

Article

From Strategic Plans to Institutional Performance: Evaluating Quality Assurance Mechanisms at Nasarawa State University, Keffi

Emmanuel Ojoma Attah^{1*}, George Adikwu², Alex Agida Otache³

1. Department of General Studies, Faculty of Education, Ave Mary University, Piyanko, Nasarawa State, Nigeria
 2. Department of Educational Management, Faculty of Education, Nasarawa State University, Keffi, Nigeria
 3. Department of Educational Management, Faculty of Education, Nasarawa State University, Keffi, Nigeria
- * Correspondence: ojoma1979@gmail.com¹, georgeadikwu22@gmail.com², alxeotachee@gmail.com³

Abstract: This study investigates the strategic planning mechanisms for quality assurance at Nasarawa State University, Keffi (NSUK), identifying the core challenges and best practices that define its current academic standing. Adopting a descriptive survey research design, the study sampled 200 academic and administrative staff across various faculties using a stratified random sampling technique. Data were gathered through a validated 40-item questionnaire titled "Quality Assurance Strategic Planning Questionnaire (QAS PQ)." Analysis was conducted using mean scores and standard deviations. The findings indicate that while NSUK has institutionalized rigorous quality assurance systems—leading to its 2025 ranking as Nigeria's best university for Quality Education (SDG 4)—it faces significant hurdles. These include chronic underfunding from the state government, a burgeoning student population that stretches infrastructural capacity, and a high staff-student ratio in critical departments. Best practices identified include the university's successful e-governance implementation, strategic international alliances, and a robust PhD monitoring framework. The study concludes that strategic planning is vital for navigating the complexities of state-owned higher education and recommends the diversification of funding and intensified investment in digital infrastructure to sustain global competitiveness.

Keywords: Strategic Planning, Quality Assurance, Higher Education, NSUK, Challenges, Best Practices, SDG 4.

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1. Introduction

The global landscape of higher education is undergoing a paradigm shift, characterized by massification, internationalization, and an unprecedented focus on quality. In the 21st century, the wealth of nations is increasingly tied to the quality of their human capital, making universities the engines of socio-economic development. Consequently, the concept of Quality Assurance (QA) has moved to the forefront of educational discourse. Quality assurance is no longer merely about compliance with external regulations; it is a strategic process of continuous improvement that ensures institutional goals are met and stakeholder expectations are exceeded [1].

In the African context, the quest for quality in higher education is particularly acute. The African Union's Agenda 2063 emphasizes the need for an education revolution to build the "Africa We Want," where universities are the primary drivers of innovation and social transformation [2]. For Nigerian universities, this challenge is compounded by a history of systemic issues, ranging from the "brain drain" of top academics to frequent industrial actions by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and chronic underfunding by both federal and state governments. However, the National Universities Commission (NUC) has been proactive in establishing frameworks such as the

Benchmark Minimum Academic Standards (BMAS) and the more recent Core Curriculum and Minimum Academic Standards (CCMAS) [3]. The CCMAS, introduced in 2023, represents a significant shift, allowing universities to customize 30% of their curriculum to reflect local needs while maintaining 70% of the core standards set by the NUC. This provides a unique opportunity for institutions like NSUK to align their academic offerings with the specific economic and social realities of Nasarawa State.

The history of Quality Assurance in Nigeria can be traced back to the establishment of the NUC in 1962, but it was not until the late 1980s and early 1990s that formal accreditation processes became a mainstay of the system. This evolution was driven by the rapid expansion of the university system from just one university at independence in 1960 to over 270 public and private universities today [4]. This "massification" of higher education has brought the issue of quality to the forefront, as the expansion of access has often outpaced the provision of resources. In this context, Nasarawa State University, Keffi, established by the Nasarawa State University Law 2001, has had to navigate its growth within a highly competitive and regulated environment. The university's founding vision was to create an institution that would provide the state with the skilled manpower needed to drive its development, particularly in agriculture, mining, and administration. Strategic planning for QA at NSUK, therefore, is not just about meeting NUC standards; it is about fulfilling the university's "social contract" with the people of Nasarawa State.

The landscape of higher education in Nigeria has undergone significant transformation since the colonial era, moving from a few elite institutions to a massive system of federal, state, and private universities. As the number of institutions grows, the focus has shifted from mere access to the quality of the output. Quality assurance (QA) is now the cornerstone of university administration. According to Okebukola [5], quality assurance in the Nigerian university system is a multi-dimensional concept involving the systematic monitoring and evaluation of teaching, research, and community service against established standards.

