AN EVALUATION OF THE NATIONAL EXAMINATIONS COUNCIL'S ACCREDITATION EXERCISES IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study was designed to evaluate the effectiveness of the National Examinations Council's accreditation exercise conducted in secondary schools across Nigeria. The study was guided by three objectives and research questions, using a descriptive survey research design. A sample of 1,703 school staff from 120 secondary schools in six selected states, along with 379 NECO staff, participated in the study. Data were collected using two structured questionnaires and analysed using descriptive statistical tools, including frequency, simple percentage, mean, t-test, and ANOVA. The findings revealed that the NECO accreditation exercise is effective in assessing the quality of the teaching-learning process and school infrastructural facilities. The various instruments designed for the exercise are adjudged to be valid and reliable. It was recommended that NECO should, among others, continuously update and refine its accreditation instruments to ensure they remain relevant to evolving educational standards and practices.

Keywords: NECO accreditation, secondary schools, teaching-learning process, school facilities, educational standards.

INTRODUCTION

The credibility of certificates issued by public examination bodies relies on the processes established by stakeholders, including students, parents, school managers, examination bodies, and the government. In Nigeria, the National Examinations Council (NECO), established in April 1999, is mandated to conduct Senior School Certificate Examinations (SSCE) and Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE), and award globally acceptable certificates. To ensure the credibility of these certificates, NECO has implemented several quality assurance mechanisms, including the accreditation of secondary schools seeking to register for its school-based certificate examinations, such as the Senior Secondary Certificate Examination (SSCE) and the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE).

Accreditation, as described by Okogie (2012), is a self-study and external quality review process used to evaluate a school's need for improvement. It determines if a school meets the standards set by the National Policy on Education. Afemikhe, Omo-Egbekuse, and Imobekhai (2013) view school accreditation as a systematic evaluation that highlights a school's strengths and weaknesses, leading to positive changes when

properly conducted. The U.S. Department of Education (USDE), as cited by Obadara and Alaka (2013), categorises educational accreditation into "institutional" and "specialised" or "programmatic." In Nigeria, NECO, along with other examination bodies, conducts institutional accreditation in secondary schools.

Three specific objectives guide NECO's school accreditation exercise: ensuring schools meet minimum standards for continuous assessment scores, maintaining school infrastructure that supports ethical conduct of examination, and having adequate, qualified academic staff for the subjects offered. Thus, school accreditation, conducted in March and October annually, involves both fresh and re-accreditation exercises. Fresh accreditation is for schools applying to present candidates for NECO exams for the first time, while re-accreditation, which occurs every five years for Nigerian schools and every ten years for foreign schools, is designed to assess continued compliance with standards.

NECO's accreditation is conducted at two levels: SSCE and BECE. While SSCE accreditation covers the senior secondary school systems, BECE accreditation is for the junior secondary school. Despite periodic accreditation, the literature (Ihebom & Uko, 2020; Afemikhe, Omo-Egbekuse, & Imobekhai, 2013) suggests that many Nigerian secondary schools still lack qualified teachers, adequate infrastructure, and instructional materials, as well as result-oriented processes. NECO's accreditation assesses several aspects of the school system, including facilities which, according to Dare (2010), are crucial for effective teaching and learning. The availability and condition of classrooms, libraries, laboratories, and sports equipment are key elements assessed during the exercise.

Another critical area of NECO accreditation is the teaching and learning process. This is described by Munna and Kalam (2021) as the transfer of knowledge from teachers to students. NECO evaluates teachers' qualifications, experience, and professional development, as well as the qualifications and experience of school leadership in teaching and administration. Continuous Assessment practices are also examined to ensure they meet national standards. Recent research, however, suggests that accreditation alone may not always lead to improved educational outcomes unless accompanied by effective monitoring and intervention measures. While some scholars (Juneja & Shikha, 2019) argue that accreditation increases institutional accountability, others (Owolabi, 2022) contend that Nigerian accreditation processes tend to focus more on compliance than on genuine improvements in instructional quality. The bureaucratic nature of accreditation has been criticised for being unduly procedural, resulting in instances where some schools fulfil documentation requirements without implementing significant changes (Oni, 2021). These inconsistencies highlight the need for a more comprehensive evaluation of NECO's accreditation, particularly its effectiveness in promoting continuous school improvement rather than serving as a recurring regulatory formality.

During the accreditation process, NECO utilises several tools to assess adherence to established standards. These tools are intended to assess student activities, teacher

qualifications, facilities, and ongoing assessment procedures. The success of the exercise depends on how well these tools work. A crucial aspect of this process is the accreditation team, which typically comprises professionals from diverse fields. The size of the teams and their composition, however, may have an impact on the outcome of the exercise. Principals, teachers, and other school employees are crucial to the accreditation process, as they provide valuable perspectives and insights.

