A Stakeholder Approach: What can be done to improve Higher Education Quality and Graduate Employability?

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Abstract

The primary focus of higher education (HE) should be developing learner's knowledge on theories, research and skills. The purpose of the study is twofold: First, it identifies to what extent Nigerian higher education institutions (HEIs) enables the development of quality education, employability and skills. Second, it outlines the roles of the major HE stakeholders and offers ways to improve graduate's knowledge, employability and skills. The study is based on a qualitative design incorporating interviews from 27 experienced Executives of public and private organisations, industry Executives, education agencies and members of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Nigeria. Data were analysed thematically to produce perceptions of key HE stakeholders. Findings reveal that there is a minimal collaboration between HEIs and industry, leading to low innovations of scale that can help produce graduates with high technical knowledge and skills. This study reveals that some HEIs in Nigeria lack adequate teaching pedagogy, funding and infrastructure to carry out the teaching of employability skills. Several practical and social implications stem out of this study, especially, how to improve graduate employability in Nigeria, the need to create a base for HEIs and industry collaboration.

Key Words: Stakeholder Theory; Higher Education; Graduate Employability; Generic Skills

Introduction

The need for policies to focus on the interconnectedness between science, technology, and innovation (STI) is now widely recognized across most African countries (United Nation, 2011). However, the level of coherence within and among the existing policies, programs, and institutions remains relatively weak (OECD, 2013). Take Nigeria for example, the higher education (HE) system is bedevilled by series of challenges such as issues of general welfare for lecturers, brain drain, a rapid increase in the number of students, low course quality and difficulties in governance structures (Iruonagbe, Imhonopi & Egharevba, 2015). Some studies claim that knowledge exchange in Nigeria and some African countries have been decreasing (Asongu & Tchamyou, 2016; Filmer & Fox, 2014; Okolie et al., 2019a & b).

In Nigeria a major challenge is graduate unemployment that is not related to unavailability of jobs; rather, lack of employability skills (Okunuga & Ajeyalemi, 2018; Pitan, 2016 & 2017) and vocational behaviours that the labour market demands (Harvey & Bowers-Brown, 2004; Okolie, Igwe & Elom, 2019). HE system must be responsive to the development of the knowledge and industrial skills required by the economy and society. Although this is considered a priority in many developed countries, education stakeholders in developing nations still find it difficult to develop innovations to cater for today's labour demands (Serdyukov, 2017; Okolie, Nwosu & Mlanga, 2019).

According to Ekechukwu (2019), decades of under-funding in Nigerian universities has had dramatic consequences. The author note that the country's population is now pushing towards 200 million, over 60% of which is under the age of 25 years and demand for university places vastly exceeds current capacity. For example, in 2017, 380,000 domestic university applicants didn't get a university place (Ekechukwu, 2019). To bridge the funding gap, higher education institutions (HEIs) are forced to adopt various strategies to rein in costs and raise alternative sources of revenue. These include enlarging class sizes and increasing teachers' workloads, deferring maintenance, substituting lower-cost part-time faculty for higher-cost full-time faculty, dropping low-priority programmes and cutting or freezing financial assistance (Zeleza, 2018). These cost-cutting measures compromise on the quality of education.

The effect is that there is a lower standard of HE, highest levels of unemployment and underemployment (not related to lack of jobs but lack of skills) among graduates more than any West African countries (Pitan, 2016; Filmer & Fox, 2014). As the United Nations (2017) reveals that it is common to find young Nigerian university graduates doing menial jobs. "They clean floors in hotels, sell mobile telephone calling cards – some even work in factories as labourers" (UN, 2017, p.1). Therefore, there are serious concerns about the ability of Nigerian graduates to contribute to driving the country forward (British Council, 2014). There is a continuing disparity between industry expectations and higher education provision (Pitan, 2016 & 2017). Although there are diverse types of mismatches in the Nigerian education system, an important element is a lack of coherence between the quality of education offered, skills development and level of education.

