TECHNICAL AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION: IMPERATIVES FOR SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL STABILITY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper focused on technical and vocational education as imperatives for socio-economic and political stability in Nigeria. It reviewed the concept of technical education and vocational education. Historical attempt at vocational and technical education were delved into; especially as it concerned the pre-independence and post independence era. This paper saw the education, our colonial masters bequeathed to us as 'general' rather than "vocational/technical". However, imperatives such as vocational and technical education were critically analysed for socio-economic and political stability of Nigeria. The paper eloquently ex-rayed basic drawbacks of vocational and technical education in Nigeria to include: lack of funds, poor facilities, brain drain syndrome, staff retention problem, curriculum, inadequacy, apathy of political office holders/lawmakers. Furthermore, the way forward and its attendant solutions to these problems were proffered. The paper suggested that a wholistic reform towards technical and vocational education and a deliberate attempt to lift the programme is the only panacea to a technological ender ado in Nigeria with socio-economic and political stability in its purview.

Keywords: Technical, Vocational, Socio-Economic, Political, Education

Introduction

Socio-economic and political stability most probably emanate from technical and vocational education (Kutz, 2001). The National Policy on Education defined technical Education as "that aspect of education which leads to the acquisition of practical and applied skills as well as basic scientific knowledge". Under critical examination, technical and vocational education have been an integral part of national development strategies in many societies because of the impact on human resource development, productivity and economic growth.

It has been noted that technical and vocational education are designed to offer training to improve individual's general proficiency especially in relation to their present or future occupation. The provision of technical and vocational schools has a long history. Before the industrial revolution (between 1750 and 1830), the home and the "apprenticeship system" were the principal sources of vocational education. Societies were, however, forced by the decline of handiwork and specialization of occupational functions to develop institutions of vocational education.

Furthermore, the Columbia Encyclopedia of 2001 noted that manual training, involving general instruction in the use of hand tools was said to have developed initially in Scandinavia (C. 1866). Vocational education became popular in the elementary schools in the United States after 1880 and developed into courses in industrial training, book keeping, stenography and allied commercial work in both public and private institutions. Some of the early private trade schools in the US include Cooper Union (1859) and Pratt Institute (1887). The number of public and private vocational schools has greatly increased since 1900.

Without gainsaying, the current preoccupation with university education in Nigeria reduces socio-economic opportunities of those who are more oriented towards work than academics. Not everyone needs a university education. But who would employ them if everyone became a university graduate? As mentioned earlier, graduates of vocational and technical institutions are highly skilled entrepreneurs. Many of the so-called "expatriate engineers who are being paid huge sum of money in dollars to build the roads and bridges in Nigeria are graduates of vocational colleges, yet Nigeria is not taking the sector seriously.

The issue of youth unemployment appears to be shooting up the sky because many of them lack "employability skills" that are often acquired from vocational schools. The nation's poverty level was put at 70% and more than 91 million Nigerians are said to live on less than one dollar per day. Also it has been well documented that Nigeria's higher institutions lack the tools to give students the skill employers needs. It is evident that Nigeria has teething problems in social, economic and political stability. Are vocational and technical skills acquisition by the citizenry likely to be the panacea to these teething socio-economic and political problems. Let us critically examine the concepts of technical and vocational education.

Concept of Technical Education

The National Policy on Education defined technical education and vocational education 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 (NPE, 1981). Technical education therefore can be seen as the formal training of persons to become technicians in different occupations. Thus any education that is geared towards teaching technical skills and attitudes suitable to such skills can be regarded as technical education.

Furthermore, Uwaifo (2009) posited that technical education is the training of technically oriented personnel who are to be the initiators, facilitators and implementers of technological development of a nation. He opined that this training of its citizenry on the need to be technologically literate, would lead to self-reliance and sustainability. He stressed that technical education more than any other profession has direct impact on national welfare. However, technical education contributions are widespread and visible ranging from metal work technology, mechanical/automobile technology, electrical and electronic technology, building and woodwork technology etc. Consequently, technical education can serve as change agents not only for technical systems but also for many other-societal changes. The practical nature of technical education makes it unique in content and approach thereby requiring special case and attention. The inputs of technical education are so visible to the extent that even an illiterate could see when failures occur.

