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ISSUE OF QUALITY IN NIGERIA EDUCATION SYSTEM

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It is important to have a look at the basic ingredients that define quality in education. It has long been found that quality is never an accident; it has always been the result of high intentions, sincere efforts, intelligent mission statement and focused as well as skillful implementation. In education, there is a broad agreement on a number of issues that define quality. They include higher academic standards, vigorous curricula, skilled and experienced teachers, updated textbooks, state of the arts laboratories and computing facilities, small class sizes, modern buildings and conducive environment for learning, strict discipline, involving parents amongst others. It is a most useful thing to look at three broad factors.

The national educational philosophy has been used for this purpose since 1948. It has always been part of the philosophy that education helps in upward movement of the individual in the social ladder. The National Policy on Education has defined the goals of education as well as enumerated the tools for achieving these goals. It is indeed a most comprehensive and thoughtful document. It is now important to also include that education could act as a source of empowerment when the quality is such that it will improve the ability of the citizenry to compete effectively in the world. In addition to the issues enumerated earlier for promoting quality, we need to add the issues of local needs adaptability and accountability. We also must create a culture of developing reliable statistical data base that will promote ability to project our needs at all levels.

Education and Basic Needs

The need to improve higher education should begin with giving greater attention to our preschool, elementary, secondary, and vocational schools. These areas are the building blocks of society's educational foundation, as not everyone needs a university education. Thus, the society must make meaningful use of the current *Universal Basic Education* (UBE) program, which is expected to provide free education to children between the ages of seven to seventeen (Umar and Adoba, *ThisDay*, 12/6/01). In addition to the free primary education, the government should guarantee free lunch for the needy students, as no child can learn while hungry. To supplement the efforts of the government, the private sector should assist in the form of financial and material donations, and collaborate with institutions of higher learning to help the primary and secondary schools to improve their teaching standards, governance, and their community relations.

If Nigeria can not give adequate and quality education to students at the elementary and secondary level, the tertiary institutions would continue to be populated by those who are least prepared to face the rigors of university education. And 'cultism,' 'intimidation of professors into better grades' and other vices will continue to blossom on the campuses across the nation.

States and Federal governments should also device ways and means of helping financially handicapped students in higher institutions, in ways of making available affordable financial loans to enable needy students to complete their education. As in the United States (and other humane societies), 'merit-based' and 'need-based' approach policy could be adopted in the process of putting the loan policy in place (King, March 1999). And adequate machinery should be put in place to collect the loan from students as soon as they find employment. Nigeria has the resources to implement a good student loan program, but as always, her problems have been corruption and implementation (the old student-loan program in the society died because of this).

We have traditionally relied on government for the funds to develop much of our national needs in education. Our leaders have also been most unrealistic about this posture. I have stated clearly that we need to promote change. *The vision of the leadership must be enriched by a mission for change.* Stakeholders must be mobilised for this crucial purpose that will aim at first class standards that must be able to compete with the world effectively. The commitment cannot be a lip service as well as a political gimmick. We need to harness all options to find appropriate priorities and sources of funding. We shall look more into this later in this presentation.

The staff must be motivated if they are to properly bring up the future leaders of our land. They have been rescued from abject poverty in recent times but a lot remains to be done. The environment in which they work needs a quantum leap from the current level. Indiscipline has crept into our schools and it must be addressed frontally. The impact of parent and community involvement in children schooling needs a new look. It is not enough that we have Parents Teachers Association (PTA) in schools, the parents themselves need a re-orientation as home education is a most vital part of the development of character, the positive change which our society needs so badly. Administrators in the tertiary institutions have been ordered to eradicate secret cults in our campuses. This has been a tall directive. Secret cults did not originate from the schools. What efforts are being put into force by the society and government against them? The control must start from our leaders both in government and business. The young ones know the elders who are the king - pins in the secret cults.