A study conducted by Fredua-Kwarteng and Ofosu (2018) through observing teaching in university classrooms in West Africa reveals that little or no attention is paid to pedagogy, which is left entirely to the discretion of lecturers. Fredua-Kwarteng and Ofosu (2018) state that universities assume without any shred of evidence that lecturers possess expertise in the

theory and practice of teaching, learning and assessment. The authors note that while lecturers are undoubtedly experts in their chosen fields of specialisation, most of them, lack knowledge and skill in effective pedagogy.

In Nigerian HE, more attention has been given to theoretical content knowledge development while the practice of holistic and competency education is often ignored (Sainta, Hartnettb & Strassner, 2003; Okolie et al., 2019a). Against this backdrop, the current study focuses on Nigerian HE. Nigeria is the largest country in Africa with an estimated population of over 200 million and have about 170 universities. Government is the major stakeholder in the Nigerian HE and much of the funding is done by the government. Other sources of funding include income-generating activities at the institutional level, corporate and donor funding and fees from students. Therefore, 'stakeholder theory' is used to evaluate the engagement of major partners in the Nigerian HE. The analytical stakeholder approach to strategic management examines the organization within a myriad of relationships and argues that devoting appropriate attention to all legitimate stakeholders is important to achieve superior performance (Verbeke & Tung, 2013).

Constructivist grounded theory is a very popular method for studies in the disciplines of psychology, education, and nursing (Mills, Bonner & Francis, 2006). The following two research questions guided the current study: (1) What should the HEIs and its stakeholders be doing to improve higher education in Nigeria? (2) How could HEIs and its stakeholders improve the quality of today's graduates in terms of knowledge, skills and employability? As part of our contribution, we hope to stimulate discussions that will lead to better educational practices and collaboration between major stakeholders to ensure that graduates fully gain the adequate knowledge and employability skills to secure jobs, operate effectively in the workplace and contribute to socio-economic development.

Graduate employability and Skills

Nigerian HE has evolved in the last 30 years in many ways such as increased enrolment rates, an increase in the number of tertiary institutions, increased turnover of graduates, etc. However, there is still a long way to go concerning graduate quality and employability (Pitan, 2016; Pitan, 2017; Okunuga & Ajeyalemi, 2018). The Nigerian HE Framework provides an excellent starting point for discussion of employability skills. A comprehensive National Policy on Education was launched in 1977, partly, in response to the dearth of skilled and technical manpower (Federal Republic of Nigeria, FRN, 2019). Under this policy, HE goals include (1) To contribute to national development through relevant high-level manpower training; (2) To

develop and inculcate proper values for the survival of society; and (3) To promote scholarship, community service, national unity and international understanding (FRN, 2019). Under this policy, HEIs in Nigeria has the mandate to provide and teach generic attributes that ideally every graduate should have. A review of previous studies reveal that HEIs lack the capacity and capability required to develop and pursue the HE goals, as outlined in the Nigerian Education Framework (see. e.g., Pitan 2016; Pitan 2017; Okolie et al, 2019a; Okunuga & Ajeyalemi, 2018). Therefore, stakeholder's roles provide an appropriate starting point from which to further explore studies on HE quality and graduate employability skills.

Generic or employability skills are significantly used in the present conversations in society, working life and education (Okolie et al., 2019a). The Commonwealth of Australia (2007) developed eight employability skills required by graduates and professionals as – communication, teamwork, problem-solving, self-management, planning and organising, technology, life-long learning, and initiative and enterprise. More so, the World Economic Forum (2018) highlights 10 skills needed to thrive in the Fourth Industrial Revolution and modern society by 2020. The skills by the order of importance are (1) Complex Problem-solving; (2) Critical Thinking (CT); (3) Creativity; (4) People Management; (5) Coordinating With Others; (6) Emotional Intelligence; (7) Judgement and Decision Making; (8) Service Orientation; (9) Negotiation; and (10) Cognitive Flexibility (World Economic Forum, 2018, p.1). These are regarded as soft skills that students need to develop to survive and perform in future. Emotional Intelligence (EI) skills encompass five competencies (1) self-awareness, (2) self-regulation, (3) motivation, (4) empathy, and (5) social skills. Also, employers demand a greater range of high-level skills such as effective communication and team working (Evans et al., 2012; Jackson, 2012). In recent years, CT has increasingly become an in-demand trait for graduates of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (Pearl et al., 2019). More so, many disciplines consider CT as a key employability marker (Pearl et al., 2019). Also, vocational education can be sources of societal esteem (Billett, 2014).