Concept of Vocational Education

The Nigerian National Policy on Education defined Vocational and Technical education 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 (NPE, 1981).

In his own views, Okoro (1993) defined vocational education as any form of education whose primary purpose is to prepare persons for employment in recognized occupations. Vocational training, he harped, deals with the training or retraining designed to prepare individuals to enter into a paid employment in any recognized occupation.

Iheanacho (2006) defined vocational education as that aspect of education which deals with business education, farming, book keeping, and bricklaying with the aim of acquiring vocational skills in these fields.

In the same vein, Ojimba (2012) had posited that vocational education encompasses fields of study such agricultural education, fine and applied arts education, business education and vocational trades in soap making, hairdressing, computer training etc.

Western Influence on Vocational and Technical Education

Iheanacho (2006) posited that advent of colonialism and western foreign influence were unfavourable to the area now called Nigeria in terms

of vocational and technical education. This influence of colonialism forced, our fledging indigenous technological development on a foundation of poorly mastered foreign technologies. In other words, western type of education came and hijacked our indigenous processes of technical education and vocational education. Invariably, we abandoned our indigenous technology and focused on foreign technology which we could neither properly adapt to our environment nor wholistically adopt to our alien environment.

Furthermore, the simple technical capabilities emanating from our local processes such as local gin brewing, wood carving, goldsmith and others should have been systematically and scientifically exploited and built into new forms of vocational and technical education. Indigenous technologies would have been given the chance to develop, no matter how crude they were. They would them metamorphose into foreign technologies.

In the same vein, our traditional technical and vocational education processes would have been recognized, formalized, encouraged, developed and institutionalized. If this had been the case, Nigeria would have been different today, because the indigenous technologies would have been vastly improved as viable alternatives to the foreign ones. Patriotic and economic reasons would have engineered us to develop our local technologies in order to compare and compete with foreign ones. In this circumstance, some economic strength would have been generated. This would have alienated the current cry of technology transfer emanating from government and policy makers.

Up to the end of the Second World War, there was no serious attempt, whatsoever to develop our crude indigenous technologies through the commitment to a viable technical and vocational exposure in our colonial educational system. Rather our colonial masters bequeathed to us a purely literary type of education. They foised on Nigerian people an educational culture that recorded low on technical and vocational education which provided no viable grounds for the development of indigenous technology and impeded any form of technological independence.

However, a nation without technology cannot in economic terms produce anything in “real” terms. In others words, they cannot produce secondary products like cars. The best they can do is to assemble cars and trucks from knocked down parts manufactured overseas. So the money earned from crude oil go back to the makers of the machines and owners of the technology used in drilling and refining our oil.

Imperatives of Socio - Economic and Political Stability in Nigeria

Esen (2002) had posited that technical and vocational education are the ingredients of socio-economic and political stability of a nation and its economic survival. For a long time now, Nigerians have adopted education

as the official ingredient for achieving socio-economic stabilities and political survival. Political stability and economic survival implies development in real economic terms and also improving the quality of life of the average Nigerian. It is in this perspective, that a re-examination of Nigeria's place in this fiercely competitive global economy is necessary.

Perhaps, if we had adopted vocational and technical education rather than general education as an instrument for national stability and economic survival, the nation would have been better for it. The classic examples of the Asian Tigers viz South Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia etc not to mention the economic giants such as Taiwan, China and Japan come to mind.

In terms of socio-economic and political stability, we want to be a producer nation, that is, producing mainly secondary goods rather there primary and crude raw materials. We do not want to remain a consumer nation. Since, socio-economic and political stability means sustained economic development, a transformation from a "consumer nation" to a "producer nation" becomes imperative. This is because a "consumer nation" in this competitive world economy is a dying nation. A developing nation must be willing and capable of producing at least a large proportion of its consumer goods.

