VOCATIONAL TECHNICAL EDUCATION: EXTENT OF ACHIEVEMENT OF MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS (MDGs) FOR SUSTAINABILITY

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Abstract

The essence of this paper is to get the stage set for meaningful discussions on the quality of vocational technical education in Nigeria, and to generate an intelligent discourse regarding the on-going reforms with Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The paper examines the philosophy of vocational technical education, goals and objectives of vocational technical education, vocational education career and potentials for manpower development to meet the MDGs. Vocational technical education in Nigeria attempts to reform, by providing strategies towards meeting the challenges of the MDGs. The paper concludes that some of the reforms are in the right course to envision vocational technical education in the country to measure up with the world standard.

The cardinal objective of education at any level and in all societies is to invest on the training of people for sustainable development and improve the quality of life. The fact of this assertion is that, if the people are poorly trained the level of their development is in jeopardy vis-a-vis the demands of modern living. The universal mission of education is entrained in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) adopted by the United Nations at the 58th Annual Conference in September 2005 (UN, 2005). The eight goals which range from eliminating extreme poverty to halting the spread of HIV/AIDS have at their centre point, the provision of quality education which is a sine qua non for achieving the other goals. These goals formed the blue print agreed to by all the countries of the world and all

the world's leading development institutions. It would be imprudent therefore, for Nigeria to refuse to respond to the clarion call to make vocational technical education development oriented in all its ramifications. The stark fact is that, if Nigeria fails or refuses to galvanize her educational agencies and institutions in the process of pursuing these goals, she is apt to compound her problems of poverty and underdevelopment.

Sequel to the following background, the authors set out to examine those development potentials required of vocational technical education in Nigeria in the light of MDGs and reforms currently engaging the attention of the government in Nigeria. This paper is organized for presentation under three sections:

1) Recent attempt to awaken vocational technical education in Nigeria as a driving force in achieving the country's National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS).
2) Attempt made in the light of passing the acid test of being efficient, relevant and functional as required by the Millennium Development Goals.
3) Suggestion for the way forward in Nigeria's desire to be an active participant in the race of turning millennium goals to reality with the instrumentality of vocational technical education – a panacea for development of third world and even the advanced countries.

The Philosophy of Vocational Education

The general philosophy of vocational education stands in stark contrast to the ideology of the general liberal arts education. While the general liberal arts style education strives to give students a broad range of cross-disciplinary knowledge and at the same time a single focus (the student's choice of major), vocational education operates under the theory that information pertinent to a specific trade is necessary for a person to enter the work force. Within the trade that is chosen, a student of a vocational education programme may learn less theory than his or her counterpart in general education, but would probably obtain more direct experience and be well suited to enter the workforce upon graduation. A vocational student would learn how to use the most up-to-date technology in the field he or she has chosen, would be taught about the trends in the industry, the skills required to work in the field, possible places of employment, and would be ready to take any certification or registration tests that may be required by any governments before practicing in the chosen occupation.

The philosophy of vocational education determines the place of instructional content of the programme. In Nigeria, the philosophy of vocational education is an expression of belief that vocational education is billed to empower the youth and Nigerian nation at large, since it is a general belief that the success of youths lies unarguably on their skills acquisition. Programmes offered at the secondary education level operate under

the philosophy that such programmes act as a supplement to students who may not necessarily have the skills required to go to a traditional post-secondary education or for students at high-risk, due to personal, economic and social situations. While a social stigma may be attached to vocational education programmes, vocational education curricular are often looked at as alternatives, aimed at giving those with different learning styles and interests a chance to earn an education that can be just as beneficial as a non-vocational one.

Goals and Objectives of Vocational Education in Nigeria

Vocational education prepares learner for careers in practical activities, traditionally non-academic and only related to a specific trade, occupation, or vocation. Vocational education might be contrasted with education in a usually broader scientific field, which might concentrate on theory and abstract conceptual knowledge, characteristic of classical liberal education.

In the past, vocational education was in the form of apprenticeship, in which young people learned from the master the skills necessary for particular trades. Blacksmiths, carpenters, merchants, and other trades have existed since the advent of civilization, and there has always been apprenticeship style relationships where specific techniques have been passed down to members of the younger generation. Vocational education had diversified over the twentieth century and now exists in industries as well as traditional crafts and cottage industries. Vocational education now forms an integral part of the educational system as a whole, providing training for a large proportion of members of the society, complementing and supporting the more academic, scholarly liberal education programme.

