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Higher education and skills development: An overview of Nigerian National Policy on Education (NPE)

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Abstract

Higher education in many developing countries including Nigeria confronts many problems. Curricula are often dominated by liberal subjects thereby making education provided by higher education institutions in the country more of liberal education than vocational, technical and other forms of entrepreneurship education. The high number of unemployed graduates in the country is becoming unbearable by the day. The cause of this is not unconnected with the fact that many higher education graduates are without employable skills. This paper, consequently, gives an overview of the National Policy on Education (NPE) on higher education in Nigeria. It reviews those aims and objectives of higher education that have to do with skills acquisition and development. The definition and concept of higher education, skill acquisition and development, training and both individual and societal needs are considered. The paper then submits that if the higher education institutions in the country operate within the content of the provision of the NPE on higher education, there would be unprecedented improvements in the skill acquisition among the Nigerian youths. Recommendations on ensuring productive implementation of the prescriptions in the NPE as regards higher education in Nigeria are consequently made.

Keywords: higher education; curricular; vocational; policy; skill acquisition; implementation

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1. Introduction

The strength and the level of development of any nation hinge on the strength and development of her human resources. Efficient human resources are made via the education systems especially, higher education systems operated by such a nation. Central to an education system are the issues of curricular. Skills development curricular is central to national development. And higher education is a major medium through which individuals acquire required skills to function and be relevant in the society. The demand of the modern world has called for skill-oriented higher education. The advent of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and general advancement in technology have made liberal education which was paramount in the pre-colonial era to become almost irrelevant in the modern day of technological advancement. The Federal Government of Nigeria in her efforts to streamline higher education and skill acquisition and development formulated the National Policy on Education (NPE) which contains goals, status, modes of operation and processes of attaining the pre-set aims and objectives of higher education with clear statements on skills acquisition and development in Nigeria.

Higher institutions of learning are centres for imparting knowledge and skills into the learners. Whatever skills acquired must be translated into practicality for it to benefit the individual and the society at large. The world today needs solutions providers and not solutions consumers and problem creators! Surprisingly, there has not been a serious and rigid adherence to the implementation of the recommendations in the NPE. Many of the graduates from the institutions of higher learning are not with employable skills. Hence, the high rate of unemployment in the country becomes the order of the day. Higher education in the country needs to be rejuvenated to conform to the provisions of the NPE as regards skill acquisition and skill development. The recommendations of NPE as regards industrial attachment, internship/teaching practice and other programmes through which necessary and relevant skills are imparted into the prospective graduates of higher education should be executed to the letter.

2. Definition, concept and description of higher education in Nigeria

Higher Education is otherwise referred to as Tertiary Education. The National Policy on Education of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN, 2004: Section 8, No. 58, p.30) defines Tertiary Education as “the education given after secondary education in universities, colleges of education, polytechnics, monotechnics including those institutions offering correspondence courses”.

From the above definition, higher education is the one provided by:

- (i) Universities
- (ii) Colleges of Education
- (iii) Polytechnics
- (iv) Monotechnics
- (v) Other Correspondence Institutions

There are in Nigeria as of present time 478 tertiary institutions. The breakdown is as follows:

Table 1. The list and grouping of higher institutions in Nigeria as at 2013

S/N	Type	Categories of Higher Institutions	Number
1.	Universities	Federal Universities	25
2.		Federal Universities of Agriculture	3
3.		Federal Universities of Technology	6
4.		State Universities	30
5.		State Universities of Technology	5
6.		Private Universities	45
7.		Other Degree Awarding Institutions in Nigeria	62
		Total	176
8.	Polytechnics and Monotechnics	Federal Polytechnics	24
9.		State Polytechnics	40
10.		Polytechnics with NCE Programmes	7
11.		Private Polytechnics	18
12.		Federal Monotechnics	22
13.		State Monotechnics	17
14.		Private Monotechnics	2
15.		Colleges of Health Sciences	2
		Total	132
16.	IEIs	Innovative Enterprise Institutions (IEIs)	61
17.	Colleges of Education	Federal Colleges of Education (Regular)	12
18.		Federal Colleges of Education (Technical)	8
19.		Federal Colleges of Education (Special)	1
20.		State Colleges of Education	46
21.		Private Colleges of Education	42
		Total	109
		Grand Total	478

Source: Joint Admissions and Matriculations Board (JAMB) Brochure 2013/2014. Pp 7 - 18.

