

Original Article

# Opportunities And Challenges in Aligning Tertiary/Higher Education to Basic Education and The World of Work

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## Abstract

The provision of quality education is cardinal to the attainment of a nation's developmental aspirations. This is to say that a highly-trained trained or skilled workforce is sine qua non for national human development capital, technological and economic progress. In essence, a nation's path to economic development is dependent on the availability of requisite skilled manpower that will contribute the requisite knowledge and skills to foster and sustain national development. To achieve the necessary impetus, the paper advocates increased funding of the education sector to not only provide necessary facilities, but also nurture talents and top-notch intellectuals and professionals leading to a drop in unemployment, social unrest, and insecurity, The findings reveal that the failure of Nigeria to leverage her educational trajectory with workplace realities is the leading cause of unfavorable developmental indices. To address the situation, the country needs to re-examine her educational policies vis-à-vis her workplace realities. The study concludes by proffering suggestions on the right curriculum and structural reforms necessary to effectively maximize her workforce potential.

## Keywords

Higher Education, Challenges, Opportunities, Basic Education, Workplace.

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## 1. Introduction

The quality of a nation's higher education sector could impact the performance of her workforce. In this wise, the ability to leverage opportunities for growth as well as effectively tackling existing and emergent challenges in the sector is crucial to the generation of skilled manpower and productive workforce.

According to Fagbemi, *et al.*, (2022), the world regards education as an index for development, especially in terms of economic, political and social ramifications as the quality of a nation's education determines development. Tertiary education, on the other hand, refers to all formal post-secondary education, including public and private universities, colleges, technical training institutes, and vocational schools and is instrumental to fostering growth, reducing poverty and enhancing shared prosperity. Taiwo (2005) states that Nigerian tertiary institutions are the third level of Nigerian educational system in Nigeria, the first two being primary and secondary educational levels.

Okoli, *et al.*, (2016), stated that the Yaba Higher College was the first institution of higher learning to be established in Nigeria. The paper, however, noted that as of 1930, other forms of post-secondary education were introduced in some government departments such as the Railways and Agriculture. For example, in the Agricultural field, there was the Moon Plantation, Ibadan; Samaru near Zaria; Veterinary science institute at Vom, and Engineering in Lagos. Otonko (2012), on the other hand, stated that university education in Nigeria could be said to have its roots in the report of the Elliot Commission of 1943, which report led to the establishment of University College Ibadan (UCI) in 1948 and was affiliated to the University of London. The young institution was, however, saddled with a number of problems at inception ranging from poor staffing, and low enrolment to high dropout rate. To arrest the situation, the Federal Government in 1959 commissioned the Ashby Commission to advise it on the higher education needs of the country.

The implementation of the Ashby Report led to the establishment of University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife), Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, and University of Lagos, in 1962. The University of Nigeria, Nsukka, had, however, been established earlier in 1960, even before the submission of the Ashby Report. Citing Babalola, *et al.*, Otonko (2012) also posited that the University College, Ibadan and University of Lagos became the first two federal universities in Nigeria as the other three earlier ones remained regional. Taiwo (2005) noted that the Ashby Commission had proposed that University College, Ibadan, be upgraded to a full university status and all the universities in the country should be national in nature under the control of Nigerian University Commission (NUC).

These universities are still referred to as first generation universities along with the University of Benin established in 1970. Between 1975 and 1980, the government established seven more universities, namely the Universities of Calabar, Ilorin, Jos, Sokoto, Maiduguri, Port Harcourt and Ado Bayero University, Kano, which came to be referred to known as second generation universities. The third-generation universities were established between 1980 and early 1990. They are: the Federal Universities of Technology in Owerri, Makurdi, Yola, Akure and Bauchi. While state universities were, as of then, found only in Imo, Ondo, Lagos, Akwa Ibom, Oyo and Cross River States. The fourth-generation universities are those established between 1991 and the present date. They include more state universities, Nigerian open universities and many private universities.

