

RE-POSITIONING THE VOCATIONAL/TECHNICAL EDUCATION PROGRAMME: AN IMPERATIVE FOR ACHIEVING THE GOALS OF NATIONAL ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY (NEEDS)

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Abstract

In Nigeria, there is a current national effort to re-position the country before the international community for the much desired Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). The re-positioning wagon also carries along with it tools and strategies to improve the lives and status of the entire citizenry. The move is evident through the current reform agenda-taking place in all the sectors, education inclusive. The Economic Empowerment and Development __ Strategy (NEEDS) is a cornerstone policy thrust for the realization of economic and development goals, NEEDS is Nigeria development plan inspired by current challenges for change and vigorous growth. In the Education sector, the quality of teaching and learning determines how far the reform goals can be achieved both now and the near future. This reform policy is based on the notion that the goals can be achieved only by creating an environment in which business can thrive, government is re-directed to providing basic services and infrastructures and people are empowered to take advantage of the new livelihood. Empowering the graduates of the educational programme like _vocational/technical education becomes an imperative for achieving this reform goal particularly in the educational sector. This becomes pertinent since vocational and technical educational programmes take interest purely on skill acquisition, which is the only key to manpower development. This paper therefore, looks at the need to empower these vocational technical programmes in order to achieve the goals of NEEDS.

Introduction

In Nigeria there is a current national effort to re-position the country before the international community for the much-desired Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) in addition to improving the life style of the entire populace. This move is evident through the country's recent economic reform agenda. The National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) document is a cornerstone policy thrust for the realization of their economic development goals. The NEEDS document is reflected in the core areas stipulated in the policy statement education inclusive, education is and continues to form the bedrock of any thriving society particularly in manpower development. This NEEDS document has thus encouraged and, strengthened not only the realization of the un-harnessed potentials of individuals but also streamlined properly the nation's economic development plans cutting across all sectors. The emergence of NEEDS has given rise to several reforms currently going on in sectors like health, politics, education, etc. According to Obasanjo (2004), NEEDS must be complemented by other reforms especially in the electoral and political governance architecture that is consistent with defending and sustaining democracy. The reform programme is rightly ambitious for one thing; we need focused goals and ambition to make progress. The Educational Reform Agenda is part of Nigeria's development plan that is inspired by current challenges for change and vigorous growth. The reform agenda also identifies the major problems we face today in the education sector and suggest how we can begin to solve them over the next few years and beyond.

As the economic situation in the country worsens, Nigerians everyday are forced to re-adjust and emphasize on more skill - oriented careers and jobs. Nigerian now expects the potentialities of vocational/technical education in saving them from the clutches of unemployment. Vocational/Technical education, which has enjoyed attention since the publication of the National Policy on Education, seems to provide the solid manpower base for the technological and industrial growth of the nation. An overview of die scenario clearly indicates that for a sustainable national development that is the thrust of NEEDS and educational reforms, vocational/technical education must be encouraged and strengthened and in possibly re-positioned. The thrust of this paper is therefore, is to critically examine the NEEDS policy document vis-a-vis educational reform agenda with a view to examining the rationale for vocational technical, education which actually represents the core instrument.

NEEDS: Policy Statement and Vocational Technical Education

The National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) is the response to the development challenges of Nigeria. The policy document was launched on the 29th of May 2004. According to the document, NEEDS is Nigerians plan for prosperity. It is the people's way of letting the government knows how they can live now and in the future.

The Policy Thrust

NEEDS focuses on Four key Strategies Namely

- a. re-orienting values
- b. reducing poverty
- c. creating wealth
- d. generating empowerment

The NEEDS policy is based on the notion that those goals can be achieved only by creating an environment in which business can thrive, government is redirected to providing basic services and people are empowered to take advantage of the new livelihood and opportunities, which the plan will stimulate.

Educational reform agency takes a cue from the vision-of NEEDS by creating an enabling environment in which quality education can thrive and be sustained for as long as it takes. NEEDS (2004) note accordingly that since half of Nigerians are children, the bridge to a prosperous future; their importance is recognized by making, improvement of education a top priority. Empowering the educators especially the vocational technical educators is one way of ensuring that these children receive quality and sustainable education. By empowerment, NEEDS creates opportunities for employment and wealth creation. It empowers people to take advantage of these opportunities by creating a system of incentives that reward hardwork and punish corruption by investing in education and by providing special programmes for the most vulnerable members of the society.

