

UNIVERSAL BASIC EDUCATION (UBE) PROGRAMME: ANOTHER WHITE ELEPHANT AS U.P. E.

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Abstract

Both the ears and eyes of every Nigerian are wide open to hear and see how the long awaited pregnant woman will deliver a golden baby boy or girl. The long awaited arrival of the baby is the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme. All the radio and television channels are this time filled with talks, the pages of newspaper equally covered with headlines of the scheme. The question that crosses one's mind is how prepared are we for the take off of the scheme? If the answer is in affirmative, when is it coming up? And lastly what strategies did government put on the ground for its take off? The answers to the above questions is the reason for this paper. The author wishes to examine the Universal Basic Education programme in its entirety and critically compare it with the failed UPE programme of 1976; background of free education; adduce the missing link of UBE as present the woes of free education in Nigeria. Then make reasoned suggestion that borders on the way forward and finally draw conclusion.

Introduction

The Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme was launched by the Head of State Olusegun Obasanjo on the 29th Sept. 1999, at Sokoto, exactly the same state his former boss launched the failed Universal Primary Education (UPE) programme on 29th Jan. 1974. The two launchings could be said to be coincidence, but according to Odo (2002), the choice of Sokoto State was symbolic; in the first place the state is the most educationally backward or disadvantaged state in the country, and again currently the state has the lowest primary school enrolment figure in the country.

Following the presidential launching accorded the programme were well articulated guided lines that which specified the objectives, thus:

- The development in the entire citizenry a strong consciousness for education and strong commitment to its vigorous promotion;
- The provision of free Universal Basic Education for every Nigerian child of school going age.
- The drastic reduction of the incidence of drop-out from the formal school system through improved relevance, quality and efficiency.
- Catering for the learning needs of young persons who for one reason or another, have had to interrupt their schooling through appropriate forms of complementary approaches to the provision and promotion of basic education.
- Ensuring the acquisition of the appropriate levels of literacy, numeracy, manipulative, communicative and life skills as well as ethical, moral and civic values needed for laying a solid foundation for its long learning.

The guidelines however set its major aims to achieving equal and adequate educational opportunities at all levels of education. Vigorous efforts have to be made to prevent any setback in achieving the stated goals of UBE. Proper and appropriate approaches for improving what is present on the ground that has to do with enrichment of curriculum.

It will be noted that the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme is not limited to the primary schools. The programme covers the primary schools and junior secondary school as well as nomadic primary, regular primary education, junior secondary and comprehensive adult literacy education. According to Odo (2001), UBE is a nine-year programme of free, universal education aimed at providing basic education to the teeming population of Nigerian children and youths, many of whom would not have benefited from Western education.

The Background Of Free Education In Nigeria

Lord Fredrick Lugard, the then (governor-General of Nigeria brought both the North and Southern protectorates together and got them united under what is referred to as Amalgamation. However, under the unification of the North and South we become one entity, Nigeria, in 1914. In Nigeria, three major regions existed and are still in existence - Eastern, Western and Northern Regions. Nigeria was then under the colony of the Europe (British). After a while, Nigerians started producing front-line elites. Among the early elites and politicians was Chief Obafemi Awolowo who spear-headed and championed free primary education for those who have reached, the school going age in the West as far back as 1955. This was the first bold step in the direction of free education in Nigeria and it was very successful, and many people in the West benefited from the programme.

Two years later, the East tried to copy what is obtainable in the West. However, in less than two years, the programme fizzled out as they ran into difficulties in the proper implementation. For the North, no serious thought was given to introduce any free-education scheme (Odo, 2002).

After the attainment of independence in 1960, Somade Commission was set up to examine and find out the feasibility of introducing nation-wide free universal primary education programme. However, the commission's recommendation were not followed and the scheme was hurriedly introduced in 1976.

The hurried nature in the scheme could very much serve as a deterrent to authorities concerned in the implementation of the present UBE programme, so as not to repeat the same experience of the failed UPE programme.

The Dilemma Of UPE Of Yester-Years

Prior to the establishment of the National Policy on Education, it has been the wish and concern the federal government to promulgate Universal Primary Education (UPE). This could be seen in the Somade committee set up by the Federal Government in 1960 to examine the feasibility, social and financial implications of introducing free primary education throughout the country (Yoloye, 1998). The committee, it was reported, traveled extensively throughout the country, compiled a lot of statistics, and conducted intensive interviews with government functionaries and opinion pools. The findings made Somade to recommend and warned that:

Unless the approach to free primary and universal education is carefully planned, and guided negative and disastrous consequences on the economic, political and social system, may result.

A majority report by Somade recommended a phased programme of implementation of UPE indicating period for planning, provision of infrastructure, training of teachers etc which will ultimately yield a 100% enrolment over a period of years. This majority report was rejected in expense of a minority report by Tai Solarin that read thus: "I want free Universal Primary Education NOW". To this effect, according to Yoloye (1998), on 29th January 1974, in Sokoto, the then head of state Major General Yakubu Gowon caught everyone by surprise by announcing the introduction of UPE throughout the country with effect from 1975. It was later changed to 1976 on the same advice of the ministry officials. This brought what is called rush to effect implementation. The Federal Government laid down three guiding principles:

1. The federal government will lay down the policy guidelines for UPE. ^2.

The federal government would provide funds for the implementation.

