

REAPPRAISING THE CURRENT NATIONAL POLICY ON TERTIARY EDUCATION FOR FUNCTIONALITY AND SELF RELIANCE: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract

This paper discusses the emerging issues in tertiary education as a result of the current reform programmes in Nigeria education sector. It seeks to address the challenges that tertiary education faces in Nigeria and how to ensure continuous growth of the system. This paper is therefore aimed at taking a fresh look at the issues involved, identifying and analysing the main factors working against positive system performance and to make suggestions on system adaptability with a view to ensuring sustainability and averting total collapse.

Introduction

General opinion about Nigeria's education system in recent times is that it has not been performing at the standard expected of it. Indeed, the complaint is that performance is on the decline. Ekaete (2001), in his address at the Convocation of the University of Uyo, Nigeria, pointed out that a major decline in the nation's education sector is its failure to achieve the basic objectives, which obviously impacts adversely on all other indices, he suggested. It will hinder the nation's march towards prosperity, progress and stability. There is no question about the importance of education to national development. However, the policy thrust of government, the management of resources within the educational sector, and the attitude to the participants in the sector (administrators, staff and students) are what will be discussed in this paper. Particularly troubling is the fact that, despite massive funds injected into education (albeit inadequate), the latter does not seem to have benefitted much, or at least has not responded in a way that would

show it has received positive impetus from increased funding. The objective of this paper is therefore, to take a fresh look at the issues involved, to identify and analyse the main factors working against positive system performance and to make suggestions on system adaptability.

Growth of Tertiary Education in Nigeria

No analyses of higher education in Nigeria could be undertaken without placing in perspective its historical development. The Nigeria university system, after the establishment of one University College in Ibadan in 1948, followed 14 years later by the establishment of four additional universities, underwent a rate of growth, which could only be described as unusual. Between 1962 and 1998, the number of universities in Nigeria grew from 5 to 37.

The federal government of Nigeria, to show the high value placed on education and particularly tertiary education, committed massive funds to the education sector. However, the model of development chosen was very wasteful and contributed partly to the decline recently undergone by higher education sector. A large proportion of funds were spent on developing new campuses. Apart from the cost of opening up these isolated locations and cost of construction, large sums were spent on providing municipal facilities and services.

System Performance of Tertiary Education in Nigeria

The purpose of higher education clearly extends beyond the trinity of teaching,

research and service taken at their face value. It involves the education of the individual to understand society, achieve academic and technical competence in selected fields, to explore cultural interests and enhance cultural skills; advancing human capability in society at large through creating and disseminating new ideas and new technology; training talent and enhancing information, understanding and cultural appreciation of the public at large. And, finally, by supporting intellectual and artistic creativity and evaluating society critically for self-renewal through individual thought and persuasion.

Adalemo (1998) argued that universities have to submit to the scrutiny of the society that funds them especially by accounting for the efficient performance of the tertiary education system. The tertiary education system must be clear about what the society expects of it. Arguably, however, Nigerian society has made known, through the policy on education document. Often, however, formally stated documents requirements are rendered unclear and opaque by later statements issued by governments and its agents. Thus, in the area of research for instance, it is not clear how far society is aware of limitations and constraints that face institutions of tertiary education especially in resources and facilities available to them.

The universities for instance are best placed to undertake basic research. The polytechnics could, with some effort, undertake applied research. Society, however, looks to concrete results and often criticizes the educational system for producing intangible results. This is the case of misplaced expectation, which leads on to evaluating system performance upon unrealistic premises. More realistically, the intangible results of the university's efforts could be handled by either intermediary bodies or institutes whose products are taken up and applied to the productive process by industrial and commercial establishments. The current situation in Nigeria is one in which such a chain or network linking

university to incubator bodies to industry is either, not available, incomplete or non-functional. Many research results, therefore, lie on shelves gathering dust. It is not the duty of universities, however, to transform these into saleable products.

Reasons for Poor Performance of Tertiary Education System in Nigeria

Given the arguments just made, evidently the higher education system is not currently performing to the standard expected by society. It is in danger of becoming obsolete and irrelevant. System collapse may be imminent. What are the factors that account for this sorry state of affairs? They include the following:

Structural Inadequacies

Nigeria's educational system is structured so as to facilitate transition from one level to the next. This is alright as long as each level performs its role adequately. It is, therefore, essential that each subsystem, primary and secondary, performs to specification. Failure at one level translates into undue pressure on the next as those graduating from it move upwards. We will therefore, focus our searchlight on the link point between higher education and secondary education.

According to the National Policy on Education in Nigeria (1998), the secondary level has failed to offer a curriculum sufficiently diversified to cater for the differences in talents, opportunities and future roles of Nigeria's young people. It has failed to provide trained manpower in the applied science, technology and commerce at sub-professional grades. It lacks the capacity to provide technical knowledge and vocational skills that are required for agricultural, industrial, commercial and economic development.

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The secondary education sub-system is simply not equipped to perform these functions adequately. Poor staffing and poor facilities constitute a major impediment to system performance. Students are prepared for academic work only i.e. book learning. Even this is not well done, as performance level revealed by the West African Examination Council (WAEC) indicate. Graduates of senior secondary education are generally not prepared for the requirements of the tertiary sector. The quality of output at the higher level can only improve provided the quality of incoming students improves. Efforts to hold the deteriorating performance of higher education at bay must include improvements to education at the lower levels.

