

Quality Education in the Institutions of Higher Learning in Nigeria: Challenges and Prospect

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ABSTRACT

This paper centred on 'Quality Education in the Institutions of Higher Learning in Nigeria: Challenges and Prospect'. It clarified the concepts of quality education and institutions of higher learning. The paper established quality higher as a tool for the development of every nation. It went further to discuss the challenges to the achievement of quality education in the institutions of higher learning in Nigeria, and the matters arising thereof. Finally, the writer is optimistic that these challenges can be changed for better if the following conditions are met: Education to be adequately funded; all institutions of higher learning in Nigeria to establish a workable quality consciousness in staff and students; the curriculum to be regularly reviewed so as to equate its contents with the changing realities; the regulatory agencies responsible for higher education in Nigeria should ensure credible and regular accreditation of academic programmes – the quality and quantity of teachers and students, facilities, and educational services among others.

Keywords: quality education, higher education, learning, institutions

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of every institution of higher learning among others is the advancement and propagation of knowledge and to use such knowledge for service to community and humanity. In addition, the National Policy on Education (2004:36) puts the goals of tertiary education as:

1. Contribute to national development through high level relevant manpower training;
2. Develop and inculcate proper values for the survival of the individual and society;
3. Develop the intellectual capability of individuals to understand and appreciate their local and external environments;
4. Acquire both physical and intellectual skills which will enable individuals to be self-reliant and useful members of the society.
5. Promote and encourage scholarship and community service;
6. Forge and cement national unity; and
7. Promote national and international understanding and interaction.

It is sacrosanct to mention these roles which the institutions of higher learning can play in building and sustaining a developed Nigerian economy.

Institutions of higher learning help to develop individuals and the individuals develop the society. It is therefore essential to establish and maintain institutions of higher learning if a nation is to transform its economic fortune for better.

It should come as no surprise that studies show a direct and substantial link between improvements in higher education and a rise in national prosperity and health. Such research whether in medicine or chemistry or engineering is essential to helping Nigeria mine its most valuable resource: Knowledge. The rare essence is not found in the ground, but in its people (Franton, 2010:5). The Nigerian society stands to gain from the research that the institutions of higher learning help to perform. Quality research results in enriching the economy for all by bringing technical advances to industry, communications, and agriculture.

However, what is important is not learning for learning sake. The important thing is for students to be successful in their learning. For student learning to be successful, not only that some kind of professionalism has to be developed in teaching by sharpening some insights into learning but also directing teaching towards helping students to understand phenomena and ideas in the way that subject experts understand them. How then can we assure quality (quality assurance) in our institutions of higher learning? Hence, “Quality Education in Institutions of Higher Learning in Nigeria: Challenges and prospect forms the crux of the matter.

QUALITY EDUCATION

Quality is a concept that defies every definition. It is a relative rather than objective term. Quality cannot be measured in specific term. However, some scholars conceive it, in terms of how good and bad something is in relation to some other things like it. This definition of quality can be seen to be inadequate because it is difficult to determine the goodness or badness in things. Goodness and badness of something or person are relative terms. Furthermore, there may be nothing to be seen in relation to what is been determined.

But Arinze (2004:9) has argued that quality can be measured with “objective attributes and specifications such as the Nigerian University Commission bench marks”. He further quotes British Standard Institution (BSI) definition of quality as “the totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs”. Quality in higher education (my emphasis) can be seen as “high evaluation accorded to an education process, where it has been demonstrated that, through the process, the educational development has been enhanced, not only have they achieved the particular objective set for the courses but, in doing so they have also fulfilled the general educational aims, autonomy or the ability to participate in reasoned discourse, ultimate contingency of all thoughts and action (Brown 1991).

