



Maintenance of Standards in Vocational Education in Nigeria: Implication for Occupational Choice and Skills Development of Students

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ABSTRACT

Standards are measured with whatever be the needs and acceptable norms of the society. Standards in education are also judged by what the society requires. The Nigerian Society requires that youths come out of schools with saleable skills for employment or self-reliance to reduce unemployment. It is very true to say that the standard of education in Nigeria has fallen greatly. This is because the products of the school system flood the streets of this country without any skill to show that they went to school. There are no employment opportunities for them, and they cannot help themselves since they are unemployable due to lack of saleable skills. Most of them can neither read nor write well. It is vocational education that can help this country out of this problem. This paper looks at standards in vocational education in terms of Supervision, Curriculum, Methods of Instructional Delivery, Equipment, and Quality of Teaching Staff.

INTRODUCTION

Standards always have their base in whatever be the needs and acceptable norms of the society. Education which, itself, determines the level of civilization and advancement of the society cannot be left out of this principle. Okeke (2001) citing Denison (2000) states that educational background is a crucial determinant of the quality of labour. This is to say that the type of education given to the people of a nation at a particular time must meet the needs and prevalent conditions of the people at that time. Many Nigerians today condemn the type of education given to Nigerians by the colonialists. For instance, Attah (2004) asserts that the British, in their orientation limited us to the type of education based on the 3Rs – Reading, Writing, and “Rithmetics”, to the total exclusion of science and technology-based courses. It is rather out of place to condemn colonial education at this

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time because, as Osuala (2004) puts it, the type of education provided by the colonial masters was able to meet the needs of the people at that time.

In other words education at that time was able to produce the quality of people needed to work. A careful consideration of this statement will reveal that early western education system in Nigeria met the standards of the time. The aim of education then was to produce teachers, preachers, clerks, and interpreters who could work in the various departments for the colonialists. The products of that system of education were actually able to read, write, and work out arithmetical calculations to the level or standard they were taught. The colonial education system therefore left behind a very good educational foundation for advancement in science and technology, in the sense that our youths still need the 3Rs in order to understand the principles involved in technical/vocational education. The issue now is not the educational system void of science and technology handed over to us by the colonial masters, but that Nigerians find it difficult to build the science and technology into the educational system and improve upon it for science and technological advancement. All we have is mere lip-service.

Education can only be said to be of standard when it is in consonance with the needs of the people at the time. The early western education was able to produce the manpower required for the economic, social and religious systems, and their products could perform to the expected standards. A cursory look at the products of Nigerian school systems will tell the truth that most of the primary school leavers cannot write their names nor can they give the correct spelling of any word either in English or Vernacular. Most of them from secondary schools who have written the G.C.E or West African Examination Council (WAEC) examination cannot make one simple, correct sentence in English. Those who have graduated from our higher institutions of learning cannot write a letter void of grammatical errors. Above all, the products of our educational system today do not possess any usable skill either for gainful employment or for self-employment.

Effiong (2001), states that some years ago the cry of many Nigerians was 'fallen standard of education' and no one can say empirically that the Nigerian standard of education has 'risen' since then. Certainly, speaking of the standard in education, one can say that it is getting worse. This is speaking about standards of education generally. Referring to the standards in vocational education, it can be said that the first and foremost failure in standard is the fact that vocational education has no base or roots in the Nigerian system of education. This situation persists because most Nigerians, even the highly placed have not yet come to grip with what vocational education is all about.

The Concept of Vocational Education

Denga (2001) regards vocational education as any form of education which specifically prepares an individual to perform well in a chosen occupation. Vocational education he says, is designed to teach skills, develop attitudes,

aptitudes and competencies that are requisite to success in a given occupation. According to Osuala (2004) vocational education includes preparation for employment in any occupation for which specialized education is required, for which there is a societal need, and which can most appropriately be acquired in schools. This assertion by these great authors indicates that vocational education within the school system trains or prepares people for work and to perform the work well in chosen occupational areas. This type of training or preparation is what the school system should provide. There is need therefore to take backward glance at the educational system. If vocational education is what these authors say it is; has it found a place in the school system? The ultimate goal of all forms of education is developing skills for work and this is what vocational education stands for.

