

MANAGING THE NIGERIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM: A BLUEPRINT FOR ECONOMIC DIVERSIFICATION AND EMANCIPATION

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Abstract

It is axiomatic to underscore that a well-managed education system is deemed globally a crucial prerequisite for not only the growth and development of every society or geopolitical space but also one of the veritable hallmarks of a diversified and functional economy that will, in the long run, culminate in economic emancipation of the people. The education industry faces enormous challenges in several African countries, and Nigeria is no exception. Even though education remains the bedrock or superstructure on which other societal structures such as politics, culture, religion, economics, etc. are laid; it is quite disheartening that education in Nigeria is not effectively and efficiently managed for economic diversification and the emancipation of the recipients of such education. Indeed, the industry faces innumerable challenges, especially in contemporary times when the education system is essentially functional. The hydra-headed nature of the challenges facing Nigeria's educational system has inevitably resulted in different dimensions of economic quagmires entangling the country and making most of its citizens find it extremely difficult to escape and survive. The level of dysfunction in various sections of the education system has made it seemingly intractable to palliate the economic predicaments confronting the country, let alone emancipate it from the monoculture of its overdependence on oil. The authors of this treatise are diagnostic in their approaches to understanding the intricacies of the challenges facing the Nigerian education system and deprive it of being a veritable tool for a functional economy as well as a catalyst for the economic emancipation of its people. Through analyses of relevant literature, this paper amplifies the conceptual and operational dimensions of the identified challenges, offers probable suggestions on how the challenges can be tackled, and finally concludes.

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1. Introduction

Contrary to the mainstream view of education as a process of teaching and learning, usually at schools, colleges, or universities, education can be conceptualized as a way in which members of a society are trained about the knowledge and skills deemed necessary for survival in such a society (Akinpelu, 2018). Education serves as the defining essence of human life, separating humanity from lower animals. Hence, every society endeavors to provide education in various forms to guide its youth toward embracing their desired cultural norms and ways of life. As is the case in societies worldwide, education has been an inherent aspect of Nigerian life since time immemorial. In pre-colonial Nigeria, education served as a potent tool for imparting essential skills, ethics, customs, traditions, and values to every child, empowering them to participate actively and contribute to society. Analyzing two key national objectives of education outlined in the National Policy on Education (NPE - FRN, 2013) reveals their pivotal role in securing the economic liberation of the Nigerian populace. First, the emphasis on instilling appropriate values and attitudes crucial for individual and societal survival underscores the importance of fostering a strong ethical framework and communal ethos. Second, the emphasis on acquiring the necessary skills, abilities, and competencies, encompassing both mental and physical aspects, provides individuals with the tools needed to thrive within their society. Together, these provisions form the cornerstone for the economic empowerment of the Nigerian citizenry.

Education, as outlined in these provisions, serves as a vehicle for cultivating citizens with positive values and equipping them with essential skills for personal economic empowerment and overall national development. This approach aligns with the imperative to diversify the economy and foster a dynamic and inclusive growth trajectory for the nation. Thus, education in a broad sense is a process through which an individual acquires physical, mental, and social capabilities and/or skills demanded by the society in which he/she is born to function (Uwadia, 2010). It is to a nation what the mind is to the body. For instance, just as a diseased mind is handicapped in the coordination and direction of bodily activities, a dysfunctional educational system will also affect the functioning of a geopolitical space or country in terms of the emancipation of its citizens as well as the diversification of its economy.

Similarly, Education can be conceptualized as a weapon for combating ignorance, poverty, and disease; as a bridge between confusion and comprehension, like a *dam* for conserving man's store of civilization and for generating the power to move to greater civilization; as a rocket for transporting man from a state of intellectual subservience to a state of intellectual sovereignty (Yoloye, 1980). Indeed, education equips individuals with the skills necessary to leverage economic resources, enabling them to overcome poverty. Moreover, it fosters the development of crucial social skills and facilitates effective social interactions and relationships. Additionally, education propels the acquisition of technical capacities essential for economic emancipation and diversification, ultimately leading to enhanced living standards for recipients. A prime example of a nation that restructured its education system to reflect national circumstances and promote the economic liberation of its citizens is South Korea (Yoloye, 1980). Despite being categorized as a very poor country in the 1960s, South Korea has undergone a remarkable transformation as an economic powerhouse. This transformation has been largely driven by the aggressive improvement of the country's education system, highlighting the critical role of education in fostering economic development and national advancement.

