

# STRATEGIES FOR ACHIEVING EXCELLENCE IN THE CERTIFICATION OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION PROGRAMME

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## Abstract

The government of Nigeria and many developing countries believe that a successful vocational education programme is important and necessary elements in their development strategies as it equips citizens with the skills needed by industry, and at the same time helps reduce unemployment. This paper aims at exploring the role of vocational education in achieving excellence through the production of human resources who are willing and prepared to justify the vocational certificates awarded to them. The paper also highlights strategies for achieving excellence in the vocational education programme. It is recommended among others that vocational educators and curriculum planners should create confidence in the students by directing their courses to the new technological wave since that is the only way employers and the entire society will have confidence in vocational education products and the certificate which they award to their graduates.

## Introduction

Social development activities, which various countries put on priority list, vary from country to country. Such social development activities as education, health services, transport facilities among others are the key-factors to the development of a nation. In the national development plan, education is highly rated because it is the most important instrument of change, as any fundamental change in the intellectual and social outlook of any society has to be preceded by an educational revolution.

The annals of education of any person include the different stages of academic life he or she passed through. These include the pre-primary, primary, secondary and tertiary levels which is crowned by the award of one certificate or the other, an indication that the possessor has successfully passed through the programme. In the job markets of the 1990s, the possession of a degree certificate offers no guarantee of employment. The world of commerce required graduates who are able to demonstrate a range of practical skills, as well as the knowledge and understanding, which underpins effective performance. In this regard, vocational education becomes an answer. Vocational education is an aspect of general education which provides its recipient with employability skills.. It is education for vocation and is practical oriented. Federal Republic of Nigeria (1998:25) states that vocational education is that form of education which is obtainable at the technical college, which is equivalent to the senior secondary education but designed to prepare individuals to acquire practical skills, basic and scientific knowledge and attitude required as craftsmen and technicians at sub-professional level. Its primary goals are: to provide trained manpower in the applied sciences, technology and business particularly at craft, advanced craft and technical level; to provide the technical knowledge and vocational skills necessary for agricultural, commercial and economic development; and to give training and impart the necessary skills to individual who shall be structured in foundation and trade modules. In spite of these visions, mission and activities of vocational education in the society, Handy (1987); Constable and McCorcmic (1987); Drucker (1992) state that employers in the labour market have, for some time now been claiming that higher institutions do not produce graduates who are flexible and able to cope with and respond to the changing complexities of commercial life.

Certification of competence is the confirmation of ability to perform specific duties of an occupation, which indicates a person's achievement of predetermined standards. It offers a benchmark for assuring that the individual possesses the qualifications required for employment in a given occupation or occupational speciality. American Learning Exchange (n.d) sees certification as involving learners in an educational process for achievement of competencies required by national or state regulations. Such certification include teacher certification (like Nigerian certificate in education); Professional associations (like Nigeria Association of Business Educators (NABE): or organizations (like Institute of Chartered Accountants of Nigeria); or industry certification (like Trade Tests).

Certification played a very important role in the job market of 1970's and early 1980. Things today are .taking a new dimension. The job market is changing every now and then due to technological innovations (explosion). This explosion in technology affects virtually all aspects of human endeavour. Employers look for graduates with requisite knowledge and skills necessary for meeting employment trend in today's society. The employers' current standard due to technological explosion has reduced employment growth based on paper qualification. Certification of skills turn to be of increasing importance to employers especially in setting the certification standards. Certificates according to Indiana Department of Workforce Development (1998) function as open transcripts of an individual's application of knowledge and skill over time and learning experiences. Organizations such as the Nigeria Union of Teachers (NUT) are working to create standards of quality for certification. In line with this, Walker and Zirkle (1999) say that organizations have seen the continuing value of skill certifications for job

applicants, their hiring institutions, and the clients they serve. Employers are willing to pay significantly higher for some kinds of knowledge (Ramsay, 1999:626). Qualifications of individuals are no longer the only determinant factor for securing jobs. Employers look out for people who can do the job without close supervision. This aim is to reduce the rate of return for on-the-job training which according to Hartog (1999) is as high as 15%. This development is in contrast to what obtains in the early 1980s when paper qualification was the major instrument for securing jobs in Nigeria.