It is all important therefore that Nigerians should take the bold step towards making vocational/technical education the foundation for all forms of education. Ibritam (2001) is of this opinion when he listed the guidelines to follow towards this direction. After making vocational education the foundation for all forms of education, then will there be the need to set and maintain standards. In this paper, standards in vocational education is discussed under the following headings:

1. Supervision
2. Curriculum
3. Methods of Instructional Delivery
4. Equipment
5. Quality of teachers

Supervision

Attah (2004) asserts that the task of providing qualitative education to the citizenry rests with the state ministry of education. The state ministry of education therefore has an enormous responsibility on its hands. Presently there are supervisory units in the ministry which are responsible for seeing to it that infrastructures, instructional materials and equipment are put in place at both primary and secondary schools levels. One cannot afford to sit down and cogitate on the effectiveness of these units regarding the discharge of their duties at this moment; but one can say that this important arm of the ministry of education requires some reorganization in certain areas. One of such areas is personnel.

There are so many areas of discipline under vocational/technical education. These include, agriculture, home economics, woodwork, banking, accounting, business studies, auto mechanics, secretarial studies etc. The ministry of education should see to it that people who are specialists in the various vocational areas are employed in the supervisory units. These experts in different areas will know the requirements in terms of structures, equipment, materials and even teaching staff.

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Vehicles should also be provided for each of the vocational areas so that the supervisory staff can visit the schools regularly in order to carry out their assignments. Supervision should not be only on equipment and instructional materials but also on methods of instructional delivery. Private schools are not left out of this exercise as their products also form part of school leavers roaming the streets for employment or seeking admission into higher institutions.

The Curriculum

It is the school curriculum that determines the quality and type of education given to the people of a nation. Till now Nigerians cannot divulge themselves from the school curriculum handed over by the western educationists. A look at the primary school curriculum shows that there is very little or no difference from what used to be in the colonial days, and yet Nigerians are crying today for technological advancement. Ibritam (2000) citing Miller (1985) says, Federal legislation for vocational education represents an expression of national priorities – a reflection of the national wisdom. Any step taken to declare technology a new national priority and national order would reflect some mark of wisdom.

Preparation for work is a developmental process and should begin from primary school. The primary school curriculum does not expose the young ones to any skill development. It only centres around language, arithmetic, social studies etc. Denga (2001) says, some less informed people might argue that primary school children are yet developing and cannot be associated with any definite talent. It needs to be realized that talents must be progressively developed in unison with progressive development of intellectual abilities, aptitudes, and interest of children. This assertion buttresses the fact that vocational education should be introduced at the primary school level.

Vocational education has to do with tools and equipment and there is no gainsaying the fact that most children learn faster with the things they can see, touch and manipulate. All of us can observe the things our children in the nursery school can construct by using empty tins and other materials they find around them to play with. The curriculum from primary four should expose our children to the use of some tools and equipment, like electric testers, hammer, spanner, scissors etc. Computers should be provided for children in the primary schools especially in areas where there is public power supply. Children in the senior primary school should be able to learn subjects like shorthand, typing and principle of accounting etc. At the age of six most children can play some musical instruments. They themselves will begin to realize their talents and areas of interests.

At the secondary school level, the curriculum should be purely science and vocational/technical education based. By the time a child is in the junior secondary school, he has already been able to identify areas of interest and aptitude and will then be planning his vocational development along the area of interest and aptitude. At the end of three years in the junior secondary,

students have acquired usable skills for either gainful employment or for self-employment. Those who will go on to the senior secondary can take to their areas of specialty.

Methods of Instructional Delivery

One cannot talk of standards in vocational education without giving due consideration to the methods of instruction. Till date, in many of the secondary schools where vocational subjects are taught, theory dominates. All vocational subjects are highly skill subjects, therefore the teaching of theory should be kept at a minimal level

Word processing for instance in one of the skill subjects and the aim of the subject should be to develop in the students the skill to operate computer to proficiency level in producing documents. The skill can never be taught and developed by teaching the theory of word processing which entails mentioning and explaining the parts of the computer with no opportunity given to the students to touch and manipulate the parts to experience how they work. Skills cannot be effectively taught in this manner. Emphasizing on how skills could be taught, Udo & Emah (2000) in their occupational analysis stressed on the teaching of work operation as against the teaching of tools. They described operation as works in a job and that it cannot be expressed primarily in terms of tools. In skills acquisition, tools are not taught but jobs in which process tools are mentioned. Therefore in teaching beginning word processing, the first job to teach is “how to go to the word processing window”. The teacher can then mention the necessary parts of the Word Application Programme that are involved in the job of word processing and how the parts are made functional in the job. Other jobs in word processing will thus be taught systematically till the students acquire the required skills and competence in Word Application Programme or MS-Word package.