Before colonialism began, unemployment was a rare phenomenon in Nigeria. This is because Nigerians and people in other African geopolitical spaces are considered highly entrepreneurial, and therefore, they are productively engaged. Nigerians across the then three regions – West, East, and North – were highly

entrepreneurial as indigenous and traditional education practiced invariably amplified social responsibility, job orientation, political participation as well as spiritual and moral responsibilities (Okoli, 2011). In other words, education was geared toward functionality, and there was no room for idleness. This indigenous education was not for mere cognition (head knowledge) but was important to the socio-economic advancement of the individual and society at large. This, perhaps, might have in one way or another influenced the current emphasis on the need for increased entrepreneurial education through the development of problem-solving curricula and the promotion of lifelong education.

However, the beginning of the colonial era in Nigeria marked a downward trend in emphasis on indigenous or traditional education systems. Indeed, the colonial overlords did not introduce any new system of education to Africa in general and Nigeria in particular, but rather distorted the already existing structure. It was an education for underdevelopment (Rodney, 1972). Therefore, unlike pre-colonial African education that grew out of the immediate environment and available resources, the colonial education structure reveals that it was not intended either to emancipate Africans economically, socially, or otherwise or to enhance the diversification of its economy. Rather, the education system is configured to make the people of Nigeria subservient to the dictates of the colonial government.

In post-colonial and contemporary times, several changes were made in the NPE, but up to now, they have not been implemented to reflect the educational blueprints contained in the Policy. For instance, to what extent has secondary education in Nigeria (as a post-basic education) been able to train students for *career development, prepare them for the world of work, and help them contribute positively to society* (Osuji and Koko, 2018) as contained in the NPE (FRN, 2013)? Meanwhile, the essence of secondary education is to give the youth the right to acquire the necessary skills, knowledge, attitudes, and values that will enable them to lead life and become productive individuals in society.

Tertiary education is the linchpin of a nation's advancement, contributing to both human and material resources. In essence, it serves as the primary driver of human capital formation, which is indispensable for fostering economic growth and overall development. This viewpoint has been supported by reputable sources such as the World Bank (1999) and scholars like Alade (2006). Tertiary education in Nigeria plays a pivotal role in various aspects of national development, as outlined in the National Policy on Education (FGN, 2013). It serves as a critical platform for training high-level workers, instilling proper values, fostering intellectual capacity development, acquiring physical and intellectual skills, and promoting community service. These functions underscore the significance of tertiary education in shaping the trajectory of the nation's socio-economic and cultural landscape. However, as lofty as these objectives are, they are not reflected in the lives of most graduates who find it extremely difficult to be employed because of their lack of employable skills.

Hence, it is plausible to emphasize that the execution of educational policies in Nigeria may not have prioritized the comprehensive development of individuals or facilitated their attainment of deeper insight and mastery over themselves and their surroundings (Akanbi and Jekayinfa, 2019). This perspective underscores potential shortcomings in the implementation of educational policies, possibly impeding the achievement of their intended objectives regarding personal growth and empowerment. For quite some time, the education system in Nigeria has been criticized for its theoretical nature and its failure to adequately address the needs, desires, and aspirations of its recipients. According to Osokoya (2016), the focus of this education system is primarily on producing individuals who are geared toward seeking white-collar jobs, despite the predominantly agrarian environment. Consequently, learners struggle to develop a deeper understanding of themselves, their surroundings, and the

rapidly changing world. This critique underscores the need for educational reforms that better align with the realities of the modern era and empower learners to navigate dynamic environments effectively.

2. Trajectories of Nigeria's Education System: Conceptual Clarifications

2.1 Traditional Education System

Before the advent of colonial rule, Nigerian societies had a traditional educational system. Pre-colonial traditional education was informal and concerned with training individuals to equip them with the skills needed to become useful persons within society and to survive in it. Children were taught traditional crafts, trades, and vocational skills through an apprenticeship system. This system inculcates in the citizenry an appreciation of their heritage, culture, ethics, and civics, and an appreciation of social obligations. On the whole, traditional education, though informal, was comprehensive, integrated, and holistic. This underscored the primacy of society and not individuals (Ajayi, 2017).

