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REFORMING TERTIARY EDUCATION IN NIGERIA: IDENTIFYING CHALLENGES AND EXPLORING STRATEGIC SOLUTIONS

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ABSTRACT
Policy reform is a planned change to existing laws guiding the administration of an organization toward improving standards to achieve desired objectives. It provides limits and direction to bring about positive change in a system and for the organization to function effectively for growth and development. The school is a social system and has its set objectives like any other system guided by policies therefore, the tertiary education system is not spared from policy reforms. However, it is worrisome to observe that there are trending issues between government policy reforms on tertiary education and stakeholders of the educational system on funding, infrastructural provision, and staff welfare, resulting in incessant industrial actions. The paper critically reviewed both past and present policy reforms on tertiary education in Nigeria, the different models that were adopted, and how effective policies are been implemented. The paper equally analyzed the effectiveness of both current and past implementation strategies that were implored and their achievements in the administration of tertiary education in Nigeria. In conclusion, the paper posits that there is inconsistency and lack of commitment on the part of the government in policy reforms and therefore, suggests among others that policy reforms should be all-inclusive.

KEYWORDS: *Education Reforms, Education Administration, Education Policy, Tertiary Education*

INTRODUCTION

Globally, education is pivotal to the development of individuals and society. It is the vehicle for social transformation of society. Nation's development is a reflection of the state of education; thus, nations ensure that the citizens imbibe the right skills and knowledge that enable individuals to live a good life and contribute to the development of society. Against this backdrop, the nation's educational systems are changed or redefined to reflect the new reality. Nigeria's educational system is facing a series of challenges that have hindered the development of the country. Some of these challenges are the increased number of unemployable tertiary institution graduates, and the crisis in tertiary education as a result of incessant strikes among others. Therefore, there is a clarion call to adopt systematic and efficient ways of solving these challenges. So, the onus of providing a labour force capable of providing the right skills and knowledge is the responsibility of tertiary educational institutions.

Tertiary education is an educational level that is saddled with the onus tasks of providing quality learning that is accessible, lifelong learning programmes that inculcate the learners with skills and knowledge that enable them to be self-reliance and provide the needed manpower needs of society (FRN, 2014). It, therefore, means that tertiary education living up to the expectation the products must allied with the market demand. Educational institutions must provide a workforce that will be absorbed in the labour market and in tune with international best practices.

It becomes pertinent to interrogate the existing tertiary education in Nigeria to ascertain if it is achieving the desired result. In so doing, it will elicit questions: why is tertiary institution graduate unemployment increasing in Nigeria? Why is Nigeria's unemployment rate very high? Why the increase in the rate of poverty? What kinds of reforms are there in tandem with international best practices? These and others have prompted the researcher to explore the historical perspective of tertiary educational reform in Nigeria. The trust of the paper is to evaluate the various reforms in tertiary education to ascertain if it is realigning to global best practices**,** relevant, and effective service delivery at the same time accessible and affordable.

The method adopted for the study is analytical philosophical research. Research is said to be philosophical when it uses speculative, analytical or perspective as a scientific attempt for the logical presentation of ideas, understand the consistency and helps to clarify assumption and their nature to generate ideas into knowledge (Nwankaywa and Iheanchor, 2021: Zukauskag et al, 2018). Analytical helps to break down the concepts to natural languages from complexity to simplicity and clarity (Bendee, 2018). It is on this note that the source of data will be based on secondary sources, journals, magazines and other literature relevant to the research problem. The scope of the study is within the boundaries of Nigeria's tertiary education.

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Tertiary education consists of the third level acquired after post-secondary education where higher degrees and certificates are obtained. It consists of colleges of education, health, science, technology and universities. It includes all specialized institutions both online, private and public-owned institutions that learners acquire higher certificates at the expiration of secondary education and have passed the prescribed examination. The study will not only contribute to a repository of knowledge for practitioners in education but also to policy formulators and implementers.