There is an increasing concern that, while graduates acquire significant subject knowledge when they leave universities and colleges, a significant proportion may lack basic skills (Hack-Polay, Igwe & Okolie, 2019). Consequently, graduate employability has been high on education stakeholders' agendas (government, industry, higher education institutions, labour etc) (O'Leary, 2017). The inclusion of generic skills in the national and international qualification frameworks facilitates students' knowledge (European Qualifications Framework, 2018). Generic skills are incorporated into the assessments and comparisons of education systems to enhance the quality of teaching and learning and graduates' outcomes

(Coates & Richardson, 2011). Of course, obtaining a range of demonstrable skills improves the chances of graduates securing employment and helps students have confidence and capabilities (Christie, 2016) to overcome many situations in life. Arguably, Nigerian HEIs and many other developing countries, have inadequate and ineffective policies aimed at directing changes in knowledge, skills, behaviour or cognitive processes (Okolie et al., 2019a & b). There have been previous studies on how a lack of generic skills negatively affects graduate employability (Virtanen and Tynjala, 2018; Yorke and Knight, 2006).

For example, a survey from a major online employment agency found that the major reasons for graduates unemployment (that is graduates not being hired by employers) are due to several factors such as a lack of communication skills (56%), bad social manners (36%), graduates requesting excessive pay packages (32%), graduates acquiring irrelevant qualifications (30%) and graduates being overly choosy about jobs (23%), among others (Salina et al., 2011). Bridging the gap on graduate employability in Asia, UNESCO (2012) explain that high-grade point average alone does not guarantee employment rather, it is important for graduates to cultivate qualities most sought after by employers (Tholen, 2014). These are what the researchers classified as "+ + factors" which include motivation, ability to think "outside the box", problem-solving and communication skills, and an ability to work both as part of a team and independently (UNESCO, 2012).

Stakeholder Theory

A stakeholder is anyone or group who can affect or is affected by an organization action, strategy or project according to Global Partnership for the prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC, 2015). The conceptualization of 'Stakeholder' model has been widely accepted as a management tool for developing organisational strategy. The notion of "stakeholders" was initially introduced by Edward R. Freeman back in 1963, defining it as "groups without whose support the organization would cease to exist (cited in Freeman, 1984; Freeman, 2010). The model illustrates visually the relationships among the various groups of actors in and around the organisation. A stakeholder is used to refer to any person, group or organization that can place a claim on the organization's resources or is affected by that output (Freeman, 1984). Also, Stakeholder theory addresses ethical and morals values of organizations. Roloff (2008) maintains that stakeholders from business, civil society and governmental or supranational institutions come together to find a common approach to an issue that affects them all and that is too complex to be addressed effectively without collaboration. Arguably, collaboration

among education stakeholders in developed nations is much well established and defined than in developing countries.

Stakeholder theory emphasizes that that organisations must consider and integrate the needs of all their stakeholders in the way they operate their business to create value (Schlierer, et al., 2012; Verbeke and Tung, 2013); as well as to maintain corporate social responsibility (CSR), business ethics (Freeman & Hasnaoui, 2011) and as principles of fairness (Phillips, 1997). In the current study, HE key stakeholders include lecturers, administrators, governing councils, students, industries, government and the university communities. In many developed countries, there is clear integration and collaboration among government, industry and HE, labour and NGOs as described in the helix model (Etzkowitz, 2015; Danson & Todeva, 2016). Arguably, integration and relationships are lacking among education stakeholder in the African HE. Also, much of intervention relies on government and international agencies/donors with minimal contribution from the local industries and non-governmental organisations. Collaboration is required to build an efficient and effective capacity. According to Yilmaz and Gunel (2009, p. 5) there exist three premises which underline stakeholder theory as follows: organizations have stakeholder groups that affect and are affected by them; these interactions impact on specific stakeholders; and the organization, together with perspectives of salient stakeholders affect the viability of strategic options.

