

Bridging The Gap Between Unemployment And Poverty Amongst Youths Through Curriculum Reform In Africa: Technology, Knowledge And Innovation In The Transformation Of Tertiary Education In Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: *Nigeria, the continent's largest and most populous country in Africa, is facing a "youth bulge" as a result of the country's fast-growing youth population, which is pushing a sizable chunk of its working-age population into the labour force. As the nation's population continues to expand at an annual rate of 2.3%, 43% of its citizens are under 14 years old, and 33% are between the ages of 15 and 24. This growth pattern is predicted to last until at least 2050 (UNDESA, 2022). Higher education institutions all over the world are recognized as key institutions that play a pivotal role in national development. This is because education is key to development and the development of nations depends on the quality of outcomes from the higher education institutions. Nigerian tertiary education has been characterised by poor funding, outdated curriculum, dilapidated and inadequate facilities, high levels of strike actions, half-baked graduates who are poorly trained for the job market, corruption and mismanagement amongst others. This study aims at exploring various ways in which Nigerian higher education institutions (HEIs) can be improved with an emphasis on reformation of the curriculum of higher education institutions. The reformation of the Nigerian higher education's curriculum will equip graduates with in-demand skills which are required in the labour market. In the light of this, a qualitative content analysis of existing literature was used in writing up this paper. This paper adopts a qualitative content analysis approach that allows for cross-country comparisons of higher education institution's curriculum. The findings of this paper call for constant, periodical reviews of the higher institution curriculum by experts in the field which will ensure that students are equipped with the relevant skill set and not obsolete ones. Among others, recommendations were made to incorporate the 21st century labour market skills in the higher institutions curriculum which ensures that students, regardless of background and socioeconomic status, are able to access a quality education which will go a long way in solving unemployment and poverty amongst the young people in Nigeria.*

Keywords: *Unemployment, Curriculum, Poverty, Technology, Knowledge, Innovation, Tertiary Education.*

I. INTRODUCTION

With 30.9% of the population living below the poverty line, mostly in the country's northern and rural parts, Nigeria has a poor Human Development Index ranking (UNDP, 2023). While 28% of young people in the workforce are officially recognized as underemployed, working 20–39 hours a week, 35% of Nigerians between the ages of 15 and 34 are unemployed, available for work, actively seeking work, or working fewer than 20 hours per week (Federal Ministry of Youth Development (FMYS) 2022). KPMG, a multidimensional consulting firm, has disclosed that Nigeria's unemployment rate would increase to 40.6 per cent in 2023 from 37.7 per cent in 2022. A recent report titled KPMG Global Economy Outlook Report, H1 2023, said the figure of job seekers would rise in 2023 due to decreased economic growth and the inability of the country's economy to absorb the Four to Five million yearly graduates into the Nigerian job market.

The role of education in Nigeria has been extensively studied by researchers in the social sciences, education and humanities (Ugbogbo et al., 2013). The Nigerian education system is faced with a myriad of challenges which includes declining standards of education, regional differences in quality, curriculum, and funding, and a lack of commitment and seriousness in implementing education policies. (Odia, L. et al, 2017). The current reality of the country has revealed that the Nigerian education sector is in a state of peril, begging for urgent attention and reform. Education in Nigeria is plagued by ongoing strikes, inadequate pay for

instructors, half-baked graduates who do not meet the requirements of the labour market needs, insufficient money, dilapidated facilities, and incompetent teachers. (Eze, 2022).

The curriculum which is the engine room of education at any level determines what is taught by teachers and the quality of lectures delivered by lecturers to students in all institutions of learning. When the foundation of any higher institution is malfunctioning, higher education outcomes tend to be below standards. As such, to fix this state of underdevelopment in higher education, there is an urgent need to reform the curriculum in order to meet the demands of the 21st century workplace. This will also lead to sustainable gains when it comes to problem solving tools and critical thinking, creativity and innovation, research and entrepreneurship education, technological trends, and many more.

A study by Obi, Ekesiobi, Dimnwobi and Mgbemena, (2016) reveals that education spending in Nigeria has been inadequate. The country, with 3% educational expenditure, underperformed that of other developing nations (like Ghana, Botswana, Kenya and Uganda that spent respectively 20%, 21%, 20% and 15% of their expenditure on education. (Obi et al. 2016) . The European Commission (2011) underlines “the need to build a greater connection between higher education and society as the capacity of European higher education institutions to play their role in society and contribute to the prosperity of Europe remains underused”. On the other hand, the Council of the European Union invites member states to implement specific and targeted actions, which can identify solutions to these challenges with the aim of supporting young adults in their transition from university to work (Boffo & Terzaroli, 2017). This framework has been implemented in Italy through a series of regulations that have increasingly identified the importance of universities as primary actors in active labour market policies and in supporting the transitions of young adults. Legislative Decree No. 276/2003, implementing Law 30/2003, the so-called Biagi Law, introduces the focus on job placement activities and graduates' transition to work in the context of higher education (Boffo & Terzaroli, 2017).

II. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION: CURRICULUM

The education sector in Nigeria's tertiary level lags by all measures – despite the national education policies (Ajake et al., 2011). With incessant strikes, poor facilities, insufficient funds, poor quality of staff, the quality of tertiary institutions in Nigeria is in a state of comatose begging for urgent attention. In any proper functioning society, the education sector plays a key role in the country's socioeconomic and political development. Today, the Nigerian tertiary education sector is suffering from poor planning and implementation. Unarguably, graduates of higher institutions in Nigeria tend not to be attractive to employers due to their exposure to the obsolete curriculum.

Oyekan (2006) suggests that a curriculum is the totality of planned learning experience which the learner will acquire under the guidance of an approved educative agency (such as home, school, and other institutions) in order to realise his/her own needs, interest and aspiration for the benefit of growth and development in the society. This position clearly substantiates the fact that education curriculum plays invaluable roles in providing relevant attitude, skills, and knowledge for championing human development.

The Indiana Department of Education (2010) explained that curriculum means the planned interaction of pupils with instructional content, materials, resources, and processes for evaluating the attainment of educational objectives. Brown (2006) stated that a curriculum is all the student school experiences relating to the improvement of skills and strategies in thinking critically and creatively, solving problems, working collaboratively with others, communicating well, writing more effectively, reading more analytically, and conducting research to solve problems. Silva (2009) viewed a curriculum as an emphasis on what students can do with knowledge, rather than what units of knowledge they have, is the essence of 21st century skills.

There are some key elements that have to be present when defining the concept of curriculum by renowned scholars of curriculum. Ughamadu (2006) listed these elements as:

- (1) goals and objectives (the curriculum intent)
- (2) content or subject and subject matter,
- (3) learning experiences, and
- (4) evaluation.

These four are referred to in the studies of curriculum as curriculum components, elements or simply pillars of the curriculum.

III. Identifying The Gaps In The Current State Of The Higher Institutions In Nigeria

The malfunctioning of the nation's curriculum in tertiary levels accounts for the lack of productivity in higher education. When compared to countries like South Africa, Kenya, Korea, Japan, the education outcomes in Nigeria are appalling. (UNESCO International Bureau of Education, 2016). The malfunctioning of the nation's higher education curriculum is a key reason why unemployment continues to increase in Nigeria which unfortunately places the country in the list of countries affected by multidimensional poverty.

There are so many factors which are challenges to the Nigerian education sector and have continuously threatened the effective and efficient performance of Nigerian higher institutions. Some of these gaps which affects the current state of the higher institution in Nigeria include:

Underfunding: Higher institutions in Nigeria are in a deplorable condition because of inadequate funding by the government. Over the years, the government has struggled to meet up with the UNESCO recommended annual budget proportion of 26% on education. (Odigwe, Francisca & Owan, Valentine, 2019). According to Kakwagh (2014), the education sector received 6.45 percent, 5.4 percent, 10.13 percent, 8.43 percent, and 8.67 percent of total spending in 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, and 2013 respectively. The consequences are grave and include recurring and prolonged strikes by higher institutions bodies like ASUU, NASU, ASUP amongst others. The underfunding of education also affects the infrastructural deficit of tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Gross underfunding of higher education in Nigeria may be related to university administration's undue reliance on government funding (Ofoegbu and Alonge, 2016, as cited in Ofor Douglas, 2021d).

Infrastructure Deficit: Poor funding, and high level of corruption in the management of higher institutions have led to a state of inadequate infrastructure in most of the higher institutions in Nigeria and this has hindered adequate performance of Nigerian universities. Inadequacies of facilities such as classrooms, teaching aids, instructional materials as well as class/building fittings lighting etc. have endangered the state of higher institutions in Nigeria (Oyebade and Dike, 2013). Only about 30% of Nigerian students have adequate access to classrooms, workshops, lecture halls, laboratories, and libraries, according to a need assessment survey that the national universities commission conducted in response to concerns about the low quality of graduates from higher education institutions in that country (Ofor Douglas, 2021f). Many public universities in Nigeria do not have adequate lecture halls, laboratories and offices for both students and academic staff. Many academic and non-academic staff do not have offices and para-venture; they have one that is shared by five to six lecturers. Additionally, students do not have adequate lecture halls and hostels accommodations (Ogunode & Abubakar, 2020).

Maladministration and corruption: Higher institutions in Nigeria have had their fair share of maladministration by those charged with the responsibility of piloting the affairs of various institutions. The high rate of corruption in the Nigerian higher institutions in Nigeria has threatened effective administration of the institutions. Ogunode (2020) opined that corruption in the public universities in Nigeria is another problem preventing effective administration of public universities in Nigeria. The Punch (2020) submitted that much of the little funds that go into the universities are stolen. In the course of the face-off, the government claimed "the fraud in the universities is amazing and you will be shocked. ICPC did a system check recently, and it was so shocking. In fact, the worst two organisations they mentioned are the Teaching Hospitals and our universities." In 2018, the Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project claimed that there were allegations of corruption in several federal universities relating to the unfair allocation of grades; contract inflation; truncation of staff's salary on the payroll; employment of unqualified staff; certificate scandal; examination malpractice; sexual harassment; and issuance of results for expelled students to graduate.

