
Commercialization of Education in a Dwindling Economy

By

NATH M. ABRAHAM

*Professor of Educational Management,
University of Port Harcourt, Port Harcourt,
Rivers State.*

Protocol and Preamble

I am indeed appreciative of the National President, Executive Secretary and indeed all members of the Association of Nigerian Teachers (ASSONT) for considering me to present the Keynote Address at the 13th Annual Conference of the Association. The theme for this conference – **Commercialization of Education in a Dwindling Economy** is quite timely and apt.

Education is a social service provided for the citizenry by government primarily. Social service organizations have some characteristics, but the first and most prominent characteristic is that they are non-profit making organizations. Every responsible government anywhere in the world makes effort to provide some social services to the citizens to build stronger communities, and promote equality and opportunity.

Federal Republic of Nigeria (2013) in Section 1, sub-section 4 of the National Policy on Education avers that “the philosophy of Nigeria education is based on the development of the individual into a sound and effective citizen and the provision of equal opportunities for all citizens of the nation at the basic, secondary and tertiary levels...” (p.1).

Equal opportunities should not be limited to access alone, but cost/who bears the cost, and in fact, quality of instructional delivery, quality of learning environment, etc. It seems rather incongruous that in the same document where the government vowed to give equal opportunities to all citizens at all levels of education, government turned round to welcome and encourage “the participation of local communities, individuals and organizations” (FRN, 2013:47) in the funding of education. It is a well known maxim that ‘he who pays the pipe calls the tune’. Therefore, the philosophy of equal opportunities for all citizens is faulty *ab initio*. It is right then to say that the invitation for commercialization of education was extended by Federal Republic of

Nigeria. Let me however note, for fear of being misquoted that commercialization of education is not all together bad; whether it is good or bad depends on *modus operandi*, intents and purposes.

There is no gainsaying the fact that education is the barometer for checking the development of any nation. It is in confirmation of this that Erwat, Isah and Fabunmi (2008:39) noted that “education is the bedrock of any society; no society can grow beyond its level of educational attainment”. Public education has always been seen as a ‘common good’ for securing a nation’s future, civic order and economic development. Commercialization of education is now a source of private economic gain (Lingard, Sellar, Hogan & Thompson, 2017).

Clarification of Concepts

Three (3) concepts yearn for clarification in this address, namely:

- Commercialization
- Commercialization of Education
- Dwindling Economy

*** Commercialization**

The concept ‘commercialization’ has been defined by different scholars. Hogan and Thompson (2017) see commercialization as the creation, marketing and sale of goods and services by for-profit providers.

It is the process of managing something, or an enterprise/organization principally for financial (monetary) gains.

The Webster’s New Encyclopedic Dictionary (2002) informs that to commercialize means “to manage on a business basis for profit”; “to exploit for profit”, and “to debase in quality for more profit” (p. 361).

The last two definitions, namely to exploit, and to debase in quality for more profit suggest that there may be more **cons** than **pros** in the commercialization of education.

*** Commercialization of Education**

Commercialization of Education presupposes that “there is sale of services or profit motive behind imparting education or funds come mainly from the receivers of education” (Borghain, 2016:71).

It is “a process of private ownership and management of educational institutions whereby investments are made with the motive of earning profit” (Chandwani & Bhome, 2013).

No matter how many definitions of ‘Commercialization of Education’ one puts forward, one thing remains constant, and that is ‘profit motive’ as against the social service motive.

* **Dwindling Economy**

The word ‘dwindling’ is synonymous with ‘decrease’. It means growing less in intensity, size, quality, or quantity; shrinking or diminishing until there is almost nothing, or absolutely nothing left.

The economy of Nigeria has been in crisis due to tremendous fall of the price of crude oil in the international market, leading to devaluation of the Naira. This happened because the nation depended on only one commodity, crude oil (mono-economy) as against diversifying to other sectors like Agriculture, Mining, etc.

Though the nation’s economy is in crisis, with high unemployment rate, high cost of goods and services, we anticipate a gradual recovery as against grinding to a total halt. This however, is subject for another discussion.

Education: A Social Service

The age-long traditional perspective of education is that it is a social service. As earlier stated, public education has always been seen as a ‘common good’ provided for the citizens from the public treasury for the good of society. It is the responsibility of government to provide education to citizens of the country using tax payers’ monies, and other common wealth of the nation. This is why Twebaze (2015:5107) notes that “education is for the common good and its cost should be borne by the government for the common benefit of society...”

It is longer news that “the provision of education is fast moving from being the responsibility of government to that of commercial individuals and organizations” (Twebaze, 2015:5107). The situation in Nigeria is such that the common wealth that should have been used for the common good is looted by privileged few, often in the political class, and used to establish schools that charge very exorbitant fees, far above the paying ability of majority of Nigerians.

