



CHALLENGES OF PROVIDING VOCATIONAL EDUCATION FOR YOUTHS IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Despite potentials of adopting vocational education as a strategy to empower Nigerian youths and the persistent increasing youth unemployment in the country, inadequate studies on the challenges of providing vocational education for youths in Nigeria has not been given adequate attention in the literature. With the aid of existing literature and secondary data, the paper identified two major avenues for vocational education in the country: formal education system, and adult and non-formal education system. Challenges of providing vocational education via formal education system include: absence of government's political will; prevailing perceived 'inferiority' of vocational education; inadequate qualified staff; inadequate equipment, materials etc. Challenges of adopting adult and non-formal education approach include political interference in the location, distribution, staffing, equipping and managing these centres. Strategies were proposed to address the identified challenges.

Keywords: Vocational education, Adult and non-formal education, Unemployment, Empowerment.

1. INTRODUCTION

Globally, youth unemployment has become a cankerworm disease plaguing every nation, and posing a persistent challenge to governments, parents, non-governmental organization and various other stakeholders in the nations of the world. The challenge is more daunting in developing nations, of which Nigeria is a good example. Although the challenge of underemployment has been in the nation since 1980s, the rate of unemployment as at today is unprecedented in the history of the nation (Adebayo and Ogunrinola, 2006; Egunjobi, 2007; ILO, 2007). Unlike in the 1970s when illiteracy was identified as a major contributor to youth unemployment, and underemployment was attributed to inordinate ambition of some youths, substantial proportion of the present cadre of unemployed youths in Nigeria are graduates from tertiary institutions – universities, polytechnics and colleges of education (FGN, 2017).

A major factor generally fingered as contributing significantly to observed ever-swelling army of unemployed youths in Nigeria, is the non-vocational educational system operated in the nation. The argument of proponents of this school of thought, is that graduates from various educational institutions in the country are generalists with no tangible skill other than being literates. The nation's educational system has thus succeeded in reeling out graduates that are not equipped to be of any readily available use to the labour market. Members of this school of thought see introduction of skill acquisition programmes in schools and provision of skill acquisition opportunities for the mass unemployed youths as the infallible solution to youth unemployment in the country. Many of advocates of this approach to solving youth unemployment in the country even carpet the nation's leaders for failing to give vocational skills acquisition the desired attention in the nation's education curricular. We need to trace the historical evolution of vocational education in Nigeria to enable us have a better understanding of the present condition of vocational education in the country.

Since colonial era, both formal education and technical/vocational/skill acquisition education were introduced in the nation. Agriculture, crafts and handwork were introduced as compulsory subjects in primary schools; secondary/grammar schools were set up for purely academic pursuits, though agriculture was one of the major courses offered in these schools. Vocational schools in form of technical colleges and trade centres were set up as post-primary institutions where vocational skills were inculcated and developed in students that were found to

have more affinity for vocational than academic pursuits. At tertiary levels, universities and polytechnics were established, respectively, for academic and vocational career development.

In the nation's First Republic spanning 1960 to 1966, most of these secondary and vocational schools were adequately staffed with dedicated teachers. Most of government and missions' secondary schools had well stocked libraries and laboratories while technical and vocational schools were adequately funded and stocked with adequate materials. Practical training was an unnegotiable part of training in these technical/vocational schools, and the graduates were readily absorbed in the nation's industries, testifying to the quality of training received in these schools.

But the colonialists that introduced both formal and vocational education into the country inserted an action that ultimately led to the collapse of technical and vocational education in the country. They introduced dichotomy in the wages of graduates from the two different schools, according to graduates from academic institutions better rating, better remunerations and better career prospects than graduates from vocational institutions. Hence, most parents were discouraged from sending their children and wards to vocational institutions.