Frequency of operation or use of the tools is another indispensable factor in skills teaching and acquisition (Udo & Emah, 2000). Students should not stay for long after they had been introduced to the use of tools before they have another opportunity to perform or practice. Frequency of use leads to proficiency in skill acquisition. It applies to all subjects in vocational/technical education. All along, students have been taught so much of theory of the skill subjects. For students to learn skills and be able to perform to the expected level of accuracy in the psycho-motor domain, teaching of theory and the use of the related tools in any job operation must be uncompromisingly synchronized.

Equipment

Standards in vocational education are set by the type and quality of equipment, tools and materials with which the students are taught. The

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students are usually exposed to obsolete and non-functional equipment and tools in both public and privately owned vocational schools. The case is not much different in our higher institutions of learning. There is the case in a university where the Office Option of Business Education Programme was scrapped simply because the Vice Chancellor of the university never wanted to hear the cracky sound from the manual typewriters used for instruction in that university. The Vice Chancellor was right in the sense that, teaching the students typing with manual typewriters and allowing them to pass out only with the ability to operate manual typewriter cannot meet up with the standard of modern office automation. These are the people that will go out to teach the younger ones Office Skills, which they as teachers do not measure up to the standard needed in teaching the skill. Instead of scrapping a very good, useful and important area of vocational education, the Vice Chancellor could have done away with the manual typewriters and equipped the studio with modern word processing machines and computers for instruction.

Many of the secondary schools, both public and private, where these manual typewrites are available, only few of them are functional. The same goes for equipment and tools for all other vocational areas. Lack of or inadequate equipment for vocational instruction has constituted a major reason why teaching of vocational subjects has been dominated by theory. It is either the equipment are not available, or available but are obsolete and not usable. No sight should be lost of the fact that equipment determines the level of interest of both the teacher and the students in teaching/learning process.

The Quality of Teaching Staff

The quality of products from vocational programmes is largely determined by the quality of teachers who trained them. A well trained and qualified teacher can adjust or modify the curriculum to the standard of the class he is handling. Where the equipment are inadequate a well trained teacher knows the basics of the subject the students need to know and he can determine the curriculum content to correspond with the available equipment. Quality of teaching staff, simply put, refers to the type of training and preparation the teachers received to enable them impart knowledge and skills to students. In this regard, it is the privately owned vocational schools that may experience some problems. The proprietors may choose not to employ those who have acquired the right training, just to cut down on wage bills. In that case, they may go for secondary school leavers, those with Royal Society of Art (R.S.A), City and Guild (C& G) certificate holders etc. These set of people do not have the mastery of the subject nor do they know the pedagogy.

The issue of quality of teachers is not much of a problem in the public schools. Government policy stipulates that the minimum teaching qualification for primary school teachers is Nigeria Certificate in Education (N.C.E). Currently, there this directive from the Akwa Ibom State ministry of education that any secondary school teacher without educational background

– pedagogical training, has two years to go back to school to get educational training. This is a very good thing to happen to secondary education system in the state. The ministry of education in the state should make sure that this exercise extends to the privately owned secondary schools.

There is one thing that needs mentioning, and that is the teachers assigned to teach Business Studies in some secondary schools. Business Studies in the junior secondary schools comprises of five unrelated subjects vis, Principles of Accounting, Commerce, Office Practice, Typing and Shorthand. These subjects are not related in principles as the basic sciences that make up the integrated science. The teacher who studied Accounting only cannot handle Business Studies in the Junior Secondary School (JSS). Likewise, the teacher who read Business Administration cannot teach all the subjects in Business Studies because they cannot teach Office Practice, Typing and Shorthand. The person who read Secretarial Studies cannot teach Accounting. Assigning Business Studies to a teacher who specialized in only one aspect is not only a disservice to the teacher but also to the students. Every person should strive to give the best of vocational education to the youths.

