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University Education for Youth Empowerment: Policy/ Management Issues and Strategies for Improvement

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Abstract

Policy and management issues that inhibit quality university education for youth empowerment in Nigeria were discussed in this paper. These issues include access, gender disparity in enrolment, high enrolment growth, staff quality and quantity, funding, cultism and poor quality of infrastructure. Unless these issues are addressed, the extent to which university education could enhance youth empowerment would remain limited. Relevant policy and management strategies for improvement were suggested.

Introduction

Youth empowerment is an ongoing process of human growth and development; a framework for youth that focuses in their capacities, strengths and developmental needs (Edginton & deOlivera, 1995). Youth empowerment promotes greater participation and involvement of youth in the socioeconomic and public affairs of the community. Through empowerment, youths are provided with opportunities to develop the competencies they need to become successful contributors to their communities (Pittman & Wright, 1991).

One of the best ways to enhance youth empowerment is through quality university education. Ololube (2007) implied that university education contributes to helping an individual develop personality as a person, acquire skills and professional abilities for life endeavours, develop the right types of

attitudes, understanding, concepts and values and be productive member of his/her society. Hence, it is believed that with high-quality university education in place, youth empowerment is guaranteed (Obanya, 2002; Amedeker, 2005, Onuselogu, 2008). Unfortunately, there are certain issues in Nigerian University education that reduces quality and hinder youth empowerment.

Policy and Management Issues in Nigerian Universities that Inhibit Youth Empowerment

For quite some time now, youth empowerment through university education appears to be experiencing some policy and management and problems as a result of policy gaps. For instance, university staff and students are required to comply with the policies governing the management of the university. The National Universities Commission (NUC, 2002) emphasized that for the purpose of ensuring equal access to education generally and higher education particularly; certain indices are put in place to cater for the various segments of the society: student enrolment ratio by disciplines, advantaged and disadvantaged states/zones; female and male; handicapped, and quota system. This is in line with the NUC memorandum (1996) which stated as follows:

- 1) That access to university education is available to all Nigerians who have the basic post-secondary qualification. In a 6-3-3-4 system, successful completion of senior secondary education primes the student for the four-year higher education programme. Access to university education, therefore, must seek to cover everyone in the society and be as comprehensive as possible for the individual..
- 2) For the purpose of ensuring equal access to education generally and higher education particularly; certain indices are put in place to cater for the various segments of the society. These indices include: advantaged and disadvantaged states/zones; female and male; handicapped, federal character; and adult education. For this purpose, certain states/zones in the country have been labelled “disadvantaged” as a result of imbalance in educational opportunities; candidates from such states therefore are given certain concessions in admission criteria and cut-off scores.

This classification of some states as educationally disadvantaged contradicts the policy on access to university education. This implies that a student from

an area that is designated as educationally advantaged, who scored a high mark may not get admitted while a student with a low mark from the educationally disadvantaged gets admission. By so doing, the issue of class, religion and federal character affects employment and admission into tertiary institutions thus having special cut off marks is a hindrance to youth empowerment (Okafor, 2007). This poses a problem to equality of opportunities, and does not encourage youth empowerment.

It is also expected that access to university education should be available to all Nigerians who have the basic post-secondary qualification. But then, there is issue of the limitation of spaces in the universities, which impose restrictions on access (Okebukola, 2002). Mbagwu (2007) pointed out that if they had their way, almost every product of the senior secondary system will want a place in a university. However, statistics from the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board confirm that they cannot have their way. Because over time, on the average, less than 13% of those who apply for admission are able to secure placement as inferred from table 1:

There are also gender issues in enrolment. Okebukola (2003) disclosed that of total population of 562,780 enrolment into universities, 178,995 are female. This is clear 34% of the gross enrolment data (FME,2003). When examined in a little more detail, sixteen of the universities have more than 40% of their students as females (Okafor, 2007). The current situation shows that female figures for some zones/states in the country are also very low due to cultural and/or religious reasons. Low enrolment of females implies that only few females are being empowered through university education.

