

ACHIEVEMENT OF MINIMUM STANDARDS IN HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEMS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The choice of the topic for this paper was informed by current controversies and actions on the issue of how to ensure the establishment and maintenance of minimum standards in Nigerian education at all levels of the system. It is well acknowledged that every national education system is like a house. If one wants a strong house, that can withstand tropical wind, rain, sun and storm, then one must ensure that every stage of the construction, right from the foundation to the roofing, and even the cosmetic painting, meets minimum standards and expectations for that type of house. It is not therefore surprising that critics of the education system from both within and outside it are locked in serious debate on how to establish minimum standards, what the minimum standards ought to be, and how to guarantee their operation. One should therefore be concerned with issues of expectations, standards, quality and excellence in education. The thrust of this paper is therefore, to ensure that while we contend with the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 26 which asserted that "Everyone has the right to education", we should not sacrifice quality on the altar of quantitative growth.

Introduction

Education is the most powerful instrument devised by man for his own improvement. It is central to all aspects of any nation's economy. This is because it prepares people to undertake specific tasks and employment functions, which are essential for the transformation of their environment. Consequently, every education system is developed and structured according to many diverse and distinct needs and demands of the society that established it. However, education is constantly changing and adapting itself to new demands and circumstances, hence it exhibits the characteristics of a living organism which according to Lester Smith (1994), not only changes with years but remains ever sensitive to place and time.

An analysis of the concept of minimum standards in education as a means of responding positively to the challenges of relevance, quality and excellence in our educational system naturally generates a lot of controversy. For example, we cannot discuss the topic of this paper without examining, if only tangentially, the concept of national educational philosophy, aims and objectives, nor can one dispose of the debate without answering difficult questions about how to maintain a balance between the quantitative and qualitative growth of the education system.

Evidence gathered over decades from Nigeria and other countries showed that shortage of talents and skills needed for development can decisively retard economic progress. Hence, the National Policy on Education (2004) points to the need to expand not only access to education in order to make it more easily available to all citizens, but also the desirability of not sacrificing quality on the altar of quantitative growth. Investment in education must therefore strike a balance between quality and quantity in educational provisions if education is to serve as a veritable instrument for self-reliance, social reconstruction and national development.

Indeed, this issue has been the dividing line between some leading economists and educationists in Nigeria and elsewhere, otherwise, both of them, according to George Bereday (1990), do hold the conviction that poor countries become rich only after they invest wisely in education. It is believed that quantitative and qualitative educations are not antithetical or mutually exclusive pursuits. Minimum standards can be maintained and even attain excellence in teaching and learning if education system is purposefully and systematically expanded. The problem, until recently, was the unplanned, un-coordinated, uncontrolled, and non-directional expansion of the system in panic or political response to the popular demand for more education for more people.

Standards and Quality Education

Standards and quality in education are two inseparable faces of the same coin and one cannot have one without the other. It is only when certain expected standards had been met that one can claim that there is quality in the system. Standard is defined for this purpose, as a definite level of excellence or adequacy required, aimed at, or possible, a criterion or an established or accepted model. Quality is also defined as grade of goodness or excellence. Implicit in any discussion of standards and quality in education is the recognition and acceptance that one expect goodness and excellence in the education we provide in schools and other institutions where the teaching-learning enterprise is carried on. How the standards and quality are established and evaluated remain the issues of continuing debate.

One can also approach the issue of standards and quality from the perspective of organizational and administrative effectiveness and efficiency. To be able to meet expected standards and quality prescriptions, it is demanded that the educational institutions should be both effective and efficient. The two terms are not synonymous, as there exists some clear-cut and heuristic distinctions between them.

Herbert (2000) approached the issue of standards and productivity in education by expressing that the school is a dynamic interactive social system with two basic dimensions. The first is the normative or sociological dimension consisting of institutional roles and expectations designed to accomplish the goals of the school. The second dimension refers to the idiographic or personal and psychological factors in which individuals project their personalities, abilities, interests and needs. He stressed that the extent to which the needs, organizational roles expectations and the needs and dispositions of the individual personalities are congruent is a measure of the satisfaction of standards and quality.

Getzels and Guba (1993) postulated on the intricate relationship between the individual and his organization in terms of goal achievement and the social behaviour of the members. Projecting these to the school system, one sees that whatever is said about standards and quality, it ends up passing value judgments on the performance of teachers and students; the central actors on the educational stage, within the context of the expected roles and functions of the school system. That is, though many factors contribute to quality in education or lack of it; the evaluation of the education system performance level is predicated upon the informed assumption that all inputs into the system from policies to programmes, from material and monetary resources to administrative support and leadership are all meant to cultivate a conducive teaching-learning environment for teachers and students to attain established education goals.