Prevailing general apartheid towards technical / vocational education led to a dwindling number of pupils applying for these schools. It also led to watering down the quality of vocational skills acquired in these vocational schools as they were poorly funded, poorly equipped and the staff were not encouraged to put in their best. The resultant effects of the abandonment of vocational education is the observed general shortage of this level of manpower that are expected to be the 'engine room' for the nation's development. Most of the plans for the nation's development could not be executed because of inadequate availability of vocational personnel. This accounts for Nigeria being rated as one of the nations with the most expensive labour in the world, discouraging foreign investments and worsening youth unemployment in the country.

Persistent ever-increasing youth unemployment in the country has led to proliferation of an ever-swelling army of idle youths that are easily manipulated by the political class, serving as political thugs, taking to crimes like burglary, armed robbery, internet/cyber-crimes, rape, assault, kidnapping and other vices. The nation's economy that depends wholly on revenue from exporting crude petroleum cannot generate adequate income to provide gainful employment for the present and incoming streams of unemployed graduates in the country.

Realizing the invaluable role vocational education, an integral part of adult and non-formal education, can play in empowering these youths, especially in turning most of these youths from job-seekers to employers of labour, Nigerian government has been making clarion calls for the need to have a national rethink on the importance of vocational education in the country. To this end, various public enlightenment campaigns, symposia, workshops, seminars and advertisements in various social media have been introduced to popularize the new call to empower Nigerian youths. The new focus on vocational skill acquisition is not limited to youths of school age, but embraces adults that have either graduated or dropped out of formal educational programmes and belief in acquiring new skills for personal empowerment.

To realise the dream of the Eldorado envisaged through the skill acquisition era for the youths, there is the need for creating, staffing, equipping and encouraging patronage of vocational schools / vocational skills acquisition centres, distributed spatially such that they are easily accessible to the targeted population. Providing these vocational centres such that they are able to assist in achieving the expected goal, is a major challenge of this dream that has not been given adequate attention in the literature, a major gap this lecture intends to fill.

In achieving this goal, the paper is divided into six sections. Immediately after this introduction is 'conceptualization of vocational education' as used in the paper. Relevant literature are reviewed in the third section. In the fourth section, challenges of providing vocational education for Nigerian youths are discussed. The fifth section is used to provide

strategies to address identified challenges, while the sixth section is devoted to concluding and recommending strategies to address identified challenges in providing vocational education for youths in the country.

2. CONCEPTUALIZATION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualization

Relevant concepts that are used in anchoring the study those of 'Vocational education', 'Adult and non-formal education', 'Unemployment' and 'Empowerment'.

Conceptualizing Vocational Education

There is need to begin our conceptualization of 'vocational education' by distinguishing between three terms or concepts that are often used interchangeably in discussions on vocational education. These are: vocational education; vocational training; and, technical vocational education and training (TVET).

The term 'vocational education' often referred to as 'vocational education and training' (VET) has been conceptualized in diverse ways in the literature. Kotsikis (2007) perceives the term 'vocational education' as a general term that includes every form of education that aims to the acquirement of qualifications related to a certain profession, art or employment or that provides the necessary training and the appropriate skills as well as technical knowledge, so that students are able to exercise a profession, art or activity, independently of their age and their training level, even if the training program contains also elements of general education'.

Kotsikis (2007) distinguishes between vocational education and vocational training. While vocational education is defined as stated above, the term vocational training is generally perceived as being the part of vocational education that provides the specialized professional knowledge and skills, which attribute professional adequacy to the trainee and are the focus of every vocational training programme. He explains further that vocational training can thus be seen as an activity or a set of activities designed in order to transmit theoretical knowledge and also professional skills that are required for certain types of jobs. Efstratoglou & Nikolopoulou (2011) emphasize that as an educational policy, vocational training refers to the initial vocational training, whose aims are connected to the given offer and demand of specialties, as they are formed by the structural characteristics of each country's economy.