2.2 Western Education System

The genesis of Western education in Nigeria can be traced to the period of Christian missionaries. Various missionary groups emerged, including the Methodists, Anglicans, and Roman Catholics, all from Europe from the early 1840s, as well as the Baptist Mission, from America that came in 1850. The essence of this system of education was to proselytize and gain more converts into Christendom.

2.3 Colonial Education System

The educational system introduced by the colonialists was modeled on the British system. It was laden with a heavier emphasis on subservient attitudes and white-collar skills. It was ineluctably based on the assumptions of colonial and capitalist societies. This meant that colonial education induced attitudes of human inequality and, in practice, underpinned the domination of the weak by the strong, especially in the economic field (Nyere, 1967). All through the colonial era, therefore, education was restricted both in scope and quality to the base-level requirements of the regimes and was structured in such a way as not to threaten the hegemony of the imperial order. Hence, colonial education alienated its beneficiaries from their own culture and entrenched cultural imperialism in society. Therefore, through this 'imported' education, some Nigerians become deluded hybrids, seeing themselves as world citizens and not the citizens of their immediate environment (Akinpelu, 2018). This system of education was principally predicated on 'how much' its recipients could consume with whatever they accumulated rather than what they could create (Olutayo, 2010).

2.4 Post-Colonial Nigeria's Education System

At independence in 1960, Nigeria inherited a colonial education system that was largely designed to meet the needs of the colonial administration. They were mainly grammar schools that produced white-collar, job-oriented labor. Practically no technical curriculum exists in the school system. The colonialists were not interested in producing the engineers, scientists, and other professionals needed to develop the young Nigerian nation. In Nigeria, the education system comprises three distinct sectors: basic education, which spans nine years; post-basic or senior secondary education, which lasts three years; and tertiary education, which varies in duration from four to six years depending on the chosen program of study (FRN, 2013). Suffice it to say that at present, the entire education system is in a pitiable state (Ajayi, 2017). There is no gainsaying the fact that the major stakeholders in the educational system, namely, parents, the government, and the larger society, have reduced the school system to merely avenues for 'certificate' acquisition, the products for 'jobs', notably white-collar ones, and no more (Akinpelu, 2018). It is common knowledge that education is expected to achieve certain objectives, one of which is to produce good citizens - men and women of good character. The current education system has

invariably failed to equip its products with the enduring values of society, such as honesty, integrity, transparency, discipline, justice, and a sense of fairness, etc. (Lina Markauskaite, 2018).

2.5 Economic Emancipation

Emancipation, according to the Memidex dictionary (www.dictionary.com), is the process of liberation or the state of being free. It signifies liberation from constraints and freedom from social inhibitions and conventions. Economic emancipation can therefore be viewed in the context of the freedom of an individual from poverty and/or financial challenges and an appreciable level of standard of living. A country can be said to be economically emancipated if it can efficiently and effectively harness its resources, get its citizens gainfully engaged, and provide for the needs of its citizens without being heavily dependent on foreign economies to survive.

2.6 Economic diversification

This is the process of dynamics in an economy that is characterized by shifting an economy away from a single income source (mono-cultural economy) to multiple sources (dynamic economy) from a growing range of sectors and markets. In the meantime, this approach has been adopted and applied by several countries as a strategy to encourage positive economic growth and development. For instance, Nigeria will diversify its economy when it exploits resources and develops other sectors of its economy and the potential of its citizens to reach fullness.

3. The Nigerian Education System: A panoramic view of its inherent dysfunctions

The Nigerian education system is currently inundated with a myriad of challenges such as poor funding, inadequate infrastructure, lack of teaching and learning tools, indiscipline, poor governance, the politicization of education, and corruption among others (Jaiyeoba, 2018) as well incessant strike actions, brain drain, poor quality, and relevance of output (Babalola, 2011).