Measurement of Standards and Quality

On the measurement of standards and quality in education, Igwe in Nwagwu (1989) noted that this can be done from a number of different levels and perspectives. Firstly, one can adopt the approach of evaluating measurable knowledge and skills such as the students' levels of acquisition and learning in reading, writing, arithmetic (the traditional 3Rs), and other

subjects. Objective and multiple-choice questions which now dominate many public examinations easily provide data to compare performance standards from one student to another, from one school to another, and from one year to another. Most of the current arguments on falling standards of education center around this perception of quality in education.

The second approach to measuring quality in education is to examine the degree of participation in schooling of children of school age in the country, and the quality of teaching and learning likely to take place judging from the qualifications, experience and motivation of the teachers, school equipment and facilities, the scope and variety of the instructional programme or curriculum, teacher-student ratio, and the entering behaviour and characteristics of the students.

Thirdly, quality in education can be measured by comparing the cost of providing education to the benefits derived therefrom. This economist's approach is concerned with rate-of-return or cost-benefit analysis both from the private and social investment viewpoint. The problems associated with identifying and qualifying the cost and benefits of education, are obvious and well known.

Woodhall (1997) suggested that one should see the application of cost-benefit analysis to educational investment as a means of appraising the future benefits of educating the citizens in the light of the costs that must be incurred in the present, as a guide to rational allocation of available scarce resources. If maximum benefits are achieved from investment in education, then one can safely claim that we have provided high quality education is provided which has met the expected societal standards of relevance and utility in meeting individual and national needs or solving personal and communal problems.

In discussing minimum standards and quality in education within the context of costs and benefits of education, it is necessary to point out that people want education for many different reasons. Therefore, standards and expectations naturally become relative from individual perceptions and need dispositions. Some people want education for its own sake, some out of curiosity, some because they are keen to acquire or maintain the social prestige conferred by education. Perhaps this explains why rich men and women want doctoral degrees conferred on them by universities, in 'honoris causa', while roadside mechanics mount big sign-boards proudly proclaiming themselves to be 'auto-engineers', the watch repairers clam to be 'doctor of watches' and native doctors clam to be 'professors of all diseases'. There are of course people who want to acquire the knowledge and professional skills that will help them obtain jobs to earn a decent living in the true sense of what the students euphemistically now call "meal tickets".

Bereday (1996) described the desire for education by people as partly noble and partly expedient. He argues that although the case for universality and popularization of education is projected strongly on the need for equalization of opportunities for all citizens and national socio-economic development, yet society directly acknowledges and assumes that those who have the benefits of longer and better education in qualitatively standardized institutions progress better and faster in life. Those inadvertently denied the opportunity to receive education of good standards and quality invariably feel deprived and either blame society for their non-upward social mobility, or resort to cheating or even violent and other criminal ways to settle the score with their better favoured citizens. It is a sad commentary on current societal attitudes and values that people should want education with little regard to the intrinsic and lasting quality of such education. This perhaps explains why some scholars have warned that people should not want so much education quite so badly, since so many want it for the wrong reasons.

Standards in Higher Education

Considering the institutional context of this topic, it is pertinent to advance from general issues of standards and quality in education to examine the particular situation in Nigeria's higher educational institutions. For purposes of analysis attention on the universities, which have become the whipping dog of the romantic critics of education of present times will be the focus of discussion. Minimum standards of education are established to ensure that general aims and specific objectives of particular type or level of education are attained. Therefore, there is the need to briefly summarize the assumed functions and uses of a university in order to lay the theoretical framework upon which to paste the quality and minimum standards specifications. Clark (1990) coined the term "multiversity" to reflect the multiplicity of functions and complexity of structure and composition of modern universities.

A point that cannot be glossed over when examining standards in universities is that these institutions of higher learning are not outside, but inside the general social fabric of a given era, and hence have to mirror the aspirations and expectations of that society and age. Over the years, universities all over the world have developed to perform the functions of teaching, research, and service to the society. Alan (2003) observed that this traditional triad of functions seems to obscure more than it reveals. This, he argued was because an analysis of the full range of university functions yields a startling picture of a complex enterprise with a wide spectrum of purposes, all which are somehow inter-related and interactive, yet many of which seem to be antithetical and mutually contradictory. Some of the functions we expected of universities to perform and in each of these many functions, minimum standards will be achieved while indeed the attainment of excellence in them is the ultimate objective. The major functions and uses of the university institutions are:

