Repositioning Skill Acquisition For The Transformation Of Nigerian Economy

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Abstract: Since the past two decades or so, the question of functionality of Nigerian educational products has been an issue of concern and a subject of discussion among educational analysts. This is against the backdrop that many students who graduate with admirable certificates from the nation's reputable institutions are often unable to apply the acquired knowledge and skills to work situations. Contemporary societies all over the world require that preparation for work must become an integral part of a person's total educational experience. One reason for this requirement is to equip their citizenry with employable skills to enable them produce and use the goods and services which any society needs for its socio-economic growth. This paper, therefore, examines the role of skill acquisition in the transformation of Nigerian economy and proffers suggestions on how it can be repositioned to transform Nigerian education.

I**ndex Terms**: Acquisition, employability, economy, innovation, repositioning, skill, and transformation

1 Introduction

All over the world education is being regarded as a tool par excellence for social and economic transformation of nations. This explains why nations are investing heavily on education. Many definitions have been advanced for education in literature but irrespective of how individuals conceptualize it, scholars are generally in agreement that education should lead to three cardinal outcomes namely acquisition of knowledge, skills and worthwhile attitudes (Enukoha, Asuquo and Ijala, 2004; Ezeani, 2005 & Enemali, 2010). Relating these outcomes to economy, education as a process is expected to produce persons who are not only literate but who can participate actively in transforming the economies of nations From this position, it seems reasonable to conclude that the extent to which an individual in a given society displays the desirable values of education, may go a long way to show the level of education possessed by the individual. In Nigeria, there is an increasing concern that the education process has not been producing products that are adequately equipped with employable skills that would position them to make positive contribution towards transforming the economy of the nation. This is in spite of the admirable credentials that individuals graduate with from institutions of learning. Okonjo-Iweala (2012) lamented that the Nigerian education system has deteriorated to a point where students cannot acquire the necessary skills needed for becoming employable and innovative in the competitive global world after graduating from school. Higher Institutions, according to her, are plagued with inadequate science and technical facilities and materials for practical skills development. Furthermore, many laboratories lack the basic equipment for sustained scientific research. Okorie and Ezeji (1988) observed that among all the factors of production, the most valuable asset is the human capital.

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To this extent, education and economy are inseparable. Indeed, as the education barometer of a country so it would appear to be its economy and vice-versa. The emphasis all over the world, therefore, is for nations to grow productive economies rather than remaining as consumer economies. This is against the backdrop of the saying that a growing economy is a productive society while on the other hand, a productive society is a skill-oriented society. Consequently, a skill-oriented society requires a huge investment on human capacity development. Employability skills, therefore, are considered as a strong catalyst that keeps the economy of any nation growing (Agu, 2011). Yakubu (2006) noted that Nigeria has remained largely a consumer nation rather than a productive society. One of the reasons adduced for this economic malaise is the lack of acquired functional skills by graduates of educational institutions, especially technical institutions. In realization of this deficiency, the Federal Government of Nigeria in the National Policy on Education (2004 & 2014) included as one of its broad goals for education, the acquisition of appropriate skills and the development of mental, physical and social abilities and competencies for equipping the individual to live in and contribute to the development of the society. This paper, therefore, focuses on the skill component of education as a critical factor for transforming the Nigerian economy into one of the world's top ten by the end of the present decade as envisioned in the Vision 20:2020 of the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN, 2006).

2 The Concept of Skill

The term 'skill' has been variously defined by different writers. The definitions often range from simple to complex depending on the context from which the discussions are directed. The Oxford Dictionary of Current English, for example, defines skills as the ability to perform expertly, facility in performance, dexterity and tack. The Business Dictionary.com defines skill as an ability and capacity acquired through deliberate, systematic, and sustained effort to smoothly and adaptively carry out complex activities or job functions involving ideas (cognitive skills) things (technical skills), and/or people (interpersonal skills). Okorie and Ezeji (1988) viewed skill as a well-established habit of doing something involving the acquisition of performance capabilities in the most economic way. Similarly, Posner and Keele (1993) described skill as those processes producing expert, rapid and ~~accurate~~

performance. From these views, therefore, it could be summarized that skill is a level of proficiency achieved on a specific task or group of tasks through practice. Some examples of these tasks include trouble-shooting and repairing a malfunction on a car, flying an air craft, operating a lathe machine, playing football, or granting an interview to a guest on a television or a radio program.