However, as lofty and laudable as the goals of Nigerian education as enunciated in the NPE (FRN, 2013), there exists a wide chasm between what is amplified in the policy document and what is practiced in the Nigerian education system. Perhaps, this lacuna became pronounced because there was no total decolonization of the mentality of the key educational stakeholders or actors coupled with the faulty academic content of the curriculum. Numerous scholars have strongly argued that a significant proportion of university graduates are unemployable or face challenges in securing jobs due to a lack of essential skills necessary for their chosen fields (Babalola, 2011; Ajayi, 2017; Akinpelu, 2018; Adedeji, 2022). They contend that the educational curriculum places greater emphasis on cognitive development while neglecting functional education, which is holistic in terms of human development (Akinpelu, 2005; Innocent-Ene, 2008).

4. Managing the Nigerian Education System for Economic Diversification and Emancipation: Hints and Useful Strategies

Every education system in the global community is established and saddled with the responsibility of transmitting knowledge that can transform the economy and modernize society; building the human capacity needed for accelerated economic growth and development as well as influencing the diversification of the economy to get people engaged optimally, alleviate poverty, and improve their standard of living (Jaiyeoba, 2018; Adedeji, 2022). Thus, managing the Nigerian education system is a herculean task that requires serious and concerted efforts from all stakeholders. Hence, designing an education system to fit domestic or local needs, resources, culture, etc., boils down to 'engineering issues'. A critical review of the education system since independence shows that Nigeria has been operating on inherited education systems coupled with faulty curricula (Yoloye, 1980). Serious attention is therefore needed to the engineering and restructuring of the Nigerian education system considering each of the following suggested strategies.

4.1 Creation of a Symbiotic Nexus between *Town and Gown*

There is a disconnect between the Nigerian education system and organically formed indigenous knowledge. Consequently, not only is the current system clearly at variance with the primordial indigenous system, but there is also an obvious separation between the *town* and the *gown*. For example, the Nigerian university system, in particular, and the educational system in general, do not interact as much with the immediate environment. Policymakers and society at large today place much emphasis on the acquisition of university degrees, with less emphasis on vocational and technical training as well as relevant skills that will enhance the quality of people living in every society.

The reality is that the *gown* cannot ignore the *town* because the developmental processes of any geopolitical space cannot be divorced from its organically formed knowledge and Indigenous knowledge culture. Instances abound in every society in Nigeria, as in many other parts of Africa, that most of the ‘so-called’ educated elites and eggheads depend more on roadside technicians, many of whom do not have a university education to make certain aspects of their daily life more meaningful (Ajayi, 2017). Also, most accident victims are treated relatively easily in traditional orthopedic hospitals, many cases of which could have attracted amputation. Unfortunately, the system pays less attention to these “unschooled persons and their indigenous knowledge” because they never saw the four walls of the educational system. A rider to the above question is to ask the pertinent question: what have our universities done to improve the food crisis, debt crisis, social crisis, etc.? This put into question the local relevance of many Nigerian higher-learning institutions.

Individuals who receive high-quality tertiary education are expected to demonstrate capabilities in addressing and resolving various societal challenges spanning economic, technological, socio-political, moral, and developmental domains. However, a discernible gap persists between the knowledge acquired within educational institutions and the practical skills necessary for effectively addressing these challenges (Qiang, 2003). Therefore, it is imperative to incorporate principles from African traditional education, including functionalism, into modern educational policies to bridge this gap.

4.2 *Glocalization* of Curricula Content and Amplification of Vocational and Entrepreneurial Education

One of the fundamental features of the colonial educational legacy was the uncritical adoption of an education system that placed a premium on academic degrees to the disparagement of technical and vocational careers. Prioritizing vocational and technical education is paramount at this critical juncture. Such education should be structured to incorporate entrepreneurial training and support the diversification of the economy, aiming to create a nation that is not only robust and self-sufficient but also economically liberated. Consequently, it is imperative to enhance the curricula at all educational levels, making them more innovative, contemporary, pertinent, and oriented toward practical application rather than theoretical concepts.

To reposition the education system for economic diversification and emancipation, robust collaboration between industry and educational institutions is indispensable. This collaboration should focus on three interconnected innovation paths: curriculum revision, skills training, and R&D initiatives. These efforts must be tailored to meet the evolving needs of society, both domestically and internationally (Olasehinde-Williams, 2018). In reality, no nation develops and emancipates itself from every form of economic doldrums by copying others verbatim. It must ‘indigenize’ what is learned from other nations. However, such indigenization is impossible without the *ownership* and *control* of the means of survival (Akinpelu, 2018).