Vocational/Technical Education

Efforts have been made by several authors to provide a suitable definition for vocational education. A few of these concepts will be cited here. All the same it should be noted that all of the concepts lend themselves to virtually the same meaning. In the words of Kawey and Hanburger (1948), vocational education, simply stated, is seen as that education directed towards the preparation of individuals for skilled performance on tasks Okorie (1988), in Qkoh (2000), views vocational education as the experience or training required by an individual to enable him fit into an occupation and become useful to himself and the society. The major thrust of vocational education is the application of specialized learning techniques in the realization of both educational and societal objectives. The National Policy on Education (2004), defines vocational education as the acquisition of practical and applied skills. The central objective of vocational education circulates on the achievement of socio-economic, industrial and technological objectives that will eventually manifest themselves in economic stability, industrial harmony, technological advancement and improved standard of living for all. Vocational Education is looked at as that aspect of education that aims at the development of human abilities in terms of knowledge, skill and understanding so that the individual may happily and efficiently carry on the activities in the vocation (Enemuo & Okoli, 2007).

Technical Education on the other hand, relates to the educational experiences assigned to meet the unique needs, interest, values and abilities of individuals to procure specific studies over and above general education (Ossisioma, 1993). The-National Policy on Education also defines technical education as that aspect of education that leads to the acquisition of practical and applied skills as well as basic scientific knowledge. Vocational Education is basically occupational education while Technical Education according to Bayo (1974), is intended to provide the skills and manpower for industry and other engineering services required by the society. Vocational and Technical Education both emphasize on skill acquisition hence they are often interwoven. Summarily, as Anyakoha and Oranu (1992), put it, vocational and technical education involves, in addition to general education the study of technologies and related sciences as well as the acquisition of practical skills and knowledge relating to various occupations. This type of education provides manpower, skills, and levels of socio-economic operations including decision making. Vocational/Technical education is this form of education that is indispensable in fostering manpower self-sufficiency of any nation.

Rationale for Vocational/Technical Education in Nigeria

Vocational Education focuses on the emphasis of individual development, self-fulfillment and accomplishment. Again, it aims at "providing the society with immediate and future manpower, requirements and moving the developing nation from relative technological backwardness to the state of technological, social and economic development through efficient manpower planning and optimum utilization (Idialu, 1991). The contributions of Vocational/Technical Education to the nation remain invaluable. One of the aims of Vocational/Technical Education according to the National Policy on education is to equip students to live effectively in the modern use of science and technology. In Nigeria, Vocational/Technical Education is often looked down on and taken to mean education for the mentally retarded and the never do-well (Amiaya, 2006). This type of education has often been seen as education for under achievers and students with low intelligence and dropouts from formal school system.

This Amiaya (2006), observed may be the reason for public reluctance to accord the programme its due respect. The situation however is gradually moving to a better position since that it is not for never-do-well "but for gifted children and those who have interest in doing things, discovering new ideas and fiddling with models. The economic situation in the country has forced many Nigerians to readjust and emphasize on more

skill-oriented careers and jobs. Nigerians now accept the potentialities of vocational/technical education in saving them from the clutches of unemployment and the likes. Vocational/Technical Education that has enjoyed attention since the publication of the National Policy on Education is seen to provide the solid manpower foundation for the technological and industrial growth of the Nation. This is definitely the focus of NEEDS policy as earlier stated and what best way to achieve the goals if not through quality Vocational/Technical Education.

If Nigeria is to achieve its numerous goals particularly the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), NEEDS policy goals, in industrialization, Vocational Education is necessary for those who will work in these industries. Appropriate skill acquisition will enhance mass production of goods and services and the production of goods and services in turn involves technical activities (Amaiya, 2006). This automatically means that labour market needs graduates with Vocational/Technical experience to enhance the enterprise. There is an increasing complexity in the technological world now as it is only those with good Vocational/Technical skills that can cope with those complexities. Summarily Agabi (1992), rightly observed that for the intelligent exploitation of our resources, Vocational/Technical Education has a salutary effect as it includes in its content of instruction, courses on business education, agricultural education, home economics education, introductory technology etc. Above all, according to Amaiya (2006) in the assumption of technological world, a Vocational/Technical Education graduate is versatile, as he is qualified for teaching post, technological management or administrative posts both in Ministries and Industries. Vocational/Technical Education is invaluable, as well as desirable in the country.

Strengthening the Skill Base for Manpower Development in Nigeria

Nigeria's future according to NEEDS depends on producing children who are well prepared with the right skills to take their place in tomorrow's society. The NEEDS policy therefore seeks to implement the Universal Basic Education on law in order to increase school enrolment and provide better schools and college and better-trained teachers and trainers. Specifically, NEEDS will ensure that more funds are spent on the following among others:

- Providing courses that build vocational and entrepreneur skills,
- Building technical schools and buying equipment,
- Improving training and exposure to information and communication Technology at all levels.