It is not the quantity that matters but the impact, in terms of skills acquisition, which the existing higher institutions have on the prospective beneficiaries of such education and training offered. According to Sharma (2013), rapid expansion of higher education grows misalignment with workplace. The consequence of poor alignment is raising unemployment, Sharma (2013) warned. The Table 1 above indicates that Nigeria has as many as 478 higher institutions of learning but it is highly disappointing that the nation is suffering from acute shortage of graduates with relevant employable skills that meet the challenges of the modern society. It is surprising that there are acute shortage of artisans and skilled workforce as there are many unemployed graduates of higher institutions. Fakomogbon and Adegbija (2011) lamented that despite the increase in number of tertiary institutions in Nigeria, students could not develop entrepreneurial skills that place emphasis on innovation that could generate wealth. In addition to improving quality of higher education, increase in attention is needed to improve relevance of higher education (Sharma 2013). If at the level of higher education, beneficiaries lack relevant and employable skills, then when and where would they acquire the required skills that would make them employable and functional in the modern world of advanced information and communication technology? Regardless of quantity, impact of higher education as regards inculcation of marketable skills into the prospective beneficiaries could be guaranteed if proper implementation of the goals of higher education as enshrined in the nation's National Policy on Education is done.

3. The goals of higher education in Nigeria

Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN) (2004) emphasized that Nigerian higher education institutions are required to offer professional courses relating to the national needs of Nigeria. Fakomogbon and Adegbija (2011), in relation to the above stance of FRN (2004), noted that there have been calls recently by different scholars to bridge the gap that exists between the education offered at the universities and the needs of not only Nigeria but of the entire world. The goals of higher education in Nigeria as contained in her National Policy on Education (NPE) are with a view to making higher education meet the needs of the country, at least in policy! It is not a gainsaying that if Nigeria is to meet up with the demand of manpower in the modern world of advanced economy, successful and productive implementation of her education policy is imperative. Policy is of no use if it is not well implemented (Adebisi, 2012). Successful implementation of policy (especially, educational policy), according to Adebisi (2012), must be adequately monitored. Policies without implementation will frustrate national development.

The NPE (FRN, 2004) lists 7 goals of higher education under section 8 no. 59 (a-g) as to:

- Contribute to national development through high level relevant manpower training;
- Develop and inculcate proper values for the survival of the 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.

Though the goals listed above are lofty and laudable, realizing them through effective implementation has been a major hindrance. The challenge with the Nigerian education system especially as it relates to skill development has been that of foundation problem. Fakomogbo and Adegbija (2011) recalled some of the problems that were responsible for the gap between higher education and the nation's needs by stating that:

The Colonial Administration did not establish university in Nigeria in 1948 to cater for the industrial and commercial needs of Nigeria. Rather then, the main objective of establishing the University College in Ibadan was mainly "to provide administrative cadre necessary to facilitate the transfer from white colonial administrators to indigenous operators". As a result, there were neither engineering nor technological programmes introduced at the inception of the University College in 1948. Subjects such as history, Latin, religion, European languages and so forth were introduced (p.196) (underlining is Author's emphasis).

Tracing the history of establishment and development of higher education in Nigeria, Virginia (2003) recalled that colonial government having sensed the usefulness of the products of the schools established and run by church missions, started to show special interest in the educational works of church missions. The schools' products were to provide cheap labour force for government's own political career and administration (Virginia, 2003). Thus, the education provided then was totally liberal. However, the demand of the modern society has gone beyond acquiring liberal education. Liberal education trains the mind. Being relevant in the modern day of advanced information and communication technology requires that both the mind and the hands are well-trained. Several researchers, among whom are Okebukola (2007), Sanusi (2009), Fakomogbon and Adegbija (2011) and Adebisi (2012) suggested setting up of a joint universities/industry panel to address issues such as: work-study programmes, expanded internship programme, introductory courses taught by industry people, and promoting partnership between both sectors with a view to bridging the gap between universities and the industries in Nigeria. Sharma (2013) emphasized that education is more effective if learning and the world of working are better integrated. According to Sharma (2013), the most recent developments in the knowledge society and the subsequent changes in the world of work at the global level are rising skill/qualifications requirements for job entry and subsequently demand for a more knowledgeable and skilled workforce. In the past the focus was on delivering education but now, as Sharma reiterated, it is on learning outcomes. Sharma (2013) further argued that accumulating knowledge matters a lot less now. More education does not automatically translate into better skills and better lives Sharma (2013) emphatically stated. Thus, education without working skills equals irrelevancy in the world of work.