The system of education inherited from British colonial education was too deeply ingrained in Western concepts. To this day, the system is still deficient in terms of being culturally centered; there is apparent difficulty in successfully producing people who are deeply ingrained in the culture, values, and norms of their people. In other words, the current educational system alienates beneficiaries from their indigenous values and makes them

beholden to foreign values. There should therefore be a working mechanism to make the educational system meaningful, relevant, and sustainable for Nigerian and African cultures, while at the same time having a critical appreciation of other cultures (Ajayi, 2017). It is significant to deconstruct the knowledge presented by the colonial overlords to bring the knowledge of the forebears to the fore by showing how their intricate and progressive knowledge, with the use of their contextual understanding of their environment, helped to create empires (Akinpelu, 2018). The Asian Tigers (South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong) hitherto experimented with this, and this resulted in their economic emancipation.

4.3 Skill-Based Education System and Emphasis on *Sabiticates*² rather than Mere Certificates

Sabiticate is equal to what we *sabi* or what we know in term of the practical application of knowledge acquired to solve problems. What is the relevance of a paper certificate that cannot empower its bearer? This implies that neither a country nor its citizens can be economically emancipated until the practicality and application of what is known are achieved. There is a need for education to acquire knowledge and not just certificate acquisition. The realities of the contemporary Nigerian situation call for more job creators rather than job seekers because the employment market is already saturated. Therefore, emphasis should shift from mere certificates to skill acquisition. Every educational institution in Nigeria at all levels must brace to ensure that its products are sufficiently well-equipped to respond to the myriad challenges facing the education system. It is important to realize that the more educated, in the Western way of life, Nigerians become, the more they distance themselves from the obvious opportunities around them. However, Nigerians employ almost irrelevant means of labor, to create new social relationships that depend on foreign knowledge and ideas. Meanwhile, means of labor are central to understanding the nature of labor and the objects on which it operates. It is therefore unfortunate that both the means of labor and labor depend on the imported object of labor such that attention is drawn more to the external than to contextual existential realities (Akinpelu, 2018).

Students should be re-oriented for survival strategies with less emphasis placed on ‘theoretical distinction and credits’. Various levels of education must begin to take an interest in how Nigerian students can compete for survival. To do so, they need to learn to appreciate societal needs based on society’s defined needs (Akinpelu, 2018). It is expedient for the Nigerian education system to embrace and learn from the forebears in science, medicine, agriculture, socio-economic relations, and so on, while the so-called knowledge from abroad should be clinically studied to find out its relevance to the country’s survival (Akinpelu, 2018).

4.4 Need for Quality Teachers and Adequate Remuneration

The significance of teachers cannot be overemphasized, as they serve as the cornerstone of a nation’s educational system. Without well-prepared and highly skilled teachers, a nation cannot advance beyond its educators’ capabilities. It is therefore essential that teachers receive thorough education and pedagogical training, particularly in teaching high-level curricula. Failing to provide such training would inadvertently communicate to students that their aim is merely to attain academic adequacy rather than striving for academic excellence (UNESCO, 1996, p. 37). Furthermore, learners should be consistently reminded of the practical implications of their daily classroom learning to help them understand the significance of their education in shaping their future pursuits. Teachers at all levels of education should also be motivated by being adequately remunerated as and when due (Ajayi, 2017). The current pauperization of teachers in social circumstances of unbridled materialism is not likely to bring out the best in them, no matter their level of commitment. Is it any wonder that the average teacher in the

²This indicates the skills, ingenuities and practical knowledge that characterized the Indigenous and organic knowledge system as distinct from the theoretical ‘head knowledge’ that is predicated on degrees/certificates (the term was neologized and used by Akinpelu (2018).

Nigerian school system today, regardless of his/her level of commitment, has had to look for additional means of sustenance or coping strategies? The point being emphasized, therefore, is that teachers as major stakeholders also need adequate motivation, a sense of life, and recognition for optimal performance. Furthermore, teachers themselves should demonstrate greater commitment to the teaching of the students entrusted to them (Ajayi, 2017).

