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ENHANCING LITERACY IN HIGHER EDUCATION FOR INCREASED GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY IN

NIGERIA

Olufide Stephen Billy

Abstract

Literacy has been one of the greatest concerns of the world for a long time. Countries devote so much of their resources to it because it drives development. Literacy has now gone beyond the ability to read and write; it includes numeracy skills and inter-cultural awareness. Paradoxically, in its most functional form, literacy would still be far from being full, because no individual can possess it absolutely. Literacy appears to be such skills as would make the individual grounded enough to become an employer of labour, or be gainfully employed - someone that thinks rationally and critically enough to make measurable impact on humanity. Higher education in particular has been expected to guarantee functional literacy because of its (higher education's) tripartite mandate for teaching, research and service. Literacy at that level is expected to ensure a perpetually harmonious link between skills acquisition and the realities of the labour market. Unfortunately however, especially in emerging economies, there is a wide gap between knowledge brands and employability indices; so many unemployable graduates are churned out yearly from the Universities and Polytechnics in Nigeria. Apart from the inadequacy of available employment opportunities, those itching to be employed are poorly skilled. The predicament of the Nigerian graduate appears an indictment of higher education. Thus, this paper set out to make a case for invigorating higher education in Nigeria by enhancing its literacy content. The paper discussed the nature and scope of literacy before assessing its place in higher education curriculum. It also examined the different dimensions of employability as a frontline item in labour discourse. It concluded by suggesting how to make the literacy component of higher education relevant to employer needs.

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DO WE UNDERSTAND EACH OTHER

ENHANCING LITERACY IN HIGHER EDUCATION FOR INCREASED GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract. Literacy has been one of the greatest concerns of the world for a long time. Countries devote so much of their resources to it because it drives development. Literacy has now gone beyond the ability to read and write; it includes numeracy skills and intercultural awareness. Paradoxically, in its most functional form, literacy would still be far from being full, because no individual can possess it absolutely. Literacy appears to be such skills as would make the individual grounded enough to become an employer of labour, or be gainfully employed - someone that thinks rationally and critically enough to make measurable impact on humanity. Higher education in particular has been expected to guarantee functional literacy because of its (higher education's) tripartite mandate for teaching, research and service. Literacy at that level is expected to ensure a perpetually harmonious link between skills acquisition and the realities of the labour market. Unfortunately however, especially in emerging economies, there is a wide gap between knowledge brands and employability indices: so many unemployable graduates are churned out yearly from the Universities and Polytechnics in Nigeria. Apart from the inadequacy of available employment opportunities, those itching to be employed are poorly skilled. The predicament of the Nigerian graduate appears an indictment of higher education. Thus, this paper set out to make a case for invigorating higher education in Nigeria by enhancing its literacy content. The paper discussed the nature and scope of literacy before assessing its place in higher education curriculum. It also examined the different dimensions of employability as a frontline item in labour discourse. It concluded by suggesting how to make the literacy component of higher education relevant to employer needs.

Key words: literacy, higher education, graduate employability

1. INTRODUCTION

Literacy in a general term can be described as the ability of an individual to read, understand and use information creatively. Beyond this, literacy depicts a range of knowledge, skills and abilities relating to reading, language, mathematics, science, psychology and so on. These abilities, knowledge and skills are derived from the basic literacy skills. According to Andrew (2012), literacy is more than a basic reading ability, but rather an indication of how adults use written instruction to function in society. The ability to use and apply key mathematics and science concepts is a necessary requirement in any type of occupation. Individuals that lack these basic requirements may not secure any reasonable employment, or himself/herself be any employer of labour.

The primary aim in formal learning is helping individuals achieve functional education, which appropriate literacy skills would enhance. An individual with weak literacy skills may not be able to contribute meaningfully on issues affecting his/her society. The world is advancing fast in technology, and the individual not proficient in reading, mathematics and science would not be able to participate well in economic and social life. He/she would find it difficult to succeed in today's complex and increasingly competitive world. Countries with high literacy levels have most upwardly mobile populations who fast-track the countries' socio-political, economic and technological advancement and ensure that their core values are not eroded by the raging globalization.

The extent to which schools are successful in equipping their students with strong literacy skills is a key indicator of educational progress. This can be seen in two ways, i.e. the weak and strong academic achievements and the range in scores between the top performing students and those at the bottom of the distribution. A school that is able to produce students with high academic achievement, irrespective of their backgrounds, is far better than the one that produces weak and low academic achievement. Also, the schools' efficiency at reducing the gap between the low- and the high performing students is an indicator of the school's success at equipping its students with strong literacy skills. Students with appropriate literacy skills will drive national development and integration (Olajide, 2010; Ochai, 2011). Specifically Olajide advocated that reading and writing be carefully linked in the classroom if literacy should lead to appreciable national integration and reconstruction.