Some analysts see quality education in terms of simplistic measurement standard set and expected to be achieved. If students achieve the set standards or outcomes, then the educator is satisfied that the programme(s) is/are of an acceptable quality. Such a notion of quality seems to be misleading since quality is not attained through quantifiable set standards, but must also be excellently disposed through the empowerment of capabilities through enabling programmes that focuses on ensuring that people are capacitated to be capable and resilient in their life-orientation. Quality in education must be acknowledged as an integral part and core business of higher education. UNESCO (2005) and UNESCO (2009) have it that the term ‘quality education’, is “a dynamic concept that changes and evolves with time and changes in social, economic, and environmental contexts of place, because quality education must be locally relevant and culturally appropriate, and that it takes many forms around the world”. It is precisely for these reasons that Maila and Pitsoe (2012) conclude that scholars clarify the concept of quality differently and noted that its application is varied.

Above all, UNESCO in Maila and Pitsoe (2012) puts it that quality education is an “effective means to fight poverty, building democracies, and foster peaceful society. Quality education empowers individuals, gives them voice, unlocks their potentials, open pathways to self-actualization, and broadens perspectives to open minds to a pluralist world”. Is this the case in the Nigerian situation?

Institutions of Higher Learning

The concept of institutions of Higher Learning differs according to the context and country. Since the definition of a higher education varies from one country to another consequently, the concept of higher institution of education also varies. According to Arusha Convention in Babalola, Popoola, Oni, Olatokun, and Agholador (2008:358) “In some countries, teacher education is considered to be a field of higher education whereas in other countries, it is considered to be part of post-secondary education but not part of higher education”.

Clark (1994) suggests that “in the United States, higher education pool includes; Research Universities, Colleges, Community Colleges, Further Education Colleges, Institutes, Polytechnics and Apprenticeship. Altbach, Berdahl and Gumpert (1999) include Universities but also two-year vocational institutions (Babalola et al, 2008:358).

UNESCO (1998:2) has it that higher education is a programme of study, training for research at the post-secondary level provided by Universities or other educational institutions that are approved as institutions of higher education by the competent state authorities and/or through recognized accreditation system. In the same way, African Development for Education in Africa, at the Second African Union Meetings of Experts described higher education as “including all post-secondary education, Universities, Polytechnics and Technical Colleges, Teacher Training Institutions, Institute for Medical Training and Agriculture (and other fields), Distance Education Centre, and Research centres and institutes, with the possibility of expanding to include other forms of Post-Secondary education (Babalola et al 2008:358).

But in all, the various definitions seem to agree that institutions of higher learning refer to post-secondary educations. These institutions award degrees, diploma or certificate at the end of the study. In Nigeria, this level of education is defined by the National Policy on Education (FRN, 2004:36) as “the education given after secondary education in Universities, colleges of education, polytechnics, monotechnics, including those institutions offering correspondence courses”. One of the goals of institutions of higher learning in Nigeria is the development and inculcation of proper values for the survival of the individual and society amongst others. However, the managers of these institutions may hold various titles such as, the Vice-Chancellor, Rector, Provost, and so on. These persons oversee the affairs of the staff and students in the institutions. For the purpose of this paper, institutions of higher learning shall be considered to be all post –secondary education in Nigeria.

The Value Background of Institutions of Higher Learning

There seem to be wide agreement on the general aims of higher education, even though the institutions which bear the institutions of higher learning vary considerably in their individual character. The ‘value background of institutions of higher learning’, refers to the cluster of aims, values and general ideas which have been traditionally associated with higher education, and which have commanded a relatively wide consensus in their support. Barnett (1990:9) highlights the values (aims) of higher education as follows:

- i. The pursuit of truth and objectives.
- ii. Research
- iii. Liberal education

- iv. Institutional autonomy.
- v. Academic freedom.
- vi. A neutral and open form for debate.
- vii. Rationality
- viii. The development of the students critical abilities.
- ix. The development of student's autonomy.
- x. The student's character formation.
- xi. Providing a critical centre within society.
- xii. Providing society's intellectual culture.

Generally, higher education influences the lives of the recipients and increases their opinion, enlarging the aspirations and self-concepts, including the exchange of their views about what are just and equitable.

