



Politics of Access and Equal Educational Opportunity in Higher Education: Productivity and Development in Nigeria

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Abstract: The expansion of higher education and emphasis on students' learning outcomes and the advent of new pedagogical approaches to teaching in higher institutions of learning are reflected in the quality of graduates turned out into the world of work. These are supposed to improve productivity and consequently national development. Several types of research have revealed that Nigerian graduates are unemployable and this means low productivity which negates national development. In addition to inadequate educational infrastructures in the higher institutions of learning, insufficient funding, inadequate and incompetent teaching staff among others, it has been established that there is a glaring disconnection between what university graduates are exposed to and what is expected of them in the world of work; the real needs of the society for national development are not put in focus. This paper maintains that implementing quality education which must positively affect productivity and national development must require a realistic assessment of the starting point (objectives of higher education), the current realities of university graduates and a way of measuring the progress made to know the way forward. This paper, therefore, discussed the concepts of policy, access, and equal educational opportunity, higher productivity in relation to socio-economic and political realities, challenges and educational implications, and suggestions on the way forward.

Keywords: Policy, Access, Equal educational opportunity, Productivity, Higher education, Development

1. Introduction

Education no doubt is a critical tool for national development, and it equips the citizens of any country with knowledge, skills, values and attitudes which empower them to enjoy maximum benefit from society and also contribute meaningfully to the development of society. This is evidenced in the assertion of Olorundare (2011) that the development of a nation is often measured by the degree and extent of the socio-cultural, socio-economic and political improvement brought about by education. Considering the enormous advantages of education the personal and national development of any nation, the policy of access and equal educational opportunity is a good decision in the right direction. It is

gratifying to note that this is entrenched in the policy of education for all (EFA) worldwide.

The issue of access and equal educational opportunity for all is important because leadership is made easier when the populace is literate and could adequately grasp the act of governance and be actively involved in a positive way.

At the lower level of education - primary and post- primary levels, the Federal Ministry of Education Publication; 'Operation Reach All Secondary Schools' (ORASS) cited in Ikeme, (2007) stated that education offered in Post-Primary Schools should aim at the following competences:

1. Communication skills (listening, speaking,



reading and writing) in the language of instruction

2. Numerical skills
3. Understanding the environment (scientific and environmental skills)
4. Manipulative skills, and
5. Entrepreneurial skills – independent minded; communication/ proposal presentation skills, business management skills, corporate leadership skills, dress code, attitude to work, mannerism, time management, friendly disposition and risk taking skills.

These skills can be acquired through properly planned classroom activities, well monitored by the teacher. The students at this level are the prospective candidates for higher education.

Higher education, in particular, is meant to foster sustainable growth and improvement of society as a whole by educating and producing qualified graduates able to meet the needs of all sectors of human activity. There is a consensus among scholars and professionals that functional education is the bedrock of the technological advancement and economic fortune of several developed nations across the globe (World Bank, 2008; Muoboghare, 2011; Dangote, 2013). Nigeria is aspiring to be among the first twenty economies in the world by the year 2020; this can be realized only if she had a well-structured higher education system.

However, research evidence in Obanya, (2011); and Idaka, (2013) revealed that the Nigerian graduates exhibited the following weaknesses: poor classroom management and control, shallow knowledge of subject matter, poor computer skills, inability to communicate effectively in English language which is the medium of communication, lack of professionalism, lack of self-reliance and entrepreneurial skills; and poor attitude to work. This claim is further supported by Ikeme (2007), who revealed that there was a mismatch between what Nigerian youths were made to study in schools and what the Nigerian economy actually needed. He suggested that

schools should be focused on improvement priorities based on needs of the nation and adapted to changes according to the challenges of the times.

There is a link between higher level skills and employability, but this does not seem to be the case in Nigeria because, most times, attention is given to the level of skills people reach rather than the area in which they achieve them. The preference for conventional courses and neglect of practical skills led to immense youth unemployment, growing poverty rate, hopelessness, youth restiveness and very slow national development in the country. This is because graduates from our conventional higher institutions lack the practical skills needed by the labor market (Raimi & Akhuemonkhan, 2014).

Access to, and equal opportunity in higher education is instrumental to national development; however the problem facing the Nigerian tertiary institutions and directly negating national development is much beyond the issue of access and equal educational opportunity in higher education. It is beyond getting all interested candidates into higher institutions, or opening more tertiary institutions to accommodate all candidates. The issue has to do with defining the kind of economy that should be built; and designing the educational system with specified curriculum that would produce graduates that would be productive to the achievement of national development goals. It is the issue of defining the quality of graduates the nation needs and what categories of graduates expected. More is better, but how much more and of what quality? There must be a focus on what is missing and insufficient, and there must be a clear measure of what success would look like.