4.5 Emphasizing Value-Oriented Education

Before the introduction of Western education, Nigeria had a thriving traditional education system. This system placed great importance on values such as industry, integrity, honesty, transparency, and contentment, all of which were highly respected (Fafunwa, 1974). These virtues were deeply ingrained in Nigerian culture, evident in traditional religious practices, dances, dramas, folklore, and arts and crafts. Similarly, the concept of "omoluwabi," which refers to a person of good character in all aspects, served as the central focus of educational efforts aimed at Nigerian children (Fabamwo, 2012). Traditional education placed great emphasis on this concept, recognizing that the goal was not only to acquire skills but also to nurture good character in individuals and prepare them to become valuable members of society.

In contemporary Nigeria, individuals emerging from educational institutions must not only acquire knowledge but also internalize and demonstrate positive attitudes to effectively integrate as productive members of society. It is significant to stress that the resources with which Nigeria has been bestowed since independence are adequately sufficient to diversify its economy and develop the country's human capital, thereby emancipating its citizens from the shackles of economic savagery comparable to what other countries, especially in South East Asia, many of whom went through the same colonial experience, have done. Given all the resources found in Nigeria, one is tempted to speculate that indiscipline at all levels is a cog in the wheel of steady educational development and economic emancipation. Therefore, the Nigerian government must build an education system that advocates for increased moral fiber and downplays ethical absurdities and materialism.

4.6 Funding of Education

Sufficient funding for the education sector is crucial if Nigeria genuinely aims to make its education system relevant and effective. A substantial increase in budgetary allocation to the education sector is needed to support the enhancement of both content and processes in education. From elementary school to the highest level of education, the scarcity of essential equipment and materials crucial for practical learning is increasing. This deficiency can be directly linked to inadequate funding for the education sector. Government expenditure on education is continually dwindling, more so in recent years, against the backdrop of fluctuations in national economic fortunes (Ajayi, 2017). There is an urgent need to ensure adequate funding to provide world-class physical structures, functional teaching equipment, and a social environment conducive to qualitative education for the common people.

4.7 Taming the Ferocity of Corrupt Practices in all Strata of the Education Sector

In modern Nigeria, there is a prevalent moral decline both within and outside the school environment. Teachers and administrators exhibit decreased dedication to their duties, leading to a devaluation of the certificates awarded by schools. Additionally, examination malpractice, in its octopod dimensions, has become rampant across all educational levels, with parents, teachers, and other stakeholders often complicit and actively supporting and facilitating this unethical behavior. Compounding this issue is the stark reality that a significant proportion of graduates emerging from the education system lack the essential technical and professional skills required to thrive in modern workplaces. Hence, beyond the scarcity of available jobs, a considerable number of Nigerian graduates are simply not equipped with the skills necessary for employment.

5. Conclusion

Diversification of the Nigerian economy and the economic emancipation of its citizens require different diagnoses. In summary, there is no single solution to the question of economic emancipation in Nigeria. What is certain is that true economic emancipation and diversification of the Nigerian economy can only be realized when the country's economy is growing at its full potential, which can be attained through a well-planned and implemented educational policy and critical overhauling of the education system. Despite the glaring enormous challenges Nigeria and its citizens face in the educational system, giant strides could be made toward ensuring that education at all levels is structured to liberate the country from the present state of the economic quagmire it finds itself. Given a more favorable environment, therefore, the country could make more contributions to the economic emancipation of its people through a well-overhauled education system.

Education for economic emancipation and diversification is not a commodity that can be lifted from a shell and given life. Nor do mere policy statements and statements of intent bring them into being. Therefore, all the education stakeholders, in all circumstances, must partake in the sacrosanct responsibility of overhauling the Nigerian education system to embrace functionalism. Perhaps, it may be apt at this juncture to quote one of the thought-provoking remarks succinctly made by Professor Toyin Falola to amplify the essence of diversifying the Nigerian economy. He said *inter alia*:

We are in the age of the knowledge economy. Knowledge economies are more lucrative than oil economies. Oil is a depreciating asset; knowledge is not. Oil needs a knowledge economy to generate progress: oil as a commodity requires a greater amount of knowledge to make it useful. Oil does not create the human capital needed to move society forward; knowledge does. The knowledge economy is linked to all forms of technologies and information that generate progress (Falola, 2016, page 58).

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