- 1) Provision of liberal education for the students. The concept of liberal education is imprecise and elastic, but it consists of higher general or basic education which prepares students to participate intelligently and meaningfully in societal living through the acquisition of fundamental knowledge, skills, values and attitudes.
- 2) Preparation of youths to engage in productive activities as workers in the various professions, sub professions and occupations. Universities select, train, stratify and channel skilled manpower into the nation's employment arena.
- 3) Discovery of new knowledge through research activities. The contributions of universities through research to the social, economic, scientific and technological development of a country are incalculable, and may be direct through the work of the university staff, or indirect through the work of graduates of the universities in their palaces of work.
- 4) Serving as custodians of a people's cultural heritage through the study and preservation of their history, artifacts and inventions. Universities become museum centers and bastions of conservatism against the impatient invading forces of modernization and change.
- 5) Providing a protected environment in which a privileged and elite community of scholars and students can make research, detach, inform, then objective and impartial criticism of the larger society. By their actions and practices more than by their utterances, universities should serve as models to the society.
- 6) Serving as a reservoir of specialized talents, which can be tapped and freely utilized by external bodies and agencies, including governments, companies and military outfits on an ad hoc basis, or for consultancy purposes. The number of academics serving on external boards on part-time basis and on secondment in governments for limited periods is innumerable. Their expertise and contributions have often been acknowledged. Indeed, universities lose some of their best brains through these special relationships and services to the wider society.

- 7) Universities serve to re-classify people and provide avenue of social upward mobility, especially of youths from low socio-economic backgrounds, disadvantaged or minority groups, races and tribes. The universities make the sky the limit for intelligent, hard working students, the age and sex factors notwithstanding.
- 8) Universities serve as socialization and maturation centers where youths are delayed for a further three to six years after secondary schooling in their march into the uncertainties of adult life. Most students mellow down and become quite responsible adults by the time they graduate and thus society is saved the trauma of coping with too many radical, jobless, irresponsible or apathetic if not anti-social youths. This custodial and socialization function is often underestimated or even not recognized when some people discuss standards and quality in higher education.
- 9) Universities serve also as continuing education centers for thousands of youths and adults who, for many different reasons, cannot pursue full time regular courses on campus. They organize amongst others extra-mural classes, sandwich courses, matured students programmes (MSP), business schools and consultancy services. They also run extension projects through such faculties as agriculture and medicine. All these are outreach programmes, which have brought town and gown closer together and thus destroyed the image of universities as ivory towers that care very little about the welfare of those outside its walls. However, it must ask whether these worthwhile programmes meet minimum standards specifications of the National Universities Commission (NUC) and the National Commission for Colleges of Educations (NCCE), etc or are they money spinning consultancy services for the cash strapped institutions of higher learning with no regard for quality in terms of course duration, teaching commitment, and provision of instructional materials. Indeed, the need to monitor enforcement of minimum standards is more imperative in respect of outreach programmes than perhaps with full-time on campus programmes.

The central issue of concern is the extent to which the universities have performed these functions as expected of them, while at the same time adjusting to the pressures of mass participation. Some critics accused the universities of abandoning the primary function of teaching and scholarly research in order to engage in all sorts of activities with no regard for standards. The university, in its 'multiversity' concept, they argued, was becoming too many things to too many people, hence it was partially at war with itself, as it became an inconsistent and sometimes absurd institution. For example, though it espouses equality of opportunities, it remains an elitist, class society. The university was mimicking and serving society rather slavishly, even as it simultaneously criticizes the same society, almost mercilessly, for its ills and failures.

With massive, often unplanned expansion in student enrolment, one wonders how standards and quality can be maintained. What had been said about the functions and the concerns about the universities also apply to a great extent to other types of higher education, including the polytechnics and colleges of education.

Criteria for determining Minimum Standards

For some obvious reasons, Nigeria has been awakened to the need to establish minimum standards at different levels of the education system. The minimum standards popularly conceptualized represent the least tolerable or expected or acceptable level of performance of our educational institutions. It is also recognized that the institutions by themselves have in the majority of cases, failed to live up to the expected minimum standards and alarmingly seem also incapable of putting themselves up by their boot-straps. Therefore

government has in recent times constituted 'visitation panels' to assess the situation in the various institutions with a view to redeeming their dwindling fortunes and images and revitalizing them through life-line special grants and other task force activities. While such governmental actions and direct control measures tend to erode the autonomy of the institutions, one hastens to say this is an inescapable natural fall-out since government owns and funds them and hence cannot watch helplessly as conditions deteriorate.

The teaching force constitutes a major input of every educational institution, and whatever standards exist can be attributed in great measure to the quantity and quality of available instructional staff. Such flattering governmental declarations as "No education system can rise above the quality of its teachers," are no mere rhetorics or exaggerated assessment of the importance and worth of teachers. To a great extent, whatever standards the teachers as a group exhibit and maintain will determine the minimum standards to expect in that institution. For one thing, no one can give what he has not got. For another, if due to low morale, poor conditions of service, lack of commitment and devotion to duty, and inability to achieve job satisfaction, the teachers fail or refuse to perform up to or above minimum standards, then the institution, and indeed the nation, are condemned to mediocrity. Therefore, the consulting clinic of all prescriptions for high standard qualitative education remains the quality and motivation of the teaching force and by logical extension, all those other school staff who provide support services for the instructional personnel.