School accreditation exercise is a crucial aspect of quality assurance in the educational system, and its relevance can be seen in several dimensions. The benefits of a well-executed accreditation exercise include improved academic standards, enhanced accountability and credibility, increased parental confidence, preparation for future educational opportunities, and professional development for teachers. Accreditation can lead schools to set high standards, promote transparency and help to drive systematic improvements and data-driven policy formulations.

Several stakeholders in the education sector are primarily concerned with the current state of the educational system. They include the state and federal ministries of education (the policy formulators), the school administrators, teachers and students. A quick appraisal of the accreditation exercise in the context of secondary school systems reveals that school administrators, teachers, and bodies responsible for the accreditation exercise are the primary sources and consumers of accreditation data. Their assessment of the effectiveness or otherwise of accreditation exercises should provide valuable insights that can help shape school accreditation for optimal results.

STATEMENT OF THE RESEARCH PROBLEM
All stakeholders in the educational sector yearn to see that any school presenting candidates for public examinations has a safe and conducive learning environment, qualified teaching staff, functional facilities and adequate continuous assessment practice. It is for this reason that the accreditation exercise becomes institutionalised. Accreditation exercises have been on for several years; however, there are no statistical evaluations of their effectiveness. There is no documentary evidence of the stakeholders' perception of the exercise. The question here is how effective is the NECO school accreditation exercise in setting standards for teaching and learning activities, school infrastructure facilities, and school continuous assessment practices? Hence, the need for this study. Also, since the inception of NECO, there is no documented evidence, known to the researchers, on the evaluation of the accreditation exercise carried out by the Council. Moreover, there is a dearth of literature on the impact of accreditation on schools over the years. To fill this gap, a critical appraisal of the Council's accreditation exercise became imperative, and this is what this study was out to address.

AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY
The study aimed to evaluate the current accreditation practices of secondary schools in the National Examinations Council. Specifically, the study sought to:

Prof. Ibrahim Dantani Wushishi, Dr. Tunde Abraham Oladokun, Dr. Maxwell Emmanuel Uduafemhe, *Dominic Chilagorom Nwachukwu

1. Examine the effectiveness of the NECO accreditation exercise in assessing the quality of teaching and learning processes in schools.
2. Examine the effectiveness of the NECO accreditation exercise in assessing the quality of facilities in schools; and
3. Determine the effectiveness of the accreditation instruments.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS
In this study, the following research questions were used for guidance:
1. Is the NECO accreditation exercise effective in assessing the quality of teaching and learning processes in schools?
2. Is the NECO accreditation exercise effective in assessing the quality of facilities in schools?
3. Are the NECO accreditation instruments effective?

Hypotheses of the Study
The following hypotheses were formulated and tested at 0.05 level of significance:

H_{11}: NECO Staff would respond more positively than school staff to the effectiveness of the NECO accreditation exercise in ensuring the quality of teaching and learning processes in schools.

H_{12}: NECO Staff would respond more positively than school staff to the effectiveness of the NECO accreditation exercise in ensuring the quality of school facilities in schools.

H_{03}: There is no significant difference among the responses of Senior Staff in the effectiveness of the accreditation instruments

Methodology
A descriptive survey design was employed in the study to assess the effectiveness of the National Examinations Council's (NECO) accreditation processes in Nigerian secondary schools. This design was deemed perfect since it enables the gathering and analysis of data from a wide range of sources in a methodical manner, offering deep insights into the opinions and experiences of those involved in the accreditation process. It was beneficial for investigating the intricacies of institutional accreditation and how it affects the calibre of education. Two theoretical frameworks—Institutional Theory and Educational Accountability Theory—serve as the foundation for this study. They directed the examination of the accreditation procedure and its impact on academic results. According to Scott (2008), institutional theory describes how accreditation functions as a tool to guarantee adherence to set educational standards and strengthen organisational legitimacy. Demeulemeester (2016) asserts that educational accountability theory places a strong emphasis on the function of accreditation in ensuring that educational institutions fulfil quality standards. When combined, these frameworks enabled the study to examine NECO's accreditation procedure in the context of broader institutional and accountability frameworks within Nigeria's secondary education system.

The study focused on two main groups: secondary school employees from schools that had received NECO accreditation and NECO employees participating in accreditation processes. A multi-stage sampling technique was employed to select a representative sample, given that there were 2,379 NECO staff members overall and approximately 18,000 secondary schools had participated in the accreditation process. To ensure geographic diversity, six states were selected from Nigeria's six geopolitical zones using a stratified random sampling method. To select schools based on their accreditation status—fully accredited, partially accredited, or not accredited—purposive sampling was employed. Ultimately, 1,703 school employees and 379 NECO employees were chosen using proportional random sampling. This strategy enhanced the validity and generalizability of the results by combining probability and non-probability sampling techniques to ensure a strong and representative sample.