In line with the expressed philosophy of vocational education in Nigeria, the following goals, as stipulated in the National Policy on Education are in order (FRN, 2004):

1. Provide trained manpower in the applied sciences, technology and business at craft, advanced and technical levels.
2. Provide the technical knowledge and vocational skills needed for agricultural, commercial and economic development.
3. Give training and impart the necessary skills to individuals who shall be economically self-reliant.

The major occupational areas of vocational education are Vocational Agriculture, Distributive Education, Home Economic Education, Health Occupation, Technical Education, Trade and Industrial Education, and Business Education. These are broad groups of occupations which when subjected to spectrum analysis yield over 1000 careers (Usoro, Akpan, Usoro & Otu, 2010; Osuala, 2004; US Department of Labour, 1999; Thompson, 1993; Evan, 1971). In the face of emerging technologies, vocational education careers are

likely to increase appreciably. The reason is simple, vocational education is very responsive to new technologies. In addition to being responsive to emerging technologies, vocational education embraces occupations which are multi-block in nature. A multi-block occupation of industrial nature is made up of divisions of work, each of which is practically an occupation in itself. The foregoing concretizes the possibility of vocational education being a vital source of career skills training in more than one thousand careers. Vocational education can provide the required manpower for meeting the MDGs (Learnovation Consortium, 2008).

Reforms in Vocational Technical Education in Nigeria

The Nigerian constitution gives all citizens of the country, the right to education. Indeed, it is a fundamental human right. However, the delivery of vocational – technical education in Nigeria has suffered an unimaginable discrimination. Education is in the concurrent list in the Nigeria constitution. This is not by accident because all the three tiers of Government are supposed to devote a quantum of their resources to education. However, the reverse is the case. The Nigerian educational system has shortchanged a good proportion of her citizens in terms of access to appropriate learning. It has also placed unmerited emphasis on theoretical knowledge to the detriment of vocational praxialogical knowledge and entrepreneurial skills. The government having realized these inadequacies is tinkering with a number of reforms which are subjected to a brief x-ray in this paper.

First, there are recent government reforms directed at establishing and maintaining a sound quality vocational technical education. A sound quality of vocational – technical education is education based on relevance and competency based curriculum, and effective quality control vis-à-vis the quality assurance measures. By reforms in curriculum is meant a set of approaches which guide the teacher/educator to develop strategic modes and specific models of vocational – technical education programmes to suit specific needs as identified via a national survey of the citizens. This includes responding to challenges of science and technology, demands of the economy occasioned by emerging technologies and evolving human taste for the effective system of instructional delivery. Chiwetalu and Ugwu (2008) opined that, the curriculum for vocational technical education should adopt the worker centered approach that accommodates the personal, social, cultural and vocational needs of the worker at the same time, this ensures all round development of the learner. The out-dated utility oriented curriculum emphasized productivity to the detriment of the social, perceptional, and attitudinal development of the individual. Again, it would appear that the present Nigerian technical-vocational curriculum is more prescriptive

than flexible. In a prescriptive curriculum, the teacher initiative in contributing to the educational process is inhibited. There is freedom for professional contribution. There is therefore need to make the curriculum flexible as it can be, in order to respond to the needs of the society and emerging technologies. Vocational and technical curriculum must cover not only the needs of men, women, children and special needs individuals but also the projected thrust of the economy (both formal and informal) (Odigiri, et al, 2011).

Furthermore, the scientific and technological achievements have impacted positively on the vocational education practices, for instance, in the business education sector, there has been a significant adoption of technological software and hardware in the processing and dissemination of information for quality education. Consistent with this, Owens (1982) affirmed that the curriculum should include at various levels modules on word/text processing, information strategy/retrieval system etc.

The Federal Government's proposal to strengthen Nigeria's technological and scientific base by revamping technical, vocational and entrepreneurial education indicates a step forward in favour of long lasting benefits for a prosperous industrial future. The incorporation of ICT and entrepreneurial skills schemes is a prudent and welcome venture. As in other spheres of human endeavour, technological advances have sharpened the focus and practices of vocational technical education. ICT has significantly revolutionalized office and business procedures through the use of electronic gadgets. Closely related to the significant role of ICT is the impact of entrepreneurial skills in vocational technical education. The cooperation between vocational technical education and the world of work is of much significance and benefit in the national development (Spencer, Dygdon & Novak, 1995).

Vocational technical education cannot be effective without the critical role of the global forces and goals in education. UNESCO (1997) report highlighted the role of enterprises in preparation of entrepreneurial skills of workers. These skills can be acquired through various models such as entrepreneurial trait, non formal education, apprenticeship role, formal managerial training and expansion/refresher course models. These proposals and reforms are attempts at refocusing vocational technical education in the country to meet the threshold of tolerance stipulated by the Millennium Development Goals. The next section will attempt a critique of these reforms against the vision and mission of the MDGs.