3 Classification of Skills

Osuala (1998) identified five basic skills which a person needs to function effectively in the world of work. These include communication, mathematics, science, vocational and employability skills. In recent times, entrepreneurial skills have also become a vital component of functional skills. The first three are sometimes referred to as basic academic skills or general skills. The fourth in this category has to do with entry into the job market while the fifth has to do with what a person needs to acquire in order to function effectively and to keep a job (Lankard 1997). Entrepreneurial skills have to do with what an individual needs to create job, manage it and grow it to the benefit of self and others in the society. Odia and Odia (2013) observed that entrepreneurial skills equip an individual to transform the challenges of life into business opportunities. Employability skills are, however, the focus of the present discourse. According to Garner (1998), employability skills can be grouped into four clusters:

i. Individual competence: This is made up of communication skills, comprehension, computation and culture
ii. Personality reliability skills: These consist of skills used for personal management and vocational maturity
iii. Economic adaptability skills: These consist of skills applied for problem-solving, learning potentials, and career development.
iv. Group and organizational effectiveness: these refer to skills required for negotiation, creativity and leadership.

4 Process of Skill Acquisition

Skill acquisition is an integral part of all economic activities. This is because human beings are the pivots of all economic activities. For them to successfully carry out any economic function, therefore, they must learn how to acquire the necessary skills required for the activity in demand. This is also called training. Acquiring skills presupposes that there are at least two parties. On one side is a teacher (also referred to as trainer) and on the other side is a student (or trainee). The teacher/trainer is assumed to have previously acquired the skills and is now able to exhibit the skills required with relative ease and within a reasonable time limit. Acquiring skills may involve a series of either simple or complex steps which must be followed sequentially in order to accomplish the task demanded. For example, a furniture construction worker must follow the necessary steps leading to the production of a filing cabinet. These include carrying out measurements on a piece of wood, cutting, planning, riveting, gluing, clamping, nailing, sand-papering and polishing before the job is considered done. In teaching or training a person to acquire skills, therefore, each of the mentioned steps must be demonstrated before the watch of the trainee one step at a time. At the initial stage, the trainee only watches how it is done. Subsequently, the teacher/trainer would carry out each step while allowing the trainee to imitate his actions. After a series of these practices, the trainee is then allowed to do it on his own while the teacher watches and makes corrections where necessary. After this the trainee is allowed to practice the steps on his/her own several times until he/she can competently reproduce the actions with speed and accuracy. In this wise, time is a critical factor. For example, if a task takes an average period of ten minutes to accomplish, a trainee who takes 30 minutes or more to accomplish the same task may be viewed as having fewer skills or less competency even though he/she may eventually and successfully accomplish the task. (Ivowi, 2001). Padelford (1994) and Hammond and Lamar (1998) conducted extensive studies in the process of skill acquisition and postulated six levels of skill acquisition, namely, Perceiving, Motivating, Imitating, Performing, Adapting, and Innovating. Out of the six levels, the most demanding and highly desirable of workers today according to the researchers, is innovation. This is because it lends itself to the use of creative intelligence. Romiszowski (1999) provided taxonomy of educational objectives in the psychomotor domain that closely relates to Padelford's six levels of skill acquisition. However, Padelford (1994) observed that innovation is the highest level of skill acquisition and therefore requires all the domains of learning and creativity and much feedback. Potential workers must not only focus on acquiring common skills required in work places but should also innovate processes that lead to the production of better products and services in appropriate industry and commerce.