Another issue is the proportion of students enrolled into Arts and Science Courses. As stated in the Federal Ministry of Education (FME, 2003) education status report, the proportion of students admitted for technology/science is 30% as against 54.9% in arts/humanities. The causes of the age long disparities between arts/humanities programmes on the other, are both social and economic. As Mbagwu (2007) noted, these causes include:

- Historically, the society first requires larger numbers of graduates from the arts/humanities disciplines than from technology/science
- The bureaucratic structure of society (by line and staff principle) favours those in the humanities/arts (as administrators) and places

them in charge of power and resource control in organizations as personnel managers, accountants, planners, and contracts and supplies managers. Students draft more to arts/humanities programme to obtain these advantages and there is skewing of admission towards accounting and public/business administration in the universities.

- The cost of technology and science education, the rigours of their courses and their demand for uncommon aptitudes, are inherent deterrents to entry to these disciplines.
- Lack of adequate special incentive to lure students to technology and science programmes in the face of the deterrents.
- The prevailing poor quality of training in technology and science programmes which tends to cultivate incompetence.

This issue of enrolment in science and technology courses needs serious attention because the Nigerian education system presently places strong emphasis on science and technology education (Ezeliora, 2003). This is in response to the rapid advancement in science and technology so that the country will be able to surge forward in keeping pace with the process of modernisation like the rest of the world (Lorsbach & Tobin, 2007). Low enrolment in sciences is, therefore, becoming inhibitive, not only for the empowerment of the Nigerian youth but also for socio-economic, and technological development of the society as a whole.

Next is the issue of enrolment growth. If there is an area in which the growth of university education in Nigeria has been mercurial, it is in the area of student's enrolment and participation in the university system. Okebukola (2003) asserted that enrolment into the Nigerian universities has been growing steadily over the last 54 years. From a takeoff enrolment of 210 students in 1948 at the university college Ibadan to six universities in 1962 enrolling a total of 23,000 students. By 1996, the number of universities stood at 37 with a student population of 234,581. The rate of growth quickened beginning from 1988 when the first set of products of the universal primary education (UPE) scheme which began in 1976 came knocking at the doors of the universities for admission. In the 1980s, the annual growth rate averaged 12%. The total number of students in all Nigerian universities by March 2002 was in the excess of 526,780 (Mbagwu,

2007). A large student population has implication for management in terms of the provision of staffing, space and teaching and learning facilities. Without the provision of adequate resources to meet up with teeming students' enrolment, the goal of youth empowerment cannot be meaningfully achieved.

Another issue has to with secret cults in campuses. Among the multi-faceted problems of the Nigerian Universities, cultism and examination malpractices appear to pose the greatest danger (FME, 2004). The number of secret cults in Nigerian universities is alarming and their activities frightening. They were known to have committed or to be committing such heinous crimes as rape, arson armed robbery and heartless murder (Onuselogu, 2008). It is not clear what lures young undergraduates into these weird acts but Elegbeleye (2001) noted that some go into it to indulge in non-conformist attitudes; to attract to themselves undue privileges and protection; to boost personal ego, to attract wild attention at gatherings; to constitute counter force against suspected opposition to their activities, to exhibit youthful exuberance; etc. The campus cults engaged in armed robbery cases, destruction of lives and property, murder, maiming, raping, prostitution, arson, looting, examination malpractices, drug abuse, alcoholism, victimization and intimidation of both staff and students and disruption of academic programmes and calendar blackmailing of the lecturers and diversion of students' interest and commitments to their studies. It is evident that the impact of secret cults is posing a grave threat to the Nigerian educational system and it is likely that under the secret cult siege, the aims and objectives of university education for youth empowerment in Nigeria cannot be achieved.