Stakeholder management has been recognised today as a pillar of an organisation's capacity building, as stakeholders play important roles as advocates, sponsors, partners and agents of change. The Department for International Development (DFID, 2010) describe the goal of capacity building is to facilitate individual and organizational learning which builds social capital and trust, develops knowledge, skills and attitudes and when successful creates an organizational culture and a set of capabilities which enables organisations to set objectives, achieve results, solve problems, and create adaptive procedures which enable them to survive in the long run. In the DFID Capacity Building Model (2010, p. 4), the broader context include external context, stakeholders and external intervention. However, these are determined by institutional rules and elements such as capabilities and resources. DFID (2010) maintains that capacity building is a dynamic process that is often part of a broader developmental or change process. It is difficult to plan which steps will need to be taken, or in which order. Arguably, stakeholder attributes differ concerning the external environment, institutional, laws rules and regulations.

Building capacity, managing capabilities, performance and adapting change are the vital components that ensure the effective performance of organisations. This can be achieved

through structured cooperation, exchange of experience and good practices. DFID (2010) identifies five core capabilities which enable an organization to perform and survive as follows: (i) To commit, relate and engage: empowerment, motivation, confidence and the management of relationships; (ii) To carry out technical, service delivery and logistical tasks: core functions directed at the implementation of mandated goals; (iii) To attract resources and support: resource mobilization, networking, legitimacy building; (iv) To adapt and self-renew: learning, strategizing, adaptation, managing change; (v) To balance coherence and diversity: encourage innovation and stability, manage complexity, and balance capability mix.

Hack-Polay, Igwe and Okolie (2019) highlights the importance of collaboration between HEIs, industry and NGOs to deliver higher education that responds to the needs of contemporary organizations and economies. Indeed, stakeholder management has become an important tool to measure the performance, management practice and strategy of organisations. Nevertheless, legitimate criticism continues on the perfectible nature of the model (Waxenberger & Spence, 2003; Wolfe & Putler, 2002). Fassin (2009, p.118) identified several difficulties in examining stakeholders and in defining the boundaries of the organisation are a function of the intrinsic flexibility of the theory itself. Fassin (2009) maintain that there a lack of clarity and consistency in the definition of a stakeholder, and indeed of a stake. Second, there are some fundamental inconsistencies between some definitions and the graphical representation of the model. Third, there is insufficient rigour in applying the framework to managerial, organisational and strategic issues. Despite the limitations, the model is adopted to evaluate the role of education stakeholders in the Nigerian HE.

Methodology

"To ensure a strong research design, researchers must choose a research paradigm that is congruent with their beliefs about the nature of reality" (Mills, Bonner & Francis, 2006, p. 25). Phenomenological interviewing techniques and constructivist grounded theory guided this study (see, Siuty, 2019, p. 1035). As stated earlier, by consciously subjecting such beliefs about the nature of reality to an ontological interrogation will illuminate the epistemological and methodological possibilities that are available (Mills, Bonner & Francis, 2006). We employed constructivist grounded theory as a data analysis approach to sustain critical ethnographic processes for uncovering systemic inequity throughout all phases of the research process (Siuty, 2019). According to Siuty (2019), constructivist grounded theory foregrounds issues related to equity and power by locating the lived experience in larger cultural practices, socio-political interests, and social positioning.

Constructivism is a research paradigm that denies the existence of an objective reality, "asserting instead that realities are social constructions of the mind, and that there exist as many such constructions as there are individuals (although clearly many constructions will be shared)" (Mills, Bonner & Francis, 2006, p. 26). By adopting qualitative research, employing semi-structured interviews we gain information on the perceptions of the stakeholders (Miller, Wesley & Williams, 2012).