It needs to be reiterated that the quality of manpower a nation has, determines the quality of its national development. To have a quality and adequate manpower that a nation needs for its national development, appropriate media for skill acquisition and development must be put in place. Nigeria as a country has

enough tertiary institutions, as enumerated above, to advance her economy if adequate implementation of her National Policy on Education as regards training for skills is ensured. Training for work-skills cannot be separated from education offered by higher institutions of learning since one of the main purposes of establishing higher institutions of learning is production of manpower for the nation. No skill, no power! The real empowerment an individual citizen could get from education is skill that makes such a citizen self-reliant, employable and productive. Sharma (2013) noted the growing awareness of the need to link education to employment. To be self-reliant, employable and productive demand adequate training. Aderogba (2011) said that for individual to be self-reliant or self-employed, s/he must have acquired the right habits, attitudes, and saleable skills, with which he can explore his environment, as well as means of surviving in the face of unemployment. Being self-reliant and self-employed cannot be possible without acquisition of relevant skills, which should be the outcome of proper training.

Training, according to Singh (1992), refers to transmission of mechanical skills to prepare people for productive activities, or to change their working behaviour. Training is the process of being given a course of instruction with a view to acquiring specific skills regarding a particular job or profession. Talking about functional literacy should presuppose talking about functional higher or technology education. Sharma (2013) said that the attention of education policy-makers and the international education community is moving away from raising literacy levels and increasing access to secondary and higher education, towards skills required by the workforce to promote economic growth. It is time we moved from liberal literacy to work-oriented literacy. It is pathetic that technology education offered in Nigeria is in most parts not functional. This is not far-fetched from the fact that higher education in the country has misplaced its priority of imparting relevant work-skills that meet the needs of the nation into its beneficiaries. According to Aderogba (2011), effective skill acquisition in education is an indispensable tool towards producing a self-reliant nation and dynamic economy. Thus, there is need for continuous assessment of technological needs of the country so that educational curriculum and policy can be tailor-made towards meeting the emerging needs for national development.

Skill refers to special ability or expertise to do something well, which is gained by learning and having undergone a particular training exercise. According to Fakomogbon and Adegbiya (2011), skill is the expertise or ability developed in the course of training and experience. Aderogba (2011) defined skill as the possession of expertise needed to perform a particular job or a series of jobs and of essence, as Aderogba (2011) emphasized, it must consist of habits that ensure adaptation. The Guardian (2012) said that if a skill is a repeatable process in a predictable environment, expertise is the application of theory to practice. Accumulation of theoretical knowledge without applicable skill to practical life renders such knowledge and its custodian irrelevant. A skill is the learned capacity or talent to carry out pre-determined results often with the minimum outlay of time, energy, or both. It is an ability that has been acquired by training. Ability to use knowledge, a developed aptitude, and/or a capability to effectively and readily execute or perform an activity is skill. Skill also refers to a person's ability to perform various types of cognitive or behavioural activity effectively. Skill can also be viewed as an ability to perform certain activities or movements with control or consistency to bring about a desired result. Higher education must diversify to provide the right mix of more vocational skills that serve the labour market and higher-end research and science graduates that can fuel

innovation for economic growth Sharma (2013). Two presumptions about skills are that they provide underpinning to a range of actions needed in employment, and they are transferable from one realm of experience to another (The Guardian, 2012).

4. Training targets

Babalola (2007) identified head, heart and hands as the targets of any training programme. According to him, the acronym A S K forms the training components:

- A = Attitude to survive – heart
- S = skills for self-reliant – hands
- K = knowledge to subdue – head

Fitts and Posner (1967) suggested that the learning process is sequential and that we move through specific phases as we learn. According to them there are three stages to learning a new skill which according to them are cognitive, associative, and autonomous phases. These correspond to forming mental picture of the acquired skill, practicing the skill and performing the skill respectively. Burke (2012) identified four skills as key to future success of graduates who are beneficiaries of higher education regardless of whatever they intend to do in life. These skills are: communication skills, numeracy, the use of information technology, and learning how to learn. The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA, 2009) identified key skills in higher education as consist of: communication, information technology, application of number, working with others, improving own learning and performance, and problem solving. According to (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (NCIHE), (1997) opportunities for key skills development, and evidence of progress and achievement, exist naturally within just about every learning situation. Global competitiveness, NCIHE (1997) asserted, required that education and training should enable people in an advanced society to compete with the best in the world.

5. The roles of higher education in skills acquisition

Concerning university education in Nigeria, Section 8 no.64 of the NPE states that the university education shall make optimum contribution to national development by making sure that technically-based professional courses in the universities compose exposure to relevant future working environment while it is believed that “teachers in professional fields have relevant industrial and professional experience”. Sharma (2013) lamented that efforts to guarantee employment of school leavers are not yet properly included in courses offered by universities as the necessary and the required skills that aid employment are lacking in the graduates being produced. Technically speaking, the university education in Nigeria has crucial roles to play in ensuring acquisition of relevant skills by their prospective students. Sharma (2013) further noted that universities are coming under increasing pressure to ensure that their graduates are employable. According to Burnett as cited by Sharma (2013), unemployment grows because people do not have the right skills.