## **2. Background to the Study**

One of the critical aspects of the discourse surrounding the Nigeria's higher educational sector has been the notion that its products are not job creators but job seekers, which implied that the sort of education received by the products of the nation's higher education system is not in tandem with world of work. Ekeruche (2019) echoes this sentiment by stating that there is a mismatch between the skills that workers have and the skills needed in the jobs available. Many educated people are not trained to suit the demand of employers. This is attributed to the poor alignment between labor market needs and the curriculum the education system teaches. There is a wide gap between theory and practice in universities, such that it becomes difficult to apply taught courses to real-world issues. Instances have been given of people who graduate with a degree in computer engineering but still have never used a computer.

Providing a context, Taiwo (2005) asserts that the missionaries that introduced western education devoid of vocational and technical education focusing mainly on the 3Rs i.e. Reading, Writing and Arithmetic with Religion to make for the 4Rs. The step towards reversing this trend was, however, taken in 1945 with the Old Yaba Higher College mandated to offer the much-needed technical and vocational education.

Furthermore, Adebisi (2019), detailed some interactions he had with some respondents as follows: "I have had courses to interview several graduates for jobs, most of them simply don't have anything to offer. If the business organizations do not teach them what to do, they have no initiative. Hence, the majority of them feel blank and really, they are." This points to the fact that the universities are not producing industry ready graduates.

### **A. Statement of the Problem**

Against the widespread perception that the Nigerian higher education system is not aligned with workplace expectations, there is increasing calls from several quarters on the need to rejig the system to generate a crop of productive workforce capable of propelling the nation towards the realization of her developmental aspirations. To do this, a radical overhaul of the country's basic education system and its curricula is non-negotiable. It is also to be noted that the nation's higher education system is fraught with opportunities and challenges that need to be leveraged and addressed if the political will is there to drive the process. It is in this context that the paper seeks to gain the understanding of policy makers on the need to devise and priorities policies that would ensure that the products of the country's higher educational system are not only employable but also job creators.

### **B. Objective of the Study**

The objective of the paper was to highlight the increasing trend of products of the nation's higher education system misaligning with the workplace expectations and what should be done to reverse these unsavory narratives.

### C. Significance of the Study

The significance of the study pertains to the increasing need to align the nation's higher educational system with the expectations of the workplace. A situation whereby many employers of having to re-train graduates in basic things about their claimed field of study or discipline is truly pathetic and concerted efforts must, therefore, be mustered by policy makers, stakeholders and the society as a whole. This study, therefore, seeks to contribute to existing literature on the imperative of overhauling the nation's basic and higher education curricula to make for a realistic and practically-oriented guiding principles.

## 3. Methodology

This study will employ a qualitative research method comprising the analysis of articles, documents and observations, to uncover meanings, opinions, motivations, and underlying reasons. The study uses techniques as interviews, focus groups, and ethnography to capture rich, contextual insights to study the increasing misalignment of the nation's basic and tertiary education system with workplace realities. To achieve this, primary and secondary sources have been consulted to elicit requisite data. The primary sources included interviews of students and teachers alike as well as detailed examination of some organizational reports while secondary sources included articles, journals and other online sources. All these sources have all assisted in the examination of the cardinal issues raised in the study. It is hoped that the paper will provide necessary insights for policy makers to do the needful. The research is anticipated to yield insights into effective strategies for aligning educational systems with workforce needs, identify existing barriers, and propose actionable recommendations for policymakers and educational institutions. The results will contribute to the ongoing discourse on educational reform and workforce development, with implications for improving educational quality and relevance in a rapidly changing global economy.

## 4. Theoretical Framework of the Study

Many frameworks can be leveraged to explain the concept of curricula overhaul, and students' transition from a school setting to the world of work. For instance, the Boundary Crossing Theory as captured in Schenke, *et al.* (2017) citing (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011; Engeström, Engeström, & Kärkkäinen, 1995; Max, 2010), states that boundary crossing concentrated on persons, who cross boundaries from one activity system to another over time, for example, from a training situation to the workplace. Also, Bakker & Ackerman (2013) citing (Suchman, 1994), state that the broader metaphor of boundary crossing could be proposed to capture the often more complex efforts by people who move not only forth but also back; boundary crossing is, therefore, bidirectional and dynamic. The concept of boundary crossing thus draws attention to a wider range of relevant processes involved in integrating different types of knowledge to be learned and used in different contexts. Also, as noted in Akkerman & Bakker (2011), the aforementioned discrepancies between school-taught mathematics and statistics and work-related knowledge can be conceptualized as boundaries, which they also defined as "sociocultural differences that give rise to discontinuities in action and interaction" Tho (2013), takes the Boundary Crossing Theory a notch higher as the study submits that the theory could also be leveraged to underscore the importance of navigating sociocultural differences, facilitating learning and transformative practices, which are necessary tools for surmounting challenges.