Quality Higher Education as a Tool for National Development

Generally, higher education is aimed at producing high level professionals who will ultimately contribute to the overall national development for a better living of the individuals and the society at large especially in the areas of science and technology, health, food production, arts, education and better policies. Higher education develops the individuals and makes them to be of great assets to the society where they live. Higher education instils pragmatism and innovation and spirit of inquiry to the learners. It makes lessons to be practical in such a manner that lecturers challenge learners to analyse issues, identify controversies and verify facts. By so doing the learner is encouraged to develop skill and attitudes of critical thinking which form great assets to all citizens in a free society. This quality is sacrosanct in the sense that through the process, learners develop intellectual curiosity to pursue independent research inspired by their own interests and ideas.

Quality higher education teaches democratic values and makes the learner to imbibe these values and ways of democracy necessary for national development. In quality higher education, students appreciate the fact that living in freedom involves enjoyment of rights and also about fulfilment of responsibilities. It creates a great sense of justice required for legitimate and collective governance as against the privileged few. However, the achievement of quality in our institutions of higher learning will produce the overall result of restraint exhibition, tolerance and sound judgement, nurtured by the institutions; and the Nigerian youths will have brighter future by the power of the ideals and inspirations of the higher learning.

The country will witness different talented students around the world and from different parts of the country, ethnic and religious groups, attracted by the institutions of higher learning, if quality is maintained. Quality creates opportunity and avenue where differences can be understood and respected; and where national identity can be forged through shared ideals not at the expense of the other.

Quality institutions of higher learning tolerate and grant 'Academic Freedom'. As Omordu (2013:226) puts it, "Academic Freedom focuses on the liberty which the teacher or members of the academic community have to carry out their intellectual and scholarly activities without interference either from within or outside the academic community". Academic freedom is sacrosanct in the development the Nigerian nation because if opinions and resources are not restricted and threatened, knowledge scope will be expanded and this is paramount if the country must develop from commodity to knowledge based economy.

CHALLENGES AND MATTERS ARISING

It is important to raise the question of whether the quality of education in the Nigerian institutions of higher learning on the current terms prepares the graduates to compete in the emergent global technocracy or even to fit into the Nigerian bureaucracy as was envisaged in the national policy. To answer the above question is to appreciate the Nigerian graduates in the labour markets at home and abroad. However, in order to reposition the country's institutions of learning much is needed in identifying and attempting to provide solutions to the challenges and matters which these challenges give rise to. Some of these challenges can be seen thus:

Funding

The popular say that education is the very foundation for the development of every other sector is a truism. This in fact explains why education should be the very priority of priorities in all societal developmental endeavours. This therefore calls for adequate funding in education. But this has not been seen to be so in Nigeria instead, it has formed the bane source of confrontation between lecturers and government leading to preventable strikes, truncated academic calendar which have combined to redefine the character of higher education in Nigeria as well as cast doubts on the possibility of realizing the official goals of the system.

Furthermore, funding the institutions of higher education in Nigeria is simply not focused, targeted and sustainable. "The major challenge to funding education in Nigeria is not that of 'more money', it has more to do with 'mis-funding than under-funding'. He further identifies the problem of wide gap between apparent, surface and effective budgets for education. "The apparent budget is that which is publicly announced, the surface budget is that which is eventually released, while the effective budget is that which is used for intended development purpose" (Obanya, 2012:19). A close look at the above an ology reveals that there is huge imbalance between capital and recurrent budgets, meaning that more of the available funds are consumed than invested. The country loses more of its budget for corruption than the actual purpose; education suffers the worst victim.

Infrastructure

Infrastructure in the Nigerian Institutions of higher learning is near total collapse due to improper funding. In other words, the academic environment has made teaching and learning difficult, and has drastically reduced quality education in the school. The learning environments are dilapidated including the absence of essential facilities such as equipped libraries, ICT, computer, and e-system laboratories, humanly habitable students' hostels, furnished and computerized offices and campus residential accommodations, recreational facilities, portable water, uninterrupted power supply, spacious and well-ventilated classroom blocks etc. This is an apt illustration of the saying 'what you sow is what you reap'.

Infrastructural deficiencies have no doubt contributed to the persisting brain drain, the anomie and anarchy prevalent in Nigerian students' culture, examination malpractice and cultism. The situation is quite discouraging. the decay makes mockery of the real image of what education is supposed to be, and so what is of interest to lecturers today is however, not necessarily of transmitting knowledge but to gain promotion within the meal-ticket syndrome as well as the pursuit of certification rather than excellence.