The Accreditation Evaluation Questionnaire for Secondary School Staff (AEQSSS) and the Accreditation Evaluation Questionnaire for NECO Staff (AEQNS) are two structured, self-administered questionnaires that were used to gather data. These tools were designed to collect both quantitative and qualitative data on opinions regarding the efficacy of NECO's accreditation process, as well as demographic information. While the AEQSSS concentrated on school staff's perceptions of how accreditation impacts curriculum standards and overall school quality, the AEQNS sought to evaluate NECO staff's opinions regarding the impact of the accreditation process on teaching, learning, and facilities. Experts in educational measurement verified the content and construct validity of both tools. The AEQNS and AEQSSS demonstrated high internal consistency, with Cronbach's Alpha coefficients of 0.98 and 0.97, respectively. While inferential statistics, such as t-tests and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), were utilised to test the study's hypotheses and determine whether there were any significant differences between NECO and school staff responses regarding the efficacy of the accreditation process, descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and means, were used to summarise the data.

Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained, and all participants were informed of the study's objectives, the voluntary nature of their involvement, and their right to withdraw from participation at any time. All participants gave their informed consent, and the anonymisation of their answers guaranteed confidentiality. The study adhered to ethical guidelines, ensuring the accuracy of the data and protecting participants' rights at every stage of the investigation.

Results and Discussion
This section primarily focuses on the presentation, analysis, and discussion of the results obtained from the research study.

Research Question One
Is the NECO accreditation exercise effective in assessing the quality of teaching and learning processes in schools?

Prof. Ibrahim Dantani Wushishi, Dr. Tunde Abraham Oladokun, Dr. Maxwell Emmanuel Uduafemhe, *Dominic Chilagorom Nwachukwu

Table 1a: Schools' perception on the effectiveness of the NECO accreditation exercise in assessing the quality of the teaching-learning process in schools.

Opinion Statement for School	SA		A		D		SD	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
The accreditation process adequately assesses the quality of teaching and learning in Secondary Schools.	689	50.55	513	37.64	78	5.72	83	6.09
School accreditation has contributed to improved record keeping activities at school level.	648	47.54	565	41.45	92	6.75	58	4.26
NECO's accreditation practices have resulted in notable improvement in the academic performance of students from accredited schools.	419	30.74	718	52.68	174	12.77	52	3.82
Accreditation visits have helped schools to lay more emphasis on adequate coverage of school curriculum.	558	40.94	613	44.97	125	9.17	67	4.92
Periodic accreditation of schools has encouraged and sustained quality of education at secondary school level.	491	36.02	683	50.11	146	10.71	43	3.15
Accreditation of schools encourage schools to employ more qualified teachers to enhance accreditation status.	532	39.03	544	39.91	227	16.65	60	4.40
The quality of teaching staff in schools usually improves as a result of accreditation.	411	30.18	663	48.68	223	16.37	65	4.77
Accreditation exercise is effective in assessing adequacy of teaching and learning activities in schools.	413	30.30	709	52.02	181	13.28	60	4.40

Source: Computed from 2023 NECO field data survey.

The interpretations of Tables 1a and 1b illustrate the effectiveness of the NECO accreditation exercise in enhancing the quality of the teaching-learning process in secondary schools. As shown in Table 1a, a significant majority of school staff members agreed that NECO's accreditation practices have a positive impact on various aspects of education. Specifically, 88.99% believe that school accreditation has improved record-keeping activities, while 88.19% affirm that the process effectively assesses the quality of teaching and learning. Additionally, 85.91% of respondents agreed that accreditation visits have emphasised adequate curriculum coverage, contributing to a notable improvement in student performance, as reflected by 83.42% of respondents.

Table 1b: Staff perception on the effectiveness of the NECO accreditation exercise in assessing the quality of the teaching-learning process in schools.

Opinion Statement for Staff	SA		A		D		SD	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
The accreditation process adequately assesses the quality of teaching and learning in Secondary Schools.	228	64.04	111	31.18	13	3.65	4	1.12
School accreditation has contributed to improved record keeping activities at school level.	177	49.72	174	48.88	5	1.40	0	0.00
NECO's accreditation practices have resulted in notable improvements in the academic performance of students from accredited schools.	104	29.21	215	60.39	29	8.15	8	2.25
Periodic accreditation of schools should be encouraged to sustain and improve on quality of education at secondary school level.	219	61.52	129	36.24	5	1.40	3	0.84
Accreditation visits have helped schools to lay more emphasis on adequate coverage of school curriculum.	153	42.98	186	52.25	17	4.78	0	0.00
Accreditation of schools encourages schools to employ more qualified teachers to enhance accreditation status.	192	53.93	146	41.01	15	4.21	3	0.84

The quality of teaching staff can affect the accreditation status of a school.	192	53.93	145	40.73	16	4.49	3	0.84
Accreditation exercise is effective in assessing schools teaching-learning activities.	162	45.51	180	50.56	12	3.37	2	0.56

Source: Computed from 2023 NECO field data survey.