Implication for Occupational Choice and skills Development of Students

Choosing appropriate occupation and developing the required skills for the jobs in it are a function of the quality of standard maintained in the supervision of learning and teaching processes. Thorough supervision of equipment, instructional materials and pedagogical strategies are tasks that are to be executed with a high degree of commitment. These exercises enhance the quality of knowledge imparted to students and also assist them to be aware of their academic capacity in relation to any occupational pursuit. Right choice of occupation and the development of the prerequisite skills for jobs in the occupation reduce unemployment to the bearest level. It was in this connection that Akpan (2008) in Makere (1990) asserted that youths unemployment was due to lack of skills and satisfactory career choice.

The quality and type of education given to the people of a nation is largely determined by the school curriculum. Acquisition of saleable skills has to be emphasized in the operational curriculum since their acquisition provides manpower needs for economic development. It also ensures security and stability of jobs as opined by Akpan (2009) in (Okorie & Ezeji, 1988). A well planned curriculum equips students with marketable skills and also prepares them for the demands in the world of work. Maintenance of standard in the planning and use of a given curriculum therefore is an insurance of self-confidence in student's choice of occupation. A curriculum that maintains standard provides for the needs, skills, technology, culture and norms etc of the society. Such a curriculum prepares students for work and develops their talents in union with progressive development of intellectual abilities, aptitudes and interest in order to get rid of societal vices. It was on

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the basis of this circumstance that Akpan & Ukpong (2008) in Makoji (1988) stressed that the price a nation pays for failure to provide the youths with vocational skills was apparently high rate of juvenile delinquency and increased crime rate in the society.

Discussion on maintenance of standards in vocational education cannot be complete without considering the methods of instruction in acquiring skill. Skill training requires less theory, more practice and frequent use of tools. The type of tools used and how they are used exert a lot of influence on the students' mind set. Different occupations require different tools for the different jobs in them. Confidence in how tools are used more often endears students to certain occupation while lack of such confidence does the opposite. It is therefore incumbent on the teacher to vigorously encourage acquisition of skills by demonstrating on how a task is done and giving the students ample opportunity to practise instead of boring them with verbose theories. The procedure enhances proficiency and easy acquisition of skills which may surprisingly sharpen the alertness of the students' in their occupational choice.

Setting of standards in vocational education has a lot to do with the type and quality of equipment, tools and materials with which students are taught. Equipment determines the level of interest of the teacher and the students in the process of teaching and learning. If appropriate equipment are available and usable, students' interest and zeal are engendered but if they are not available or are available but obsolete and not functional, students' interest is seriously dampened if not outrightly killed. Sight should therefore not be lost of the fact that engendering or dampening of students' interest poses a high magnitude of positive or negative impact on occupational choice, skill acquisition and development.

It is not an overstatement that the factor that needs standard maintenance most in vocational education is the quality of the teachers who train the students. The quality of training and preparation a teacher received determine the quality of his products. Half-baked teachers produce half-baked students with bundles of negative life traits which are unavoidably transferred to almost all spheres of life endeavours. Such students remain permanent liability to the system or society. In order not to allow such an awful situation arise, the quality of teachers should not in any way and at all cost be compromised. It should be noted that quality teaching staff offers quality teaching and quality teaching enhances quick and easy assimilation, self-confidence, burning desire for self-actualization as well as wise and visionary occupational choice.

CONCLUSION

Vocational education in Nigeria is still at the crawling stage of existence despite the well-articulated policy of the Federal Government on it. Its acceptance is not wide and is more or less in principles. Majority of

Nigerians, even the educated and the elites appear ignorant of its concept and importance. Thus, setting and maintaining standards remain elusive. Since the attainment of rapid technological and socio-economic development of any developed economy is based primarily on this type of education, Nigeria has to strive to tow the line of the developed nations of the world for her to develop.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Realizing the role of vocational education as a vehicle for technological advancement, government should come out with a policy making vocational education the foundation for all forms of education. Ministry of education should set up very effective supervisory units to see to the setting and maintaining standards in vocation education. This, the ministry will do by employing experts in all vocational areas and providing vehicles for transportation during inspection exercises. The school curriculum should be vocational education-based; and being that vocational training is a developmental process, it should start from the primary school. In teaching vocational skills theory should be kept at a very minimal level. Modern equipment should be provided in all the vocational areas to meet the needs/standards of the modern society. Qualified teachers, in the right numbers, should be employed in all the vocational areas of the school curriculum.

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