The position of Nigeria in terms of development after more than forty years of independence is a disheartening one. We have stagnated in almost all fronts except in terms of population growth, currently at 2.83 percent. The last twenty years have also seen us to be amongst the poorest countries of the world in economic terms. Our current GDP per capital is given at less than US \$300. To become a middle

country, we need to reach the level of US 1,200 which requires a double cycle of being able to double our GDP from the current level. The value of our currency has continued to be at a loss by a factor of over 2000. Industrial production has been dismal. The installed capacities, which are inadequate, are not fully utilised and productivity is at an all time low with some marginal increases here and there in the last two years. The agricultural sector has not fared better as we have been transformed into a country that depends substantially on food imports from an agricultural economy that was almost self-sufficient in local food production. Education in general, is a field in which we have had a tremendous explosion in the number of institutions at all levels as well as a rather reasonable increase in student enrolment. It is to be noted that we are not anywhere near where we need to be if education must be the catalyst for industrial development. The numbers are well below the international levels that will make us become an educated modern society. We are beset with so many problems especially with inadequate facilities, obsolete laboratories, low-level in terms of staff training, dislocated teachers whose sense of worth have been at the trenches due to irregular payment of salaries until in recent times. The standards have fallen so low that our public institutions have become a national disgrace. If we look at available figure, the reading scores of the equivalent of JSS3 students are compared with funding level per student. We are no where to be found as the reading level is dismal. The available! data shows that we spend less than US\$150 per this level. At the university level, the annual expenditure per student is around US\$1,200 at the current funding which is a lot of improvement in the last two years. This is in comparison with the equivalent student at values for USA., Sweden, and Japan of US\$ 15,500.00, 12,000.00, and 8,500.00 respectively.

Education in Nigeria: An issue?

Nigeria has toiled with some educational programs, which have only served as conduits to transfer money to the corrupt political leaders and their cronies. For instance, the nation launched the *Universal Primary Education (UPE)* in 1976, but as noted, the program failed due to lack of fund necessitated by corruption, among other factors. Nigeria has again launched another mass-oriented education program, this time branding it the *Universal Basic Education (UBE)*. The President, *Olusegun Obasanjo*, declared during the launching of the program in *Sokoto* that the nation “cannot afford to fail this time around.” However, not long after that, the federal government reported that the falling standard of education in Nigeria is caused by “acute shortage of qualified teachers in the primary school level.” It is reported that about 23 percent of the over 400,000 teachers employed in the nation’s primary schools do not possess the Teachers’ Grade Two Certificate, even when the National Certificate of Education (NCE) is the minimum educational requirement one should possess to teach in the nation’s primary schools (*Ogbeifum and Olisa; The Vanguard Online*, July 1, 2001).

If one may ask: with the troubling revelations of the shortage and “half-baked” teachers employed to teach in the nation’s schools, how are we certain the current *UBE* program will be successful? Has the government trained the required number

and quality of teachers needed to successfully implement the program? Are the teachers going to be motivated to perform their duties well? Are the classrooms and seats ready, or are the pupils going to sit on bare floor? Are the books and other teaching materials ready? This writer has noted elsewhere that to improve the standard of education in Nigeria, the society has to first educate the educators, and motivate them to perform their duties well (Dike, July 14, 2000). But the leaders do not seem to want to listen!

Although Nigerian's educational institutions in general are in dire need, the most troubled of the three tiers is the primary education sector. The recent statistics on primary education available to this writer shows that there are about 2,015 primary schools in Nigeria with no buildings of any type. Classes are held under trees. The quality of lectures conducted under such an inhumane condition would not be anything to be proud of. With this dismal statistics, the government is still in the habit of allocating less money to the educational sector (see Tables A). If Nigeria's allocation to education is compared with that of other less affluent societies in Africa, the picture becomes more discouraging (see Table B).

*Table A: Federal Government
Budgetary Allocation to Education*

Year	Allocation (%)
1995	7.2
1996	12.32
1997	17.59
1998	10.27
1999	11.12
2000	8.36
2001	7.00

*Table B: Spending on Education (%GNP) for
some African Countries as compared to Nigeria*

Country	% GNP
Angola	4.9
Cote d' Ivoria	5
Ghana	4.4
Kenya	6.5
Malawi	5.4
Mozambique	4.1
<i>Nigeria</i>	0.76
South Africa	7.9
Tanzania	3.4
Uganda	2.6

Sources for tables A & B: Extracted from, The African Dept; Reported by Jubilee 2000; Alifa Daniel: Intrigues in FG-ASUU

Relatively speaking, the above disheartening statistics show how insufficient Nigeria's allocation to the educational sector has been. One can only get what he or she has ordered! Nigeria has to change her value system and invest on education, which is the intellectual laboratory of any nation and the engine that propels the economy. It has been noted that 'without a formidable intellectual base' it is not likely that any society would move forward (*Anya*, June 19, 2001).