Participants and Data collection

Methodologically, the qualitative method enabled the identifying and selecting individuals that are exceptionally knowledgeable about a phenomenon of interest (Cresswell & Clark, 2011). We reached out to participants by face-to-face and email and those who responded with interest were asked for an appointment by setting a time, date and venue for the interviews. The sampling frame for participants included experienced executives of businesses, directors of public and private organisations and directors of education agencies that include 3 Senior Bank Executives, 6 Senior Public Companies Executives, 3 Graduate Entrepreneurs/SMEs owners, 5 Public Officers - Government Educational Ministry, 2 Executive Directors of Federal Educational Agency, 2 Executive Members - Non-Governmental Organization (NGO), 3 Executive Officers – Nigerian Labour Congress and 3 founders of private universities. In total, 27 semi-structured separate interviews were conducted, lasting between 45 - 60 minutes. Interviews were undertaken in English. We carefully followed the ethical procedures by obtaining consent from all participants in the study. Before the interviews, participants were informed about the aim and objectives of the research. They were also informed that they had the option of withdrawing from the interview at any time. To ensure confidentiality, all participants' names have been removed from the publications.

Data Analysis

The interviews were carried out by the authors, audio recorded with permission, transcribed and verified prior to thematic analysis, identifying a range of conceptions of stakeholder's engagement and roles in the Nigeria HE. Each author has coded data individually, using a mix of MS Word and NVivo (see, e.g. Nind et al., 2019). Mixed inductive/deductive thematic analysis has pursued key concepts in the data, critical factors and emerging patterns (Nind et al., 2019). Coding from the data is the fundamental analytic tool that uncovers an emergent grounded theory from the field of inquiry (Mills, Bonner & Francis, 2006). Additional interviews and re-interviews were booked with 8 participants to examine the constructed codes

and categories (this iterative procedure was used as theoretical sampling in grounded theory) (see, e.g., Charmaz 2014; Eriksson, Boistrup & Thornberg, 2018; Siuty, 2019) and as means of validation and data checking. All the transcripts were printed out and coded manually to identify relevant themes and dominant quotes by finding the best fit for the research questions (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012).

Findings

The analysis highlighted three themes related to the perceptions of Nigerian HE stakeholders. The three themes are (i) HEIs roles related to teaching pedagogy and design (ii) government roles related to the provision of funding and infrastructure and (iii) industry and NGO roles. These stakeholders are fundamental to the construction and advancement of a knowledge economy and society and possess the necessary elements to develop a national innovation system. All the participants of this study agree that Nigeria needs to develop graduates who are highly skilled and ready to face the challenges of increased globalization. They believe that for the Nigerian economy to grow as expected, HE graduates have a huge part to play in building the economy by having the practical skills to work effectively in their roles.

Government Roles

Some of the participants explained that past governments of Nigeria have initiated higher education policy reforms intended to bring its HE in line with international good practices. One of those reforms is the policy on the autonomy of universities (Federal Ministry of Education, 2000). Most of the participants noted that although the reforms promote increased institutional autonomy, there are challenges related to governance and mechanisms for innovations and teaching practices. As noted by a Bank Executive;

> *"HEIs responsibility is frequently thwarted by long-standing problems of instability in the government administration, underfunding, regulations and governance".*

Participants emphasise that knowledge has become the most important factor for economic advancement and hence the need for government to examine ways to improve HE in Nigeria. Some maintain that historically, the government has been the major financier and investor in Nigerian HE system. They believe that this approach is no longer sustainable given the global fall in oil prices which has traditionally been the major source of income for the Nigerian government. Some participants advocated that innovative ways are required to ensure adequate funding of the TE. Other measures suggested including giving more powers to government

agencies to monitor the use/ misuse of funds released to HEIs and provision of sanctions as appropriate in all cases of breach of financial rules.