In the early 1990, things started taking a new dimension especially in the labour market. Industrialists, business community, employers of labour and other stake-holders in education and industry, started re-emphasizing the import of the learning processes of engagement, investigation, speculation, reflection, trial and error. Practical oriented graduates in areas of computer, internet, among other innovative skills were sought. Vocational education graduates in Nigeria were put at disadvantaged position. The reason is that most of these products were not practically sound, hence, they, in most cases, find it difficult to secure jobs in strategic positions that requires occupational competencies because of the competitive nature. The authenticity and quality of certificate awarded to these graduates were in most cases quarried. Vocational educators were accused of not giving their students the necessary sub skills in their areas as expected by their employers because of the emerging technological challenges. These therefore create the need for vocational educators to embark on extensive crash courses in listening to markets, creating value-added programmes, and identifying and assessing competence.

To function in a continually changing and global market place, everyone needs to engage in continuous learning and skill development. These efforts may take the form of post-secondary education, on-the-job training, or other types of professional development. Marchese (1999:4) says that "Nowadays, it is not uncommon to find bachelor degree holders enrolled in graduate schools pursuing not the familiar master's or doctorate in a discipline, but a custom set of interdisciplinary courses aimed at competencies valued in the market place. Individuals' careers will continue to emerge not even in a linear fashion. The existence of difference skill and competency certificates reflects the importance society is placing on these occupational skills and competencies that reflect competence. This skill and competencies certificates is an indication for wider changes in the next century. Competence according to Beaumont Report (1996) is the ability to apply knowledge, understanding and skills in performing to the standards required in employment including solving problems and meeting changing demands. The key question for the competence of graduates in Nigeria therefore should not be based on "What the students understand" but more of "what can students do"?

The emphasis employers place on occupational skills and certificates have made graduates of higher institutions to embark on further studies aimed at obtaining marketable skills needed in the job market. Commenting on this, Quanley and Quinley (1998) opine that one practice that is increasingly evident in colleges is that of "reverse transfer". Countering the typical progression from primary school level towards higher education show that graduates return to higher institutions to obtain more marketable skills in order to obtain occupational upgrading as well as personal satisfaction. Most of these re-entering graduate students are already employed, many in professional and managerial positions. Milltehauser (1998) stated that data from Bureau of Labour and Statistics show that the growth rate of college level jobs between 1996 and 2006 will be expected to be lower than that of the previous 10 years ago. This reduced employment growth is expected to provide 65,000 fewer college level jobs, leaving 18% more new college graduate job seekers than there are openings of college level jobs. This confirms what is happening today in the labour market and institutions that produce these job seekers.

### **The Need for Vocational Education for Employment**

The race for vocational education for employment has in recent times attained an alarming proportion such that well meaning Nigerians have wondered aloud how to tackle it. These social, educational, cultural and economic problems should be the concern of all, especially now that unemployment has been a cancer worm eating deep into our national fabrics following technological explosion which reformed the skills and competencies needed in offices and industrial workplaces. In response to this, Donne as quoted by Iroegbu (1983) stated that no man is an island upon himself. Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. Any man's death diminishes him because he is involved in mankind and therefore never sent to know for whom the bell tolls for it tolls for all.

The past educational offering in Nigeria has made the citizens to cultivate false values, which holds out no aspiration for prosperity, destroys originality and the creative essence in man. Nigerians in particular have been mis-educated. They need mental emancipation so as to be re-educated to the real needs of Nigerians society. Fafunwa (1974) and Orji (1990) say that the worst of it all regarding our country, Nigeria, is the undue emphasis placed on paper qualification as a criterion for employment. It has not made our education to effect any change in behaviour nor does it encourage independence, and constructive thinking in the child. In the job market of 21st century, a degree therefore offers no guarantee of employment hence the need for Nigeria to cultivate new culture values.

The major question for the competence of vocational education graduates should not center on "what the students know" rather, it should focus on "what the students are able to do". This therefore means that vocational education should emphasize occupational competence which is required by government and industry in addition to academic competence which traditional forms of education have followed since the pools of knowledge and expertise acquired in the initial knowledge can no longer be sufficient for the new order. The trend is for individuals to be able to operate on their knowledge and deploy the operational capacities and expertise in an unfamiliar circumstance in the world of work. Vocational education always claims to teach students to be practical oriented by imparting requisite skills and competencies needed in modern workplaces, and enabling the students to be self-reliant. Despite these claims, some institutions do not have the modern machines needed in imparting these knowledge so as to reflect the true work environment while some that manage to procure the needed equipment use them to decorate their studios, and department instead of allowing students to make use of them during teaching/learning processes. These ugly situations make graduates from these institutions deficient in skills and competencies needed and make the employers to lose confidence in the capabilities of these education graduates. Stephen and Weil (1992) advised educational development promoters to give confidence to the students to enable them explain, take effective action, work effectively with others and continue to learn from their experiences. When confidence is assured, individuals will continually make their portfolios, keep themselves current and look for new development opportunities.