Therefore, to move forward the government should adopt necessary policies to destroy the current bad value system in the society, and create conducive environment that would enable the educational institutions to engage in healthy competitions, raise funds through private donations and grants, and attract and retain qualified students financially positioned to pay tuitions. (Higher education in Nigeria should not be free. If one would pay for any service, one could afford to complain, or move to an institution where he/she could get the money's worth of service. This, however, does not mean that diplomas should be sold to the highest bidder. Also the universities should develop a system whereby students could transfer to schools of their choice (and change their major) if they are qualified, without it adversely impacting their studies. And university admissions should be based strictly on merit, without ethnically and state-based criteria, which have unfortunately colored the system). All these are not available in system currently. If these suggestions are implemented they would, among other things, help the institutions of higher learning to prepare grounds for more intense academic competition, and to attract better quality teachers by "rebuild [ing] a culture of scholarship which has been eroded by under funding" so as to motivate them to be more productive (*Bollag*, Feb 1, 2002, A40). And any institution that cannot survive should be allowed to wither. Improving the condition of things in this sector would pave the way to the nation's prosperity.

It is known (at least in the developed world) that education determines, not only earning capacity, but also the very quality of human life (even longevity has relationship to education). In a society that appreciates educated class, those with good education tend to earn higher incomes; they also are in a better position to leave a better and healthy live. Higher education gives one a greater sense of how to reduce risks in life and change their behavior. As Davies noted, confidence, self-reliance, and adaptability are all earmarks of advanced education (*Davies*, Nov 30, 2001, B16-B17). The need to critically look at the poor or lack of infra-structural and support facilities needed to provide a most conducive learning and teaching environment at all levels of our education system.

The issues of student enrolment and reward system for the teachers are also rather critical. Professor Anya O. Anya recently summarised the situation vividly thus in a paper: "Clearly, the Nigerian education system has been left far behind even by third world standards. While there has been a steady increase in for instance, number of schools and enrolment figures, the increase has neither been matched by a corresponding rise in the number of teachers nor by an expansion in the facilities utilised by these schools.

It is abundantly established that we have very serious problems in our country and especially so in education. The World Bank produced the document in 2000 on Financing Higher Education in the world. It is an exposition on the financial crisis in higher education of the 1990's. It is no comfort that the crisis is not with us alone. We need to recognise that for Nigeria and most of the developing world we are far behind.

The challenge is for us to catch up as well as creating the necessary change within the system for a sustained educational planning and implementation with regular review that will make us a permanent member of the knowledge world.

The financial crisis is the result of:

Economic mismanagement;

Intensified demand for higher education;

Rising tertiary enrolments;

Reduced government capacity to finance higher education expansion as a result of competition for public funds as well as the high cost of maintenance of residential campus in Federal Universities; and Low level of internally generated fund by the institution.

It can be seen that from 1992 the fund provided was just below the amount needed (on per student basis). This was on a reduced expectation basis! The gap became enormous from 1993/94 session. On the issue of enrolment as against staff strength, the effect is staggering. The staff strength actually dropped from 1985/86 session while the student population is more than doubled. If we were to look critically at academic strength only, the situation has been much worse. There is no surprise here. Many left for the greener pastures and the young bright ones could not be attracted. The other fact is that the average academic in our system is not as competent as he was fifteen years ago. The challenge here is to develop a system to bring up the quality of our teachers so that this can impact positively on our students.

There are problems induced by students, lecturers and their unions. In the case of students, the factors include the large number of unqualified and/or inadequately

prepared ones admitted through dubious means or with dubious credentials. Some have become permanent students. They are in the Students Union Governments (SUGs) and sometimes constitute terror on our campuses. Management is faced with the challenge of screening prospective students. Some innovative ways have to be developed to reduce their number. In the case of lecturers, the factors have been fueled by frustration in the 1990s and ethnic and religious activities have been the result as well as intensified trade unionism. The activities of Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and other unions in our tertiary institutions have actually helped to maintain some sanity against the assault on academia during military rule. It is time for ASUU and the other unions to change gear and develop new tactics for the new scenario.

The global challenge in the end is for our country to ensure that our educational institutions are able to simultaneously develop the skills and the innovations that help our national development programme and make it possible for us to be relevant in the world through effective participation in the global economy. The higher institutions must be the leaders and must take the challenge seriously.

The search for knowledge is rather tedious, unending but could be a fulfillment. The challenge is for us not to give up. Quality education is not an elusive quantity. We deserve it but we must sweat for it.

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