
ALLEVIATING POVERTY IN NIGERIA: THE PLACE OF QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT: Poverty remains one of the major problems militating against the development in Nigeria. This fact informed the introduction of several programmes by the Federal Government aimed at alleviating the suffering of the Nigerian citizens. Notable among the programmes are structural adjustment programme, National Poverty Eradication Programme, among others. Despite this, there has not been positive result as many Nigerians cannot afford the three squal meals and other basic necessities of good living. Education that is known as an instrument of change is gradually becoming social irrelevance in the scheme of event due to lack of quality in the whole process from primary to tertiary level. This paper therefore examines quality assurance in higher education as viable tool for poverty alleviation in Nigeria. Since poverty alleviation is predicted on functional higher education, which is charged with the production of manpower for socio-economic and political development of the nation, the paper concluded that the needed impetus such as adequate financing, motivation of teachers, equipment and facilities etc, should be provided to enhance its operations.

KEYWORDS: Poverty, Quality Assurance and Higher Education

INTRODUCTION

Education is generally assumed as a viable instrument for socio-economic and political development of the nation. Tijani and Musa (2010) are of the opinion that:-

In the past, education was a source of livelihood to its recipients. Thus, educated people were high respected in their communities. Then, holders of NCE and Degree certificates could compete favorably with their counterpart any where in the world. Based on their level of training, white collar jobs were waiting for them as soon as they finished their service year. (p382).

It is however disheartening that educational system has changed from its glorious status to the state of collapse due to inconsistency in the polity and lack of good leadership. For instance, Ada (2010) believed that “the quality of education is on the decline from primary, post- primary through tertiary to the Universities”. The public perception is that the quality of education offered is low and that standards have dropped. The situation resulting from this is more pronounced in tertiary education which has been observed to be producing low quality graduates.

The inability of these graduates to secure job in a highly competitive labour market is a contributing factor to the increase rate of poverty in the Nigerian society. World Bank (1990) identified Nigeria as being part of the ten (10) poorest African countries. (Cited in Abdullahi, 2006). This is because poverty is on the increase level. For instance, the number of those in poverty increased from 27% in 1980 to 45% in 1985, it increased sharply to 67% in 1996. In 1999, it was estimated that more than 70% of Nigeria lived in poverty (Garba, 2006 cite in Abdullahi 2006). Ideally, education in the opinion of Gills (1999) cited in Ayodele (2007) is seen as “switch that turns on light that brightens the darkness of poverty and enlightens the lives of people”. In view of this, this paper aimed at examining the concept poverty alleviation and the relevance of quality education in poverty reduction in Nigerian society.

POVERTY ALLEVIATION

Without any doubt, poverty is a reality in every human society especially within the African continent. The World Bank (1990) in Kiyawa (1999) opined that “poverty is the lack of capability to attain a minimum standard of living”.

Poverty is multi dimensional that cannot be reduced to a single indicator. Thus, more often than not, people talk about absolute and relative poverty. The world Bank country study (1993) in Bulus (2006) states that absolute poverty line can be measured with respect to the income needed to satisfy minimum nutritional requirement and non-food component while relative poverty exists where a percentage of household are at the bottom of the income distribution minimum level”. Accordingly, Oyeyinka (2001) in Jere (2004) reflected that poverty directly relates to inaccessibility to food, clothing, shelter, education, health service and clean water to mention but a few. Jere (2004) opined that poverty is measured in terms of level of income, standards of living (quality of food intake, housing), level of employment and literacy among others. Poverty alleviation according to Jere refers to the attempt to reduce the level at which people live in a state of deprivation.

From the foregoing deliberations, the conceptual frame work of poverty alleviation is very clear. It is the attempt made to reduce the level at which people live below the minimum standard. It involves narrowing the gap between the rich and the poor through provision of enabling situation such as creation of employment opportunities and other basic life sustaining requirement.