According to the Stutern Nigerian Graduate Report (2022), in a recent labour market study, many employers believe that university graduates are poorly trained and unproductive on the job. Furthermore, there is an urgent need for higher education to respond to the demands of the labour market for both public and private employers to hire the best and brightest. The global employment rates for graduates and postgraduate students across the globe has become competitive and scarce due to the emerging trends in the demands of the labour market. Many scholars have continued to emphasise that the quality of education offered to the students at undergraduate level is not on par with the requirements of the competitive global market (Mujundar, 2012). With the growing demands on the graduates, there is a wide unemployment rate in the country because in reality, the graduates have little to show as the world demands much from them.

IV. Way Forward In Fixing The Identified Gaps In The Curriculum

The poor quality of the curriculum has an effect on human capital development in Nigeria, as characterised by the growing rate of unemployment and poverty. To revamp the education sector, there is a need to re-jig the 21st century graduates with modern-day skills such as basic communication, social relations, ICT, work culture skills – which are lacking among the majority of recent graduates. That said, this can only be possible if there is an adjustment on the tertiary education's curriculum which is pivotal to raising productive and well-equipped graduates. Lack of critical skills is a direct pre-determinant factor for unemployment (Aderogba, 2011; Sharma, 2013). In the Nigerian context, it has led to an exponential increase in unemployment. Thus, giving employers other than the need to retrain graduates to fit into the most basic corporate jobs.

In a globalised world, there is a need to develop and build skill acquisition centres and graduate trainee programs for fresh graduates. Select graduate training programs are now organised to train and equip graduates with 21st century skills in companies such as MTN, Interswitch, MultiChoice, Glo, Dangote, BUA. However, there is a need to make it compulsory for all companies to provide a year intensive and labour demanding internship for early career professionals, particularly, new graduates. This would enable graduates from higher institutions in Nigeria - who may lack the skill set, experience and expertise - to fit into the globally competitive 21st century labour market.

In repositioning the education sector in the country, emphasis must be placed on funding education most especially at the tertiary level which is in a state of comatose begging for revitalization as a result of poor funding. The poor funding of the education sector contributes largely to the infrastructural deficit of higher education which is overstretched and under-resourced. The underfunding of the sector is also a key reason why the curriculum has failed to raise productive graduates. Until a keen attention is given to how higher education is funded, the curriculum will play little or no role in addressing the state of unemployment in the country, which in turn, has affected the state of underdevelopment in the country. Paying more attention to funding of tertiary education in Nigeria will play a key role in motivating the lecturers through incentives and supports, building more and quality infrastructures, addressing the incessant strikes in the country and most especially revamping the tertiary institution's archaic curriculum.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

To reform the state of tertiary institutions curriculum in Nigeria, the following are recommendations that should be put in place by stakeholders such as the government, educational practitioners and authorities, private sector, students, lecturers amongst others working in tertiary institutions in Nigeria:

Firstly, there should be a periodic review of the higher institutions' curriculum which should ensure outdated areas are removed, while demanding, relevant, and contemporary areas are incorporated in the curriculum.

In addition, 21st century labour market skills should be introduced in coursework and made compulsory for students in tertiary institutions. This will empower the students with relevant skills in getting job opportunities after school.

Furthermore, the tertiary institutions should be adequately funded with the required resources and materials. Sustainable funding will help to strengthen the quality of the curriculum which will help raise employable graduates.

Also, students in tertiary institutions should be mandated for graduate training opportunities offered by top corporate firms. Graduates will have real world experience that will enable them to apply learnings from the classroom in innovative and practical ways.

Moreover, tertiary institutions should embark on steps to build career development and skill acquisition centres in their institutions. This will increase the employment and entrepreneurial skills of undergraduate students, prior to graduation.

Nevertheless, public-private partnerships in higher institutions should be strengthened and improved. More cross-sector partnerships will help bridge the gap between rural and urban areas when it comes to curriculum development and higher education strengthening

VI. CONCLUSION

Reforming the deficiencies in higher education is a direct way to address the ailing challenges of the young people. Young Nigerians are not just the future, but they participate in the national economy.

Additionally, their innovations and talents are needed to build a developed, peaceful, and just world order when empowered with the right resources. A weak curriculum increases the susceptibility of young people to unemployment, perpetuates the cycle of poverty, and poses a big threat to nation building. As argued in this paper, fixing underdevelopment requires a thorough reform in the higher education's curriculum which serves as the heartbeat of development in any country. This can only be possible when 21st century skills are pumped into the curriculum by reviewing the content, mandatory deployment of students for relevant graduate training programs, accessibility to skill acquisition centres, and most importantly, improved sustainable funding.

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