Next is the issue of funding. Writing on university finances, Okeke (2005) identified inadequate funding of public universities as the prime cause of the problems of the Nigerian universities. Government have not been able to provide sufficient funds for the universities and the university management have not benefited immensely from private sector contributions to the funding of public universities (Akpa, 2007). The constraints of funding manifest in the lack of student accommodation, crowded classrooms, teaching reduced to chalk and talk, frustrated lecturers who must hustle for additional income, libraries whose acquisition votes have been nominal for several years and impoverished research. These in turn retard progress of science, creativity, technology and scholarship; on the kind and quality of individual academic work, and on the teaching and empowerment of students (Man-sheng (2004)). There is real danger that financial inadequacy can

make and indeed, has made; it difficult for many institutions of higher education, particularly the universities, to create enabling environment for youth empowerment.

Staff quality and quantity is another issue that hinders youth empowerment in Nigerian Universities. Staff retention has become increasing difficult. Indeed the loss of talented staff – the “brain drain” is one of the most critical problems currently facing the university system (Ajayi, 1996). Studies commissioned by World Bank (2002) on the brain drain phenomena have shown that it is the most highly trained, and the most experienced personnel in areas of dire need in Africa (medicine, engineering, the natural sciences, computer science) who tend to get out of the universities. The trend has been and continues to be that very substantial members of highly qualified academics leave the universities. Many of those who have fled the universities and taken up employment elsewhere are now in occupations in which they are not directly practicing their particular highly skilled professions (Mbagwu, 2007). Higher salaries and better fringe benefits by other institutions and sectors within the country or elsewhere abroad have often been cited as the major factor attracting academic staff away from the universities. But Ajayi (1996) believed that many young lecturers leave because they are unable to advance themselves by research and publication or by acquiring advanced degrees; while senior lecturers and professors have obligation to growing families and may have suffered sharp declines in real income. Thus, while the chance to earn higher salary and better conditions of service are important, many of those who are committed to their professions or specializations had migrated, and are migrating because they believe that they can use their professional training more effectively and thus, work more productively elsewhere; because they cannot secure much needed research funds and for other resources for their work at home. Without quality, competent and productive staff in adequate numbers, the dreams of youth empowerment will continue to be a mirage in Nigerian universities.

Poor quality of infrastructure is another key issue. Infrastructure in this sense includes both physical and material resources. Nigerian universities have been poor in physical infrastructure construction and capital development especially buildings in a way that hinders excellence in university education (Isayku, 2002). Material resources including equipment in schools such as science laboratory equipped for various forms of practical consumables are inadequate. It is clear that there are lack of maintenance culture, insufficiency of funds to carry out repairs, and poor procurement have led to a steady

running down of existing facilities-buildings, equipment and other infrastructure. Indeed, some buildings have deteriorated to the point to where universities might end up losing present structures. At the same time, unplanned expansion in response to increasing demand for higher education, has led to an overstretching of physical resources. According to (Okebukola, 2003) because of large student numbers the space requirements for classroom, lecture theatre, laboratories and workshops are hardly met in over 70% of the universities.

Facilities are stretched for some reasons. Ajayi (1996) identified two problems besides those connected with deterioration of facilities. One is that many of the older universities were planned when much smaller numbers of students and staff were envisaged. Thus, expansion has required not merely the addition of one or two classroom blocks, but an increase to facilities available in general buildings. Another is that a number of universities were built at a time when centralization was fashionable, but recent trends by universities are for faculties to decentralize, for example, to create colleges or schools-now require additional support structures in terms of new buildings and building annexes. The deterioration and shortages of physical facilities – lecture rooms and laboratories, staff and student housing, staff offices, equipment and supplies – constitute the most limiting factor for extending universities capacity in Nigeria presently. Inadequate resources no doubt undermine opportunities for excellence in the performance of expected tasks for youth empowerment. Thus, while the demand for higher education continues to increase unabated, the present capacities of universities cannot meet the demand by those qualified to enter university. Those that have opportunity to gain admission do not reap maximum benefits and cannot be optimally empowered by such university education.

Policy and Management Strategies for Improvement

In view of the issues in university management that hinder youth empowerment, the following management and policy strategies are suggested for improvement:

- A) *Improved access and student management:*
 - i. The policy on quota system of admissions should be abolished. Students should be admitted into Universities of their choice based on merit and not on ethnic grounds.