HIGHER EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

The concept “higher education” is synonymous to tertiary education in Nigeria. UNESCO sees it as all types of studies and training for research at the post secondary level provided by universities and other educational establishment that are approved as institutions of higher education by the competent state authorities (cited in Dias, 1998). Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004) perceived higher education as the education given after secondary education in Universities, Colleges of Education, Polytechnics, Monotechnics including those institutions offering correspondence course. Accordingly, Teboho (2000) opined that the Nigerian higher education system is comprised of Universities, Polytechnics and Colleges offering programme in areas such as teacher education and agriculture. It is the largest and most complex higher education system on the continent. David (2007) asserted that “higher education is closely associated with economic development mainly because it is charged with production of strategic manpower for development. Similarly, Teboho believed that the need for higher education is partly based on the fact that those with higher education qualifications have a better chance of securing a job in a tough market compared to those without higher education qualifications. He however added that such surpluses make the system wasteful because training is obviously not matched to the needs of the economy. He lamented that:

It is worth noting that despite great demand for higher education, the overall participation rate of the age cohort (5%) in higher education institutions is lower than that of many developing countries. Low participation rates in this situation cannot be attributed to low demand but to the failure of the system to provide enough places to meet the demand. (p30).

PURPOSE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The purposes of higher education as stated in the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004) are to:

- contributed to national development through higher level relevant manpower training;
- develop and inculcate proper value for the survival of individual and society;
- develop the intellectual capability of individuals to understand and appreciate their local and external environments;
- acquire both physical and intellectual skills which will enable individuals to be self reliant and useful members of the society;
- promote and encourage scholarship and community service;
- forge and cement national unity; and
- Promote national and international understanding and interaction.

The policy further enunciates the achievement mechanism to include the following: - Teaching, research and development, virite staff development programmes, generation and dissemination of knowledge, a variety of modes of programmes including full-time, part-time, block-release, day-release, and sandwich. etc. access to training funds such as those provided by the Industrial Training Fund (ITF); Student Industrial Work Experience Scheme (SIWES); maintenance of minimum educational standards through appropriate agencies; inter-institutional co-operation; and dedicated services to the community through extramural and extension services.(p36-37)

The above purpose of higher education and its achievement mechanism sound very laudable. However, the question that comes to mind is have they been fully implimented or achieved? The answer lies with open-minded Nigerians as we are all leaving witnesses to happenings in our educational system. Therefore, what goes on in the lecture rooms go beyond policy formulation. It requires serious determination by the government and other educational providers to put in place strategic principles towards the actualization of these noble goals for the betterment of our educational system, individual learners and the society in general.

QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The term quality assurance is conceptualized by Hornby (2006) as the practice of managing the ways goods are produced or services are provided to make sure they are kept at a higher standard. Quality assurance in education connotes that standards are created and maintained in school through effective principles for the purpose of achieving the predetermined objectives. (Tijani and Musa, 2010). It is synonymous with functional education for the citizens. Maduewesi (2005) in Ada (2010) remarked that “Quality in education embraces functions and activities, staffing, students, building, facilities, equipment and services to the community”. It pre-supposes that the aims of establishing tertiary education as stated earlier are achieved. Thus quality assurance is derived from the following:-

- a - The desire for adequate preparation of the school products to be useful to themselves and the entire society;
- b- The need for acquisition of worthwhile knowledge and practical skills by the students to face the challenges of a modern world; and
- c- Value reorientation that is expected to be engineered by the elites group for peaceful coexistence of the society.

It is pertinent at this juncture therefore to state that quality assurance in higher education depends on the removal of the following obstacles in the educational sector as identified by the UN report on Nigeria (common country assessment 2001) cited in David (2007)

- Inadequate financing, Poorly paid and trained academic staff
- In sufficient and irrelevant learning materials
- Out dated equipment
- Outmodel and inflexible management structures
- Unplanned expansion of enrolment
- Irrelevant curriculum.