Tertiary Education

Tertiary education is acknowledged as a veritable vehicle for social transformation and development of individuals and society. It is the third and most prestigious citadels of learning where individual potential is discovered, groomed and developed for the better and improvement of the individual and society. It is education designed to cater for graduates of secondary education and prepare them for further level of educational pursuits. Tertiary education consists of the colleges of education, sciences, health and other specialized institutions and universities saddled with the responsibilities of developing the manpower needs of society. It also consists of online-offline courses, private and public schools, and undergraduate and postgraduate students with the onus task of disseminating knowledge and discovering new knowledge that will help to solve societal problems.

The demand and agitation for tertiary education can be traced back to the colonial days when Yaba College was established. It became the first Nigerian institution to provide training for Nigerians in the fields of medicine, teacher training, veterinary medicine, agriculture, and engineering among others. Despite the breakthrough, the nationalists bombarded the institution with a series of criticisms among them were that the curriculum was inferior and not capable of providing the needs of Nigerians, the certificates were not recognized outside Nigeria and the certificate qualified Nigerians as junior cadres in the civil service.

Therefore, there was constant agitation for a full-fledged university by nationalists, and this led to the establishment of two commissions: the Commission of Higher Education in the Colonies, the Asquith Commission and the Commission on Higher Education in West Africa, the Elliot Commission. It is pertinent to note that the two commissions, the Asquith and Elliot commissions reports contributed to the establishment of the University of Ibadan in 1948 (Adeoti, 2015). The University College Ibadan was established and affiliated with the University of London to award degrees (Nnokan, 2021*).* UCI become the only university college in Nigeria until Nigeria's independence.

Like the Yaba College, the University of Ibadan was vehemently criticized that the curriculum was too British-oriented and the certificates issued were similar to the ones given to private candidates who sat for London University exams. Thus, there was the need for a full-fledged university with autonomy akin to what operates in London. Nigeria's preparation for political independence, an indigenous commission headed by Eric Ashby in April 1959 with the mandate to conduct an investigation on the needs of Nigeria on higher education in the next 20 years. The resultant effects of the commission led to regional universities in the then three regions of Nigeria. University of Nigeria, Nsukka in 1960 in the East, in the West the University of Ife and Ahmadu Bello University Zaria in the North in 1962. Interesting to note that UCI was granted a full-fledged university in 1962, the University of Lagos in 1962, University of Benin in 1970. From this humble beginning higher education has grown in heights and bounds and the demand for higher also on the increase.

Another interesting milestone in the development of higher education was the creation of states which led to state ownership of universities and subsequent deregulation of universities that ushered private ownership of universities. With the increasing demand for higher education, it becomes imperative to mention the roles of higher education in the economy of a nation. Fundamentally, higher education is used for the development of individuals and society, for the transmission of national goals and it is crucial to the success and growth of Nigeria (Onyeike, 2015). The national policy on education recognized higher education as essentially a vehicle for not only cementing national unity, and manpower development of a nation but also promoting and encouraging scholarships and community services (FRN, 2014). It is also the purview of higher education to disseminate knowledge and discover knowledge for the development of society. Despite these laudable roles of higher education, there is still a hip-cup in achieving the desired goals. These had called for educational reform to ensure that educational systems are in turn with international best practices.

Educational Policy and Reform

The concept of educational reform became very crucial due to the need to have an education that aligns with societal core values Educational reform is changing the goals of public education to reflect the needs and values of contemporary society (Encyclopedia Dictionary). Education that guarantees equal access and adequate opportunities at all levels. Education that will provide the needed manpower and sustainable development of the environment and society. Unfortunately, tertiary education in Nigeria is faced with numerous challenges that if not addressed will be reduced to glorified secondary institutions. It is against this backdrop that the government consciously introduced certain policies and programmes that will help to improve the learning outcome. It can be a

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deliberate policy to change the structure of the school, the methodology and the administrative process. It is imperative to have an operational definition of educational reform. First, education is the process of impacting skills and knowledge to the recipients for a positive change in their behaviours. In the school system, it involves the process of training and learning under the tutelage of a certified teacher. Reform means improving the system for better performance and attainment of the predetermined goals. In the school system, it involves deliberate efforts by the government to improve the educational system for better service delivery and outcomes. Educational reform in higher education in Nigeria refers to deliberate and systematic changes aimed at improving the quality, accessibility, relevance, and efficiency of tertiary education in the country (Ololube, 2016).