Universities/colleges of education and vocational education departments in particular have commitments to students and the society. They have a duty to explore a range of ways to fulfill the expectations and interests of both individuals and organizations. To achieve this, they should come up with means of providing and improving access to further developmental opportunities. The philosophical position of general education, according to Parnell (1996), has been learning to know, application can come later. Learning to do should therefore be emphasized in vocational education especially in this technological age since knowledge will somehow seep into the process eventually. Vocational education in this technological world should see activity as a major factor in knowledge building. Participation in everyday activities, according to Billet (1994), forces learners to access higher-order procedural and propositional knowledge.

The irony of vocational education according to Stevenson (1994) is that studies of cognitive development in vocations are leading reforms of general education, yet the full import of the theoretical advances are not being applied in vocational education itself despite emphasizing skills and competencies. This assertion is true of vocational education since personal observations show that the common method of teaching today in Nigeria applied by practicing student teachers is lecturing, especially in theory classes.

The implication of this development for students generally and universities in particular is that vocational education departments should restructure their educational programmes where necessary to reflect the trend in the society, industry and workplaces. This activity when properly implemented will provide a structure that allows students to demonstrate assessable standards of performance which will make the application of what is taught and learnt more meaningful in terms of what students are able to contribute to the employing organizations.

### **Image Problem of Vocational Education Towards Achieving Excellence**

Prior to the technological changes in the offices, industries and job markets, vocational education was viewed as a separate system of education aimed at meeting a nation's labour needs by providing college level training for specific occupations. The period 1980 to early 1990s saw leaders from federal, state and local government areas not giving vocational education priority recognition. They saw it as education separate from general education with little educational value, and as a result should be replaced by a predominantly academic curriculum. The National Policy on Education (1998) sees vocational education as education designed to prepare individuals to acquire practical skills, basic and scientific knowledge and attitude required by craftsmen and technicians at sub-professional levels. Silberman (1986) stated that vocational courses at best are expected to provide students who are not college bound with minimal training at low-status jobs at entry level. In confirmation of these, What Do People Think of Us (1997:14) states that when one asks a vocational educator to name the most serious issues facing the field today, most will rank "our image problem" high on the list. Journal issues from the American Vocational Association (AVA) (1987, 1993 and 1997) prove that vocational education image has been pervasive over the past ten years. The word "vocational" does not work for many people.

In Nigeria today, many vocational training centres exist. People misunderstand the activities of these training centres with those of vocational education programme in institutions of higher learning. The misconception creates a serious image problem for the education programme, their products and the certificate awarded to the graduates. Personal observation from tertiary institutions in the South East Geo-political Zone of Nigeria and some other higher institutions visited shows that this image misconception has caused many tertiary institutions offering vocational education courses in Nigeria to change their departmental nomenclature to vocational teacher education. This situation is not only peculiar to Nigeria and South-East Geo-political Zone, but to other countries of the world, hence, this trend, according to American Vocational Association (AVA), has been accelerating since 1992. The AVA Technique (1992) notes that at least 15 states have changed the name of their vocational education system within

the past three (3) years and that many school districts had changed the names of vocational programmes. Buzzell (1987) says that the surest formula for improving image is to do a good job and tell people about it. The image of any service organization is in the hands of its providers. This is true of vocational education whose teachers and students are in daily contact. Quantity and quality of influence on students, employers and society at large will place vocational education in the executive seat for tremendous control over image problem. Vocational educators need to find out what customers think of them and how well they perform their services, An upbeat, enthusiastic attitude demonstrated on the front line is what will sell vocational education and its product. Vocational education like any other service industries must respond to change. Vocational educators must constantly monitor the technological wave by finding out the skills possessed by their products and what is expected of them, and thereby redress the imbalance. The redress should be done by including in the programme those courses that will portray the skills needed by the present dispensation. Computer, internet, and other innovative skills should be seriously emphasized in the vocational education programme. Causes associated with these skills should be made compulsory instead of putting them as electives which give students options to do or choose other courses. Lecturers should also be required to update their knowledge in these innovative skills to enable them impact the skills fully on the students. Vocational education should capitalize on comprehensive marketing approach, tell people their mission, vision, what they do, what they have achieved and prove to the employers and society at large that it can achieve excellence. This is the only way its graduates and certificate can be recognized. It should capitalize on comprehensive marketing approach and prove to the employers and the society at large that it can achieve excellence. This is the only way its graduates and certificate can be recognized.