Education is a key means to national economic, social, political, and in fact, sustainable development. Nations that understand this still invest wisely and hugely in public education, while also strictly regulating commercialized education to ensure that standards are maintained.

Why Commercialize Education?

Commercialization of education is a global trend, not just a Nigerian affair. Verger, Lubienski and Steiner-Khamsi (2016) call the trend, “Global Education Industry (GEI)”. They aver that the expansion of the Global Education Industry has been necessitated by the following factors:

1. Economic globalisation
2. The commodification of schooling as a positional good for families
3. The financialisation of the education sector
4. Changes in the governance of education
5. The emergence of an evidence-based policy paradigm
6. The intensification of technology in learning relationship (pp. 6-11).

While agreeing with Verger et al (2016), let us see the reasons why education in Nigeria is now heavily privatized and commercialized. They are:

Failure of Government

Successive governments neglected public education. Public educational institutions were, and are still poorly funded, and never supervised, and public education was almost comatose. Private providers of education came to the rescue (Abraham, 2017). Also, the absence of a sincere regulation of the establishment and operation of private schools led to the proliferation of school.

Government and its officials abdicated the responsibility of providing quality education to citizens, as a way of boosting clientele for the privately-owned commercialized schools to thrive. They killed public education, and used public funds to set up schools for themselves and their wives, and exploit the citizens whose common wealth was used to establish the schools.

Quality Issues

This is another reason for justifying commercialization of education. There is the claim of ‘falling’/‘fallen’ standard of education in public schools. If standards are falling or fallen in public schools, the blame still goes to government and her agencies that are charged with Quality Assurance. It is a fact that public education institutions at all strata in Nigeria (primary, secondary and tertiary) still have the most qualified teachers than the commercialized private institutions. The problem of low quality of products of public institutions stems from the neglect of government and her agencies to:

- Equip laboratories, libraries and other learning facilities
- Honestly and professionally monitor and supervise instruction.
- Motivate the teachers
- Train, and retrain teachers.

Burch (2009) confirms that commercial providers of education try to proffer solutions to various education problems which public schools face, in the forms of provision of assessment services, digital learning, professional development of teachers, and administrative support. This is done to complement and supplement basic education facilities often in a context where bureaucratic or central support is being withdrawn (Burch, 2009).

It is necessary to note here that since pupils’/students’ results constitute the major indicator of quality provided by the education system, most private providers of education indulge in ‘Corporate Examination Malpractice’. A 100% pass rate at public examinations assures the school of more clients even when most of the candidates that parade nine (9) Alphas cannot defend the results they have. The question now is: Who is fooling who?

Privatization

Commercialization of education is a product of privatization. According to the United Nations Committees (2014) in Twebaze (2015:5109), “commercialization of education in Uganda has been exacerbated by liberalization and privatization of educational institutions which was occasioned by the failure of the Government of Uganda to adequately fund public education”. This is 100% true in the case of Nigeria.

There is nothing wrong with privatization if it is properly done with strong legal framework, more so, if there is an honest government regulatory agency to ensure that all guidelines are followed by the privately owned educational institutions. After all, privatization is a potentially lucrative and legitimate means of increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of public institutions (Lingard, Sellar; Hogan & Thompson, 2017).

The problem lies with weak and dishonest government regulatory agencies that close their eyes to the desecration of standards by some private school proprietors the moment ‘fat brown envelopes’ exchange hands. This is the reason for the proliferation, or better put, the ‘mushrooming’ of private schools. Let it be noted here that there are private educational institutions that are keeping to standards.

Pros and Cons of Commercialization of Education

Granted that commercialized education means that members of the public (the clients/customers) are paying more for education, there are many good sides of it. Borgohain (2016) listed the positive impact of commercialization on education and society to include:

1. Employment Opportunity – Reducing unemployment
2. Economic Development – Through increasing literacy rate, Gross Domestic Product (GDP), national income, per capital income; and job opportunity, all of which are indicators of economic development
3. Preparation to face Global Challenges – in the forms of modernization, industrialization, globalization, ICT, international knowledge network.
4. Personality Development
5. Quality Education – exemplified by quality of the learning environment, quality of content of curriculum quality of instrument delivery process, and quality of the learning outcomes.
6. Increased number of private institutions which directly increases access to education.
7. Social Development – Through socio-cultural activities, and other co-curricular programmes like excursions, private educational institutions help to develop the affective and psychomotor domains of learners, in addition to the cognitive.
8. Fulfillment of expectations of parents – To provide quality education (as they can afford) to their children (pp. 72 – 73).

In addition to the afore-listed positive impacts are:

9. Competition among private proprietors of education to provide Quality Education at the most efficient cost leads to continuous improvement (a key component of Total Quality Management).