Educational reform, therefore is the deliberate efforts of the government to restructure the entire educational resources for optimal utilization and attainment of educational goals. it is a continual effort to modify and improve the institution of education to align with the values and needs of changing society (Merriam Webster). The reform could be in the methodologies, the learning process or the administrative process. For the study, educational reforms in higher education will be interested in some of the policies that have been introduced in higher education in the area of admission of students, funding, quality assurance, deregulation of tertiary education, and carrying capacity.

Education policy reforms in the true meaning of the word are aimed at improving existing frameworks in practices, procedures, and processes in achieving educational goals for the overall benefit of society. The assumption is that existing laws and regulations guiding the educational sector are at variance with current social political and economic realities to deliver the objectives of education. For clarity of the meaning of reform, the Oxford English Dictionary defined it thus; the amendment, or altering for the better, of some faulty state of things, especially of a corrupt or oppressive political institution or practice; the removal of some abuse or wrong.

Reforms in the education section in the history and introduction of Western Education have taken different dimensions and shapes all in the spirit to add value and improve on the achievements of educational goals. Stakeholders of the educational sector in various platforms have agitated for a deal from the government at all levels to reform policies to improve standards. Dakuku, (2023) as reported in Premium Times, cried out and called for a state of emergency and a complete reset of education in Nigeria. This means a holistic reform program that will position our education sector as the engine for social and economic growth. According to him, the Asian Tigers; Singapore, Malaysia, and South Korea, amongst others, can attribute their successes to the fact that they scaled up investments in education, as well as in research and development, that enhanced human capital development.

Information on Tertiary Education Policy Reforms in Nigeria

There have been a lot of reforms in the educational sector, both at the junior, senior, and tertiary levels. These reforms are aimed at fostering the frontiers for the expansion of educationin Nigeria due to the rising demand for higher education. However, there is a sharp increase in the number of tertiary institutions in Nigeria both privately and government-owned, all to provide skills but sadly the needed objectives and gains are yet to be achieved failing to keep pace with the changing dynamics of the labour market and fast-paced economy (Taibat, 2020).

According to Andreas Schleicher, Director of Education and Skills at the OECD, it is important to think more systematically about what we want to achieve from curriculum design, instead of continuing to add more “things” to what is being taught, as is the norm with many tertiary institutions in Nigeria.

She further stated that the higher education sector needs urgent improvement to ensure young Nigerians do not fall further behind their peers across the globe. An underperforming education system coupled with neglectful administration has failed millions of young people, and we need systematic change across the country to redress the problem. It is well due for institutions to look beyond providing students with a customary degree and instead begin to help them build a strong skill set to find suitable employment.

Review of Reforms in Tertiary Education

UNESCO, (2015) educational policy consists of the principles and government policies
in the educational sphere and the collection of laws and rules that govern the operation of education systems. National Policy on Education in Nigeria: As stated in the national policy on education
include the following:

a) a free and democratic society.
b) a just and egalitarian society.
c) a united, strong and self-reliant nation and
d) a great and dynamic economy and e) A land of bright and full opportunities for all citizens

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Policy on Education was first published in 1977, and the 2nd and 3rd editions were published in 1981 and 1993 respectively in keeping with the dynamics of social change and the demands on education. The fourth edition was in 2004. This edition was necessitated by some policy innovations and changes, and the need to update the 3rd edition (1998). the fifth edition was published in 2007. The Reforms while the sixth edition in 2013. The sixth edition accommodated some recent developments.

Education Policy Reforms and Administration in Tertiary Education in Nigeria.

Educational administration is the management of a school system. It involves providing leadership for the education of students, developing curricula, implementing assessments, and managing human and material resources to achieve specific goals. It also includes the management of processes within a school system to ensure the achievement of particular outcomes. To ensure an effective school system in higher education, the skills acquired must align with the demands of the labour market hence stakeholders of the education system come up with reforms to shape education in Nigeria.