5 Acquisition of Employability Skills in Nigeria

There has been loud public outcry in Nigeria on the need for the development of employability skills by its citizens in order to reduce unemployment especially among the youth. In order to achieve this, certain conditions are expected to be put in place to achieve the objective. Olaitan (1999), identified eight conditions that should guide skills development namely:

i. Teachers/trainers must be well trained and experienced in their vocations in order to effectively train others
ii. Students/trainees must be highly motivated to be willing to be trained or re-trained
iii. Training packages must be carefully designed to meet the yearnings and aspirations of trainees and the society where they are eventually going to serve
iv. Materials and Equipment must be made available to support practical trainings – teacher demonstration without which trainees may not develop the competency to perform assigned tasks in the world of world of work.
v. Training environment must be made conducive for both trainers and trainees in order to encourage them to stay on the job (for the trainer) or to learn (for the trainee).
vi. Skills should be packaged and taught in an integrated manner rather than specialized to avoid obsolescence in the event of technological change

vii. Skills taught should reflect the needs in the job market
viii Government alone cannot train the workforce required for economic transformation of any nation hence the need to involve the private sector, that is, strengthening the concept of Public Private Participation (PPP).

Having satisfied the foregoing conditions precedent, teachers could proceed to introduce essential job-related skills using the Dreyfus Model of Skill Acquisition (Dreyfus, 1982). The model involves five levels of progress in skill learning starting from novice and advanced beginner stages through competent and proficient to expert stage. Functionally, it implies moving from a situation of little situational perception and limited situational perception through the stages of standardized and reutilized procedures and fully acceptable standard of performance to the ultimate stage of excellence at which guidelines and maxims are no longer required. Berner (1982) who researched into the training of nurses reported that she found the Dreyfus model useful because it took cognizance of increments in skill acquisition based on manifestation of education and portrayed experience. Furthermore, the model equally provided for assessment of transfer value For instance, in the case of nursing, a pedestal for development of clinical knowledge and career progression in clinical nursing. Nigeria as a country should believe in what she produces as goods and services that meet her domestic consumption. Therefore, less emphasis should be placed on foreign made goods while promoting home made goods and services. A situation where high premium is placed on imported goods and services does not encourage home grown or indigenous technology which is a gateway to economic emancipation.

6. Benefits of Skill Acquisition to National Economy

The International labor Organization (ILO, 2010) has identified some key areas where skills development can boost the economy of a nation. They include:

i. It empowers people to develop their full capacities and to seize employment and social opportunities.
ii. It raises productivity level of workers and their enterprises
iii. It contributes to the enhancement of future innovation and development
iv. It encourages both domestic and foreign investment, and thus job growth, lowering unemployment and underemployment
v. It leads to higher wage earnings
vi. When broadly accessible, it expands labor market opportunities and reduces social inequalities.

7 Challenges of Skill Acquisition in Nigeria

Several challenges have been identified with skill acquisition in Nigeria. Baah-Boatang, Baffour-Awuah (2015) and Agu (2015) have identified some of these challenges to include:

i. Poor quality of infrastructure - Training environments and facilities are often in short supply and even when they are available, they are non-functional due to epileptic supply of electricity to the institutions to operate technical equipment;
ii. Poor motivation of teacher - Many trained and experienced teachers have left the classroom in search of greener pasture in industries and other professions leaving the classroom grossly under-staffed;
iii. Poor school supervision - Poor supervision of schools, especially public schools has often resulted to poor performance of teachers and students. The result of this phenomenon could precipitate decline in the quality of skill training;
iv. Poor linkages between skills training and industry, culminating into skills mismatch. The present collaboration between vocational/technical institutions and industry/commerce is weak. This has in some cases resulted in irrelevant trainings – trainings which do not contribute positively to national economic growth.
v. Neglect and poor perception of technical and vocational education and training;
vi. Lack of clear and coherent policy statements on science and technology and the associated institutions;;
vii. Lack of political will to implement policies on the development of skill-based programs including recognition and encouragement of innovators such as the 'young engineers';
viii. Promotion of white collar jobs at the expense of blue collar jobs
ix. A strong desire for foreign-made goods to the detriment of home-made goods
x. Dichotomy between university education and other forms of vocational or technical trainings;
xi. Poor utilization of research and development (R & D) findings to strengthen the economic base of the nation.