To make meaningful progress in this direction, certain questions such as the following should be addressed: What educational outcomes are the institutions seeking? What do they have as measures of change? How do they make change happen? Which fundamentals must be put in place? What is the focus of the change? The bottom

line of these questions is how would the politics of access and equal educational opportunity in higher education encourage productivity and national development? The answers to these and similar questions will lead; it is hoped, to the production of quality graduates and the categories needed for productivity and national development. The focus of this paper is to emphasize the need for government policies to be re-articulated and implemented in a way that the quality of graduates needed will be produced. In this case there should be needs assessment and establishment of criteria for assessing success.

In this direction, the paper discusses the issue of access and equal educational opportunity to higher education about socio - economic and political realities in Nigeria. The paper also highlights the concepts of politics, productivity, higher education; and challenges. Finally the paper suggests the way forward.

Clarification of Concepts about Socio - economic and Political Realities

Politics: According to Obanya (2011) politics is fundamental to education and presents a 5 point chain of the education process as:

Politics – Policy – Program – Process – Product

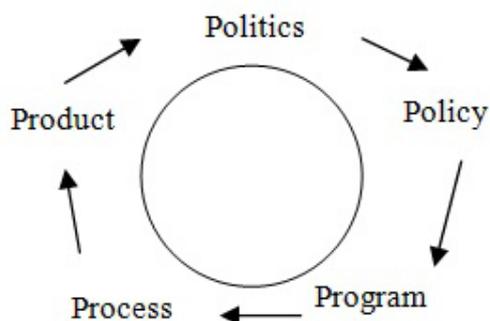


Fig. 1 The cyclic nature of the education process

He described the 5-Ps as a cyclic process, where political directions/decisions are the root of education policy, which in turn informs the direction of education program. The program is “processed” at the school and classroom levels to turn out the required products of education,

and the nature of the product leading to constant reviews of all other Ps in the chain. The reviews make the structure of the Ps to be cyclical in nature and not just a chain. He further explained that politics could either be “good” or “bad.” By “good politics” he meant effective leadership for the public good and “bad politics” refers to the type of divisive politicking that is concerned only with the acquisition and maintenance of power. He developed ten education factors in the context of “good” and “bad” politics, but this paper is only interested in two of them - those related to physical facilities and outcomes of the program.

On physical facilities, he opined that where “bad” politics prevails physical facilities will be inappropriate, inadequate and there will be little or no maintenance, while if “good politics”, prevails there will be appropriate, adequate physical facilities and a culture of maintenance will be firmly upheld. The other factor is the outcomes; in the situation of “bad politics” the development of educational policies and program will be less responsive and participatory leading to less desirable outcomes. The products are students who merely pass through schools that are not adequately prepared for “effective learning.” While in the situation of “good” politics, desirable outcomes will be students who have passed through school and the school passing through them because provisions for “effective learning” makes them productive. Productive graduates are the outputs of higher institutions that can meet the needs of the labor market. Their productivity must be measured in relation to the quality of skills acquired. National University Commission (NUC) (cited in Okome- Okandeji, 2014) referred to this state as quality assurance; it is the ability of institutions to meet the expectations of users of manpower in relation to quality of skills acquired by their outputs. She considered quality assurance very important in enhancing the internal efficiency of the educational system. Also, she stated that quality assurance would ensure the quality of academic (teaching – learning process and the curriculum) and structural (building and physical facilities) provision of courses and allow for an objective review of their quality.



This, however, is only possible when there is “good politics” that will adequately fund the educational system and is committed to the improvement of the nation’s graduates.

Good politics presupposes the capacity to realize educational goals. However, Olofintoye and Prince (2013) stated that the goals of university education remain elusive and seem unachievable as the university products in Nigeria often cannot marry knowledge acquired in schools with that of the world of work. This is corroborated by the study of Effiong and Agboola (2014) on Nigerian Universities’ outputs and their employability in the labor market in South-South, Nigeria. It was reported in this study that the employability of Nigerian university students is low irrespective of their sex, type of organization where they work (public or private) and their educational qualification. This is so, as they explained further, because graduate employability is a measure of skills and knowledge acquired which reflect their ability, quality of instruction and type of curriculum they have been exposed to. This shows that so much still needs to be done by the government and all stakeholders to restructure the curriculum, set targets for university education to reflect present realities and match it to the needs of the labor markets. This calls for collaboration between employers of labor and the management of higher institutions in restructuring the curriculum.