The school system is a social system with specific objectives. The process of achieving the objectives of the school system relies on quality administrative processes that require policy formulation and implementation. According to Eman and Jordan, (2019), the concept of the education process has been accompanied by the concept of school administration so that it expanded to include the administrative aspects and the technical aspects in an integrated form aimed at providing the means and the material and human resources and creating suitable working conditions that help to achieve the objectives of the educational process for which the school was established. In creating suitable working conditions, there must the regulations that guide the school administrator to function optimally. The purpose, therefore, is to improve existing structural systems and the inclusion of innovative designs to guarantee an effective and efficient school system. It is also aimed at redefining and constantly renegotiating structural standards to cogitate the ever-changing educational standards for global competitiveness and alignment with the social demands of education. Therefore, it suffices to posit that tertiary education cannot be effectively administered without sound policy reforms

Administrative Challenges in Implementing Education Policy Reforms

Challenges are unsure realities identified in the management of a task that requires adequate skills and knowledge to unravel. It poses difficulty to resolve depending on the capacity of the individual and the availability of required facilities. In every human endeavor, Education no exception is faced with challenges to manage the advancement of education to achieve set objectives. It has been observed over the years that the implementation of education policy in Nigeria has become a troubling issue owing to a lack of transparency and sabotage from the operators of the education system.

Enyiazu, (2022) argued also that some good educational policies have been sabotaged at the implementation stage for several reasons: firstly, lawmakers often pass the budgets for the implementation of the policies with personal strings attached to them. Secondly, even when the budgets are passed, the executive arm of government is often reluctant to release the funds to facilitate implementation. Lastly, the inadequate funds often released to the operators of the education system are not honestly and fully utilized to promote the cause of education.

It is of note that the inability to implement policy reforms has resulted in several issues affecting the growth and development of tertiary education in Nigeria, resulting in to drop in the academic quality of products. Most significantly, lack of funding poses the major constraints in the implementation of policy reforms in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Asiyai, (2013) opined that a significant constraint to attaining academic excellence in Nigerian universities is financial constraints, making many academics and non-academics work under challenging circumstances. In the same vein, Aigheyisi and Obhiosa, (2014) attributed the non-functionality of Nigeria's tertiary education system, and identified some factors responsible for the problem:

a) weak commitment of the Nigerian government to the nation's tertiary educationsystem;
b) manifested in inadequate funding of the nation's higher institutions of learning incessant strikes;
c) poor implementation of educational policies by relevant authorities; inadequate skilled, qualified and experienced teachers in several departments in the institutions;
d) the prevalence of corrupt practices in the higher institutions and weak educational foundation (at the primary and post-primary level) Adesina (2012) noted that planned implementation is constrained by the following factors:
e) over estimation of available resources: This is a situation where estimated resources are greater than the actual available resources to implement programme;
f) under estimation of cost implementing a plan: this happens when cost estimated does not make adequate provisions for inflation and actual implementation costs become sunmanageable;
g) over reliance upon external assistance: plans that substantially rely upon assistance from foreign sources for their implementation run into hitches when such aid fails to comes, and

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h) inaccurate statistical data: planning education requires accurate and up-to-date dataplan that do not adequately provide for this usually have implementation problems

As of the time of this paper, Nigeria nation is experiencing a dwindling economy which is referred to as a depressed economy or recession economy due to negative activity based on the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) rate. There is an acquit, a spiraling currency crisis, and rising food insecurity. The inflation rate hits 29.9% triggered by an increase in food prices resulting in high cost-of-living. Given these economic indicators, education policy implementation becomes a problem and as such could spell doom for the nation's education sector.

Conclusion

Policy formulation in every aspect of governance in Nigeria has never posed any problem rather implementation. Policies are to guide and direct the administration of an institution to achieve targeted goals and the school system can only improve when policies are implemented. As enumerated above, several factors are responsible for the poor implementation of education policies which affects the effective administration of tertiary education in Nigeria leading to avoidable industrial actions and poor performance student outcomes. One underlying key factor is largely attributed to poor funding of tertiary education in Nigeria which hurts the growth and development of the education system and sadly, no effort is in sight to redirect this ugly trend in our school system.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this paper, the following recommendations were made;

i. The tertiary education system should be adequately funded to develop highly skilled Manpower
ii. There should be a periodical review of policies to match the economic, social, and political needs of society
iii. There should be reliable data for the system to plan effectively.
iv. The government should involve all stakeholders in the process of policy formulation
v. Tertiary education administrators should be appointed on merit based on competency and professionals in school administration.

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