## 5. Literature Review

According to Salifu (2022), university education is an important form of investment in human capital development, which is very significant to the economic growth of any society. However, contemporary literature, especially in Nigeria, is fraught with such notions as "falling standards of education," "half-baked graduates," "job seekers, not job creators", among others. Adebisi (2019) noted that respondents in a study conducted also agreed that in fairness to these graduates of the nation's tertiary education system, most of the courses they studied do not give relevant knowledge to their students until they get to the penultimate or final year of their study. He wondered why higher institutions would waste precious time teaching accounting students' history of computers, MS DOS and abacus instead of teaching them sage, Peachtree, Quick Book or at the very least, Excel spreadsheet operations. He, therefore, suggested a radical overhaul or re-evaluation of the nation's higher education curriculum and its implementation.

Similarly, Ekeruche (2019) pointed out that one of the reasons why Nigeria has so many educated and jobless graduates been on account of the mismatch between the skills they acquired and the jobs available. He noted that many educated people are not trained to suit the demand of employers. In essence, there is a wide gap between theory and practice in universities, such that it becomes difficult to apply taught courses to real-world issues adding that instances have been cited of students who graduate with a degree in computer engineering but still have never used a computer.

However, Ackerman & Bakker (2013) opine that vocational students and beginner professionals typically find it hard to integrate what they have learned at school with work-related knowledge or workplace realities. Hence, their perceived inadequacies might not be on account of intellectual deficiency or the likes. According to the study, the perceived inadequacy of a new employee in a workplace could also be conceptualized as a problem of transfer. Transfer is mostly considered the application of some general principle by a person in a new situation when confronted with a task. These and many other factors are responsible for the non-alignment of the higher education system to workplace realities examined in the study.

#### **A. What is Basic Education?**

According to Enwe (2024), Nigeria, promulgated the NPE 2013 and the Compulsory, Free Universal Basic Education Act of 2004, under this Act, the Nigerian government commits to providing compulsory, free, universal, and qualitative pre-primary, primary, and junior secondary education to all children up to age 15. Basic education covers children aged 0-15 years, with Early Child Care and Development Education spanning from 0-4 years and formal schooling extending for ten years. However, Early Child Care and Development Education for children aged 0-4 is promoted and managed by parents, the private entities, and other social development organizations. For children aged 5-6, both the private and public sectors play a role in providing formal education. In effect, the government guarantees one year of pre-primary, six years of primary, and three years of junior secondary education but with no guaranteed right for Nigerian children to receive daycare or *creche* education from the government.

#### **B. Goals of Basic Education**

According to Igbokwe (2015) states that following the decision of the Federal Government of Nigeria to introduce the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programmed in September, 1988, the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) re-structured and re-aligned all extant primary and Junior Secondary School (JSS) curricula into 9-Year Basic Education Curriculum for implementation in Nigerian schools with effect from September, 2008. The 9-Year Basic Education Curriculum emphasizes value re-orientation, poverty eradication and employment generation capabilities in learners for the socio-economic transformation of the Nigerian nation.

However, as evident in the preceding sections, the laudable goals and objectives of basic education do not seem to be advanced or built upon by the country's higher education system otherwise, the perceived misalignment identified in earlier sections would not have arisen.