Inculcating the right skills into the prospective higher education beneficiaries should be a core function of higher education. It is inappropriate to assume that a student is highly employable merely on the grounds that they have experienced a particular curriculum (McGraw-Hill, 2003). McGraw-Hill (2003) believed that graduates exhibit employability in respect of a job if they can demonstrate a set of achievements that are relevant to that job.

As regards teacher education in Nigeria, Number 72 of Section 8 states that “all teachers in educational institutions shall be professionally trained” (underline is author’s emphasis). It goes on to state that “teacher education programmes shall be structured to equip teachers for the effective performance of their roles”. Number 70 (a) had earlier stated that no education system may rise above the quality of its teachers. Teacher education, therefore, must impart the prospective teachers with productive teaching skills for the purpose of national and educational development. Number 75 of the NPE emphasizes in-service training as an integral part of continuing teacher education with a view to taking care of inadequacies in the initial teacher education. To further ensure acquisition of adequate teaching skill by teachers, no 75 (b) states that those already engaged in teaching but not professionally qualified shall be given a period of time within which to qualify for registration or leave the profession, while no. 75 (c) states that newly qualified teachers shall serve a period of internship one (1) year for degree holders and two (2) years for National Certificate of Education (NCE) holders.

Surprisingly enough, this aspect of the NPE has not been well implemented. Number (b) especially is prone to politicization because any government in Nigeria federal, state or local government that attempts to implement it may have to think twice because of its political party’s popularity; the people may view it as an anti-people policy! Technology education incorporates post secondary education in technology offered in polytechnics, monotronics and college of education technical (NPE 2004). The NPE states in No. 80 that polytechnics, in addition to general goals of higher education in No.59, shall:

- Provide full-time or part-time courses of instruction and training in engineering, other technologies, applied science, business and management, leading to the production of trained manpower.
- Provide the technical knowledge and skills necessary for agricultural, industrial, commercial, and economic development of Nigeria.
- Give training and impart the necessary skills for the production of technicians, technologists and other skilled personnel who shall be enterprising and self-reliant.
- Train people who can apply scientific knowledge to solve environmental problems for the convenience of man; and,
- Give exposure on professional studies in the technologies.

Regrettably, outcomes of education offered by the above identified higher institutions are very contrary to the stated goals in the NPE. Okebukola (2007) cited by Fakomogbon and Adegbiya (2011) identified lack of practical skills in teaching; shallow knowledge of subject-matter; poor computer and communication skills; and, lack of entrepreneurial skills as weaknesses among higher education graduates in Nigeria. According to Fakomogbon and Adegbiya (2011), the gap that exists between what is taught in school and the skills required to perform on a job is what is responsible for a high percentage of graduate unemployment in

Nigeria. Advanced economies need two sorts of high-level expertise: one emphasizes discovery and the other focuses on exploiting the discoveries of others through market-related intelligence and the application of interpersonal skills (Yorke, 2002). Yorke (2002) identified the learning-by-doing that takes place in innovative workplaces and higher education system as important sources of knowledge growth.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, all of the above statements of the goals of polytechnic and monotechnics education are laudable. However, they need to go beyond being ordinary paper documents to that of practical implementation. Development and self-reliance of individual citizens are what culminate into national development. A nation whose citizens are not individually developed and self-reliant cannot be developed and/or be self-reliant nationally. The university systems and other higher institutions of learning must become a primary tool for Africa's development in the 21st century.

6.1. Recommendations

With a view to fostering skills acquisition and development in higher education in Nigeria, the following recommendations are hereby made. To reduce lack of employable skills among the Nigerian graduates, rejuvenation of the curriculum and objectives should be embarked upon with immediate effect. Not only this, appropriate practical training centres/workshops should be established by the government and embedded in the duration of years to be spent for bargaining a degree. For instance, automobile mechanical, electrical, chemical, and civil engineering centres should be established separately where all these category of engineering students could go to, at least a year, for practical skills acquisition pre-requisite for obtaining a degree. The recommendation of NPE on newly qualified teachers to serve a period of internship one (1) year for degree holders and two (2) years for NCE holders should be implemented without reduction in the duration as being currently done by higher institutions in the country. Local engineers (artisans with little or no formal education) should be accredited as centres where the engineering students could be sent to for practical skills acquisition. In addition, government should encourage young graduates to establish their own business or trade by given them support in terms of funds and facilities; disbursement of soft loan with close monitoring should be given to graduates and school leavers to make them self-employed. Finally, government should give adequate ratings and special remuneration for personnel with technical skills. This will serve as propelling force that will attract them to technical and vocational studies.

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