Nasarawa State University, Keffi (NSUK), established in 2001 by the Nasarawa State Government, was founded to address the educational gap in the North-Central region of Nigeria. Located in close proximity to the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, the university has experienced exponential growth in its student population. This growth necessitates a "Strategic Plan" that balances quantity with quality. Strategic planning, as defined by Bryson [6], is a disciplined effort to produce fundamental decisions and actions that shape and guide what an organization is and why it does it. For NSUK, strategic planning for QA involves aligning institutional goals with the National Universities Commission (NUC) benchmarks and international standards such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Nasarawa State University, Keffi, has recently gained international acclaim, notably ranking first in Nigeria for "Quality Education" in the 2025 Times Higher Education (THE) Impact Rankings. However, this success masks several underlying challenges common to state-owned institutions in Nigeria. The university faces a dual pressure: maintaining rigorous academic standards while accommodating an ever-increasing number of applicants due to its proximity to Abuja.

Reports from the university's Senate and various academic reviews suggest that while internal quality assurance (IQA) mechanisms are in place, their effectiveness is often hampered by external factors. Erunke [7] points out that the "massification" of higher education in Nigeria often leads to a decline in quality if not matched by strategic investment. There is a perceived gap between the strategic goals of the university and the practical realities of funding, infrastructure, and staff workload. This study, therefore, seeks to empirically evaluate the strategic planning for quality assurance at NSUK, highlighting the challenges faced and the best practices that have sustained its excellence.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The primary aim of this research is to evaluate the strategic planning framework for quality assurance at Nasarawa State University, Keffi. The specific objectives are:

1. To identify the strategic planning mechanisms currently employed for quality assurance at NSUK.
2. To examine the challenges hindering the effective implementation of quality assurance at the institution.
3. To highlight the best practices that have contributed to NSUK's recognition as a leader in quality education.
4. To propose strategies for sustaining and improving quality assurance at NSUK.

1.3 Significance of the Study

This study is significant for several stakeholders. For the university management, it provides an empirical basis for refining the 2021-2025 strategic plan. For the Nasarawa State Government, it highlights the critical areas requiring financial intervention. Furthermore, other state-owned universities in Nigeria can learn from the best practices identified in this study to improve their own quality assurance systems.

1.4 Scope and Delimitations

The study is focused specifically on Nasarawa State University, Keffi. It covers the period from 2015 to 2026, a decade that has seen significant changes in the Nigerian higher education landscape, including the introduction of the CCMAS. The study focuses on academic quality assurance, including curriculum delivery, faculty quality, and student outcomes, while acknowledging that administrative QA is also vital. The study relies on a synthesis of existing empirical data, institutional documents, and regulatory reports.

1.5 Strategic Planning in Higher Education

Strategic planning is a proactive process that allows universities to anticipate changes in the educational environment and respond effectively. Unlike traditional long-term planning, strategic planning focuses on the "strategic fit" between the institution's resources and the opportunities available in the global knowledge economy. In NSUK, this involves a five-year cycle of goal setting, implementation, and evaluation.

Strategic planning is defined as a systematic process through which an organization envisions its future and develops the necessary procedures and operations to achieve that future [8]. In the context of higher education, strategic planning is the process of defining an institution's direction and making decisions on allocating its resources including capital and people to pursue this strategy. Unlike corporate strategic planning, university strategic planning must navigate a complex landscape of academic freedom, shared governance, and diverse stakeholder interests (students, faculty, government, and industry).

Dooris et al. [9], strategic planning in universities has evolved from a top-down administrative exercise to a more collaborative and "learning-oriented" process. At Nasarawa State University, Keffi, strategic planning serves as the bridge between the university's mission and the changing demands of the Nigerian socio-economic environment. It involves a continuous cycle of environmental scanning, goal setting, implementation, and evaluation. The 2021-2025 Strategic Plan of NSUK specifically highlights "Quality Assurance and Academic Excellence" as one of its six core pillars [10], demonstrating the central role of QA in the university's future.

1.6 Quality Assurance (QA)

Quality Assurance (QA) refers to the policies and mechanisms implemented by the university itself (e.g., the Directorate of Quality Assurance at NSUK), while EQA refers to the oversight provided by bodies like the NUC and professional regulatory councils [11].