Effective literacy practices also need to reflect the policies and entrepreneurial practices of the nation. Garba and Adiele (2011) emphasized that linking literacy to the industries 'brings about the strengthening of relations or transactions that will boost the development of domestic and global partnership' (p.203).

There are various types of literacy, including media literacy, document literacy, computer literacy, adult literacy, neo-literacy, family literacy, occupational literacy, functional literacy, cultural literacy, dysfunctional literacy, information literacy, technology literacy, and so on. According to Olajide (2012), there is only a thin wall separating literacy and illiteracy. By this, it may be impossible to get an individual that would be absolutely literate. The one that enjoys appreciable computer literacy may be culturally illiterate. The reality of the tenderness of the nature of literacy makes highly educated people caught in the paradox of illiteracy at certain levels of functional living. They simply lack some prerequisite skills because they, as humans, cannot possess all skills possible. While reading and writing may be central to literacy, the hallmark of a balanced education would seem to be the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and engage in creative communication in a variety of contexts.

For example, a media literate person can think critically about what he/she sees, hears, and reads in books, newspapers, magazines, television, radio, movies, music, advertising, video games, the Internet, and new emerging technology. Based on the experiences gained, he/she could produce their own stories for educating, entertaining, instructing, persuading or dissuading others. Garba and Adiele (2011) noted that such universal programmes as the Millennium Development goals require media literate population in order to be effective.

Computer literacy is the ability to use a computer and its software to accomplish practical tasks. Most of the corporate employments these days are tied to individual knowledge and skills of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), a purely

computer-driven enterprise. Ndukwu (2006) reiterated the overwhelming need for people with appropriate digital orientation in any modern economy. Digital literacy is more than just the technical ability to operate digital devices properly; it comprises a variety of cognitive skills that are utilized in executing tasks in digital environments, such as browsing the Internet, deciphering user interfaces, working with databases, and chatting in chat rooms (Ushet-Alkali & Amichai-Hamburger 2011).

Information Literacy is the ability to detect when there is a need for information, to be able to identify, locate, evaluate, and effectively use that information for the issue or problem at hand, while technology literacy is the ability to responsibly use appropriate technology to communicate, solve problems, and access, manage, integrate, evaluate, and create information to improve learning in all subject areas and to acquire lifelong knowledge and skills in the 21st century.

2. AN OVERVIEW OF HIGHER/TERTIARY EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

Economic and social developments are increasingly driven by the advancement and application of knowledge made possible through properly coordinated higher education which is saddled with the responsibilities for skills development and civic reorientation. Higher, post-secondary, or tertiary education is the stage of learning that occurs at universities, colleges of education seminaries, mono-technics and polytechnics. It is also given and received in such institutions as the vocational schools, trade schools, and career colleges that award academic or professional degrees. Seasoned minds that can compete on the international labour market are expected to emanate from higher Education (FRN, 2007). Nigeria possesses the largest university system in Sub-Saharan Africa. Although South Africa's tertiary enrollments are higher, Nigeria boasts of more institutions. The latter's system embraces much of her research capacity and should have produced most of the skilled professionals the country needs for her structural development.

In Nigeria, a most decisive effort has been the government policy on autonomy for Universities. This forward-looking policy framework gives university councils full responsibility for institutional governance, including the appointment of senior officers. In enforcing the policy, government has restored block grant funding to universities; circumscribed the powers of the National Universities Commission; vested university senates with the authority to decide on curricula; returned to universities the right to set admissions criteria and select students; and laid the groundwork for new minimum academic standards which are sensitive to the issue of graduate employability.

In May 2002, a resulting set of legislative proposals designed to reform the existing higher education laws and establish a permanent legal basis for these changes was approved by the Federal Executive Council and forwarded to the National Assembly for deliberation. The proposals reportedly would give university councils the responsibility for setting institutional policies, by which they could hire top management and forwarding institutional budgets. The proposals also sought to give higher institutions control over their own student admissions; limit the role of the NUC to quality assurance and system coordination; place curbs on the right of employees to strike; and legally de-link the universities from the public service, thereby ending their adherence to government regulations regarding employment, remuneration and benefits.

Governments efforts at the reforms of higher education has been informed by the increasing awareness across the Third World that if they wish to get into the globalized, competitive economic orbit and benefit any significantly, they have to do so on a merit. They cannot rely on subsidies. A precondition would be to give a good deal of autonomy to their higher institutions for them to be dynamic and move fast in international competition. The higher institutions in turn would utilize the autonomy in giving priority to the development of entrepreneurial leadership. Nigerian universities need to be responsive and flexible, for them to actually fulfill their mandate of successfully constructing a new society.