Throughout the discussion, participants highlighted that the major challenge to HE is funding. Some suggest it is time the government reduced its influence and allow for more private-led initiatives and investment. Some advocate measures that make the HE more competitive, self-sustaining and not heavily reliant on government funding as currently is the case. As a public Company Executives put it;

> *"Allow private investment and internationalization of the HEIs as practised in many countries. If possible, make all HEIs private-public enterprises arrangement".*

The company Executive goes on to emphasize that some of the regulations by some education agencies are no longer fit for purpose in the 21st-century global competitiveness environment;

> *"The regulation baring opening multi-city campuses and foreign universities operating in Nigeria does not encourage competitions and internationalization of HE."*

Some participants emphasised that an increase in private investment will enable increased funding to universities, increase in research, innovation, science and technology required to improve the knowledge, skills and employability of graduates. As a founder of a private university put it;

> *"Relax stringent rules on registration of private universities and allow international recognised HEIs to set up campuses in Nigeria as obtainable in many developing countries like China and Malaysia".*

Previous studies have called on the government to encourage collaboration between universities, industry and NGOs through increasing the capacity- building among education stakeholders to encourage practical education (Igwe, Okolie & Nwokoro, 2019). Other areas that some participants point that government can contribute towards improving the quality of HE and increasing the capabilities and performances of the HEIs relate to the provision of modern facilities, internet, modern classrooms, hostels, alternative electric power and supply of potable water in the campuses. As noted by an executive member – NGO;

> *"Many of the HEIs do not have internet access and constant power supplies thereby discouraging technology and digital learning and applications".*

The NGO Executive goes on to blame the state and conditions of the infrastructure that has been provided in many tertiary institutions;

> *"The state of the buildings are terrible and overcrowding is common whereby a class of 300 students, 200 will be seated while 100 will be standing in corridors and pathways receiving lectures"*

Participants note that under the current infrastructure provided by most universities, it is difficult for HEIs to deliver quality education and develop the skills and capacity of the students to respond to the 21st-century industry demand. Other ways participants suggested that government could assist improve the work readiness and employability of graduated include provision of careers, information and job centres in the major cities, the introduction of schemes that make compulsory internship and work placement and provision of professional scholarship programmes. Another measure that was suggested was the provision of competitions and loans which enable graduates to access loans to start a business rather than seek work employment. Igwe, Okolie and Nwokoro (2019) advocate for private-public partnership (PPP) initiatives through the development of science and engineering centres/hubs in the Nigerian states capitals to encourage innovation & research activities.

Industry Roles

Throughout the interviews, there is a general acknowledgement that the contributions of the industry and private sector to the Nigerian HE have not been encouraging. Many participants attributed this condition to the culture and the lack of business ethics and corporate social responsibilities (CSR) among the business leaders in societies. When some of the business leaders were asked why this is the case, the responses were related to government unfavourable approach to policy making which does not solicit the industry view and collaboration in policy design and formulation. A senior public company Executive blamed it on institutional rules and culture;

> *"Ethnic, tribal, religious and political difference makes it difficult to bring the stakeholders together or agree on a common front towards national development"*

Another challenge is the business environment. According to one senior private company Executive, the economic environment is distorted and restrictive, hence businesses are unable to contribute effectively to CSR;

"The enabling environment and cost of running businesses have a significant effect on operational cost and profit hence companies are unable to engage in CSR".

Participants were of the views that despite the nature of the business environment, the business society has a lot more to do to advance education in Nigeria. One area that was suggested is that business and industrial community should work hard to create more graduate jobs with better pay and work satisfaction. Some participants frowned at the pay, remuneration and work conditions that the industry offer graduates in Nigeria. Another suggestion from one of the Graduate Entrepreneurs/SMEs owners is for industry and public enterprises to;

"De-emphasize focus on degree qualification and generational desire for degree education and focus on recruitment based on skills and competencies".

They also recognise the importance of all stakeholders working together to create an enabling environment required for HEIs to function. Change is most evident when all stakeholders recognise their role in the economy and work towards policy implementation. In contrast, Nigeria have neither articulated a development strategy linking local NGOs;

"In many nations, NGOs have important roles to play in the national development but this is not the case in Nigeria where their relevance is not recognised by the government".