In his own views, Obiefuna (1998) had earlier retorted to asking these questions. One may ask, he opined, "do Nigerians need to wear clothes?" Then we must have the capability to produce some of the clothes we need to wear; not just the raw cotton. Do we need to drink food drinks? Then, we must be willing and capable of producing finished goods like pronto and the like, rather than cocoa. Do we need to drive cars? Then, we must not only mine and stockpile iron ore/steel at Itakpe and Ajaokuta we must have the capability to transform this steel/iron ore into finished goods. It is not sufficient to assemble cars from completely knocked down parts but to manufacture them as is done in Japan, France, Germany etc. A developed Nigeria means a Nigeria where the average citizen enjoys an appreciable standard of living and we produce most of what we consume with substantial leftovers to sell to foreign countries.

However, is it "general education" that turns our hides and skin into shoes, or raw cotton into clothes? It is only the relevant technological skills that are only derived from vocational and technication education that will transform wood pulp into paper and our crude oil into a wide spectrum of petroleum consumer goods. Therefore, technical education and vocational education and not just "general education" are the real ingredients of socio-economic and political stability in Nigeria.

Though technical and vocational education seem to be the panacea for Nigeria's socio-economic and political problems in terms of stability, they are engrossed with teething problems such as:

(i) **Funding**: Universities in Nigeria are owned and funded by the Federal Government, state government and private individuals. In Nigeria, the allocation to education as a share of the GDP is quite minimal. Till date, government funding of vocational and technical programmes have not been impressive.

(ii) **Facilities:** Most technical education departments in Nigerian universities do not have laboratories or workshops space let alone usable equipment and facilities and where they exist, they are grossly inadequate, as the laboratories only have the items or equipment that were provided when the departments were established. Oryem – Oriya (2005) had posited that most technical education departments still depends on engineering workshops and lecturers to teach technical education concepts in this 21st century.

(iii) **Brain drain:** In the context of this paper, brain drain refers to the movement of lecturers of technical education which are needed for the socio-economic and technological advancement of Nigeria from one university to other universities or to other professionals (including politics), calling for better conditions of service. Akintunde (1989) had earlier identified five different components of brain drain:

- Experts in academics who moved to the industry where they get better pay for their services.
- Lecturers and students who leave the country to acquire more knowledge and skill but later refused to return.
- Lecturers who move from one country for other conditions of service.
- Skill professionals who abandon the practice of technical education in favour of other more lucrative economic activities and political appointments which are not related to their training.
- Skilled professionals, although in their field of training who do not devote their full attention to their job because of their effort to supplement their earning through other unrelated economic activities.

(iv) **Staff training and retention**: The training of academic staff is ordinarily a continuous exercise to ensure consistent improvement in the quality of their outputs. The training is two-fold: training to acquire minimum qualification (Ph.D) to teach and continued professional training. Both types of training can be acquired either locally or overseas. However, the salary and service benefits paid to technical education teachers in Nigeria is about the lowest in the world. This leads them to migrate to other countries especially the United States of America or local industry for better pay.

(v) **Staff situation**: Many universities across the country are inadequately staffed both qualitatively and quantitatively (Uwaifo, 2005). In most departments especially in technical education programme, the proportion of staff without Ph.D out numbers those with Ph.D. However, it is difficult to get people trained to the level of Ph.D because academic is not as attractive and commensurate to the effort, commitment and finances put in to acquire it; whereas a first "degree graduate" can function well in the industry and politics etc and earn good money.

(vi) **The curriculum of technical education**: The curriculum of a subject with practical content is generally organized into an average of 67% for the theoretical classes and 33% for laboratory. Olunloyo (2002) noted that one of the issues confronting the design of appropriate curriculum for technical education is preparing students for the shift from the fordist to ICT paradigm in technology practice. However, some problems inherent in curricular include:

- They are based on a foreign model
- There is a basic lack of textbooks and available ones are illustrated with examples from outside the local environment.
- There is usually a shortage of highly competent indigenous teaching and support staff with sufficiently wide practical experience of technology.
- The curricular are adjudged to be too academic and over-loaded with intellectual content in pure science and mathematics at the expense of basic engineering and technology.
- The teaching approach follows the conventional method of transforming knowledge across through the lecturer reading out to students, who would then take down notes. The educational system continues to place considerable value on this method of teaching.