Table 1b reinforces this positive perception from the perspective of NECO staff. 98.60% of staff agreed that accreditation has bolstered record-keeping, while 97.76% supported the idea that periodic accreditation sustains and enhances educational quality. Furthermore, 95.23% of staff members concurred that accreditation visits ensure comprehensive curriculum coverage, and 94.94% agreed that the process encourages schools to employ more qualified teachers, directly impacting school performance. These findings collectively suggest that NECO staff are confident in the accreditation exercise's capacity to maintain high standards in teaching and learning across secondary schools.

Research Question Two
Is the NECO accreditation exercise effective in assessing the quality of facilities in schools?

Table 2a: Schools' perception on the effectiveness of the NECO accreditation exercise in assessing the quality of facilities in schools

Opinion Statement for School	SA		A		D		SD	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Accreditation of schools have helped schools to procure more school facilities for teaching and learning.	657	48.20	506	37.12	127	9.32	73	5.36
School accreditation helps schools to attain minimum standard in terms of infrastructural facilities.	466	34.19	615	45.12	215	15.77	67	4.92
The quality and quantity of laboratory facilities usually improve because of accreditation.	528	38.74	572	41.97	198	14.53	65	4.77
Schools make efforts to improve on infrastructural facilities to pass accreditation exercise.	530	38.88	599	43.95	155	11.37	79	5.80
NECO accreditation exercise is effective in assessing school's infrastructural facilities.	401	29.42	741	54.37	171	12.55	50	3.67

Source: Computed from 2023 NECO field data survey.

Table 2b: Staff perception on the effectiveness of the NECO accreditation exercise in assessing the quality of facilities in schools

Opinion Statement for Staff	SA		A		D		SD	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Accreditation of schools have helped schools to procure more school facilities for teaching and learning.	213	59.83	131	36.80	10	2.81	2	0.56
One major purpose of school accreditation is to help schools attain minimum standard in terms of school infrastructural facilities.	204	57.30	144	40.45	8	2.25	0	0.00
The quality and quantity of laboratory facilities can affect the accreditation status of a school.	208	58.43	129	36.24	18	5.06	1	0.28
Availability of school infrastructural facilities in any school usually influences its accreditation status.	203	57.02	137	38.48	11	3.09	5	1.40
NECO accreditation exercise is effective in assessing school's infrastructural facilities.	160	44.94	188	52.81	5	1.40	3	0.84

Source: Computed from 2023 NECO field data survey.

The interpretation of Tables 2a and 2b highlights the effectiveness of the NECO accreditation exercise in assessing the quality of facilities in schools. As illustrated in Table 2a, the perceptions of school staff indicate strong agreement on the positive impact

of accreditation on school facilities. 85.32% of respondents believed that accreditation has facilitated the procurement of essential facilities for teaching and learning, while 83.79% agreed that the accreditation process effectively evaluates the adequacy of school infrastructures. Additionally, 82.83% acknowledged that schools enhance their facilities to meet accreditation standards, and 80.71% agreed that laboratory facilities have improved as a result of the accreditation process. This strong agreement underscores the effectiveness of NECO's accreditation in ensuring that schools meet and maintain required infrastructure standards.

Similarly, Table 2b reflects the perceptions of NECO staff, further affirming the effectiveness of the accreditation process. 97.75% of staff members concurred that one of the primary purposes of school accreditation is to help schools meet minimum infrastructural standards, and the same percentage agreed that the process effectively assesses the quality of school facilities. Furthermore, 96.63% believed that accreditation has helped schools acquire the necessary facilities, and 95.50% agreed that the availability of infrastructure significantly influences accreditation outcomes. Additionally, 94.67% of staff affirmed that the quality and quantity of laboratory facilities can impact a school's accreditation status. These findings suggest a unanimous belief among NECO staff that the accreditation process plays a critical role in maintaining and enhancing the quality of facilities in accredited schools.

Research Question Three
Are NECO accreditation instruments effective?
Table 3: Staff perception on the effectiveness of the accreditation instruments

Opinion Statement	SA		A		D		SD	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
The accreditation instruments are good at revealing fake school records and information.	141	39.61	179	50.28	28	7.87	8	2.25
Accreditation officials are good at detecting fake and inaccurate school data.	102	28.65	216	60.67	31	8.71	7	1.97
School accreditation instruments are effective in measuring school quality indicators.	129	36.24	210	58.99	9	2.53	8	2.25
Accreditation instruments need review to be more effective.	1	0.28	32	8.99	191	53.65	132	37.08
Accreditation instruments are too difficult to use.	95	26.69	219	61.52	31	8.71	11	3.09
A good knowledge of accreditation instrument is desirable to effectively evaluate prospective schools.	160	44.94	182	51.12	11	3.09	3	0.84

Source: Computed from 2023 NECO field data survey.

