

GREATER IMPETUS TO VOCATIONAL EDUCATION FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

P. A. Nwigbo

Abstract

The Federal Government of Nigeria directs that vocational subjects shall be studied as electives in all the Senior Secondary Schools in Nigeria without further designing and implementing a clear-cut national system of vocational education. This is a problem. On the other hand, a well-organized vocational education system can make enormous contributions to national development in the areas of agriculture, health care delivery, basic technology, cottage industries, information technology, political stability and peaceful family life. Vocational education should therefore, receive greater impetus from the Federal Government. A suggested seven-step programme of action for re-vitalising vocational education in Nigeria begins with the appointment of a Federal Board for Vocational Education and ends with the admission of students into vocational schools. A similar seven-step programme review plan involves collecting reports from the vocational schools and making necessary changes. The time to improve vocational education is now.

The Problem

In the National Policy on Education, the Federal Government of Nigeria directs that vocational subjects shall be studied in secondary schools throughout Nigeria (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004:19, 21). Unfortunately, this is where the Federal Government has stopped. No effort is made to map out and supervise a strong result-oriented national system of vocational education. Besides the Government, teachers and other stakeholders in vocational education join in paying lip service to what can significantly transform this nation into a producer rather than a consumer society. Our national development is hampered by this general apathy, and clear-cut programmes of vocational education can reverse the trend.

The Contributions

How can vocational education assist in national development? It is the view of Okwuanaso (2002:8) that vocational and technical education is important to national development because it is expected to produce the manpower that will facilitate the development of the country where it is offered.

In agriculture, the grassroot and middle-level farmers of crops including fruits and vegetables, livestock, poultry, fisheries, forestry and even wild life, can all be trained and produced by well-organized programmes of vocational education. Let us stretch our imagination a little and conceive a Nigeria where all these groups of farmers are available in large numbers providing large quantities of high-quality farm products of assorted types to feed the nation. It will mean self-sufficiency in food production and national food security. It will mean an end to the importation of foodstuff and an upthrust in our foreign exchange reserves. The Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (2004), quoting the then Federal Minister of Agriculture, reported that Nigeria spent 756 million United States dollars every year on the importation of rice alone. This staggering amount can be saved through a well-designed national system of vocational education. Before long, the nation will begin to export agricultural products for earnings that will finance the construction of roads, railways, bridges, water-supply projects and other developmental infrastructure.

One of the cardinal indicators of a nation's developmental level is the standard of health-care delivery in the nation in question. It is a matter for deep regret that Nigeria's health care position was placed 187th out of 191 countries surveyed by the World Health Organization a few years ago (Ezeoke, 2004). A formidable system of vocational education will produce qualified basic health workers enough to cover all the sections of the communities throughout Nigeria, leading the campaigns against malaria, HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, poliomyelitis, measles, whooping cough and many other diseases afflicting the nation. The health workers will also give any needed first-aid and/or other types of basic

health assistance to patients before (and even after) a medical doctor's attention. Above all, they will oversee general public health especially the hygienic conditions of homes and environmental sanitation. Vocational education can also produce qualified auxiliary nurses, medical laboratory assistants and pharmacy dispensers. On the whole, these services will raise the health-care delivery of the nation to greater heights.

Perhaps, it is in the area of basic technology that the contributions of vocational education stand out most markedly. For Nigeria to become an industrial giant like Britain, America and Japan, she must give greater encouragement to her grassroot, indigenous practical arts, crafts and technology instead of expecting heavy industrialization to fall like manna from heaven. If such a fall is very unlikely from a power so kind as heaven, how much more negatively need it be expected from less generous sources like foreign experts. It was observed that Japan, the People's Republic of China, India, Indonesia and Taiwan started their industrialization process from cottage industries that produced inferior but cheaper goods (Nwobualor, 2006).

It is the central function of vocational education to produce men and women with the necessary knowledge, attitudes and skills in woodwork, metalwork, electrical and electronic installation and repairs, automobile driving and repairs, cottage-industry management, and many other basic technical occupations too numerous to mention. No other social institution will do better than vocational education in the performance of this function. The present practice of establishing skill acquisition centres here and there in Nigeria, without making them purely vocational schools, falls short of what vocational education will achieve.