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) is defined by UNESCO-UNEVOC (2017) as education and training that provides the necessary knowledge and skills for employment. e-forum (2018) explains that 'Technical and vocational education' is used as a comprehensive term referring to those aspects of the educational process involving, in addition to general education, the study of technologies and related sciences, and the acquisition of practical skills, attitudes, understanding and knowledge relating to occupations in various sectors of economic and social life. UNESCO (2017) explains that TVET uses many forms of education including formal, non-formal and informal learning, and is said to be important for social equity and inclusion, as well as for the sustainability of development. Marope, Chakroun and Holmes (2015) identify TVET, literacy and higher education as one of three priority subsectors for UNESCO, and emphasize that it is in line with the UNESCO's work to foster inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all.

Asian Development Bank (2008) clarifies that the development and definition of TVET is one that parallels other types of education and training, such as Vocational Education; however, TVET was officiated on an international level as a better term to describe the field, and therefore is likewise used as an umbrella term to encompass education and training activities such as Vocational Education (UNESCO-UNEVOC, 2017).

Existing literature reveals that the main aims of vocational education and training could be summarised as including, to:

- i. enhance the trainees who have completed the highest level of secondary education;

- ii. develop the professional knowledge and skills required for the practice of a profession;
- iii. evaluate the participants' educational level, in order for them to become competitive professionals in the future (Zafiridis, 2000);
- iv. assist the students in their gentle adjustment to the challenges in the productive procedures;
- v. provide specialized training initial or continuing;
- vi. satisfy the continuously changing needs of labour market; cultivate the integration of the students in professional life and in community as well;
- vii. enforce the European, and also global, dimension of vocational training (Zafiridis, 2003);
- viii. contribute to the acquirement of economical knowledge and skills that the organization and evolution of a profession demands;
- ix. assist to the acquaintance with the codes of social values, the integration of culture through professional socialization and the creation of a behavioural and social code that constitute the professional deontology; and
- x. prepare for the exercise of the rights as well as obligations of the citizen as a professional (security, protection, social benefits, taxes etc.)(Kotsikis, 2007).

Conceptualizing Adult and non-formal education

Of the various conceptualizations of adult and non-formal education available in the literature, the one perceived to be germane and most appropriate for this study, is the one provided by Hassan (2009), who conceptualized adult and non-formal education as 'any educational programme that is organized for all ages regardless of the content, place of study, form of study (part-time or fulltime) once the programme is flexible and is organized to satisfy the needs and aspirations of the beneficiaries and their community'. Aderinoye (2004) provides comprehensive explanations on adult and non-formal education, and identifies six cohorts of scope and forms of adult and non-formal education as:

1. Functional Literacy; Basic Literacy; Preventive Education; Leisure Education; and, Vocational Education.
2. Extra mural Studies; Remedial Education; and Reproductive Education
3. Trade Union Education; In-Service Training; Women Education; Extension Education; and, Second Chance Education.
4. Lifelong Education; Continuing Education; and, Apprenticeship.
5. Family Planning Education; Population Education; Aesthetic Education; Intermittent Education; and, Prison Education.
6. Information Education; Open Distance Education; Peace Education; Citizenship Education; and, Environmental Education.

It could thus be observed that adult and non-formal education is the type of education that makes ample provisions for providing varieties of opportunities for every individual to improve his/her educational status.

Conceptualizing Unemployment

Although 'unemployment' often referred to as 'joblessness' is conceptualized in diverse ways in the literature, general consensus among the diverse conceptualizations is that unemployment or joblessness occurs when people are without jobs and they have actively sought work within the past five weeks (International Labour Organization, 1982; Fajana, 2000). Its occurrence has been attributed by Fajana (2000) to the surplus of labour supply over labour demand. The unemployment rate is a measure of the prevalence of unemployment and it is calculated as a percentage by dividing the number of unemployed individuals by all individuals currently in the labour force. The work force comprises those people who want to work; it

excludes people who are retired, disabled, and able to work but not currently looking for a position; for instance, they may be taking care of children or going to college.