Curriculum

Curriculum is the crucial link between objectives and outcome. The general aims of education are expressed through the curriculum. Curriculum makes it possible for education

to see and interprets the philosophy of the society in which it (education) is created to serve. So every curriculum must address the question of: what are the objectives of education? What is to be taught so as to realize these objectives (content)? How is instruction being given (methodology)?

Curriculum is not static; it changes to reflect the changing realities. So from time to time, curriculum is supposed to reflect the changing realities since realities are themselves subject to changes. In the view of Seetharamu (2008:162), “education is a sub-system which interacts with other sub-systems such as agriculture, industry, health, trade etc. Curriculum should be able to reflect the interdependence of education with other sub-systems”. The above analysis is contrary to the Nigerian situation. The curriculum in Nigeria can be said to be relatively static, and ill-equipped to contribute meaningfully to national development through high-level relevant manpower training. It does not in the complete sense of it, reflect the needs of the society thereby producing irrelevant, ill-equipped, unskilled, lack of character and unappoint able graduates who cannot drive the economy to the expected end.

Quality of Students’ Intake

The era of academic corruption is believed by many Nigerians to be one of the major challenges confronting quality higher education in the country. As a result of undue importance attached to paper qualification, parents use all available means to see their children/wards admitted into school. This has drastically led to the decline in the quality of the school outputs because ‘what goes around comes around’. Those who gain admission through fraudulent means also bribe their ways through and pass out the same way. This unethical means of gaining admission has inevitably flooded the higher institutions of learning with immature and porous minds who are not aware of the objectives of higher education, and in most cases, they resort to vices such as examination malpractices and cultism so as to keep themselves busy while waiting for the final year of graduation. The implication of the above is that the nation’s labour market is flooded with ‘half-baked graduates’ with little or nothing to contribute to the nation’s development.

Poor Conditions of Service

The condition (low remuneration inclusive) in which people work affects their outputs. When lecturer’s morale is high, students typically show high achievements. On the contrary, the result is usually geared towards pression, cynical attitudes to students, little initiative and so on. The condition in which the staffs of the academic community sees themselves in Nigeria would hardly guarantee the much needed job satisfaction which in turn, promises greater outputs. It is needless saying that lecturers operate without good offices, and residential quarters, lack of power, without access to ICT facilities, research grants and so on. In particular, the absence of ICT facilities and power disconnect the Nigerian lecturers from cross-fertilizing ideas with other colleagues in the rest of the world and contribute to low quality outputs in the system.

Poor conditions of service in the Nigerian institutions of higher learning have been given as the reason the massive brain drain in Nigeria. The first class brains are not attracted to the services in the nation’s institutions of higher learning. They prefer rendering their services to oil companies, leaving the system for the others who take teaching as a waiting room, while looking for greener pastures. In extreme cases some lecturers resort to going back to pick up employments in the countries where they schooled. Over the years, the nation’s institutions of higher learning have lost their best brains. The matter arising however is that quality personnel are tempted to and will continue to migrate out of the country whenever, and wherever the find better jobs. Those who can endure the frustration always look outward for

more income so as to augment their meager salaries at the expense of their jobs. This no doubt discourages quality because the lecturers give little or nothing to teaching, research and community services which they are known for. The scope of knowledge is therefore narrowed down while the recipients gain little or nothing. This situation is capable of grinding the entire system if the government does not seriously and urgently intervene.

Authority/Government Intervention

The quality of outputs of higher education is to an extent influenced by the internal, and or external organization(s) and administration(s) of each institution. The traditional areas of academic freedom for the institutions according to the National Policy on Education (2004:37) are to:

- i. Select their students, except where the law prescribes otherwise;
- ii. Appoint their staff;
- iii. Teach, select areas of research; and
- iv. Determine the content of courses.

The NPE further states that government shall continue to respect this freedom as long as these areas are in consonance with national goals.