What about business in Nigeria? Vocational education provides the basic skills in business management, commerce, according, secretarial and office practice-all leading to higher incomes and better standard of living for the people. At present the Federal Government of Nigeria has intensified her support for small and medium-scale enterprises by granting soft loans and where necessary, improved raw materials. State Governments are not left out. Abuja Enterprises Agency, for example, assists entrepreneurs who have sound business ideas to set up the business and make progress. The need to produce, through vocational education, men and women with adequate business knowledge and skills to enable them take advantage of the encouragements, becomes pressing. A good system of vocational education will face the challenge successfully, otherwise our entrepreneurs will remain "people of average means with no specialized skills or expertise" (Ohadugha, 2005:71).

Vocational education is capable of giving the necessary broadly-based and skilled training for the production of not only the operators of modern Information and Communication Technology (ICT) achieves, but also the technicians to service and repair these gadgets. In the GSM sector alone, over two million handsets are daily yearning for servicing and maintenance with no capable technicians to come to the rescue. Calculate the number of telephone handsets damaged every day in Nigeria by cut-and-try-it, avaricious men and women who claim to be GSM phone technicians, and you will voluntarily join in the campaign to give vocational education its proper place in Nigeria. Many other areas of ICT, like computers, suffer from lack of skilled training programmes which vocational education can easily supply. By and by, the trainees from the vocational schools will graduate and set up their own efficient ICT business reducing unemployment and comfortably earning a living.

A good system of vocational education will increase people's self-confidence in what they can produce by themselves and, thus, give the people a certain social worth that will make the clamour for political power, rigging, thuggery and other forms of political instability quite unnecessary. As a result, the nation will experience peace, progress and development. Agbo (2004:55), re-states this view in his own words, "vocational/technical education well implemented in developing nations will re-enact social consciousness and esteem in people. This will go a long way to eliminate political bickering and encourage developing nations to forge ahead".

The basic social unit on which the nation rests is the family. Disorganize the family and you have disorganized the nation. Improve the family and you have improved the nation. Fortunately, vocational education focuses emphatically on home economics, organized and peaceful family life, nutrition, catering, clothing, textiles and cordial interpersonal relations. Armed with these skills the individual goes into the larger society to make worthy contributions to national development.

Action Plan

Having presented just some of the ways how vocational education engenders national development, the writer feels that the time is ripe for definite action, practical steps aimed at giving vocational education greater capacity for national development. We must move away from the old system and enthrone reforms. "We must have reforms, reforms that take us away from where we have found ourselves" (Obasanjo, 2003). He further said that, for us to develop, we should start from then to lay the foundations of such development through reforms.

The Tables below, highlight the flow chart of the actions required to give a boost to vocational education in Nigeria.

Table 1: Programme Inauguration Plan

Step	Action
1.	Federal Board of Vocational Education appointed
2.	State Board of Vocational Education appointed
3.	Vocational Curricula Designed
4.	Funding estimates completed
5.	Pilot Schools selected
6.	Teachers and other staff recruited
7.	Students admitted

Interpretation

A federal board for vocational education as a body that specializes in the initiation and development of sound, result-oriented programmes of vocational education for the country has to be set up and given the powers to oversee all matters concerning vocational education. Naturally, all the members of this board should be professionals in vocational education, who, in addition, have the nation at heart and can patriotically effect the requisite vocational-education reforms. The writer is aware that there is the National Board for Technical Education (NBTE) in Nigeria overseeing technical education throughout Nigeria. There is, however, a significant difference between vocational education and technical education. The former concerns all occupations of social and economic value while the latter concentrates on the relatively small cluster of jobs involving the manipulation of metals and/or wood. Moreover, the training in technical education is narrow while that of vocational education goes beyond schoolwork to include job placement and follow-up. Put rightly, technical education is a component of vocational education. It cannot therefore, be correctly argued that since the NBTE currently exists, there is no need for a new federal board that will take charge of vocational education.

At the State level, boards similar to the Federal Board will ensure that the national vocational-education policies are implemented to the letter in the States. The State Board, among other functions,, appoints staff, supplies equipment and regularly inspects ongoing programmes.

The curricula to be used in all the vocational schools throughout Nigeria will be designed by the Federal Board in collaboration with selected vocational education experts. Although the curricula will be tailored to suit Nigerian conditions they should not be entirely unorthodox.

Funding vocational education usually poses a problem, as the machines, laboratories and other equipment are very expensive, but this hurdle can be surmounted if Nigerian begins with just a few pilot vocational schools, and gradually expands over the years.

The number of pilot schools will depend on the funds available for the project. At the costing stage, both staff and students' needs must be included. In the recruitment of teachers, emphasis must be placed on quality rather than quantity. If this will mean a reduction in the number of pilot schools to start with, then, let the number fall.