Part of the problem with staffing arises from the current status of teacher. Poor remuneration and poor condition of services, compounded by low esteem of the teaching profession especially at primary and post primary level are severe disincentives. In the past, the best among graduates were recruited to the teaching profession. Today, only those who cannot secure other employment accept posts in teaching, and even after then, they stay in the teaching profession biding their time until a better job comes their way. For such persons, the teaching profession is just a stepping-stone, a temporary tent to be abandoned at the slightest opportunity. There is no job commitment, despite the clarion call of the National Policy on Education (1998), that education shall continue to be central in national development plans and that education is the important instrument of change. Those who do the job, teachers, are treated as foot mats to be trampled on. Such treatment can only result in poor staffing and this in turn reflects in the quality of students.

- **Dissonance**

Dissonance between National Policy Statement (1998) practices is not limited to the treatment of teachers. Students are the butt of

inconsistencies in the education system. The National Policy on Education (1998), states that the transition from junior secondary to senior secondary should be based on differences in academic ability, aptitude and vocational interest. In reality, the technical and vocational streams are perceived as dumping grounds for academic failures referred to as 'dropouts'. Such tracks and streams are, most assuredly, not destinations of choice. Facilities for evaluating aptitude and vocational interest are generally non-existent. Very few students benefit from guidance and counselling facilities. Both perception and practice reflect negatively on the quality of intake into polytechnics and colleges of education considered second-rate compared to the university. Such a perception is reinforced by the lower rating of students from polytechnics and colleges of education. Even where the starting salary is the same as for university first-degree graduates, the limit on how far they can rise in the occupational hierarchy acts as a disincentive and brings further pressure to bear on the university system.

Abdullahi (1982) commented on the relationship between the universities and other components of the higher education sector. As the acquisition of paper qualification – often alluded to elsewhere as the Paper Qualification Syndrome or PQS by Carmen (1996) - commands undue importance in Nigeria; the pressure on the university system is bound to be severe unless measures are taken to alleviate it. There is a further evidence of this condition. Comet Newspaper (2001) reported a representative of teachers in one of Nigeria's polytechnic as decrying a situation when, after 5 years of study for the Higher National Diploma(HND) graduates were compelled to spend 3 years more to obtain first degree from the university. The impression is

common-placed that university education is the only way to get ahead in society, a view that compounds the problems of the university by exacerbating overload and system malfunction.

Sustainability of Tertiary Education

It has been stated quite clearly that government cannot provide all the resources that higher education needs to carry out its roles adequately. Universities particularly, have been directed to find ways of raising funds to supplement what government is able to provide. Certainly, government is trying its best in the face of competing demands from other sectors to provide funds for education. Because of the policy of equal access, it has adopted the mass approach to education. This puts great pressure on government resources. Every sub-sector of the education system complains of inadequacy of the resources available and all of them are totally dependent on government. Maintaining those physical facilities of universities alone requires very substantial sums of money. In a situation where resources are scarce, avoiding over-commitment is a reasonable policy. That the Federal Government has assumed responsibility for practically all levels of education merely adds to government over-load and over-extension.

Evidently, the situation deserves reviewing. Primary Education is too important to be left to the vagaries of Local Government administration especially when it is characterised by incompetence and inadequate performance in its duties. It is the foundation of the educational system and unless the foundation is well laid, the super structure may be endangered. Secondary education is equally important. To revert to the analogy of the train running on a single track and dropping off its passengers along the route without stopping, secondary education should equip its students with necessary skills to make a living and contribute meaningful to the society.

With such a scenario, to concentrate government resources on the needs of primary and

secondary education and make them tuition free appears reasonable. Tertiary level education should not be tuition free. Only on this condition can we ensure the sustainability of higher education in Nigeria.

Summary and Conclusion

This review of Nigeria's education system from a development perspective leads us to the conclusion that collapse is imminent. Urgent action is required to avert disaster. Structural inadequacies threaten the ability of the system to perform. Neglect suffered by higher education is probably due to the fact that the effect of such neglect is not immediately observable or felt by the society. The vast disparity between policy statement and practice also plays its part in threatening quality. Emphasis on paper qualifications and the general malaise in society also contribute to the lowering of standard.

Looking beyond these immediate problems and charting a way forward, some suggestions are advanced. There is an advantage to be gained from the development of communications and information technology. Distance education is a recognised means of coping with the rising demand for higher education while ensuring good quality and improving current standards. The potential of classrooms without walls and overcoming the constraints of distance are indeed very encouraging. Distance education should be adopted in complement to the conventional system. The existing infrastructure, which will anyway have to be maintained, should be utilised more effectively to support both modes of conventional and distance education.

Care should be taken not to reinvent individual institutions from developing specialist programmes, while sharing of resources should be encouraged.

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Finally, government should allow educational institutions to charge tuition fees and realistic accommodation fees in order to ensure sustainability. Such an initiative would make valuable resources available for use at the lower level of the education system. Were these suggestions to be given serious consideration as a constructive and sustainable response to the crisis in Nigeria's higher education, the imminent threat of collapse may be averted.

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