Table 3 presents staff perceptions on the effectiveness of accreditation instruments. It shows that 96.06% agreed that a good knowledge of accreditation instruments is desirable to evaluate prospective schools effectively, 95.23% agreed that school accreditation instruments are effective in measuring school quality indicators, 90.73% disagreed that accreditation instruments need review to be more effective, 89.89% of the respondents agreed that the accreditation instruments are good at revealing fake school records and information, 89.32% of the respondents agreed that accreditation officials are good at detecting fake and inaccurate school data, 88.21% agreed that accreditation

instruments are however complex to use. Therefore, it can be deduced that the Council's accreditation instruments are effective in measuring all the parameters they are designed to check. However, the accreditation instruments can be improved upon to make them easier to use.

Hypothesis One
NECO Staff would respond more positively than school staff to the effectiveness of the NECO accreditation exercise in ensuring the quality of the teaching and learning processes in schools.

Table 4: A t-Test of NECO Staff and School Staff on the effectiveness of the NECO accreditation exercise in assessing the quality of the teaching-learning process in schools.

	NECO Staff	School Staff
Mean	3.445	3.1775
Variance	0.0173	0.0116
Observations	8	8
Df	13	
t Stat	4.448	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.00033	
t Critical one-tail	1.771	

Source: Computed from 2023 NECO field data survey.

Table 4 shows the analysis of responses of NECO Staff and School Staff regarding the effectiveness of NECO accreditation exercises in assessing the quality of the teaching-learning process in schools. The result showed that the t-statistic of 4.448 is greater than the t-critical value of 1.771, and the p-value of 0.00033 is less than 0.05. This indicates a statistically significant difference in the responses of NECO Staff and School Staff. By implication, the stated hypothesis is that NECO Staff would respond more positively than school staff to the effectiveness of the NECO accreditation exercise in ensuring the quality of teaching and learning processes in schools. Therefore, it can be deduced that NECO Staff viewed their role in school accreditation as having a more positive impact on accredited schools in ensuring the quality of the teaching and learning process than School Staff.

Hypothesis Two
NECO Staff would respond more positively than school staff on the effectiveness of the NECO accreditation exercise in ensuring the quality of school facilities in schools.

Table 5: T-test of NECO Staff and School Staff in the effectiveness of the NECO accreditation exercise in ensuring the quality of facilities in schools.

	NECO Staff	School Staff
Mean	3.514	3.156
Variance	0.00313	0.00573
Observations	5	5
Df	7	

t Stat	8.505
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.0000308
t Critical one-tail	1.895

Source: Computed from 2023 NECO field data survey.

Table 5 presents the analysis of responses from NECO Staff and school staff regarding the effectiveness of NECO accreditation exercises in evaluating the quality of school facilities. Similar to Hypothesis One, the result shows that the t-statistic of 8.505 is greater than the t-critical value of 1.895, and the p-value of 0.0000308 is significantly less than 0.05, indicating a statistically significant difference in the responses of NECO Staff and School Staff. Therefore, the stated hypothesis is hereby accepted. The staff of the Council responded more positively than their school counterparts on the effectiveness of the NECO accreditation exercise in ensuring the quality of school facilities. Although both sides' responses were positive, as expected, the NECO staff expressed a higher opinion on the impact of the accreditation exercise on ensuring the quality of facilities in schools.

Hypothesis Three

There is no significant difference among the mean responses of Senior Staff in determining the effectiveness of the accreditation instruments.

Table 6: ANOVA Analysis of the differences among the mean responses of Senior Staff in determining the effectiveness of the accreditation instruments

Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	P-value	F crit
Between Groups	0.197	2	0.099	0.755	0.471	3.021
Within Groups	46.127	353	0.131			
Total	46.324	355				

Source: Computed from 2023 NECO field data survey.

The analysis in Table 6 reveals that the F calculated value is 0.755, and the F critical value is 3.021. Since the F critical is greater than the F calculated at a 0.05 level of significance, the null hypothesis is accepted. It implies that there is no significant difference among the mean responses of the three categories of senior staff (CONRAISS 7-9, CONRAISS 11-12, CONRAISS 13 and above) in determining the effectiveness of the accreditation instruments.

Findings of the Study

The following are the findings from the study:

1. The NECO accreditation exercise is highly effective in assessing the quality of teaching and learning processes in schools.
2. The NECO accreditation exercise is very effective in assessing the quality of facilities in schools.
3. The NECO accreditation instruments are effective in measuring the indicators they are designed to measure.
4. The NECO Staff responded more positively than school staff on the effectiveness of the NECO accreditation exercise in ensuring the quality of the teaching and learning process in schools.

5. NECO Staff responded more positively than school staff regarding the effectiveness of the NECO accreditation exercise in ensuring the quality of school facilities.
6. There is no statistically significant difference among the mean responses of the three categories of senior staff (CONRAISS 7-9, CONRAISS 11-12, CONRAISS 13 and above) on the effectiveness of the accreditation instruments.