Some of the participants state that the business leaders and NGOs could contribute more towards funding university projects and research by donating grants to universities. Other participants pointed out the role of the business leaders and wider community such as instituting good values, engaging in CSR, promoting a campaign against corruption, nepotism, teachers and students' attitudes and orientation. Some believe that business leaders and society could come to help the government to fight against corruption in the education system and society. Previous studies maintain that cultural orientations and corruption are the most debilitating factor affecting education (Igwe, Okolie & Nwokoro, 2019).

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)

This study explored the role of HEIs towards improving the quality of HE, knowledge dissemination, research and scholarship related to teaching pedagogy, curriculum design and implementation. Some participants advocated for a transition towards institutional performance and financial management that encourages change and adoption. The university policy

framework gives university councils full responsibility for institutional governance, the appointment of academic and non-academic staff. Also, National Universities Commission; vests university senates with the authority to decide on curricula; admissions criteria and select students; and lays the groundwork for new minimum academic standards (Sainta, Hartnettb & Strassner, 2003). At the present conditions, many of the participants doubt the capability of the Nigeria HE system to contribute to effectively to national advancement. According to a senior Executive director of Federal Educational Agency;

> *"Align programme to focus more on skills required by the labour market and to enable graduates to achieve adequate remuneration and job satisfaction".*

Another participant talked about the impact of HE on students from a variety of background. The stakeholder observed that students new to higher education will arrive at tertiary institutions with widely different experiences, expectations and attitudes. Hence, it is important to provide students with an excellent learning experience, practical and skills. As a private university owner put it;

> *"It is the responsibility of the Faculties to provide an enabling environment for the students to adapt, learn and prosper. These can take in many forms such as providing functioning and well-equipped libraries, digital platform and online resources".*

On the other hand, participants identified critical issues that demand urgent attention in the HEIs. They questioned the quality of grades and the lack of checks and balances in the assessments and grading. According to an Executive of education agency;

> *"Are tutors expected to develop curriculum to include practical and group work? Are coursework and exams submitted for internal and external reviews? You will be surprised to find that there is no standard in many HEIs".*

> *"Because the moderation system is not effectively coordinated, some unethical lecturers, therefore, find it so easy to teach students or award grades as it pleases them"* *(Graduate Entrepreneur/SME owner).*

Vocational skills development has been advocated as a strategy for positioning HE to produce graduates which can be relied upon by the industry (Okolie, Igwe & Elom, 2019). Participants emphasised the importance of collaborations between universities and the private sector to

enable students to take up internship and work placement to provide students with work experiences. A graduate entrepreneur/SME owner state;

> *"Expose students to experiential learning. Reform the university system to make sure that the curriculum can deliver employable graduates".*

Labour market and its linkage to the educational and training sector supports the objective of increasing providing young people with qualifications and empowering them with knowledge and skills. To achieve these objectives, some participants stated that HEIs need to embrace and operate fully I.T, digital and technology learning and infrastructures for learning & innovation. According to a senior company executive;

> *"Up to date, many Nigerian universities do not have internet system and digital blackboard as it is popularly called in other nations where education is at its peak".*

Unfortunately, many Nigerian Universities operate without internet technology and modern facilities such as libraries and laboratories. This is one of the most factors limiting quality education and development of skills, maintain some participants. Hence, it was suggested that universities should;

> *"Teach less of theory and more of problem-solving and practical" (Company Executive director).*

Many were of the views that HEIs can contribute to national development by designing their curriculum to address the challenges of graduate such as unemployment; under-employment and un-employability. Some of the areas suggested by the participants were inculcating morals and financial management in the curriculum design, practice-based learning and de-emphasise degree awards but focus on short-term vocational courses. Others include upgrading programmes to meet global standards and employing qualified and competent teachers to teach, encourage professionalism and avoiding nepotism that is common within the public offices.