Economists have classified unemployment into two main broad categories: Voluntary unemployment and Involuntary unemployment. *Voluntary Unemployment* occurs when a person has left his job willingly in search of other employment. *Involuntary Unemployment*, on the other hand, occurs when a person has never been employed or has been fired or laid off and must look for another job.

Direct association has been established in the literature between unemployment rate and poverty level and associated welfare challenges (Fajana, 2000). Unemployment rate is also observed to usually have inverse relationship with the health of the economy: the higher the unemployment rate, the poorer the health of the economy, and vice-versa.

It must be observed at this juncture, most of the social, political, cultural and psychological trauma associated with unemployment and joblessness are often associated more with involuntary unemployment than voluntary unemployment.

Conceptualizing Empowerment

Empowerment has been conceptualized in diverse ways in the literature. Rappaport (1985, pp. 15 – 21) provided a broad-based concept of empowerment, which was conceptualized as “*a sense of control over one's life in personality, cognition, and motivation. It expresses itself at the level of feelings, at the level of ideas about self-worth, at the level of being able to make a difference in the world around us... We all have it as a potential*”. Gutierrez, et al. (1998) proposed four necessary changes which have to be seen in a person before he/she can be described as “successfully empowered”. These are: an increased self-sufficiency, a developed group consciousness, a reduction of self-blame in the face of problems and the ability to assume personal responsibility for change. That is, not relying on other people to help out, but trying to take matters in one's own hands and pursuing a change for the better.

Wikipedia (2015) conceptualizes empowerment as ‘*policies and measures designed to increase the degree of autonomy and self-determination in the lives of people and in communities in order to (re-)enable them to represent their interests in a responsible and self-determined way, acting (again) on their own authority*’. It emphasizes that empowerment refers both to the process of self-empowerment and to professional support of people, which enables them to overcome their sense of powerlessness and lack of influence, and to recognize and eventually use their resources and chances.

Three categories of empowerment have been identified in the literature, which are: individual empowerment—which focuses on what happens on the personal level in the individual's life (Gruber & Trickett, 1987, Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988); community empowerment—which emphasizes the collective processes and the social change (Dolnick, 1993); and empowerment as a professional practice—which sees empowerment as a means of professional intervention for the solution of social problems (Rappaport, 1981). In this study, focus is on individual empowerment, emphasizing how participating in adult and non-formal education programmes can bring about significant improvement in the life of unemployed youths in Nigeria in general, and Southwestern Nigeria, in particular.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the main reason for advocating for enhancing vocational education and skill acquisition for Nigerian youths' empowerment is centred on the concern for enhancing the youths' 'manpower development', literature review in this section is focused on manpower development. Jinadu (2004) emphasized the fact that adequate qualitative and quantitative availability of required manpower are prerequisites for development of any nation. This

assertion was buttressed by Agbola and Olaoye (2008), who emphasized that the late American President, John F. Kennedy, in the first manpower report of the USA, identified manpower as being 'the basic resource' for development. Agbola (1985) identified manpower cost as constituting significant proportion of development cost. He documented that manpower costs constitute up to 40% of construction cost, and that in nations where adequate quality and quantity of required manpower are available, manpower costs have multiplier effects on the nations' economy unlike in nations that rely on importation of required manpower that are usually encouraged to repatriate their income back to their home nations, thereby depleting the host nations' foreign reserves.

Importance of availability of skilled manpower is to development has been recognized in Nigeria since as far back as 1980, when the planners of the Fourth National Development Plan observed that shortages of skilled manpower constitute the most serious bottleneck to the capacity of the economy to absorb the increasing volume of investment made possible by oil revenues (FGN, 1985). In 1986, Ojo (1986) observed that the World Bank, in its Economic Mission Report on Nigeria's economy, asserted that in the past, economic growth has been largely left to the efforts of expatriate entrepreneurs, administrators and technicians. The Bank observed that the time had come to increase, as speedily as possible, the number of adequately trained Nigerians able to contribute effectively to that growth.