In the above context, Teboho (2000) affirmed that “the overall responsibility of the Federal Ministry of Education is to ensure quality within the system, encourage and initiate innovations and to ensure that the schools maintain minimum standards of acceptable educational practice”. According to UNESCO in David (2010) cited in Jide and Tijani (2011) Qualitative education is seen as “making the abstract real and developing the capacities of individuals and societies to work for a sustinable development” Quality assurance is therefore an all embrasing concept covering all aspect of an effective teaching and learning processes.

HIGHER EDUCATION AND POVERTY ALLEVIATION: THE NEED FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE

Education can develop or retare the socio-economy of the society depending on the types of educational system in operation. The main purpose of education and higher education in particular, is the

mobilization of the entire citizens for social liberation or emancipation, economic empowerment and human character development. It is believed that if higher education is equipped enough to perform these tasks, definitely, the development of the country is assured. This being the fact suggests the roles of higher education in poverty reduction or alleviation in the society. Therefore, the products of higher education should be given practical and purposeful skills that would make them to be self-reliance.

Talking about higher education and economy, David (2007) stipulated that functions of higher education particularly research, are crucial to the realization of our national goals of socio-cultural transformation and economic development. This means that Quality assurance in higher education has the capacity building to alleviate poverty at the individual level, family level, and the society at large. It would ensure rational thinking capacity in its recipients. Therefore, even though there is no public jobs; they would not act funny, but develop a culture of endurance and look for acceptable alternative sources of livelihood. However, lack of quality in the educational provision has led to low standard in educational productivity. Teboho (2000) corroborated this as follows:-

The higher education system has been criticized for being inefficient and ineffective, making it irrelevant to the societal demands. There are also issues that are unique to the Nigerian context like cultist practices that impact negatively on the activities of higher education institutions. (p30).

Supporting the above view, David (2007) said that quality and relevance of graduates from our higher institutions are far below the needs of economy. The implication of this assertion is that the glory of education is fading simply because schools are ill-equipped, while the enrollment population is on the increase. Poor funding and low quality of teachers dominated the educational scene especially at the lower and middle educational levels which serve as the foundation for higher education in Nigeria. In some institutions, most of the technical, engineering and vocational departments which could be termed as the back bone of technological development are not proactive enough. Some of the workshops and laboratories are dumping ground of obsolete equipment of many decays, while the classroom infrastructural development leave much to be desired. In this situation, can one expect good result?

It is pertinent to state that the solution to educational problems is not constant change of educational policies but up dating the quality of the process and input in the education sector for functionality. For instance, the country has experienced Universal Primary Education, 6-3-3-4; and now trying Universal Basic Education under the 9-3-4 system. Has there been any value added to the educational provisions? Are the issues of insufficient funding and population explosion and other irregularities typical of Nigerian education been resolved? Until the quality assurance takes a place of pride in Nigerian school system, education sector will continue to portray social irrelevance in a society blessed with abundant natural and human resources. There is therefore urgent need for quality in higher education in order to brighten the lives of present and future generation of the Nigerian society. It will help in no small measure to alleviate poverty at the individual level, family level, and the society at large if the required knowledge and adequate skills are inculcated into the recipients through the provision of adequate infrastructural materials and sufficient teaching/ learning resources.

THE NEEDED IMPETUS FOR QUALITY HIGHER EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

Higher education plays pivotal functions in social, political, economic and technological development of the society. Despite this noble tasks, government attitudes towards the developmental process of these institutions remain a bone of contention. Therefore, if the higher education is expected to be used for poverty alleviation in the Nigerian society, the following provisions should be made for utmost performance

Finance: Adequate financing of educational sector should be of primary concern to the government. Effective management of investment on education brings about national productivity. In this context, Idris (2009) and Ada (2010) opined that “higher education in Nigeria is largely under funded by government which does not place much value on educational sector resulting into recurring strikes especially in the Universities”. Therefore, compliance with UNESCO directive of 26% budgetary allocation would be advantageous to the education sector.

Infrastructural Facilities: The deplorable conditions of lecture rooms student hostel, staff quarters, science laboratories, staff offices, etc. Should be looked, into in order to enhance efficient and effective teaching and learning activities.