Discussion of Findings

Tables 1a and 1b show that both NECO and school staff recognise the value of the NECO accreditation process, which is a very effective way to assess the calibre of teaching and learning processes in schools. This conclusion is further supported by the findings of the corresponding hypothesis (Ho1), which are displayed in Table 4 and indicate that NECO Staff were substantially more positive than School Staff in their assessments of the accreditation exercise's ability to guarantee the calibre of the teaching and learning process. Given their direct involvement and expertise in the accreditation process, NECO staff may have responded more favourably because they had a better understanding of the exercise's criteria, goals, and results. In contrast to Ajayi and Ekundayo's (2018) study, which highlighted educators' scepticism regarding the effectiveness of accreditation, this study found a consensus between NECO staff and school staff that accreditation improves teaching and learning. This suggests that, despite perception discrepancies, NECO's accreditation model may have greater stakeholder alignment than other accreditation frameworks. This pattern of accreditation officers rating their processes more favourably than school-level implementers is consistent with findings by Owolabi (2022) and Ajayi and Ekundayo (2018), who noted that accreditation bodies frequently perceive their quality assurance mechanisms as robust, while teachers and school administrators express reservations about their actual impact on classroom instruction.

The findings are consistent with those of earlier studies, such as Imhangbe et al. (2023), Ngadiuba (2010), Orji (2012), Ayeni and Adelabu (2012), and Eboka and Inomiesa (2015), all of which emphasise the key role of quality assurance in education. It is noteworthy that despite the disparity in response levels, both NECO Staff and School Staff agreed on the overall effectiveness of the NECO accreditation exercise in assessing and improving the quality of teaching and learning. Although the results of these studies generally support the value of accreditation in raising educational standards, there are some subtleties in their conclusions. Imhangbe et al. (2023), for instance, highlighted the importance of accreditation in promoting institutional accountability; however, this study indicates that its influence is more noticeable in terms of improvements in teaching and learning. According to Orji (2012), school accreditation led to changes in policies but had little impact on regular teaching methods. On the other hand, the study's conclusions indicate that NECO's accreditation is having a significant impact on curriculum coverage and pedagogical approaches, as confirmed by the agreement between NECO and school personnel. This disparity suggests that the regulatory body's

Prof. Ibrahim Dantani Wushishi, Dr. Tunde Abraham Oladokun, Dr. Maxwell Emmanuel Uduafemhe, *Dominic Chilagorom Nwachukwu

enforcement tactics and schools' readiness to incorporate feedback into their teaching methods may significantly influence the success of accreditation. The emphasis on raising the calibre of instruction and learning that unites these studies is indicative of the general concern among governments, educational institutions, and non-governmental organisations to uphold and improve educational standards. The agreement further underscores the crucial role that infrastructure, learning environments, and effective accreditation processes play in determining the overall effectiveness of the teaching and learning process in schools. Although this study supports the idea that accreditation improves learning environments, it does not definitively address the question of whether gains are maintained after the accreditation period. While schools may temporarily improve their facilities and instructional methods to meet accreditation standards, some return to their pre-accreditation state after accreditation teams depart, according to studies by Nwokorie (2023) and Olugbenga (2019). The results of this study, on the other hand, indicate that NECO's accreditation procedure promotes longer-lasting improvements in the quality of instruction, as both school and NECO personnel recognise the long-term benefits. This disparity emphasises the necessity of longitudinal research to determine whether the benefits noted continue throughout several accreditation cycles.

The results presented in Tables 2a and 2b also demonstrate the effectiveness of the NECO accreditation process in evaluating the calibre of school facilities. This is further corroborated by the findings of the corresponding hypothesis (Ho2), which are displayed in Table 5 and indicate that NECO Staff gave noticeably more positive answers about how well the accreditation process ensured the calibre of school facilities than did School Staff. Given their direct involvement and more profound comprehension of the standards and criteria used in evaluating school facilities, NECO staff members' significantly higher positive responses can be attributed to their increased familiarity and expertise with the accreditation process. While Eboka & Inomiesa (2015) found that some school staff viewed accreditation as a bureaucratic obstacle with little impact on infrastructure, this study shows a strong overall agreement among school staff that accreditation significantly improves school facilities, which is in contrast to findings from Orji (2012) and Eboka & Inomiesa (2015), who similarly noted that regulatory bodies tend to have a more optimistic view of accreditation outcomes than school-based personnel. This suggests that those directly involved in implementing accreditation standards often perceive them as more effective than those who must adjust to and comply with these standards. Compared to more compliance-driven accreditation models examined in other regions, NECO's particular emphasis on infrastructure requirements during accreditation may be the reason for this stronger consensus in the Nigerian context. These results are consistent with the work of Ajayi and Ekundayo (2018), who claim that peer reviews and evaluations are frequently part of accreditation procedures, providing teachers with insightful feedback for improving their facility standards, teaching strategies, and curriculum delivery. According to Ajayi and Ekundayo's research, stakeholders, including teachers, educators, and administrators, have a