The image problems, societal and job market changes of late 1980s and early 1990s in particular triggered numerous demands to re-examine and change the way students and their teachers are educated. Most of the initiators of the change movement argued that improving education requires improving teacher quality and teacher education. Hartley, Mantle-Bronmley, and Cobb (1996) propose changes in teacher recruitment, preparation and certification. Dykman (1993) states that it is in response to the mounting evidence of the deterioration of vocational education that 13 points for initiating a change process entailing designing and implementing a customer driven learning system and accountability was identified.

### **Strategies for Achieving Excellence in Vocational Education**

Transfer of learning from school to work settings is the major concern of vocational education. Constructivism being a learning theory has suggested a way to restructure learning that will make transfer more effective and excellent. To achieve this, the following strategies are postulated.-

#### **1. New Focus in Mind**

In view of the technological challenges in the labour market and society at large, Tozer and Nelson (1988) urge vocational educators to provide students with generalizable higher order skills by teaching through vocations instead of for vocations. Gregson (1993) opines that vocational educator must be capable of transforming their students into critical thinkers and problem solvers needed to make workplaces more democratic and emancipatory.

The vocational education focus should be on how to organize experiences that allow learners to develop their own knowledge and understanding instead of setting tasks, which may not be accomplished. This vision in mind will cause vocational teachers to forge ahead in order to know more than ever before, to keep pace with rapid technological advancement in their occupational field and in the teaching profession, and finally, to reach out to new, non traditional audiences. These increased expectations make the process of choosing a vocation lengthier, more rigorous, more costly and excellent.

#### **2. Constructivism Approach**

Constructivism is a cognitive approach that emphasizes constructing knowledge through a problem solving process designed to produce learners who are problem solvers, life-long learners, makers of meaning, collaborators, agents of change who are able to change, and practitioners of democratic processes.

Research, according to Stevenson (1994), has confirmed that the focus in teaching and learning should be on the individual's construction of education, which emphasizes skills and competencies needed in real work situation. It should facilitate construction of knowledge through experiential, contextual, and social method, in real work environment. Since the focus of vocational education is on the learner, vocational education should be conceptualized as a learning process rather than a teaching process. A vocational educator should see himself as a coach and an expert who models the strategies and activities needed to solve problems. Farmer, Bucknaster and LeGrand (1992) state that experts should coach learners with appropriate physical aids and supporting materials that gradually decrease assistance through continued practice; learners internalizing the process by constructing their own knowledge and understanding.

Stevenson (1994) and Billett (1993), while commenting on constructive learning approach, advocate assessment of performance in multiple settings, attention to dispositional factors including learner interests and ways

of knowing and combining constructivist practices with direct instruction for the accessions when presentation of information or theory is necessary.

### **3. New Assessment Strategy** **CT\***

With the trend in the society and labour markets, vocational educators should move from their usual testing culture and embrace the assessment culture. This will help in meeting their expectations. Johnson and Wentling (1996) advise vocational educators to see assessment as an occasion for learning rather than testing, formative and ongoing activity based on a criterion - referenced philosophy of evaluation that focuses on accomplishment rather than rank; an occasion based on what prospective teachers are expected to know rather than what is easy to score; and the use of multiple performance assessment, teaching portfolios and assessment centers.

### **4. Restructuring Programme**

Restructuring of vocational education programme will be a positive step towards achieving excellence. This is as a result of the changes in the job market resulting from technological explosion. which affects all aspects of human endeavour. Vocational educators should include in their restructuring exercise courses in areas of computer, internet and other innovative skills currently required in the ever changing technological world. This will ensure that old skills which seem to be outdated among the societal needs are expunged. This will help to redress the imbalance between what is existing and the skills and competencies needed in this dispensation.