3. The state government would be the agents of the scheme.

At this juncture, there were contract galore to build primary schools and teacher training colleges. It was reported that recruitment tours were made overseas to bring in large numbers of expatriate teachers to staff the yet established teacher training colleges. Many of the contracts were not done, and those done were badly executed. A prodigious amount of money was spent on hotel bills for the expatriates who waited for more than six months before getting their posting. By 1979, it was obvious that the federal government could not move on with the financial burden alone, and a little shifted responsibility to state, Local Government and finally UPE died a natural death by 1983.

The Missing Link Of UBE

i. Physical and Instructional Facilities

The author is not a prophet of doom, but if adequate care is not properly taken, what befell the Universal Primary Education (UPE) in 1976 may eventually re-occur. Definitely, the UBE cut across, beginning from primary school to adult literary programme, but primary education is the cradle and the foundation base/the spring board for any other educational pursuits (Ezugwu, 1998). A monitoring survey by the former NPEC in 1991 showed that about 5% of the school in the country had no school building, however, the percentage is much higher in some states, for example, Benue (21.24%); Borno (18.9%); (FME, 1991). The SAPA survey showed that 77% of the pupils had no textbooks at all, while 30 % had no writing materials. Presently nothing has been done positively to improve physical and instructional facilities for the take off of UBE.

ii. Teaching Staff

It has been observed that nothing is virtually on the ground to train teaching staff for the smooth take off of the programme. What is seen everywhere is evening lessons being organized by the NTI in every corner of the country in the name of training teachers for the programme. No wonder Oranu (1994) observed that the proliferation of NCE awarding institutions has merely increased the number of possible avenues for issuing of NCE certificate to any person who desires to become a teacher. The implication of what the NTI is doing is far beyond description, for according to Ukeje (1993), no nation can rise above the quality of her teachers. One of the guiding principles of UBE is that the programme goes beyond primary schools, and it covers junior secondary schools, and adult literacy programme which is all embracing. To tin's, NTI is not competent to train the required manpower teaching staff for the programme, if it is destined to succeed, and not to crash land as the UPE.

iii. Lack of Proper Planning

The Universal Primary Education Programme failed because the country was in a hurry, The country is always in a hurry to see the ends. The country lacks national planning which could take some space of time interval. Our problem is that every government wants to start a programme and conclude same. This is partly because other subsequent incoming and administration will always abandon such for a new one. This was what killed the well articulated programme of UPE, for Somade commission warned, that unless the approach to free primary and universal education is carefully planned, and guided, negative and disastrous consequences may result (Yoloye, 1998). Amidst all the prophetic warnings, the government waded into it and crashed without lasting for a decade.

iv. Lack of Commitment

It is already an established fact the Nigerians lack commitment when it comes to national issues. This idea should be fully discouraged in the minds of the young ones. The spirit of consciousness has to be made indelible in us. The inbuilt selfishness is fully inscribed in us that what belongs to the government should not be said to be our own. If this inertia were not in the elites, UPE could not have failed so soon. Everybody wants to grab "this or that" at expense of the national assignment. For instance, Yoloye (1998) reported that many educationists wasting hotel bill in the most expensive hotels in the country. Already now, overseas tour are in progress which is not called lot yet. A good many of Nigerians are intelligent enough to sit down and do proper planning for this, UBE programme.

v. **Management of Funds**

A one-time Nigerian head of state asserted that 'the problem of Nigeria is not money per-se, but how to spend money'. Money could be released from the top, but before it gets to the targets, a lot may have been lost in transit. Every Nigerian is greedy, especially those at the echelon, Sometimes, money meant for a particular project could be diverted to another. Nobody had time to go back to the drawing board to actually assess the progress being made. Even the policy makers left the substance and pursue the shadow, until the UPE crash-landed beyond getting up.

vi. **Involvement of Non-Professionals**

It is really sad to not that those who make policies in the education sector in this country are those that do not know anything about education. Most of them are engineers, lawyers, medical doctors etc. For instance, during the period of Shagari and Buhart administration, a medical doctor was a minister for education; during Babangida and Abacha, a Lawyer was a minister for education. This type of misplaced priority has already crept into the UBE programme, and this will automatically spell doom on the scheme. There is an adage which says: 'that when an old woman falls twice, whatever she carries in a basket will be thoroughly counted'. Nigeria cannot afford to fall twice in such a bogous scheme that gulps trillions of naira and dollars.

Why Free Education Has Never Succeeded In Nigeria

A lot of reasons are deduced able why free education never succeeded in Nigeria, and this could be guided to the authorities concerned in the implementation of UBE programme:

- **Unreliable Data for Planning**

Certain data are supposed to be routinely available in a country like Nigeria for any project, but are conspicuously absent or rather deficient. After 30 years of attaining independence, Nigeria do not have up-to-date census figure, instead we base all we are doing largely on projections from the 1963 population census figure. It will be noted that the population keeps on multiplying in geometrical projection every year. Because of figure projection, UPE for instance was underestimated.