favourable attitude towards accreditation as a means to promote professional growth, accountability, and advancements in educational facilities. In contrast to studies conducted in more resource-rich settings, like Brown & Williams (2020), which found that accreditation leads to long-term infrastructural stability when backed by sufficient funding and vigorous policy enforcement, Nwokorie (2023) found that while accreditation in Nigerian secondary schools contributes to better infrastructure, some schools struggle to maintain improvements due to financial constraints. The focus on how well accreditation works as a means of enhancing school infrastructure has also contributed to the worldwide agreement that high standards of education must be upheld. Indeed, according to Vaccari and Gardinier (2019), the results align with the worldwide demand for educational reform spearheaded by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) to ensure that education is not only accessible to everyone but also meets high standards, such as well-maintained learning environments. The accreditation exercise is thus seen as a key mechanism in this effort to uphold quality by ensuring that schools maintain the necessary infrastructure for effective teaching and learning. Although this study provides compelling evidence that accreditation enhances infrastructure, issues with equity and uniformity in accreditation implementation persist. Schools in urban areas typically gain more from accreditation processes than those in rural or underserved communities, where resource constraints make it challenging to comply with accreditation standards, according to Oni (2021) and Olugbenga (2019). This implies that specific interventions, such as funding and policy changes, may be necessary to ensure equitable benefits for all schools, as accreditation alone may not be sufficient to close infrastructure gaps. While the overall perception of accreditation is positive, it is essential to acknowledge the challenges that could undermine its goals. The challenges of bureaucracy, inconsistency, favouritism, and corruption need to be addressed to sustain the effectiveness of the accreditation process and ensure it continues to support the broader goal of improving educational standards.

The study revealed that NECO Senior Staff overwhelmingly affirmed the effectiveness of NECO accreditation instruments in accurately measuring the indicators they were designed to assess (Table 4). Additionally, a hypothesis (Ho3) was tested regarding the perceptions of Senior Staff toward the accreditation instruments (Table 6), which showed no statistically significant differences in responses. This consistency in answers points to a high level of agreement among senior staff members about the calibre and usefulness of the accreditation tools. Senior Staff members' opinions on the accreditation tools were consistent despite the variety of roles within the company, demonstrating organisational cohesiveness and a strong sense of unity. This result aligns with the findings of Imhangbe et al. (2023) and Ngadiuba (2010), who noted that the effectiveness of accreditation tools is highest when stakeholders have a broad consensus regarding their validity and reliability. However, other researchers, such as Owolabi (2022), have found that stakeholder agreement alone is insufficient to ensure the long-term effectiveness of accreditation instruments, despite Ngadiuba (2010) emphasising the importance of consensus for institutional legitimacy. According to Owolabi's study

Prof. Ibrahim Dantani Wushishi, Dr. Tunde Abraham Oladokun, Dr. Maxwell Emmanuel Uduafemhe, *Dominic Chilagorom Nwachukwu

on accreditation in postsecondary institutions, deficiencies in enforcement and follow-up procedures may lessen the actual impact of accreditation instruments, even when stakeholders concur on their efficacy. Therefore, the study's findings contribute to the ongoing discussion by demonstrating that while senior staff at NECO agree that accreditation tools enhance confidence, regular monitoring and revisions are necessary to maintain their effectiveness.

These results are consistent with Smith and Jones's (2019) research, which highlights the importance of stakeholder consensus in accreditation procedures. Cohesive perceptions among organisational members improve the overall efficacy of quality assurance measures, as their work demonstrates. In a similar vein, Brown and Williams (2020) emphasise the significance of comprehensiveness and dependability in accreditation tools, emphasising the necessity of ongoing enhancements to address any fresh weaknesses. Although this study confirms that NECO's accreditation tools are generally considered adequate, other research suggests that perceptions of effectiveness may vary depending on the accreditation model used. For example, Dawkins and Reinhart (2018) found that institutions with more flexible, outcome-based accreditation systems frequently reported higher stakeholder satisfaction compared to those using rigid, criteria-based models. This raises a crucial question: Does NECO's accreditation model offer sufficient flexibility to adapt to changing educational needs? Further research is needed to determine whether adjustments to the accreditation framework can enhance its responsiveness to evolving educational environments.

These results carry significant implications for educational stakeholders. The consensus among Senior Staff indicates a strong foundation for further development, and any areas for improvement identified in the process should be addressed to ensure ongoing effectiveness. The shared perception of the value of accreditation instruments underscores their critical role in evaluating and enhancing school quality. Despite this broad consensus, it is critical to recognise that sustaining this consistent view over time may present particular difficulties. According to Nwokorie (2023), if accreditation tools are not routinely reviewed and modified, they may become obsolete as educational policies change. Similarly, Orji (2012) found that even highly regarded accreditation tools may not adequately address new educational issues if stakeholders are not regularly engaged. This implies that, although NECO's accreditation tools are currently functioning effectively, procedures such as regular validation workshops with accreditation officers and school representatives should be implemented to ensure their continued relevance. This staff agreement can inform policy choices aimed at enhancing accreditation procedures, ensuring their ongoing relevance and positively impacting high standards in education.