It should be emphasized that manpower shortage in Nigeria is more in the middle and lower cadres. This shortage worsens availability of required manpower at this vital level of development. It also scuttles evolution and development of small and medium scale industries, a level performing pivotal roles in industrial development of most nations. It is this vital levels that could assist much in mopping up excess unemployed population in the country. Contributing to the realization of the dream of empowering Nigerian youths through skill acquisition is the main rationale for this lecture.

4. CHALLENGES OF PROVIDING VOCATIONAL EDUCATION FOR YOUTHS IN NIGERIA

In this paper, challenges of providing vocational education for Nigerian youths will be addressed under two main subheadings:

- (a) providing for vocational education through formal education;
- (b) providing for vocational education through adult non-formal education

Providing for vocational education through formal education

It must be emphasized at this juncture that formal post-primary and post-secondary education in Nigeria were primarily of two divergent foci: secondary and university education focusing on acquisition of abstract knowledge on theories, concepts and the like without any accompanying skills; and technical colleges and trade centres and polytechnics, focusing purely on skills acquisition in various trades and professions. Graduates from the first cadre of schools are expected to be dependent on the government and the communities for employment, where they function as administrators, teachers etc., while graduates from the second cadre were meant to be self-employed, employers of labour or technical workers in government parastatals. As stated in earlier part of this lecture, government's decision to give preference to secondary and university education in wages and other perquisites of office, over graduates with vocational skill, led to parents insisting on their children and wards distancing themselves from vocational education. A major disadvantage of secondary and university education, as presently available in Nigeria, is that with none of the graduates having any marketable skill, they are left at the mercies of the different employers of labour and therefore constitute the highest proportion of unemployed, underemployed and unemployable graduate youths in the country.

The 6-3-3-4 educational system adopted in Nigeria makes provision for every child to spend the first six years on primary education, the next 3 years in junior secondary education where all the children are introduced to both academic and professional skill acquisition activities. At the end of the first three years, students are disaggregated based on their natural inclinations: those with ability for abstract reasoning are to spend the next three years in secondary schools while those that have ability for working with their hands in fabricating things are sent to technical and vocational arm of the second three year education. The last four years are to be spent by graduates of secondary schools in the university while graduates from technical schools move on to polytechnics where their skills are perfected. At the inception of this 6-3-3-4 system in Nigeria, secondary schools were classified into Junior and Senior Secondary Schools and senior secondary schools were classified into secondary and technical schools. Required materials and equipment were bought and supplied for smooth and easy take off of these schools. At the end of the day, refusal of parents to allow their children to go for technical education led to the demise of the system as every student transit from junior secondary to senior (academic) secondary schools. Most of the technical colleges and trade centres in Southwestern Nigeria were either converted to secondary schools (comprising both junior and senior schools) or had their buildings converted to offices of government parastatals, as in the case of Government Trade Centre, Osogbo, Osun State.

A major challenge in providing vocational skills for students through formal education therefore, is how to include vocational skills acquisition in the academic curriculum of these schools. Should it be introduced as a subject or as an integral part of existing subject(s)? What specific skills will be introduced at this level? Who handles/teaches the skill acquisition – is he/she a master craftsman or somebody grounded in theoretical aspects of the skill? If he/she is a master craftsman, what is his/her minimum expected qualification? What is the expected relationship because teaching and instructing staff? What remuneration structure should be put in place for the skill acquisition staff? To what extent will the wage structure encourage parents to allow their children and wards to take interest in vocational education? What are the financial implications of providing spaces, equipment and materials for vocational education in these schools?