- **Political Instability**

Constant disruption of educational programme as a result of political instability has been the most influential factor leading to the departure from reality. Due to regular and abrupt change in government coupled with the fact that we do not follow national plan, free education does not last.

- **Conflict of Power**

Experience has shown that policies made during the military rule when the power is centralized is always disorganized or totally eliminated during the civil rule when the power is highly decentralized. To this, there is always conflict between centralized and decentralized control of power.

- **Accountability**

There is always poor accountability in financial management due to lack of commitment. Besides, there has never been legal enforcement and subsequent penalty for defaulters to serve as an eye opener to others.

- **Inadequate Funding**

Management of fund, for instance during the introduction of UPE in 1976 was grossly inefficient. If there were adequate funds followed by good management, UPE would have been sustained till today. But because of colossal shortage of fund, the entire programme fizzled and was blown away like harmattan wind.

There was no mechanism for accountability and to that UPE did not stand the test of time.

The Task Before The UBE On The Way*Forward

According to Odo (2001), the programme is tagged Universal Basic Education (UBE) because it is not limited to primary education but will operate up to the junior secondary school level, and that the programme aims at providing basic education to the teeming population of Nigerian children and youths many of whom would, not have benefited from Western education. With the above at the back of the mind, the UBE will bear the following tasks ahead:

Sensitizing the Public

Even though the Universal Primary Education (UPE) of 1976 did not fully succeed in its stated aims and objectives, but it was able to sensitize the public from all nooks and corners; the entire citizenry, market women, children from interior rural areas. At that point in time, the afore-mentioned group of people came out en-mass to start school. In the same vein, the UBE should enlighten the public through the entire populace in the rural areas through the moral custodians etc.

Teaching of Teachers

In a communique issued after a National Summit on Higher Education convened by the Hon. Minister Prof. Babalola Borishade from 11th - 16 March 2002, it was observed in sub-theme 3, No2; thus:

The Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme does not need the crash programme in teacher training currently based in the National Teacher Institute (NTI), as the Colleges of Education have the statutory mandate and the capacity to produce non-degree teachers for primary schools. Consequently, funds allocated for this exercise should be applied to enhanced the capacity of the Colleges of Education to meet the increased need for teachers.

From the above communique of the National Summit on Higher Education, it has been observed and still could be seen that if this UBE scheme will succeed, a carefully organized teacher education programme which should come under an accredited body like NCCE, instead of National Teachers Institute (NTI), who sees to the award of Teacher Grade II certificate. This is another misplaced priority which should not be allowed to continue.

Changing the Image of the Present Public Schools

At present, the entire public schools in Nigeria lost their credibility and need to redeem such image again. The up-surge in this last 10 years or below of private schools is an attestation that our present public school has lost its potency. The reason for this was that in most of the states, teachers are not paid salaries, even where salaries are paid most of them abandon their duties for private business. This made so many parents to withdraw their wards for private school where teachers are more dedicated. This requires another services campaign to re-assure the entire public that public schools have come back to its glory, which the Universal Basic Education has to shoulder.

Retraining of Teachers

There should be a retraining programme for the teachers in the field. Most of the existing teachers in our public and private schools need to be retrained to get them into the new system of Universal Basic Education programme. This retraining programme will re-examine the roles teachers have been performing and usher them into the current roles with particular reference to the new scheme at hand. This could be done through workshops, seminars and conferences etc.

Fortification of the UBE Commission

In order not to repeat the experience of the past with particular reference to what happened to UPE in 1976, the government should be wise enough by involving transparent, honest and dedicated professionals in the field of education. Government should be mindful of people with questionable and dubious character, for many out not only to undermine such programme but to empty the treasury, then turn round and blame the government.

Incorporating Street and Working Children

The UBE owes it as a responsibility to incorporate and make plans on how to bring in those our children who roam the street selling banana, fruits, pure water, cola etc, which was aimed at alleviating the economic status of either the parents or their different sponsors. According to Otu and Ojo (2002), these children are found in the streets, market, motor parks; and they stand the danger of becoming social misfits and pick up bad habits like stealing, lying, bullying etc. For girls, they can be introduced into sexual activities before they reach the age of 10 years, and even become commercial sex workers eventually.

Summary And Conclusion

In the foregoing, this paper has been able to discuss Universal Basic Education: another white elephant as the Universal Free Primary Education UPE. The author advanced the dilemma of the UPE of 1976 to serve as a pre-warning to the present UBE programme. Thereafter, the author x-rayed the missing link of the UBE as observed so far; why free education may never succeed in Nigeria; the task before the UBE programme where the author made available those things to be done to avoid the mistake of failing the second time. Therefore, it is the intention of the author that if the above guidelines are complied with, Nigerians will not tell another history of the past in a negative way.

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