One crucial question, however, is how flexibility and responsiveness in higher education are measured? El-Khawass (2001) offers a framework for generating answers to this question. She distinguishes between rigid institutions of higher learning and responsive institutions. A rigid institution resists making changes in institutional behavior and often rejects possible changes without openly considering whether they are feasible or desirable. A responsive institution, on the other hand, is adaptive in its orientation. It intentionally considers changing circumstances, identifies appropriate ways to adapt, and takes responsive actions. El-Khawass suggests the use of four criteria for assessing responsiveness: access, teaching/learning, financing, and management/governance. These criteria, especially two of them - access and responsiveness - should provide a heuristic tool for appraising the performance of Nigeria's present university system.

Responsiveness to the challenges of improving university access entails adaptive behavior by institutions to provide academic and other support to an increasingly diverse student body, and to develop retention strategies that lead to the completion of studies (El-Khawass, 2001). It further implies efforts to upgrade labour productivity by creating opportunities for the nation's workforce to obtain continuing professional education.

In Nigeria, three pieces of evidence suggest the need for greater attention to innovation in both curricula and pedagogy. First, student success seems limited. Dropout rates appear to be high. Although institutional statistics are extremely unreliable and universities do not monitor their dropout rates, in 2002 the National Universities Commission (NUC) attempted to calculate dropout rates within the federal university system. Its preliminary findings suggested that dropout rates may be as high as 50% at six universities. Dropout rates of 10% or less were attributed only to the three federal universities at Kano, Maiduguri and Owerri (NUC 2002). Plainly, additional research attention to this issue of institutional performance and system efficiency would seem warranted.

Second, public and private employers of university graduates, as well as the government itself, consider the quality of university graduates to be inadequate. A study of the labor market for graduates found that employers believe "university graduates are poorly trained and unproductive on the job, and shortcomings are particularly severe in oral and written communication, and in applied technical skills" (Dabalen, Oni & Adekola 2000). Labor market demand for degree-based professional skills over the period 1991 - 1999 centered largely on engineering, business administration, health services, accounting and marketing (Dabalen, et al. 2000a). During the same period, however, 49% of the graduates from federal universities was concentrated in Arts, Education, Law and Social Sciences (Dabalen, et al. 2000). The mismatch is clear. Under these conditions, the labor market annually absorbed just 10% of all graduates produced by the entire education system. University graduates fared better, but their unemployment was still estimated to be 22% in 1998 (Dabalen et al.).

Such findings suggest the need for adaptive university responses vis a vis the labor market for public and private employment. As one African observer has noted, the supply of education services is market blind. Admission policies of higher education institutions are not related to labour demand requirements, nor to individual student interests, but mainly to secondary school grades.

In sum, the policy reforms outlined in this paper constitute a long overdue movement to bring Nigerian higher education into concert with current higher education practice around the world, but they are neither well understood nor appreciated by major stakeholder groups. A substantial dose of political will and broad-based leadership from both NUC and Federal Ministry of Education officials, as well as senior university officers will be needed if the reform package is to achieve its intended results. Unfortunately, the window of opportunity for these reforms may pass because of political miscalculations.

3. EMPLOYABILITY AND HIGHER EDUCATION

In simple terms, employability is about being capable of getting and keeping fulfilling work (Hillage & Pollard, 1998). It is the possession of the qualities and competences required to meet the changing needs of employers and customers by an individual, thereby realizing his/her aspirations and potential in work. Employability defines the knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours required by individuals to seek, obtain and sustain employment at all levels in the increasingly competitive labour market. Yorke (2004) also described it as a set of achievements – skills, understandings, and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.

Thus, employability is more than just getting a job after graduation from school; it is rather the capacity of the graduate to function in a job, be useful in many ways in the society and be able to move between jobs, thus remaining employable throughout their life. Hillage and Pollard, (1998) viewed employability as being capable of getting and keeping fulfilling work, the possession by an individual of the qualities and competences required to meet the changing needs of employers and customers, whereby he/she realizes his/her aspirations and potentials in the work. Employability defines the knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours required by individuals to seek, obtain and sustain employment at all levels in the labour market.

Knight and Yorke (2004) consider employability as having four broad and interrelated components, to include:

- (i) understanding,
- (ii) skillful practices (including deployment of skills),
- (iii) efficacy beliefs (including students view of themselves), and
- (iv) meta – cognition (including self-awareness and a capacity to reflect on learning).

