mean of 2.50 and above while 9 items have a mean less than 2.50. The standard deviation ranges from 0.81 to 1.15 indicating that the external assessors were homogenous in their responses. This result means that external assessors' literacy on tertiary institutions integrity is very low in the process of accreditation and this cannot ensure improvement of tertiary institutions.

**Research Question Three:** *What is the extent of tertiary institutions academic quality literacy of external assessors?*

**Table 3:** Mean rating of external assessors literacy on tertiary institutions academic quality

S/N	Items	X	SD	Decision
1	Courses/program description are appropriately done in TI	2.58	1.09	YES
2	TI follow hours of instruction stipulated course credit hours	2.62	1.11	YES
3	Course objectives are clearly stated in programs of TI	2.60	1.10	YES
4	Course contents and materials are stated in programs of TI	2.23	0.89	NO
5	Courses are appropriately delivered in tertiary institutions	2.47	0.91	NO
6	Courses are regularly updated in tertiary institutions	2.02	0.81	NO
7	Teaching methodologies reflect current global practices in TI	2.16	0.89	NO
8	Teachers are proficient in tertiary institutions	2.66	1.12	YES
9	Assessment and evaluation are appropriately done in TI	2.69	1.12	YES
10	Students' outcomes are positive in terms of employability	2.48	0.96	NO
11	Students have appropriate resources to support their studies	2.33	0.92	NO
12	Students have access to suitably qualified teaching staff	2.54	1.08	YES

TI = tertiary institutions, N = 150, Expected mean = 2.50, X = mean, SD = standard deviation, YES = assessors' assessment literacy, NO = lack of assessors' assessment literacy

The result shows that 6 items record a mean of 2.50 and above while 6 items have a mean less than 2.50. The standard deviation ranges from 0.81 to 1.12 indicating that the external assessors were homogenous in their responses. This result signifies that external assessors' literacy on tertiary institutions academic quality is moderate in accreditation which cannot guarantee great improvement of tertiary institutions.

### Discussion of Findings

The result of research question one revealed that external assessors' literacy on tertiary institutions administrative responsibility was very low in accreditation which cannot guarantee improvement of tertiary institutions. Similarly, the result of research question two showed that external assessors' literacy on tertiary institutions integrity was very low in the process of accreditation and this cannot ensure improvement of tertiary institutions. The result of research question three indicated that external assessors' literacy on tertiary institutions academic quality was moderate in accreditation which cannot guarantee great improvement of tertiary institutions. Accreditation of tertiary institutions of learning has led to mounting criticisms of the process and the identification of a number of largely unchallenged assumptions underpinning it. One of such assumptions is that external assessors who assess these institutions are assessment literate but these findings have revealed low external assessors literacy in three key areas of accreditation of tertiary institutions which are tertiary institutions administrative responsibility, integrity and academic quality as there are variable levels of assessors' literacy in these aspects of accreditation and they require attention pertaining to the evolving global procedures for quality assurance and acceptable criteria for quality tertiary institutions. If external assessors lack the requisite knowledge and skills of accreditation, then the success of accreditation for the improvement of Nigerian tertiary institutions cannot be guaranteed. The findings of this study corroborates the finding of Okecha (2008), that the NUC accreditation panels in recent times have not lived up to expectation as the high accreditation scores obtained by many academic programmes cannot,

in anyway, be justified. Similarly, Jack (2014) found out from his study that a look at facilities in most Nigerian universities reveals that the results of accreditations are not compatible with what is on ground as physical facilities in most public universities are grossly inadequate and in a state of disrepair.

### **Conclusion**

Sequel to findings of the study, low level of external assessors' literacy in accreditation which cannot guarantee improvement of tertiary institutions in Nigeria was indicated as there were variable levels of assessors' literacy in some aspects of accreditation and these aspects which require attention pertain to the evolving global procedures for quality assurance and acceptable criteria for quality tertiary institutions. From the results of the ranking of world universities, no Nigerian universities have entered the league of world class universities. Given this ranking therefore, there is an urgent need for improvement in accreditation practices which should match with internal quality mechanism within the universities. As succinctly pointed out, the undeniable fact remains that except external efforts are matched with a purpose driven internal quality assurance mechanism, the entire effort may be fruitless. Thus, to ensure global competitiveness of Nigerian tertiary institutions, high assessment literacy as an indicator of quality education delivery is imperative and cannot be compromised.

### **Recommendations**

1. A joint effort between proprietors and administrators of tertiary institutions as well as external assessors is needed to ensure good coordination and communications of current global best practices and standards so that tertiary institutions can adhere to quality assurance practices that ensure improved tertiary education in Nigeria.
2. Tertiary institutions accreditation bodies in Nigeria such as NUC and NBTE should ensure the development of assessment literacy of their external assessors through the sharing of experience and understanding of the wider process of accreditation of tertiary institutions with colleagues in the western countries so as to get a firm grip of what the process entails.
3. External assessors should engage in self-regulation and perhaps encourage greater integration of assessment literacy within the programme teams that they work to support. As a result, perhaps the focus of the external accreditation system could be redirected away from the standardization of procedure, and towards a focus on illuminating and developing the quality of the underlying practices of the role. In other words, perhaps the focus of the external accreditation system might be broadened to incorporate quality enhancement, not only of modules and programmes but also of the external assessors themselves.

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