Challenges in the existing technical colleges and polytechnics bother much on the morale of teachers and lecturers in these institutions that have, for long, been dampened by poor condition of service, poor teaching aids and resources required for skill acquisition practical for long, that majority of the teachers / lecturers have resorted to teaching purely theoretical aspects of their various disciples. The expected practical aspect of their training is therefore, mostly not acquired by them in schools. The mandatory Students Industrial Working Experience Scheme (SIWES) in which the students are expected to be exposed to industrial training relevance of their vocations have been reduced to mere formalities as most of the industrial organizations in which students are attached for SIWES have been adversely affected by the nation's dwindling economy and could not provide the required industrial working experience for the students. Existing dichotomy between graduates from universities and polytechnics, in which university graduates are treated as being superior to those from the polytechnics is another issue mitigating against vocational education at polytechnic level. Providing required incentives for students, graduates and lecturers at the polytechnics are therefore major challenges of providing vocational education at this educational level.

Providing vocational education through adult and non-formal education

Unlike formal educational system where the anticipated skill acquisition programme is expected to take place in formal class atmosphere, adult and non-formal education approach focuses on providing the skill acquisition programme in such a way that peculiarities of participants are taken into account. To this end, three major approaches could be adopted,

each with its peculiar challenges. These are: (i) government setting up vocational skill acquisition centres, owned and managed by the government; (ii) private sector driven vocational skill acquisition centres, owned and managed by private corporate and individual organizations, under government's supervision and quality control; and (iii) public-private-partnership (p.p.p.) initiated vocational skill acquisition centres.

As stated earlier, each approach has its own peculiar myriads of challenges. For instance, the major challenges of government providing vocational skill acquisition centres in Nigeria has to do with the general tendency of politicizing spatial distribution, financing and management of these centres, at the end of which the end results might end up in scoring political points than in empowering the targeted beneficiaries. Most prominent challenge of leaving the establishment of these vocational institutions in the hands of the private sector might make them inaccessible to the targeted beneficiaries as the profit motive of the proprietors could make the fees too high beyond the capacity of unemployed youths they are really meant to empower. Another challenge is that the private sector might end up agglomerating these centres in highbrow areas of big urban centres, where their profit is guaranteed. Major challenge of the p.p.p approach is that the government might have to provide incentives for the private sector involvement in the p.p.p. venture.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

The study has provided evidences that existing myriads of challenges of providing vocational education for Nigerian youths can best be addressed by the government at all levels – the federal, state and local – having and sustaining political will to adopt, develop and nurture vocational education as a strategy for youth empowerment, eradicating youth unemployment and boosting the nation's economic and social development.

Recommendations

Taking cognizance of the fact that vocational education is not alien to the nation and that the government and parents contribute significantly to the present apartheid towards vocational education in the country, this section proposes some strategies to popularize vocational education to make it acceptable to both the government and the people of the country, to enable it perform the expected magic of empowering the youths, bailing them from the all-pervading shackles of unemployment.

The first huddle to be tackled is the government developing and sustaining the political will to promote vocational education in the country, provided by the government and private organizations/individuals under government monitoring and quality control. With the political will in place, the government should monitor and guide setting up of vocational training centres of different cadres to provide required vocational training at these centres. Each of these vocational centres should be provided with modern equipment that will make the vocation less labour-intensive. Professionals and Master-Artisans should be employed and encouraged to man these centres. Incentives should be provided for trainees at these centres to ensure their striving to be among the best in their chosen vocation. Book-keeping, office management and marketing should be integral part of the training to be given to the trainees such that every trainee will be conversant with diverse opportunities available in his/her chosen vocation. Seed money in form of soft interest-free loans should be made available to every trainee to set up business after graduation, and the government should provide avenues for them to market their products either within or outside the country.

Vocational training in the nation's formal school system, especially in technical colleges, trade centres and polytechnics should be given adequate attention by the government at all levels in the country. Symbiotic relationships should be established and strengthened between

the nation's industrial corporations and the vocational schools and vocational centres such that these schools and centres should be encouraged to provide inputs for the industries'.

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