Implications for Further Research, Policy, and Practice
The study's conclusions have significant implications for the development of future research, the formulation of educational policy, and the enhancement of accreditation procedures in Nigeria's secondary education system.

Regarding future research, the study recommends conducting longitudinal studies to monitor the long-term effects of NECO's accreditation procedure on academic outcomes, particularly in institutions that undergo multiple accreditation cycles. Future studies should examine the performance of accredited schools over time, with an emphasis on the ongoing enhancements to infrastructure, instruction, and learning quality. It is also critical to understand the challenges faced by educational institutions that do not meet accreditation requirements. Examining the causes of these failures and possible solutions could shed light on how to improve the effectiveness and inclusivity of the accreditation process. Studies comparing NECO's accreditation procedure to similar systems worldwide may also provide insights into global best practices that could inform adjustments in the Nigerian context.

Although NECO's accreditation system has been beneficial, the results suggest that there is still room for improvement in policy. Regular updates to accreditation requirements should be a top priority for policymakers to ensure that they take into account new developments in technology, teaching and learning best practices, and evolving educational standards. All schools will have the staff and facilities needed to satisfy accreditation requirements if a concentrated effort is made to support them, particularly those in underprivileged areas, with targeted funding and resources. Furthermore, improving stakeholder engagement and encouraging a more cooperative approach to education's ongoing improvement could be achieved by encouraging NECO to communicate more clearly about accreditation expectations and results.

In terms of practice, the study emphasises the necessity of continual professional development for educators and school officials to navigate and fulfil accreditation requirements successfully. Accreditation must be integrated into schools as a continuous process of self-evaluation and development rather than as a one-time occurrence. By providing schools with valuable tools and resources, such as workshops and online platforms that guide them through the accreditation process, NECO could take a more active role. Instilling a culture of accountability and stressing that accreditation is a tool for long-term improvement in educational quality are also crucial tasks for school leadership. Schools can enhance their overall educational outcomes and accreditation status by prioritising continuous improvement.

Conclusion and Recommendations
With an emphasis on its efficacy in evaluating the calibre of the teaching and learning process, school facilities, and the reliability of the accreditation tools employed, this study offered a thorough assessment of the National Examinations Council's accreditation process in Nigerian secondary schools. The results demonstrate the effectiveness of NECO's accreditation process in evaluating these crucial areas. The positive effects of the accreditation process were generally acknowledged by both NECO and school staff; however, NECO staff's responses were more positive due to their direct involvement.

Prof. Ibrahim Dantani Wushishi, Dr. Tunde Abraham Oladokun, Dr. Maxwell Emmanuel Uduafemhe, *Dominic Chilagorom Nwachukwu

It was found that the accreditation tools accurately and effectively measured the desired indicators. They could be improved, though, to ensure they remain applicable to the changing nature of education. The senior staff members who were sampled agreed that these tools are practical, which shows organisational cohesion and emphasises the importance of shared views in upholding high standards. In general, while NECO's accreditation exercise is robust, continuous improvements are necessary to address the gap identified in school infrastructure and the need for enhanced communication with school staff. These improvements will ensure that NECO continues to effectively play a critical role in raising educational standards in Nigeria's secondary schools. Based on the findings of the study, the following are recommended:

1. NECO should strengthen its accreditation process by identifying gaps in the teaching-learning process and providing regular feedback to schools for continue improvement.
2. Schools should act on the accreditation feedback to maintain and improve their facilities while NECO collaborates with relevant government agencies to ensure adequate funding for infrastructure enhancements.
3. NECO should periodically review and update accreditation instruments with input from educational experts to ensure they remain accurate and relevant to modern educational standards.
4. NECO should organise workshops for school staff to educate them on the importance of accreditation in improving teaching and learning so as to bridge the perception gap between NECO staff and school staff.
5. NECO should enhance communication and provide clear guidelines to school staff on facility standards to ensure alignment with the accreditation process's expectations.
6. NECO should maintain the cohesion observed among Senior Staff by fostering organizational unity through team-building activities and collaborative efforts on accreditation standards.

Data Availability Statement
Due to privacy restrictions and confidentiality agreements with participating institutions, direct access to the raw data is limited. However, the data supporting the findings of this study are available upon reasonable request from the authors.

Competing Interests Statement
The authors declare that they have no competing interests concerning this study. The research was conducted independently, with no financial, commercial, or personal influences that could have affected the study's design, analysis, interpretation, or conclusions.

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