- ii. Government should initiate policies to encourage students' interest and enrolment in higher education institutions other than universities. This would reduce the high enrolment trend in universities.
- iii. Further expansion of students population in public universities should be slowed down at the same time, efforts should be made to achieve the 60.40 admission ratio in favour of science based disciplines. This policy should be pursued by state, federal and privately owned universities.
- iv. Each institution should adopt a code of conduct for students. A handbook of the code should be made available to all students on enrolment. This would help in reducing cultism indiscipline among students.
- v. Each university management should provide mandatory guidance and counseling services to facilitate appropriate choice of careers and prepare students for life as paid employees or preferably, self – employed persons and creators of jobs for others. This is the essence of youth empowerment.
- vi. The fight against secret cult activities should not be left on the university managements alone, all hands must be on deck government, religious organizations, parents, staff, students, law enforcement agencies, and the entire society should be actively involved in the fight to sanitize the campuses and make their environment conducive for effective teaching and learning to take place.

B. Staff management

- i. Experienced academics must be encouraged to remain in service. Improved staff remuneration and conditions of service could be used to achieve this.
- ii. As a result of rapid increase in knowledge, scientific and technological advancement, encouragement should be given for the academic staff to attend conferences within and outside Nigeria.
- iii. Continuous training opportunities should be given to all academics; technological, secretarial and administrative staff through staff development programmes.
- iv. University management should encourage staff exchange programme between Nigeria universities and overseas institutions.

- v. Fresh but competent lecturers should be employed and given adequate training in teaching through short courses and seminars in pedagogy.

C. Financial empowerment

- i. The present practice of commercial ventures undertaking in our universities should continue provided they are profitable. Currently, various institutions engage in such ventures as bookshops, printing presses, publishing, real estate and transport services, machines production, farming, hospitality and consultancy services. The rewards would contribute significantly to funding recurrent needs of the universities.
- ii. Universities should be allowed to charge realistic and commercial fees for other non-academic services provided this would definitely increase the internally generated revenue of the universities.
- iii. University management should effectively implement Federal government partnership reform initiative to boost private sector collaboration in public education management. Multi-sectoral partnerships (companies, banks, PTA, Organizations associations, banks and industries) should be mobilized and sensitized to partnership with government and provide resources for public universities.
- iv. Transparency and accountability initiatives should be practiced by university management to minimize misappropriation and mismanagement of funds.

D. Facilities

- i. To enhance quality university education for youth empowerment, the quality of financial resource management must be assured. Resources voted for education must be properly disbursed and accounted for, and the regular monitored to ensure its effective use.
- ii. Existing facilities for teaching and learning should be maintained while provision should continue to be made for replacement of obsolete and unserviceable equipment.
- iii. Considering the amount of books, journals and equipment delivered to the universities through the World Bank Credit facility and overwhelming positive reactions received from the various universities, it is recommended that government should continue the provision of funds

through the NUC for the continuous procurement of books, journals and maintenance of equipment in order to strengthen facilities in the universities.

Conclusion

Promoting youth empowerment through university education is one of the strategies increasingly adopted by various countries around the world that want to encourage socio-economic and techno-scientific development. Unfortunately, issues in access, gender disparity in enrolment, high enrolment growth, staff quality and quantity, funding, cultism and poor quality of infrastructure characterise university education in Nigeria. The prevalence of these issues cannot in any way, create an enabling environment for meaningful empowerment of youths. Where the youths in universities are not meaningfully empowered through university education, is quite difficult for them to recognise opportunities and maximise their capabilities for productive living. These, hindering issues, therefore must to be urgently addressed using relevant policy and management strategies if the dream of youth empowerment through university education would be realised.

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Table 1:

Number of Applicants and Admissions into Nigerian Universities

Year	Applications	Admissions	Admission %
1995/96	508,280	32,473	6.4
1996/97	472,362	76,430	16.2
1997/98	419,807	72,791	17.3
2000-2001	550,399	60,718	11.0

Source: Mbagwu, L. (2007). *Effectiveness of University management in Nigeria*. Masters' degree thesis: University of Abuja.