#### **C. What is the World of Work?**

Morin (2025) defines the concept 'the world of work' as a concept that encompassed such things as occupations, jobs, employers, employees, paychecks, promotions, among others. According to *The HR Digest* (2025), the world of work is rapidly evolving, and the emergence of the new world of work is transforming the way we work, learn, and live. This shift, according to the publication, technological advancements, shifting expectations of workers and employers, and changes in the global economy are all contributory factors to the new world of work. Consequently, the publication reports that the new labor market is characterized by a set of trends and disruptions that are changing the nature of work. These trends include the rise of automation, the gig economy, remote work, and the need for upskilling and reskilling.

#### **D. Opportunities inherent in the Nigerian Higher/Tertiary Education System**

Fagbemi, et al., (2022), observed that the end of lower secondary school in Nigeria marks the end of compulsory education referred to earlier. Hence, by this stage, students should be able to master subject-related knowledge and

skills, possess personnel and social skills and have a solid foundation for further learning. Tertiary education exercises a direct influence on national productivity, which largely determines living standards and a country's ability to compete in the global economy. Therefore, tertiary education institutions are unique in their ability to integrate and create synergy among these three dimensions. Hence, sustainable national transformation and growth are not possible without the capacity-building contribution of an innovative tertiary education system.

Otonko (2012) notes that even though the Nigerian higher education has not had a very smooth sail from inception, it has witnessed many successes. He characterized university education as more than the next level in the learning process adding that it has been able to provide not only the high-level skills necessary for every labour market but also the training essential for teachers, doctors, nurses, civil servants, engineers, humanists, entrepreneurs, scientists, social scientists, and a myriad of other personnel.

#### ***E. Challenges inherent in the Nigerian Higher/Tertiary Education System***

According to Fagbemi, et al., (2022), a number of issues and challenges are militating against the imperative of providing quality education at all levels. The study cites the many issues bedeviling the Nigeria education sector. Chief among these is the need to align programmes to the requirements of the world of work as pointed out earlier. Adeka, et al., (2025) also noted that the higher education system in the country is beset by such problems as

- Inadequate funding is a fundamental challenge that has impeded the quality of tertiary education in Nigeria.
- Weak policy implementation structure as policies are largely unimplemented.
- Lack of political will to do the needful by successive political office holders.
- Poor quality of teaching staff is also germane to the issue at hand other factors are often considered above merit in the employment of lecturers.

## **6. Discussion of Findings**

The paper highlights the poor alignment between tertiary/higher education and basic education on one hand, and the world of work, on the other hand. It notes that at the basic and post-basic levels, there are lofty concepts that had been infused into the curriculum and which are subsequently imparted to students at these levels. The study finds that at the higher education level, the experience is that of undergraduates being taught courses without adequate attention to the practical side of his training hence, he finds it extremely to deliver at the workplace. The study notes that, fortunately, policy makers seem to be waking up to this reality as there are discussions on introducing entrepreneurial courses into undergraduate curriculum among other curriculum-related undertakings. In all, based on the findings of the study, it is suggested that rejigging the nation's higher education curriculum is the way to go if its products are to find their footing in the ever-challenging workplace of today.

## **7. Conclusion**

There is no gainsaying the fact that Nigeria's higher education system has been widely perceived as churning out half-baked graduates and the likes. However, the high level of corruption and nepotism are also factors. Additionally, the mismatch between products of higher education and their workplace expectations could also be as a consequence of undue focus on theoretical rather than the practical aspects of their education or it could just be that the real world is not the same as classroom experience as pointed out by Akkerman & Bakker (2011). At any rate, critical steps had to be taken to address the situation for the nation to move forward.

## **Recommendations**

As noted earlier, especially in Adebisi (2019) and Ekeruche (2019), the issue of misalignment could be addressed by empowering and upskilling young graduates by providing them with short-term job opportunities in agriculture, schools, health centers and tax administration departments solve the unemployment crisis, as being done through the Federal Government's N-Power programme.

Therefore, the study recommends that:

- The curriculum should be completely overhauled to make it practical and responsive to workplace realities.
- Encouraging the private sector to facilitate job creation through innovation centers.
- Motivating civil society organizations to assist in training job seekers on necessary competences and connecting them with employers.

The study also that the bright side of the lack of jobs for educated graduates is that the situation is fostering a sizeable entrepreneurial class, with roughly four out of five employed Nigerians working for themselves, according to the World Bank.

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