In Nigeria, experience has however; shown that there have been infringements of varying degree on the academic freedom of lecturers in the institutions of higher education by both the military and civil rules. Educators whose teachings are objectionable to the government are sometimes dismissed, harassed or detained. The above situation is contrary to Wokocha and Okujagu's (1999:123) claim that,

A university has to be insulated from the hot and cold wind of politics. Responsibility for its management must be vested in autonomous councils. The council must include representatives of public, but these representatives must attend as individuals and not as agents for some sectional interest or party line.

The higher institutions of education in Nigeria represent government's extension. Their administrative modes are structured to revolve around the vice-chancellors, rectors, and provosts who use their positions to please the government of the day rather than the staff and students whose interests they are meant to protect. In extreme cases like in the case of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, an Army Major General was appointed the sole administrator of the University.

The countless cases of government intervention in the day to day administration of our institutions of higher learning according to Ihonvbere as reported by Okorosaye- Orubite, Abraham and Paulley (n.d) concludes that,

The university system in Nigeria has been destroyed by various military regimes aided by scores of intellectual rationalizers who served as advisers;... hangers-on, consultants, and agents of the world Bank... collaborated in different capacities to erode strands of academic procedures, freedom and respect of the country. As a result, institutions are no longer known for teaching and research, but for politics, manipulations, ethnic and religious jingoism, petty squabbles, political posturing, opportunism...

Apart from direct attack on the radical university teachers by the government, the various unions were not left out. The Academic Staff Union of the Nigerian Universities (ASUU) has severally been banned. It was banned in 1988 only to be lifted two years after. It was also banned in 1994. The ban was resorted to after a method of intimidation and blackmail had

been exhausted. As part of the intimidation technique of the Nigerian government, records were opened in every Nigerian Universities in the year 2013 during the ASUU- Federal Government disagreement over the State of the Nigerian Universities. The federal government therefore requested that those who wished to continue with their jobs should sign the register while others should consider their appointments terminated; the condition which was later revoked by the federal government. This crude method is presently in used by the various levels of government in Nigeria. For instance, in the University of Science and Technology, Rivers State, Nigeria, the Union Executive Members and others who champion the cause of the Union were/are made to forfeit their salaries for the past number of years, while some others who denounced and signed the register still retain their jobs. This was because that branch of union insisted that the right way of appointing the vice-chancellor for the institution must be followed. Today the Academic Staff Union of the Universities branch of that institution has been laid to rest by the government.

CONCLUSION

Every known human institution is faced with one problem or the other. The advancement and propagation and the use of such knowledge for service to community and humanity through the institutions of higher learning has been eluding Nigeria. Owing to the above, the country still depends on commodity rather than knowledge based economy. Many countries of the world have far gone beyond this level. So if the voice of Nigeria must be heard among the nations of the world, much is needed to be done in the area of education especially, the institutions of higher learning. However, this is to ensure that the Nigerian child receives quality education so as to development himself and contribute to the development of the nation at large.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper is optimistic that the above situation can change for better if the following steps are taken:

1. The restoration of academic freedom in higher institutions of learning will help expand the scope of knowledge for the benefit of the learners and the development of the society at large.
2. The curriculum should be regularly reviewed so as to equate its contents with the changing realities.
3. The regulatory agencies (NUC, NBTE and NCCE) in charge of higher education in Nigeria should ensure credible and regular accreditation of academic programmes, the quality and quantity of teachers and students, facilities, and educational services.
4. All institutions of higher learning should establish and encourage a workable quality assurance unit that will be responsible for building quality consciousness in staff and students.
5. Education should be adequately funded.
6. Regular employment of teaching staff including Nigerian experts at home and abroad as well as expatriates should be encouraged, and without prejudice in order to ensure cross-fertilization of ideas.
7. The primary and post-primary institutions of Nigeria should be strengthened in order to produce quality applicants that will subsequently be admitted into the institutions of higher learning.

8. To retain and encourage the available teaching staff, government must necessarily improve the conditions of teaching/learning in the institutions of higher learning.
9. Strong relationship should be made to exist between the production (industrial) sector and the institutions of higher learning in the country in order to ensure that what is taught or studied in school is relevant to the requirements of the outer society.

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