The problem thus facing the Nigerian tertiary institutions and directly negating national development is much beyond the issue of access and equal educational opportunity in higher education. It is beyond getting all prospective candidates into higher institutions, or opening more tertiary institutions to accommodate all candidates. Although these are part of the problem, the issue has to do with defining the kind of economy that should be built and designing the educational system with specified curriculum including compulsory internship and work study. These would produce graduates that will be productive in the achievement of national development goals. To reap the benefits of effective implementation of access and equal

opportunity for higher education, the Nigerian government must pursue good policies which would develop individuals that can meet the needs of the labor market.

Access

In education, the term access typically refers to the ways in which educational institutions and policies ensure or at least strive to ensure that students have equal and equitable opportunities to take full advantage of the provision for education. Increasing access requires schools to provide additional services or remove any actual or potential barriers that might prevent some students from equitable participation in certain courses or academic program. Factors such as religion, gender, disability, perceived intellectual ability, past academic performance, family income among others contribute to certain students having less “access” to educational opportunities than others (Galenda, Lizardy, Hajbi & Wilkerson, 2010).

Dewey, (cited in Little, 2010), believed that education is important to a democratic society. That those persons who govern themselves must be educated and able to make the decision necessary to preserve their democracy. This should apply not only to a privileged few but to all citizens in society. According to him, attaining an education supports state interests regarding economic benefits as well as the sustainability of a democratic and socially just society. Nigeria is a democratic nation, therefore in this context, access to equal educational opportunity will prepare students for citizenship and at the same time enhance the growth and development of the nation.

Equal Educational Opportunity

Equality in education means that everyone has the right to education. Perry (2009), in a model for education policy in a democratic society, articulated five key points to establish socially just policies in the education arena. These include; equality, diversity, participation, choice, and cohesion. He noted that equal access and the opportunity for an equal outcome regarding education should be paramount because education plays a central role in social



mobility in a democratic society. He explained diversity as the concept of multiculturalism within education policy that multiculturalism should foster equal status for diverse groups and allow those various groups and cultures to maintain their identity. According to him, a multicultural approach to education will promote a sense of equality among all cultures in an academic environment, and that it will give students confidence that their opinions and points of view will be respected.

Multicultural education, according to Oregon (2015), is a life-long learning process designed to empower all students to become participants in their communities. It is inclusive and respectful of all ethnic, racial and cultural backgrounds and engages staff, families, students and communities. It is a model of an educational reform movement which is intended to change the structure of educational institutions and all components of the education enterprise. This includes underlying values, procedural rules, curricula, institutional materials, organizational structure, and government policies so as to reflect cultural pluralism of the society so that all students have an equal chance to achieve academic success. Thus, integrating multiculturalism into the educational system of Nigeria will ensure that students acquire the right knowledge and skills that are essential for effective performance of the individual in a rapidly changing and pluralistic world.

Perry (2009) further stated that participation and choice revolve around the principle that families and communities must be involved in education. He noted that involvement in the process of education policy is critical in a democratic society. This involvement leads to choice for families regarding the education they want for their children and what young adults want for themselves. The concept of cohesion encompassed all the concepts of the model for education policy in a democratic society and was of the opinion that education is critical to the continuation of a democratic society, as is the case of Nigeria because education promotes uniqueness regarding the standards of how a country will move forward.

Nevertheless, higher education is expected to be a personal decision and schools should not encourage students to pursue a higher degree, if they are not interested, or if their career ambitions do not require a degree, or if their family cannot afford college. For instance, the case of preparing all students for higher education could become inequitable because it 'forces' students to take a higher education preparatory course of study, and it may discourage students from considering alternative options (such as a career in the military or skilled trades which may not necessarily require a higher education degree). This could also divert resources away from other educational programs, reduce the perceived value of other options, and potentially stigmatize those without university degrees.

There is need therefore to equip tertiary institutions especially the universities with the necessary counseling units with facilities and equipment to identify candidates interests and aptitudes and channel them to courses they can excel in and are satisfied with to become useful to themselves and the society. Continued use of some strategies to foster equal opportunities in admissions into higher institutions by the government and universities through the quota system and (Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination) UTME is necessary to help break down barriers and ensure that all Nigerians have a fair chance to demonstrate their talent and abilities.