(vii) **The apathy of political office holders/law makers**: Education generally, including technical education programmes has been grossly neglected in Nigeria. Technical educators have the greatest challenge of convincing the law markers on why they should give priority to the programme in allocating resources. However, if this lopsided attitude to the proper development of technical education remains, Nigeria's dream of becoming a technologically developed country will be a mirage.

The Way Forward

It is evident that Nigeria lags behind in preparing her workforce for the challenge of the rapidly changing global economy. For that, the nation must invest copiously in education with particular attention given to vocational and technical education. No nation would make any meaningful

socio-economic stride without viable educational institutions. This was buttressed by the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), noting that revitalizing this sector is among the ways to improve economic opportunities for the youths.

Furthermore, the NEEDs and SEEDs programmes should include vocational education and job training program in their economic growth and development strategies as part of poverty alleviation and assist the unemployed for job search. This is the way things are set up in many societies, and Nigeria should adopt and adapt the system if she wants to move forward. However, political rhetoric without action will not solve Nigeria's problems. The progress of Nigeria lies in the productivity of its citizens and quality education and genuine vocational programs hold the key.

The 1991 policy of the world bank harped on the development of a skilled labour force which makes an important contribution to development. The challenges are to use employer, private and public training capacities effectively to train workers for jobs that use their skills and to do so efficiently in developing economies increasingly influence technological change and open to international competition. Training in the private sector by private employers and in private training institutions can be the most effective and efficient way to develop the skills of the force.

It is pertinent to note that government at all levels must be pressured to devote the recommended 26% of their budgets to education. Out of this, we should demand that at least about 50% should be allocated to technical – vocational education representing roughly 10% of the total budgets. Rather than spend tax payers money establishing General Studies Universities, the existing ones should be well funded so that both staff and students will be motivated to make their contributions to the development of the country.

Another major problem of our education is that every government wants to give an impression that it is doing something. Thus policies that are not well thought out are introduced and changed arbitrarily and whimsically. There should be an end to policy somersaults. We should build an architecture of technical schools with the universities of technology at the apex. Those who choose the technical career path should be able to proceed from the senior secondary schools to doctorate degrees without feeling inferior in the least to graduates of the general studies institutions.

Technicians and all who pass through our technical – oriented schools ought to be adequately and equitably remunerated. The dichotomy in the civil service between holders of "General Studies" certificates and technical certificates must not only be abolished as a matter of policy but in the thinking and attitude of government officials. The truth of the matter is that technicians or technologists are not inferior to their counterparts. It is a

matter of career choice and we should make this very clear to our children right from the primary schools.

Conclusion

From the fore-going statements, it is evident that technical and vocational education stand as imperatives for socio-economic and political stability in Nigeria. Jimn Gang (2004) posited that there is need for a total overhauling of the educational system and that in many fields, course work available only lead to rising unemployment, poverty and misery. He concluded that the situation could only be curbed if syllabuses were innovated, re-engineered or re-designed to include disciplines that build up the fighter-spirit needed for today's intellectual battles of life. For progress to be made in Nigeria, the challenges confronting technical education must be recognized and fought vigorously. Since a focus on technical – vocational education will help ameliorate the incessant youth restiveness in Nigeria, advocating for a technically-oriented economy will not be in the wrong direction. Socio-economic stability depends on a sound national economy and this also depends on a skilled national workforce. Hence, political upheaval becomes a thing of the past as the citizens are gainfully employed. A comprehensive reform towards technical and vocational education and a deliberate attempt to uplift the programme is the only panacea to a technological enderado in Nigeria.

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