Material Resources: The outdated resources in tertiary education should be replaced by the new ones. Some of these are computer, workshop equipment, teaching aids, classroom furniture, etc. All these and many more support infrastructures to ensure good quality product in education.

Motivation: Motivation of academic and non-academic staff in terms of adequate remuneration can facilitate teachers' commitment to duties. Hence, effective teaching and learning. In line with this, Kazeem (2010) asserted that University teachers should be adequately motivated, enhanced pay, provision of welfare packages, promotion as at when due and provision of basic working tools could enhance quality teaching delivery. Paul (2010) in Jide and Tijani (2011) asserted that low teacher motivation is often reflected in apathy, lack of commitment and relatively high labour turn over. Thus, the teacher can hardly give their best under this situation.

Workshops/ Seminar: Adequate and appropriate workshop / seminar should be organized for lecturers by the authorities of various institutions of higher learning in order to keep them informed of current innovations in teaching and learning activities. On the importance of training and re-training of teachers, Ozoji (2006) in Tijani and Muhammed (2010) remarked that giving the poor reading culture of Nigerians, absence of renewal of experience built into teaching profession reduces the quality of teacher and teaching.

Teaching Practice (TP): Teaching practice is the professional and practical training component of teacher education programme meant to inculcate pedagogical competence in teaching and learning activities into would-be-teachers. Therefore, teaching practice at the various teachers producing institutions should be given adequate attention it deserved. Teachers should be adequately remunerated and effective monitoring mechanism put in place by the management of various tertiary institutions to ensure quality assessment. Thus, quality of teachers is paramount for effective learning. Therefore, the present provision of six months TP in the minimum standard in colleges of education should be strictly comply with.

Qualify Teachers: Adequate provision should also be made for the recruitment of well qualified teaching and support staff at the various institution of higher learning even at the primary and secondary levels. Hence the foundation must also be strong. According to David (2007) "High performance standard among students cannot be guaranteed when teaching and support staff do not possess the required knowledge and skills". James (2008) opined that "teacher quality is an important aspect of the education of a nation" In the same vain, Ali (1992) in James equally stated that "an educational system is only as good as the teachers who operate it"

Methodology: Quality method of teaching brings about the understanding of the course of instruction by the students, while bad ones can mar effective learning process. Therefore, variety of methods should be employed by the teacher to enhance students' understanding. In this context, Fajonyomi (2007) recommended multi-media, learner-centred and participatory approach.

Implementation of Policy: There must also be a correlation between policy formulation and policy implementation. Thus poor implementation of well articulated educational policies is part of the failure for the attainment of the desired educational objectives in Nigeria.

Leadership: Effective leadership: Lack of effective leadership to some extent is a key factor for low level of quality in some of the Nigerian tertiary institutions. Idris in Ada (2010) lamented that "No matter the amount of money the Federal government pumps into the educational system, lack of good and credible leadership will continue to make it difficult for the system to face the challenges of higher educational development for the benefit of national interest" Accordingly, Fajonyomi (2008) believed that "quality make significance difference in organizational effectiveness. So, calculated policies should be formulated that will enhance supervisory qualities of leadership" Therefore, government should provide good leadership in tertiary institutions through effective monitoring control.

Generation of Employment: High unemployment rates of graduates remain a major problem in Nigeria. Eventhough, this has not stopped people from seeking admission into higher institutions, it has negative

socio-economic implications on the Nigeria education sector. Therefore, government should make adequate provision for employment opportunities for the graduates of respective institutions of higher learning.

CONCLUSION

From the discussion so far, it becomes very obvious that poverty alleviation in the Nigerian society is possible through quality in higher educational system. Higher education is a vital and crucial instrument for growth and meaningful national development. However, insufficient quality in the process renders it ineffective. Therefore, concerted efforts should be made by the government and all stake holders in the education industry to provide fund, human and material resources needed to ensure quality assurance in the various institutions of higher learning for poverty reduction in Nigeria.

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