Higher Education

Higher education is the Post-Secondary section of the national education system, which is given at Universities, Polytechnics and Colleges of Technology including courses as are given by the Colleges of Education, Advanced Teachers Training Colleges, Correspondence Colleges and such Institutions as may be allied to them. Higher education, including professional education, has the following aims:

- 1) The acquisition, development, and inculcation of the proper value-orientation for the survival of the individual and societies;
- 2) The development of the intellectual capacities of individuals to understand and appreciate environment;



- 3) The acquisition of both physical and intellectual skills which will enable individuals to develop into useful members of the community;
- 4) The acquisition of an overview of the local and external environments. The National Policy on Education further stated that higher educational institutions should pursue these goals through teaching, research, the dissemination of existing and new information, the pursuit of service to the community; and by being store- house knowledge.

According to Brown (2009), higher education has a key role to play in initial higher skills formations, and the development of higher levels of knowledge and understanding at work. The development of higher level of knowledge and understanding he defined as 'learning and applying of any combination of skills, knowledge, and understanding which builds on what could be reasonably expected from a new qualified, skilled worker. Though, this is a relational concept it can be measured in relation to a worker's productivity. Inferring from the above, higher institutions in Nigeria should be able to prepare graduates with skills that can help them make adjustments easily to different job challenges. In other words, productive graduates should not remain unemployed and least of all unemployable. In addition, it is necessary to assess and evaluate the effectiveness of the academic staff and encourage training and re-training of lecturers to prepare better their students with skills and knowledge that will make them productive in the world of works.

Higher education improves the preparation and productivity of workers and entrepreneurs, thus increases the wealth of the nation. It also increases individual wealth and it is associated with greater civic participation, health and well being, and economic competitiveness. Higher education graduates earn more than those who are not; it affects prospects for a job; but unfortunately at present in Nigeria researches reveal that most of the graduates from Nigeria higher institutions of learning are unemployable

for they lack skills they are supposed to have acquired.

Productivity and National Development

Productivity is the quality, state or fact of being able to generate, create, enhance or bring forth goods and services. (Dictionary.com). Productivity here refers to the quality or state of the effectiveness of the productive effort of the products of higher education. It deals with how effective and efficient the products can convert the knowledge gained and skills acquired into useful productions. A difficult but essential question is how to get a clear understanding of how we should measure productivity or products of higher education. This is important so that we can be sure of what we are trying to achieve through the policy of access and equal educational opportunity in higher education and how it can influence national development.

A primary objective of industries, enterprises or institution is to optimize the efficiency of production processes. That is, to maximize the amount of output that is physically achievable with a fixed amount of inputs. (National Research Council, 2012). The importance of productivity growth to an economy is widely recognized as the extent to which living standards can be improved over time which depends almost entirely on the ability to raise the output of its workers. In higher education, productivity improvement is seen as the most promising strategy for containing costs in the continuing effort to keep higher education as affordable as possible and expedient too. The American Association of Colleges and Universities (cited in Garrett and Poole, 2006) reported the fall in the quality of students graduating from institutions of higher learning and stated that, public policies have focused on getting students into college, but not on what they are expected to accomplish once there.

Additionally, Montecel (2011) stated that expected outcomes both on students' metrics of success must be tracked at many levels; on school metrics of success that is focused on the ability, the willingness and the capacity of an institution to keep students in schools



and learning through graduation, and to prepare them for further studies or a career. She explained that there should be outcome indicator which should be tied to data about the conditions that give rise to the outcomes, if not it will be difficult to know what to change. Again that outcome, should be coupled with best practice and models for action, if not it will be impossible to know what might work, and that it must be tied to citizen engagement and not only to consumer choice or public opinion.

However, in Nigeria there appears to be inadequate data collection base to track the success of students or institutions in different areas of study. This has led to producing graduates who acquire knowledge and skills that are not needed in the labor market. To reposition the development process in Nigeria, policy makers and education planners should implement the policy on technical, vocational education and training. And entrepreneurial education should also be included as a pragmatic education option for the conventional courses studied in tertiary institutions that have no particular relevance to the skills needed in the labor market today.

Challenges of Politics of Access and Equal Educational Opportunity to Productivity and Development:

From the research evidence presented, it is reasonable to say that at least three circumstances demand consideration in the higher education sector in Nigeria:

- 1-Nigeria is already behind and must catch up with the global competitiveness in the field of education if she to be among the first twenty economies in the world by the year 2020
- 2-Funding higher education must be re-examined and handled with utmost concern and with strategies streamlined.
- 3-Nigeria's higher education system is not performing at optimal levels and must be improved upon as a matter of urgency.