Conclusion, Contributions & Implications

Contributions

The current study provided a voice to the HE stakeholders in a way that has not been done in previous research. In a world in which labour markets are continuously transforming with direct consequences on job content, the ability of organizations to find competent employees and the capacity of graduates to find appropriate jobs have become real challenges (Nicolescu

& Nicolescu, 2019). The objective of this paper is to contribute to knowledge on how to develop innovations required for effective education and to examine the roles of the major stakeholders, the hurdles to HE delivery and offers ways to improve knowledge, employability and skills in Nigeria. Previous studies indicate that there are serious concerns about universities in Nigeria being ill-equipped to develop adequate skills to respond to the requirements of the modern job market (British Council, 2014; Okolie et al., 2019a & b). There is a disparity between industry expectations, and HE provision (Asongu & Tchamyou, 2016; Pitan 2016 & 2017). The role of HEIs has become critical in the socio-economic development of many nations. The empirical analysis revealed the specific issues such as policies, governance, state of infrastructure and non-participation of the private sector which have negative effects on the development of HEIs in Nigeria. HEIs have been accused of overreliance on ineffective teaching and learning pedagogies (Asongu & Tchamyou, 2016; British Council, 2014; Serdyukov, 2017).

These conditions have been exacerbated by weak infrastructure, incompetent teaching staff, and poor teaching pedagogy, a lack of professional development and lack of corporate governance. Government is the dominant partner in educational policy reform, but their efforts have been less complemented by other stakeholders. Our findings reveal that the government has not properly integrated stakeholders during the policy design. Arguably, Nigerian HE is long overdue for improvement in the capabilities and performance, change and adoption. This will put the country's HE in line with the standard practice around the world. Increasingly there are concerns about complex institutions of HE, weak governance, lack of monitoring and control. Of course, high enrolment and high demand for admission have so much pressure for HEIs to admit more than their capacity leading to overcrowding and infrastructure deficient. Moreover, the continued expansion of the HE system has now exceeded the government's capacity to serve as the principal financier. As a result, the core activities of universities which centre on coordination and management of teaching, research and scholarship are affected.

Capacity-building between HEIs, industry and NGOs is required to strengthen the links with society and business and to reinforce the systemic impact of higher education. Many participants believed that the institutions prevalent in the HEIs perpetuate bad practices such as the lack of adequate curriculum design, evaluation and moderation (e.g. Beutel, Adie & Lloyd, 2017), including weak examination moderations and standards. These affect the standard of HE in Nigeria and the impact on graduate employability. The World Bank (2017) warns of 'learning crisis' in global education. The report states that millions of young students in low and middle-income countries face the prospect of lost opportunity and lower wages in

later life because their schools are failing to educate them to succeed in life. Therefore, we recommend re-validation of curricula and courses, teaching methodologies and pedagogical approaches, especially those delivering key competences, generic and employability skills, and focusing on the use of ICT; new forms of problem-based learning and study of real-life cases.

Limitations and implications for future research

The size of the participants of the qualitative study presents a limitation. Another limitation is the lack of information from HEIs academics and administrators on some of the issues raised about teaching methods and pedagogy. Nonetheless, the qualitative approach, the quality of data collected, and analysis approach enabled the synthesizes of factors influencing the quality of HE in Nigeria, the development of graduate skills and employability and the role of the stakeholders. Regarding, implications for policy on education, the findings suggest that Nigeria HE system have a lot of work at hand to do with regards to stakeholder's collaboration and improving the standard of education, knowledge exchange, and skills development. Regarding the implications for future research, the qualitative approach we adopted enabled us to offer new paths for future research. Future research is required to define the capacity and regulative environment of the HE system in Nigeria, examining it in-depth to offer new insight. A second implication is the need to understand how teaching and knowledge dissemination takes place. This is particularly important given the implications of the study and claims from previous studies that HE in Nigeria offer weak teaching pedagogy (British Council, 2014; Okolie et al, 2019a, & b; Pitan, 2016 & 2017).

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