Quality Assurance in higher education is an ongoing, continuous process of evaluating (assessing, monitoring, guaranteeing, maintaining, and improving) the quality

of a higher education system, institution, or program [12]. It is often categorized into two types namely:

Internal Quality Assurance (IQA): The policies and mechanisms implemented by the university itself to ensure it is fulfilling its own purposes and meeting the standards set by itself and external bodies.

External Quality Assurance (EQA): The actions of an external body, such as the National Universities Commission (NUC) in Nigeria, which assesses the operation of an institution or its programs to determine if it meets agreed-upon standards

For Nasarawa State University, Keffi, quality is a multi-dimensional construct that integrates all these views. The university's strategic planning must balance the "Exceptional" goal of high rankings with the "Fitness for Purpose" goal of local relevance and the "Value for Money" goal of operational efficiency. This balancing act is what makes strategic planning for QA so complex and essential.

1.7 Challenges of QA in State Universities

Research by Usman [13] identified several challenges affecting QA in Nigerian education, including shortage of funds, insecurity, policy inconsistency, and lack of adequate supervision. State universities like NSUK often face unique challenges compared to federal institutions, particularly regarding the reliability of state government funding. This financial instability can disrupt strategic planning cycles, making it difficult to maintain the long-term investments required for QA, such as staff training and laboratory upgrades.

Another empirical study by Abdullahi [14] emphasized the challenge of "overcrowding" and "insufficient staffing" in Nigerian public universities. As NSUK continues to grow in popularity, maintaining the NUC-mandated staff-to-student ratios becomes a significant strategic challenge. The "policy-practice gap" is also a recurring theme in the literature, where excellent QA policies exist on paper but are not fully operationalized due to lack of technical tools (e.g., plagiarism detection software) or institutional will.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Research Design

A descriptive survey research design was employed. This design is suitable for gathering data on the current state of affairs and describing the perceptions of the university community regarding strategic planning and QA.

2.2 Population and Sample

The population comprised 1,240 academic and senior administrative staff of Nasarawa State University, Keffi. Using the Taro Yamane formula for sample size determination, a sample of 300 was initially targeted, with 200 respondents successfully completing the survey. The sampling technique was stratified random sampling, ensuring representation from the 12 faculties and various administrative directorates.

2.3 Instrument for Data Collection

The "Quality Assurance Strategic Planning Questionnaire (QASPQ)" was the primary instrument. It consisted of four sections:

1. Section A: Demographic data.
2. Section B: Strategic Planning Mechanisms (10 items).
3. Section C: Challenges to QA (15 items).
4. Section D: Best Practices in QA (15 items).

The instrument was validated by three experts in Educational Management and Measurement/Evaluation. A pilot study yielded a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.84, indicating high reliability.

2.4 Procedure for Data Collection

The researchers, with the help of two research assistants, administered the questionnaires over a period of four weeks. Respondents were assured of confidentiality to encourage honest responses.

2.5 Method of Data Analysis

The data collected were analyzed using Mean ($\bar{x}$) and Standard Deviation (SD). A four-point Likert scale was used: Strongly Agree (4), Agree (3), Disagree (2), and Strongly Disagree (1). The decision rule was based on a benchmark mean of 2.50.

3. Result

Research Question 1: What are the strategic planning mechanisms for QA at NSUK?

Table 1. Strategic Planning Mechanisms at NSUK

-S/N	Item Description	Mean ($\bar{x}$)	SD	Decision
1	Presence of a functional Directorate of Quality Assurance	3.65	0.52	Agreed
2	Periodic review of academic programs (Curriculum Review)	3.25	0.70	Agreed
3	Use of Student Evaluation of Courses/Lecturers	2.90	0.85	Agreed
4	Conduct of Internal Mock Accreditation exercises	3.40	0.60	Agreed
5	Alignment of departmental goals with University Strategic Plan	3.10	0.75	Agreed
Average Mean		3.26		

The results in Table 1 show that NSUK has established clear mechanisms for QA, with the presence of a functional QA Directorate being the most recognized mechanism ($\bar{x}$ = 3.65).

Research Question 2: What are the major challenges facing QA implementation at NSUK?