8 Relationship between Skills and Economic Growth

The contribution of skills to economic growth of any nation all over the world is not in doubt. This is because it has been sufficiently established that human resources form the basis upon which the economy of any nation is anchored. When humans are adequately trained, they are better positioned to participate in the social and economic transformation of their society. Okonjo-Iweala (2012) further noted that there is direct linkage between skill development and economic growth of any nation. This relationship is positively correlated implying that as skill level increases, the economy also increases and vice – versa. This according to Charles (2006) is the experience of the Asian Tigers such as Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan and also the emerging Tigers namely Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, Ireland, Estonia and Chile which invested heavily on Technical and Vocational Education (TVET). Within a short time, witnessed rapid transformation of their economies from that of third position to first position in the world. Today, these countries have one of the highest GDPs in the world (Okonji-Iweala (2012). For Nigeria to experience similar economic growth, it must be willing to develop its human capacity to acquire employability skills in order to transform its ailing economy.

9 Developing a Framework for Skill Acquisition

Just as it happens in any sector of economy, planning for skill development is imperative. A system that produces abundant skilled labor force but does not take into account how they are to be effectively harnessed and utilized in meeting its present and future needs may be embarking on wasteful economic venture. In order to avoid this, the ILO (2010) advised that skills development policy in any nation should aim at meeting at least three main objectives, namely:

i. Matching supply to current demand for skills - The production of skilled labor force should be based on needs analysis in various sectors of the economy. This requires careful planning, information gathering and sharing;
ii. Helping workers and enterprises adjust to change - Competition in global economy always necessitates movement of workers and enterprises from declining or low productivity activities and sectors into expanding and higher productivity activities and sectors. Therefore, workers must be helped to acquire new skills, upgrade existing ones and embark on lifelong learning to maintain their employability and for enterprises to adapt and remain competitive;
iii. Building and sustaining competences for future labor market needs - Society must look at the world of tomorrow with the eye of today which requires long-term perspective, anticipating the skills that will be needed in the future and making provision for the type of education and training that would propel innovation, investment, technological change, economic diversification and competitiveness thereby engendering job creation and growth. This is perhaps, an aspect of what is often referred to as skill development for knowledge-based-economy.

11 Recommendations

In order to reposition skill acquisition in Nigeria for economic transformation, the following suggestions are proffered: In order to reposition skills acquisition in Nigeria for economic transformation, the following suggestions are proffered:

i. Curriculum planners for tertiary education in Nigeria such as the National Universities Commission and the National Board for Technical Education should build in program that will bridge the existing gap between industry and training/academic institutions through refurbished technical and vocational education courses that lay emphasis on hands-on training;
ii. The federal government through the TETFUND should provide adequate funds to strengthen research activities in skill-oriented programs in tertiary institutions in the country.
iii. The supervisory agencies for higher education in the country (NUC, NBTE and NCCE) should set up departments for harmonizing and coordinating research findings from tertiary institutions in the country for dissemination to industrialists and to the public.
iv. Industries and investors in Nigeria should be encouraged through tax wavers to promote creativity in science and technology by sponsorship of scientific and technological innovations carried out by universities and polytechnics in Nigeria. The various governments in the country should increase investment in the provision of better school infrastructure, teaching resources and other facilities to promote effective teaching and learning, particularly that of TVET.
v. University vice chancellors and polytechnic rectors should seek for more proactive collaboration between science and technical faculties and industries/commerce to ensure development of appropriate and relevant skills in prospective graduates.
vi. Governments in Nigeria should pursue affirmative action's that encourage the patronage of made in Nigeria goods and services as alternatives to foreign ones. This will boost indigenous technological activities and further motivate entrepreneurial initiatives of local investors.
vii. There is need for the Ministry of Science and Technology to embark total overhaul of policy framework for science and technology to have built-in alternative routes for encouraging adaptation and innovations in response to shifts in market demand for labor consequent upon the vagaries and changes brought about by globalization.

10 Conclusion

There is no gainsaying the fact that a sure way of transforming the Nigerian economy into one of the top ten in the world by the year 2020 would require an increase in the quality and quantity of human capital base. This requires serious commitment on the part of the government as well as other stakeholders in the production of a strong labor-force.Therefore, to put Nigeria on the path of economic transformation requires a number of policy actions and programs. As noted by Rigby (2006), the social construction of skill has implications for policy on skill definition and development. Any policies and programs should include a robust plan to overhaul the skill acquisition initiatives of the educational institutions in the country.

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