Re-Engineering University Education for Employability in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT
The paper examines the worrisome issue of unemployability among Nigerian graduates in recent times. Certain factors such as unplanned expansion, unnecessary duplication of courses/programmes, deterioration of physical facilities, overstretching of teaching, research and managerial capacities, massification of student numbers, upsurge of various forms of ills, etc, have been implicated. The paper went further to identify some employability skills and suggested how university can be re-engineered to achieve these skills for the benefit of our students and society at large.
KEYWORDS: Graduates, employability skills, Nigerian universities.

INTRODUCTION

University education is one of the educations given after secondary school. The goals of university education as enunciated by the National policy are:

i.   To contribute to national development through high level relevant man-power training;
ii.   To developed and inculcate proper values for the survival of the individual and society;
iii.   To developed the intellectual capacity of individuals to understand and appreciate their local and external environment;
iv.   To acquire both physical and intellectual skills which will enable individuals to be self-reliant and useful members of the society;
v.   To promote and encourage scholarship and community service;
vi.   To forge and cement national unity; and
vii.   To promote national and international understanding and interaction.

Generally, the purpose of a university education, from the point of view of both the university and the individual student, is in the main to train and prepare young people for their future vocational activity, which may bring them into close contact with commercial or social enterprise. In other words, at the family and individual levels, a university education is to enable the beneficiary to have a good and sustainable employment. In the immediate past, that has been the case of university graduates in various professions.

However, in the wake of rapid growth in the number of universities in Nigeria, and the global market competition experienced by employers of labour, so much concern has been expressed about the quality of Nigeria graduates. Our graduates have been described variously: half-baked, ill -equipped, ill-trained, of poor quality, of the poor standard and unemployable (Obanya, 2002).On daily basis, one is tempted to ask: the teachers we produced 20 years ago, are they the same as today? The doctors or engineers of 20 years ago are they the same today? What about our lawyers? More so, the Nigerian newspapers are inundated with reports of graduates on the one year compulsory national service that can neither write formal letter nor fill their engagement forms correctly in the Orientation camps. When finally posted to secondary schools for their primary assignments, there have been reported cases of those, for example, who read accountancy but would rather prefer to teach business studies in JSS 1; Electrical/Electronic Engineers who can't teach physics and would rather boldly request to teach introductory technology. This embarrassing situation is unacceptable! The next pertinent question is: Are there certain expected skills that are no longer manifested by our graduates?

Worldwide, the current thinking is that university education should develop in the beneficiary a certain number of generic skills to a level that will ensure the continued creative productivity of the individual. These skills according to Obanya (2002) include:

i.   Analytical power: an advanced capacity for logical reasoning, employing appropriate verbal, quantitative, graphic, documentary, audio- virtual, sensory- perceptions and a wide variety of tools
ii.   Communication: oral and written as well (as in other possible forms) using the appropriate language and non-verbal form in specific situations to achieve specific objectives.
iii.   Problem-solving: the ability to task one's analytical power to the maximum in developing possible solution paths to problem in a variety of situations,
iv.   Team spirit: the ability to contribute meaningfully to group activities in a wide variety of forms, to relate with others to get out of one's shell while remaining oneself.
v.   Creativity: the ability to go beyond the well trodden path, in thinking as well as in action.

vi.   Versatility: a broadened horizon in terms of domains of knowledge and competence
vii. IT (information technology) as a discipline in its own right, as a tool for and support to other disciplines and life activities.
viii. Life-long learning skills: perseverance, risk-taking, a spirit of enquiry, reading as a habit, self-directed learning efforts, the activity to face challenges, etc.

The major attraction of these generic skills is that they are transversal in nature, and can help to break the artificial barrier among disciplines. What is more, the rapid obsolescence of factual knowledge is taken care of, as the emphasis is on the tools and methods of learning; not on mere memorization and regurgitation. These skills are really the attributes, traits and behaviors that endure and which are transversal.

Unfortunately, experience has shown that these skills are either no longer in significant quantity in our graduates or completely non-existent in some. Incidentally, it is these same skill that are needed in many types of high level employment.