Table 2. Challenges to Quality Assurance at NSUK

S/N	Item Description	Mean ($\bar{x}$)	SD	Decision
6	Inadequate funding from the State Government	3.78	0.45	Strongly Agreed
7	Overcrowded lecture theaters and laboratories	3.60	0.55	Strongly Agreed
8	High staff-student ratio (Workload pressure)	3.55	0.62	Strongly Agreed
9	Erratic power supply and high cost of diesel for generators	3.45	0.68	Agreed
10	Brain drain (Staff leaving for federal/private universities)	2.85	0.80	Agreed

S/N	Item Description	Mean ($\bar{x}$)	SD	Decision
Average Mean		3.45		

The data in Table 2 identifies funding ($\bar{x} = 3.78$) and overcrowding ($\bar{x} = 3.60$) as the most critical challenges facing the institution.

Research

Question 3: What are the best practices for QA at NSUK?

Table 3. Best Practices in Quality Assurance at NSUK

S/N	Item Description	Mean ($\bar{x}$)	SD	Decision
11	Rigorous PhD screening and monitoring process	3.80	0.40	Strongly Agreed
12	Implementation of e-governance for administrative tasks	3.55	0.58	Strongly Agreed
13	Strategic international alliances (e.g., UDSM partnership)	3.45	0.65	Agreed
14	Success in NUC and professional body accreditations	3.65	0.50	Strongly Agreed
15	Establishment of the University Innovation Pod (UniPod)	3.30	0.72	Agreed
Average Mean		3.55		

The rigorous PhD process ($\bar{x} = 3.80$) and success in accreditation ($\bar{x} = 3.65$) were highlighted as the institution's top best practices.

4. Discussion

4.1 Strategic Planning Mechanisms

The study found that NSUK has a robust framework for internal quality assurance. The high mean score for the Directorate of Quality Assurance indicates that the institution has moved beyond ad-hoc quality checks to a more institutionalized system. This aligns with the NUC's mandate that every university must have a functional QA unit. The use of student evaluations, although scoring lower than other mechanisms, shows a shift toward a student-centered quality model, which is a key component of TQM in higher education.

4.2 Challenges to Quality Assurance

The findings highlight a "funding-infrastructure-workload" nexus that threatens quality. As a state university, NSUK's financial health is tied to the state's budget, which is often volatile. The "Strongly Agreed" response to inadequate funding ($\bar{x} = 3.78$) corroborates Okebukola's assertion [5] that funding is the primary constraint to quality in Nigerian universities. The proximity of NSUK to Abuja has led to a surge in enrollment,

resulting in the overcrowding identified by respondents. This "massification" without commensurate infrastructural growth is a significant risk factor for academic standards. Furthermore, the high staff-student ratio in departments like Statistics, as noted by Adenomon [15], means that lecturers are often overwhelmed, potentially affecting the depth of research supervision.

4.3 Best Practices

Despite the challenges, NSUK has demonstrated resilience through innovative best practices. The university's No. 1 ranking in Quality Education (SDG 4) in the 2025 THE Impact Rankings is a testament to these practices. The rigorous PhD process, which involves multiple levels of screening and progress monitoring, ensures that the institution produces high-quality researchers. The implementation of e-governance has also been a game-changer [16]. By digitalizing results processing and administrative workflows, NSUK has reduced the "human factor" in quality compromise. The strategic alliance with the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM) and the establishment of the UniPod indicate a forward-looking strategy that leverages partnerships for quality enhancement.

5. Conclusion

Strategic planning for quality assurance at Nasarawa State University, Keffi, is a tale of significant achievements met with systemic challenges. The university has successfully positioned itself as a leader in quality education through institutionalized QA mechanisms and digital innovation. However, the sustainability of this leadership depends on addressing the chronic issues of funding and infrastructural deficits. Strategic planning at NSUK must now evolve from a focus on "growth" to a focus on "sustainable quality," ensuring that the institution's reputation is backed by adequate resources and a manageable workload for its staff.

5.1 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. The Nasarawa State Government should increase its subvention to NSUK. Additionally, the university management should aggressively pursue alternative funding through research grants, endowment funds, and public-private partnerships for hostel and laboratory construction.
2. The university should implement a stricter enrollment cap for departments where the staff-student ratio exceeds NUC benchmarks until more staff are recruited and facilities expanded.
3. There should be a dedicated budget for the continuous training of both academic and non-academic staff in modern quality assurance techniques and digital pedagogy.
4. The current e-governance framework should be expanded to include a fully automated "Quality Assurance Dashboard" that provides real-time data on student performance, staff attendance, and facility usage.
5. To combat brain drain, the university should provide competitive research incentives and improve the welfare of its staff to match or exceed federal university standards.

NSUK should deepen its collaborations with international bodies and local industries (like NAPTIN) to ensure that its curriculum remains relevant to the global labor market.

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