Commercialization of Education has the following negative consequences:

1. Mushrooming (proliferation) of Education centres
2. Profiteering, with detrimental consequences to quality
3. Engagement of inadequate number of staff (to reduce operational cost, maximize profit, and therefore overloading the few teachers with excess work)
4. Engagement of unqualified manpower (particularly, teachers) so as to pay less.
5. Poor remuneration/slave labour (poor conditions of service)
6. Corporate Examination Malpractice – so as to have fantastic results which are used as bait to attract and retain clients.
7. Too much emphasis on academics (cognitive domain) to the neglect of other domains of learning.
8. “Inefficiency due to focusing on the profit motive rather than the ideals of the noble purpose of education” (Twebase, 2015:5107).
9. Overload of the curriculum – This is to impress parents many of who will love to have the children tucked away in the school from dawn to dusk while they pursue their careers and money. The attendant consequence is that children rarely have time with their parents; and do not have to play (due to too many lessons). This has led to the fast erosion of humanity in children and youths, and enthronement of robots (as children/youths).
10. High cost of acquiring education (in favour of the few from the elite class).

Making the Best out of Commercialization of Education in a Dwindling Economy

Commercialization of education is not all about negative consequences. In fact, it helps to increase competitive efficiency, and further increases/provides access to education. Even the negative consequences of commercialization of education can be reversed for good. This is possible if:

1. A strong legal framework is put in place, streamlining the conditions for the establishment and operation of private educational institutions. Granted that there has always been such document in the Ministry of Education, but the bastardization of the system calls for a total review, to re-jig it to suit present day realities.
2. Creation of strong institutions manned by men and women of proven integrity to regulate the establishment and operation of private schools. These regulatory institutions should be created to possess such powers that will make them attract such awe (reverential respect and fear) that National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC) had under Professor Dora Akunyili. In fact, an Educational regulatory agency must be accorded higher or same level of prominence given to NAFDAC because if we don't get the education of the young right, then all hope is lost.

Commercialization of Education in a Dwindling Economy

3. Regulating fees. There should be categorization of schools according to certain criteria, and stipulation of fees/charges based on identified qualities/criteria.
4. Legislation to make political office holders/government functionaries (serving or retired) forfeit educational institutions established by them to government. Government should in turn get credible members of the National Association of Proprietors of Private Schools (NAPPS) to manage such schools in partnership with government on Public-Private Partnership (PPP) basis.
5. Regular Monitoring to maintain standards
6. Government's Financial Intervention. Based on certain conditions, government should assist private educational institutions financially. This will reduce the financial burden on parents of the pupils/students.

Conclusion

There are different connotations of commercialization of education. A school of thought sees it as the exploitation and debasing of education for profit-making. This suggests that commercialization leads to reduction in quality of education. Another school of thought suggests that "commercialization of education means that schools are competing more than ever for who can provide quality education at a reasonable price" (Borgoham, 2016:72). This latter viewpoint is more positive. The onus therefore is on government to re-kit public schools for a healthy competition with private schools. Let it be such that quality education can be gotten from both public and private schools, and it becomes only a matter of choice to enroll into whichever.

It is also important that a task-force of credible Educational Management experts be set up to conduct a check to confirm compliance to standards for establishment and operation of private schools, with a view to recommending non-complying 'mushroom' and other institutions for immediate closure. This is necessary so that citizens will have value for monies paid for children's education. Commercialization has its benefits, but government and other stakeholders must insist on compliance to policies, and standards, as well as regular monitoring.

References

- Abraham, N. M. (2017). The Challenges of Funding Private Education in a volatile economy. Keynote Address presented at the National Association of Proprietors of Private Schools (NAPPS) Conference held at Obi Wali International Conference Centre, Port Harcourt, on November 15.
- Borgohain, S. (2016). Commercialization of Education System: A critical analysis. *International Research Journal of Interdisciplinary and Multidisciplinary Studies*. 1(XII), 71-76.

- Burch, P. (2009). *Hidden Markets: The new education privatization*. New York: Routledge.
- Chandwani, V. S. & Bhome, S. M. (2013). A study of impact of commercialization of education in India. *Episteme: An online Interdisciplinary, Multidisciplinary and Multicultural Journal*. 1(5).
- Ewart, E. A.; Isah, E. A. & Fabunmi, M. (2008). Redirecting Education for Sustainable Development and Poverty eradication in Nigeria. In J. B. Babalola, G. O. Akpa, H. Imam & A. O. Ayeni (Eds.). *Managing Education for Sustainable Development in Development Countries*. Ibadan: His Lineage Publishing House.
- Federal Republic of Nigeria (2013). *National Policy on Education*. Yaba, Lagos: NERDC Press.
- Hogan, A. & Thompson, G. (2017). *Commercialization of Education*. Oxford Encyclopedia of Education.
- Lingard, B., Sellar, S., Hogan, A. & Thompson, G. (2017). *Commercialisation in Public Schooling (CIPS)*. Sydney, Australia: New South Wales Teachers Federation.
- Webster's New Encyclopedia Dictionary (2002). Springfield, MA: Federal Street Press.