Challenges and Strategies in Vocational Technical Education Towards the MDGs

As earlier stated in this paper, vocational technical education is a vital tool that will transform societies and empower the individuals for the achievement of the MDGs. These objectives are only achievable if countries

are to focus persistently on the following targets:

- unfettered access to vocational technical education;
- improvement of the quality of vocational technical education at all levels ;
- using vocational technical education as a tool for improving the general quality of life;
- evolving a dynamic curriculum;
- creating a network on improvements and developments in vocational technical education;
- providing sustained sources of funding for vocational technical education.

These strategies present immense challenges for any country which would want to keep abreast with the global trend which recognizes vocational technical education as a panacea for many ills. Here in Nigeria, there is a comparatively low enrolment rate of students of vocational technical education at the tertiary levels of education institutions. MDGs target a hundred percent level in the acquisition of literacy and numeracy at the primary school level and at least up to 50 percent secondary school graduates who would move to tertiary institutions. General education is expected to enhance productivity while tertiary education will stimulate entrepreneurial skill activity. However, the MDGs believe and recommend that the quantum jump in the productivity of tertiary institution graduates will be replicated in the growth and expansion of job opportunities to absorb these graduates. This strategy provides a formidable challenge to Nigerian education since the country is still far away from achieving universal primary and secondary education.

The demand for quality vocational technical education is even more challenging. Many primary school teachers in Nigeria still do not possess the minimum teaching qualification of the Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE) while some secondary school teachers lack the academic and professional qualifications. Unfortunately, the crash programmes mounted to train unqualified teachers are suspect in their quality (Adesina, 2006). Improving the quality of life through vocational technical education implies that, the contents of the curriculum should be focused on life building, skill acquisition, and exposing the students to work study for practical knowledge and experience. The quality of life is an aggregate measure of all the ingredients that contribute to a good texture of life. That the world's poorest people are found among the most uneducated is a simple confirmation that vocational technical education can contribute to the improvement of the quality of life. Make no mistake about it, the world's campaign against poverty goes pari pasu with a similar campaign for liberalizing vocational technical education. In Nigeria, the areas of endemic poverty coincide with spots where the level of literacy is equally low (Okafor, 2005).

Networking the changes and the dynamics of vocational technical education curriculum is a fair demand that will encourage comparison and ginger progress. This requires a good availability and use of information technology. MDGs are a global initiative which underlines the world as a global village. As much as we emphasize the peculiarity of the local environments, there are universal phenomena which require networking and dissemination. MDGs envisage a situation where these universal issues provoke cross country comparison. To do this, the assumption is that the knowledge and exposure to information communication technology (ICT) is high. Finally, MDGs also assume that the funding of education is assured and sustained. There are prescribed levels of funding required of the government. Education is a social service for which an average citizen can claim a right to. The present beggarly posture of government in Nigeria for public/private partnership is beyond the tolerable level. The private sector in Nigeria should be involved in funding education but not to the point of government abdicating her responsibility. Vocational technical education should be accorded top priority status in budget at all levels if the sustained level of funding is the target. The ultimate goal of MDGs is to develop a formula of funding per primary, secondary or tertiary education beneficiary.

Conclusion

The essence of this paper is to set the stage for meaningful discussions on the quality of vocational technical education in Nigeria and to generate an intelligent discourse regarding on-going reforms. At the onset, it was stated that, the Millennium Development Goals provide a universal guide for cross-country comparisons. Nigeria has tried to respond since it is clear that the country is lagging behind in producing the enabling environment for effective and efficient delivery of education. The National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy has enunciated some measures to ameliorate the ills, but the country is still deep in quagmire.

The task before the researchers is to use field experience to suggest some policy guidelines that will put the reforms on the right course. From the reactions so far generated from the stakeholders, it is clear that, some suggested reforms lack proper consultation. For example, the recent directive to merge some Colleges of Education and Polytechnics with Universities and to phase out Higher National Diploma courses seems counter-productive. The middle level manpower is still relevant to our development agenda. Also, the sending of the unity schools to orphanages where they are left for adoption does not instill hope on numerous parents and stakeholders.

Lastly, it is proper to emphasize the fact that, some of the reforms are in the right course of envisioning vocational technical education in the country to measure up with world standards. The fear usually entertained is inconsistency in policies and policy implementation following any change of government. It is

hoped that changes in government will not involve throwing the accumulated and consolidated gains overboard. We may not have done our duty as educators and educationists if we do not assist politicians who are not trained in the complexities of vocational technical education management to craft compromise solutions.

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