Vocational/Technical Education as can be seen from the policy document is given its pride of place, and is recognized as one of the ways in which the skill base for manpower development in the country can be strengthened. Events since the introduction of Vocational/Technical programme in 1999 However that the human and non-human resources are yet to be effectively harnessed to

realize the socio-economic and technological goals of the nation in spite of the large investment in these directions (Osisioma, 1993). Accordingly Enemuoh & Okoli (1999) noted that despite the attention given since its inception, there is still a great limitation to the achievement of qualitative Vocational/Technical Education in Nigeria today. This situation calls for a re-positioning and re-focusing to ensure qualitative education with the right skills needed for sustained manpower development in Nigeria.

Re-Positioning Vocational/Technical Education in Nigeria to Meet the Goals of NEEDS

The greatest problem standing between policy makers and their policy realization is the implementation of such programmes (Adamaechi and Romaine 2000), unless these programmes are faithfully transferred from the drawing board to the ground and implemented to the last word, despair and frustration await the policy makers at the end.

The same is applicable to NEEDS policy. Re-positioning calls for an entire change in the current position of Vocational/Technical Education from the primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education (Osuala, 2004). The following ways/strategies are advocated for repositioning Vocational/Technical Education in Nigeria:

Discouraging dual controlled system of Managing Technical programmes. To date, Vocational Technical Programmes faces great challenges in the midst of general education as obtained in most tertiary institutions. Madu (1990), noted that the greatest obstacle to a rapid acquisition of technology in many Countries could be traced to the type and quality of the management system prevalent in the Countries.

The advocacy here is that emphasis be placed on the management of Vocational/Technical Institutions so that personnel who are trained in the area and who understand what the whole programme involves are allowed to run these institutions. Vocational/Technical Programmes should be clearly dissociated from institutions of general education. The single controlled Vocational/Technical Programmes should be specifically planned and implemented under a strict vocational/technical culture. The importance of such programme is found in their proper utilization of facilities, equipment and recruitment of proper personnel, while achieving the set down goals of skill acquisition.

In addition, skilled and qualified teachers should be employed to teach in these vocational/Technical schools. A more positive approach is to restructure the programmes into being autonomous while enjoying all the

benefits therein. Olaitan (1987), pointed out that it might be necessary to practice single programmes for Technical/Vocational Education, under the present financial constraints so that any programme in colleges of education that does not meet the accreditation requirements for vocational/technical teachers should be transferred to polytechnics and colleges of technology, etc. Where facilities are available and could be shared.

NEEDS has also highlighted some measures for re-positioning Vocational/Technical Education thus: Science and Technology particularly information and communication technology will be mainstreamed into the school curriculum and innovative approaches to be developed to ensure that teachers have access to continuing professional development so that they remain the culling edge of their disciplines. Amiaya (2004), also noted that re-positioning of vocational/technical education will require the following among others: -

Appropriate training: Vocational/Technical Education is a skilled programme and not a theoretical programme that can be read from textbooks. This means that machines/equipment's must be seen and used to practice the skills.

Adequate Teaching Staff: If the programme will boost, qualified teachers who are professionals must be produced through those programmes-

Proper funding: Vocational/Technical Programmes at all levels of education requires enough funding. Funding here is needed for the procurement of equipment and for recruitment and training of vocational educators.

Proper Curriculum Innovation: The vocational technical education curriculum as it is, can no longer meet the needs of making of products relevant in the modern offices. Technological development has made the curriculum obsolete. In order to rectify this situation, teachers of vocational/technical education must first of all be trained in the current modern office machines. At the same time students of vocational/technical, education should be sufficiently exposed to the latest technology devices in the automated office.

Basic infrastructures should be provided: Most secondary schools/colleges have no workshops or laboratories and where they do they have ceased from being functional. Classrooms have fallen below standard, and are grossly inadequate. Providing these facilities for schools should be a matter of urgency if the goals/objectives must be achieved.

Encouraging positive attitude towards vocational technical education. There is the need to change the negative attitude of the public that vocational/technical education is for the low achievers and the never-do-well.

Curriculum Evaluation: For education to be relevant to life in the ever-changing world, evaluation is necessary in all aspects of the programmes. Njoku (1993), advocates innovations in the curriculum that would enable students live effectively and be productive in tomorrow's world. This means that of necessity, curriculum must be constantly evaluated in line with the needs of students for effective performance in a changing world. -

Conclusion

The importance of vocational/technical education programme in national development is fast gaining grounds. It is argued that given the rate of technological change and the need to upgrade and update existing stock of labour force, manpower development should be viewed as a continuous process through the work life. It is however, advocated that the programmes should be backed by strong policies and as Arukwa (1992), rightly stated, Vocational/Technical Education can only be meaningfully planned and implemented in this country if there is a strong policy backed up by appropriate legislation and financial provisions to ensure compliance, NEEDS document policy -is definitely one of such, and if it is implemented to the last letter; an ensured and sustained manpower development can be guaranteed through quality Vocational/Technical Education.

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