The next critical input of the teaching-learning enterprise is the student. One must continuously ask about the quality of students given by parents and society to educate. Since the educative process is conducted in a structured hierarchy of levels and types of educational institutions, the standard of the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes brought by students from one level to another will necessarily affect, if not determine, the quality of education possible at the next higher level or dependent type. The inter-dependency of primary, secondary and higher education cannot be over emphasized. Hence the introduction of the post-jamb screening examination by many higher institutions in Nigeria to ensure that only the best candidates are admitted.

Nwagwu (1987) has warned Governments that although compulsory education may be desirable, yet every law enacted to enforce it is double-edged. First, is the responsibility of parents to ensure that, their children who are of school-going age do attend classes. On the other hand, government itself has the legal responsibility to make necessary arrangements and provisions to guarantee that children, when they leave their parents' homes do not merely "attend schools" but are actually given the opportunity "to learn and be educated," government, parents, teachers and students have their own perceptions of good education and expectations of minimum standards, it behooves all concerned to take measures to eliminate or at least minimize distractive and disruptive behaviours of some students who have no sense of mission in schooling, and who therefore make the attainment of standard qualitative education in schools, colleges and universities impossible.

The instructional environment is another dimension in the consideration of what we must do to achieve acceptable standards and quality in education. There is no gainsaying the fact that the quality of the classrooms, laboratories, libraries, workshops, and hostels in terms of infrastructure, equipment and other facilities greatly affect the school climate, and consequently inter personal relationships of administrators and staff, staff and students, and others in the system. The current poor infrastructural situation in most of our educational institutions at all levels give cause for alarm, as obviously attainment and maintenance of standards will remain a mirage or pipe dream.

The issue of continued existence of illegal universities in the country is an outstanding threat to the standard of education in Nigeria. This is happening before the National

Universities Commission (UNC). As at the year 2010, up to 34 illegal universities are existing in the country (Julius Okogie in Vanguard, April 1, 2010).

Leadership and management remain another important ingredient in the achievement of minimum standards and quality in education. The organization and administration of the education system is a complex activity and it requires people with vision and initiative; leaders who possess professional, technical and human relations skills, people who are devoted and committed to the upliftment of the system to new heights of excellence and respectability. Unfortunately, Mackinnon (1999), observed that the chances of politics and godfatherism often bring into the leadership of many governmental institutions some persons who have mediocre ability, who lack common sense, or who are more concerned with selfish and sectional interests than with public and institutional welfare. Even with some academic leaders and politicians in educational leadership position, though they may have a good understanding of educational problems and issues and would like to act for the welfare of the system, yet the transient and insecure nature of their tenure in office may lead them to become impatient with academic matters because they may have an axe to grind, a section of voters, power brokers, or vested interest groups to please, or there is a controversy they would gladly avoid for survival sake.

Furthermore, the executive and administrative decision on institutions, teacher-students ratio, class size, minimum entry requirements, and basic qualifications for teaching staff are examples of factors, which determine or influence the standard or quality of education possible in given institutions.

Quite recently, the National Universities Commission (NUC) had set the doctorate degree (Ph.D) as the minimum teaching qualification in Nigeria Universities. For example, while the International Labour Organization (ILO) prescribes 25 as the ideal class size, (UNICA1999), while in Nigeria a class size of 40 is adopted but classes of 50 students or more are tolerated and almost the pattern. We do not need the crystal ball to see that everything else being equal, better educational standards will be attained in a class of 25 students than in one of 50.

Conclusion

Conditions of teaching and learning in our educational institutions must be elevated to a pedestal of tolerable adequacy and satisfaction since deplorable conditions are likely to dehumanize and demoralize rather than motivate people to achieve high standards and excellence. For those who manage and administer the education system, they must be given enough freedom and autonomy to discharge their responsibilities. This has to be exercised within the framework of established laws and order, rules and regulations, and division of labour.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study the following recommendations were made:

- (1) Since our educational outputs and productivity are logically determined by the objectives, inputs and processes, ideal quality conditions should be made available in the parameters of teacher supply, students characteristics, provision of infrastructural facilities, instructional materials and governmental leadership.
- (2) Institutional authorities must determine their priorities and ensure rational and judicious allocation and utilization of available resources as well as accountability for their actions and decisions.

- (3) There should be known channels of consultations and communications that will result in effective management, supervision and evaluation of policies and programmes.
- (4) Government, educational administrators, teachers, students, parents and the general public should sponsor and support education for all to the extent that each is capable of profiting from it.

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