Hartley, Mantle-Bromley, and Cobb (1996) propose a restructured vocational programme incorporating integrated content, integrated academic and work-based learning, partnership with businesses, industries, full range of clinical experiences and applied instructional and curricular technology. To achieve excellence in vocational education, there is need to restructure the programme in such a way that students are taught the skills and competencies required by industries at mastery level instead of alternative certification which may end up graduating students who are not competent in handling jobs available in the job market. It is in line with this that Copa and Philah (1996) question whether the vocational education curriculum should remain a collection of separate fields or be restructured into a comprehensive subject for learning about work, family and community roles.

### **5. New Entry/Exit Requirement**

The entry and exit requirement of vocational education programme also needs to be restructured for effectiveness and image improvement. There is need for vocational education programme to have one-year internship period before granting permanent certification for the candidate to practice the profession just like other professional counterparts in areas as law, accountancy, medicine, etc. This, when properly considered and implemented will be a positive step towards achieving excellence and image improvement since only candidates who have positive dispositional view (interest, attitude, etc) about the vocational technology education will enroll in it and be proud to practice it for life. This will help to rescue the programme from being a dumping ground where frustrated candidates can enroll into and come out with little or no skills and ambition to practice. This kind of people takes vocational education as a cover while waiting for the opportunity for them to achieve their hearts' desires in life.

### **6. New/Current Audience**

Vocational education's changing audience should be another impetus for change in vocational education programme. Due to changes in technology, offices, industries, job market and all facets of human endeavour, people now move back to school and vocational education, in particular, to update their knowledge, skills and competencies in order to keep abreast with the changes in their places of work. Such people include the adults, young, and married, who are managers, and administrators who want to update their knowledge in order to hold forth their positions in their various places of work. Rudolph, Fry and Barr (1988) and Nolan and Venerable (1988) underscore the importance of developing pre-service and in-service educational activities to equip vocational education teachers with the knowledge and skills required to serve the growing number of minorities, at risk-students, itinerant population, and adult students enrolled in vocational education programme.

Vocational education teachers, in order to achieve excellence, should reach out to new developments in the society; strive to know more than ever before, and keep pace with the technological changes in the occupational field. Making the move towards achieving excellence, Lynch (1997) offers nine principles as a foundation for vocational education to achieve excellence.

- 1) Faculty should be committed to students and their professional development as lifelong learners.
- 2) Faculty should use curriculum and instructional techniques to integrate theory with practice, academic and work force education, professional education and subject matter, learning theory and work force preparation and development.
- 3) Faculty should understand the philosophy and effective practice of work force preparation and development.
- 4) Faculty should use dynamic pedagogy based on learning theory and practices appropriate for youth and adults.
- 5) Faculty should be partners in teaching communities through which they model collaboration and democratic processes for their students.
- 6) Programmes should be dynamic and change oriented.
- 7) Programmes should be grounded in academic education, workplace subject matter, technology, professional education and clinical practices.
- 8) Universities and Colleges should provide resources to sustain programmes at high quality levels.
- 9) Academic and clinical faculty should view vocational education programme as a top priority.

Vocational educators should, in addition to these strategies,

1. integrate information technology, networking and internet facilities in their programmes and make same compulsory for all levels;
2. universities and colleges of education should continue to give priority emphasis to public/private alliances in training students in vocational skills;
3. vocational education departments should constantly allow students to practice with the technological equipments existing in their studios/laboratories/workshop instead of keeping them for decorative purposes;
4. vocational education department should solicit for funds from the business community in order to update their studios and laboratories with modern equipment;
5. vocational education departments should create societal awareness regarding their programmes so that a clear distinction can be made between their activities and those of skill acquisition centers; and
6. university and colleges of education should create conducive learning environments that will ensure reflective thinking.

### **Conclusion / Recommendations**

Vocational education is an aspect of educational programme that develops in individuals, the occupational skills and competencies, which would enable individuals to fit into the society, which they live in and earn a living. For vocational education to achieve excellence in this technological dispensation, it must be prepared to reach out, adapt to changes, keep track and pace with the new innovations, be prepared to impart in students knowledge more than ever before in their chosen occupational field. The curriculum should constantly be monitored and restructured where necessary to keep pace with the technological wave. When these are fully implemented, vocational education will achieve excellence and win the confidence of the employers, students and the populace.

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