Student admission into vocational schools must be handled by expert hands who will take into consideration the students' aptitudes, interests and abilities.

Table 2: Programme Review Plan

Step	Action
1.	Progress Reports from Schools
2.	Progress Reports State Boards
3.	Changes identified by Federal Board
4.	Review for improvement completed
5.	The new programmes implemented
6.	Another periodic review made
7.	Another set of changes implemented

Interpretation

Once commenced, the vocational education programmes need to be monitored and safeguarded. Heads of schools have to forward periodic reports to the State Boards highlighting the success and problem areas in their schools and suggesting solutions where possible. The reports must cover all the essential areas of vocational education such as physical conditions - classroom conditions, floor space, administrative office space, etc - classroom instruction, laboratory workshops, laboratory activities, guidance services and teacher performance.

The State Boards react to the school reports immediately by providing solutions to the problems where the Boards can act and forwarding the more difficult problems to the Federal Board.

The latter has a duty to study all the reports from the States and carefully assemble and discuss especially the common problems. It may become inevitable to make changes in the vocational education programmes. Normally, these changes are communicated to the vocational schools through the State Boards and State and Federal Boards see to the religious implementation of these new programmes. After a considerable period, say, two years, another review of the existing programmes is made, and another set of changes identified and implemented.

Recommendations

In addition to the proposals already made in this paper, the writer recommends as follows:

The Federal Government of Nigeria should take the bull by the horns in all matters relating to vocational education in this country. The time for this bold attack is now that reforms are going on in our educational system. What the Federal Government will do has already been articulated in this paper.

The free and compulsory nine-year universal basic education programme should significantly contain elements of pre-vocational education especially inculcating in the students' healthy attitudes to all types of work including for example, public gutter cleaning. Students should be made to realize that all types of legitimate labour has dignity and importance.

All the skill acquisition centres in a state together with the National Open Apprenticeship Scheme of the National Directorate of Employment in that state should be merged to form one standard vocational school for that state. The school should be run according to the policies and directives from the suggested Federal and State Boards for vocational education.

The Federal Government of Nigeria should sponsor overseas trips especially to the United States of America for the purpose of first-hand study of the American vocational education system with a view to using it as a guide for the formulation of our own domestic policies. Similar visits could also be made to Germany and Japan. In each country the study should centre on the vocational school curricula and their implementation.

Entrepreneurship education currently going on in many tertiary institutions should not form part of general studies. Rather, it should be inserted into the programme of each field of study with emphasis on how entrepreneurship can be applied in that particular field of study. For example, entrepreneurship in Biology should be a course for Biology students only and should aim at exposing the Biology students to the

job-creation opportunities in the field of Biology. Additionally, it should be noted that entrepreneurship education falls within the purview of vocational education and should therefore be taught by vocational teachers. This raises the need for the training of more vocational teachers who will take care of this course, which, as we can now see, is very vast. Series of workshops should be organized for lecturers nominated in each Held of study in order to give the nominated lecturers some vocational orientation no matter how small.

Conclusion

Greater impetus must be given to vocational education in Nigeria if the nation really wants to develop. There must be a radical change from the present system of general education that lacks occupational direction to vocational education that terminates in specific jobs. Functional vocational education emphasizes practice rather than theory, skill acquisition rather than cognitive abstractions, and job creation rather than job seeking. Moreover, it requires but little thinking to notice that vocational education, more than any other type of education, directly leads to the attainment of the nation's millennium development goals, especially, poverty eradication and wealth creation. It is time now to give vocational education the number-one position it deserves.

References

- Agbo, C. IK (2004). The role of business education in national development. In *Introduction to Vocational Education*. Enugu: Ozybel Publishers.
- Ezeoke, P. (2004). Challenges of our health care delivery. ABS News Commentary, Awka. 3rd November.
- Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (2004). Network News, 7ain, 10th October.
- Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004). *National policy on education*. 4th Edition, Lagos: NERDC Publishers.
- Nwobualor, S. (2006). Large-scale industries: A panacea to unemployment. ABS News Commentary, Awka. 28th May.
- Obasanjo, O. (2003). News insert. FRCN Network News, 1st November.
- Oladugha, O. O. (2005). Management and administration of small-scale business. In *Entrepreneurship in vocational education*. Vol. II. Enugu: Ozybel Publishers.
- Okwuanaso, S. I. (2002). Vocational and technical education (VTE) for self-reliance through Universal Basic Education (UBE), lead paper presented at Federal College of Education (Technical), Unrunze, National Conference.