These components are grossly missing among the graduates of the Nigerian institutions of higher learning, perplexing the employers of labour, and bothering other stakeholders in higher education.

There is a dangerous mismatch between the quality of the graduates of the Nigerian universities, polytechnics, mono-technics, and colleges and the skills requirement of the meteoric entrepreneurial world. The result has been a gloomy situation that Ogundele (2011) described as involving too many unskilled graduates chasing too few opportunities

that need skilled hands. Ndukwe (2006) attributed the problem to the inadequate digital component of Nigeria Education. Ogundele (2011) and Olajide (2011) agreed with Ndukwe that for higher education to have meaningful impact in Nigeria, the curricula should be overhauled to accommodate aggressive literacy and skills development. The country needs greater commitment on the issue of making graduates employable; the development of entrepreneurial skills and inculcation of work ethics and discipline in graduates should come to the front burner of the education industry.

In this direction, successive governments in the country have taken some steps. Since 1999 the government have made several efforts to tackle the nation's long-festering higher education difficulties. Specifically, the present government has instituted more policy and institutional reforms in higher education than the combined governments of the previous two decades. Among its more notable actions are institutional audits of all universities, revocation of the vice-chancellors' former privilege of personally selecting 10% of each year's student intake, reconstitution of all university governing councils with broader representation, the licensing of many more private universities, exemption of university staff from public service salary scales and regulations, and the increase in funding of the university system.

4. TACKLING EMPLOYABILITY PROBLEM BY ENHANCING THE LITERACY CONTENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The reforms in Nigeria higher education so far highlighted in this paper are worthy of note, but they do not in themselves guarantee increased graduate employability. At best, they could serve as catalysts. In spite of them, the country continues to experience unbridled production of unskilled graduates. One pragmatic step that government may want to take is making balanced literacy the corner stone of the reforms. Here, graduates would need to be trained across the different shades of literacy not only in English but in the mother tongue (prosperous countries are not mainly those who use their native languages in education (Olajide, 2007)). Indeed, literacy should be taught across higher education curriculum (Lawal & Olajide, 2005) and as a separate subject. Learning experiences related to effectiveness and efficiency in job performance and employability should be integrated in the literacy curriculum of higher institutions. Employers of labour and relevant other stake holders need to be interested in literacy for higher education and employability.

The possession of appropriate literacy skills would have armed graduates for correct understanding of work situations and application of the skills acquired in schools. These would be possible because literacy firmly transmits values and effectively molds creative consciousness. Its capacity to mobilize, liberate and enamor a nation's moral and intellectual capabilities is great. This implies that literacy has the wherewithal to combat such vices as corruption, nepotism, ethnicity, bigotry and arrant abuses that exist in the entrepreneurial world.

For literacy to be as functional as being envisaged there would be need for methodological shift in literacy education. Emphasis should be on the cultivation of critical thinking through carefully shared language experiences. The individual and collective control of lives made possible by stimulating and socially valid classroom interactions should be a principal concern of the literacy classroom. The interactions have to promote such socio-economic undergirds as equality, reciprocity and cultural sensitivity. The right

literacy skills will create a formidable crop of worker-citizens that will be consistently rational and discerning, and that would be able to undertake socio-economically rewarding negotiations in the age of raging globalization represented in innumerable technological fads. Such citizens will neither lose their identity nor refuse to reciprocate and integrate in multicultural things.

Properly articulated literacy programmes in higher education in Nigeria will lead to graduates who would be above the common-run. They would be employers of entrepreneurs as they would be intellectuals rather than intellect-workers. Uwasomba (2011) described the intellect-worker as one that aims meeting the job requirements of the moment, whereas the intellectual citizen is an all-round developed personality who not only deploys entrepreneurial skills appropriately but is rightly critical of the context of work. Effective literacy helps to place the latter where he/she has developed the taste for valued productivity. If literacy is developed on adequate methodology involving the use of relevant local materials and resources, it would be a huge success.

5. CONCLUSION

Unemployment is a universal problem made worse in nations where higher education is not skills oriented. Nigeria is one of such places. For a long time, the country has been experiencing the production of unskilled graduates. The consequences have been grave – social insecurity and grueling poverty. Governments have attempted to salvage the serious situation by undertaking some reforms, particularly at the tertiary level. However, a clear solution is yet to be found. Literacy is one angle that governments and relevant other stakeholders may explore in the quest for a lasting solution to the menace. It should cover all aspects of life and would result in rounded world citizens if properly pursued in Higher Education in Nigeria. Only all-round developed citizens can assert themselves in the competitive global context of employment and employability.

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