Except strategies are devised to improve the quality of higher education, Nigeria's goal

of economic development will remain wishful thinking. Government policies must be re-articulated and implemented with a focus on the category and quality of graduates needed. This could be hinged on the view of Montecel (2011) which stated that educational systemS, not students are the issue, and that schools are under performing not because students in them are poor in academic performance, but, rather because of poor policies, poor practices and inadequate investments in the schools. It is important that government and institutions of higher learning set objectives that indicate concrete actions to be demonstrated by the students after each program, and also specify the conditions under which certain actions can be performed. These actions could make it a bit easier to measure the effectiveness of education gained at this higher level. This is important because the public needs to be aware of the performance of higher education because of the value that it adds to the individual and society regarding return on investment.

Higher education must demonstrate its value to students, to business and industry, and to the public to gain the support it needs, (Montecel, 2011). This weighty responsibility is reposed in institutions of higher learning because every higher institution is intended to produce human capital needed for the realization of national socio-economic agenda, which must be of quality and relevance locally and internationally. The mere possession of a degree, if not earned or deserved, becomes antithesis of professional success. It is important to translate the knowledge one has acquired into practical use, the total of what education, skills, and knowledge an individual has acquired and that which lies within the frame of the degree he obtained shows his true worth and should be evident to all.

Educational Implications

Access and equal educational opportunity in higher education will enhance productivity and development in Nigeria if some modifications are made. Garrett and Poole (2006) opined that higher education has seen a decrease in productivity over the



past decade, and that spending by colleges and universities is increasing as they use more resources to educate each graduating student, but the quality of the graduate is not improving commensurately, that productivity will increase if students quality increases more than the cost of educating them. That is to say, the essence of access and equal educational opportunity should be aimed at quality, not numbers. One can deduce from the above statement that any policy that can improve on higher education productivity could be implemented successfully if government and education officials including higher education faculty could first address the following issues raised in this paper:

- 1) Understanding the objectives of the colleges or universities: This may include increasing students' quality, increasing access, achieving greater cost efficiencies and making a better contribution to the needs of society. It will also include improving basic research. Students' quality will always meet the demands of all stakeholders, students, parents, employers and the state.
- 2) Defining Productivity inputs and outputs: Before any measurement of productivity can occur, educational administrators and policy makers must decide what levels of the institutions' productivity should be measured. For example, should a university measure the productivity of an individual faculty or staff member, an academic department or the university as a whole? Though all are important and should be measured. For the measurement to be effective, goals and objectives set must be understood. First so that the administrators will measure what is valuable and not value something that is measurable.
- 3) Measuring Productivity: Improving productivity through higher education requires undertaking measures that increase efficiency and effectiveness. Although measuring productivity can be difficult, assessing society demands, setting targets about society standards, or standards of

other institutions of higher learning could be applied. For, example, the number of graduates who find jobs within three months of graduation, or to measure the percentage of students taking a class that requires relatively advanced work, measuring clients' satisfaction as the graduates are hired for jobs and so on.

- 4) Showing Productivity Improvement: Demonstrating productivity improvement in higher education can be done by showing, increase in revenue or participation, employment rates of recent graduates, etc, this can only be effective if Nigeria has adequate data storage and retrieval process.
- 5) Improving students' quality and increasing the flexibility of faculty: This remains unclear though the most important. In Nigeria tertiary institutions it appears that faculty rates teaching secondary we behind publishing in academic journals and acquiring research grants. Also, most faculty members do not have training in good teaching strategies. Good teaching practices include; encouraging student/faculty contact, encouraging active learning, encouraging cooperation among students, giving prompt feedback, communicating high expectations to students, among others. Though, attempts to implement these strategies may be met with resistance, or genuine challenges, encouraging more time on each task and respecting diverse talents and ways of learning will inspire students to take charge of their learning. An important point is that the passive lecture format that is found in higher institutions does not account for most of these practices; this is a big challenge for higher institutions of learning.

Conclusion

Equal access to quality educational opportunity is the right and just thing to do but it can remain a good intention without accomplishment. It will be impossible to pursue quality outcomes in higher institutions of learning without the collaboration between educators, students, parents, school leadership,



and all of them connecting with each other and across the education grid. Maintaining urgency and clarity in sustainable education reform, which is what Nigeria urgently needs, depends largely on national will and informed engagement of the nation. Implementing quality education which must positively affect productivity and national development must require a realistic assessment of the objectives of higher education, the current realities of university graduates and a way of measuring the progress made to know what to adjust.

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