What went wrong?

Several reasons have been adduced why currently education in Nigeria is unable to produce a critical mass of individuals with these core or generic skills. The bottom-line is that certain socio-politico-economic factors have combined to incapacitate university education, as manifested in certain institutional problems. These according to Ogunyemi (2001) are:

i.   Unplanned expansion, leading to a very rapid increase in the number of institutions from 1995 onwards;
ii. Unnecessary duplication of courses and programmes;
iii. Deterioration of physical facilities; (iv) a near absolute lack of teaching- learning and research facilities; (v) overstretching of teaching, research and managerial capacities;
Vi. massification of student numbers;
vii. an upsurge of various forms of social ills: examination malpractices, falsification of certificate, cultism and commercialization of the entire system;
viii. Universities scuttling for avenues for extra income, often-through approaches that tend to rubbish the cherished traditions of academic;
x. Internal and external personal hemorrhage among the intellectual class; and
xi. Loss of faith in the entire system

What is employability?

From the perspective of employers, employability refers to work-readiness, that is, possession of skills, knowledge, attitude and commercial understanding that will enable new graduates to make productive contributions to organizational objectives soon after commencing employment. Of course, studies of employer demand for graduates in engineering and science disciplines have found that appropriate work experience and evidence of commercial understanding rank highly as selection criteria because of commercial pressures to seek graduates who will not require long learning curves when employed (Mason, 1999).

However, in the discussion of the employability concept Hillage and Pollard (1998),lay more emphasis on individuals possessing the capacity to move self sufficiently within the labour market to realize potentials through sustainable employment. Similarly, Harvey and Morey (2003), highlight the skills which graduates need in order to manage their own career and those which will enable them to continue learning throughout their working lives.

These broader conceptions of employability encompass a set of key skills which were not only needed in employment but relevant throughout life. These skills are: communication, numeracy, IT and learning how to learn at a higher level. Within university education, the generic skills needed to enhance graduate employability (whether defined in terms of immediate work-readiness or longer term career prospect) are: literacy, problem-solving skills, team-working skills, and understanding of the world of work (which refers to knowledge about the ways in which organizations work, what their objectives are and how people in the organization do their jobs) (Coopers and Lybrand, 1998)

From the foregoing, it is clear that if university education in Nigeria can re-engineer itself to bequeath those generic skills in her graduates, employability skills would have been addressed.

RE-ENGINEERING UNIVERSITY EDUCATION?

Re-engineering university education is the technical application of the re-thinking process. It normally cannot be better than the philosophical principles underlying it. In practical and realistic terms, re-engineering university education should respect a number of ground rule principles. According to Obanya(2002), these principles include:

-it must be an integral part of an overall societal engineering problem since education (university education) does not take place in a socio-politico- economic vacuum;
-   It must involve the real people and the ultimate beneficiaries, in a participatory endeavor;

- It must break new grounds, by moving away from well-trodden paths, but should not be a mere day-dream;
- Its planning must provide for a variety of scenarios, to anticipate likely changes in the fortunes of society;
- It must integrate all programmes as there is a strong systemic relationship among them.
  Re-engineering university education in Nigeria would require a strong emphasis on curriculum enrichment which would involve the following:
  i.   modifications of existing course content (sometimes in responses to employer suggestions),
  ii.   the introduction of new courses,
  iii.   the introduction of new teaching methods, and
  iv.   expanded provision of opportunities for work experience -all intended to enhance the development of employability skills and/or ensure that the acquisition of such skills is made more explicit.

SUGGESTED STRATEGIES TO ENHANCE EMPLOYABILITY

1.   Employer involvement:
   Employers of labour should be involved in course planning, design and delivery.
This can take the forms of commenting on the relevance of course content to future employment prospects; providing material and ideas for students' project and giving guest lectures. Other forms include: employers being formal members of course advisory panels, and personal contacts between employer representatives and university staff.

2.   Teaching, learning and assessment   approaches that dwell more on developing analytical / communicative /manipulative/finding-out skills and logical reasoning. This is explicitly aimed at enhancing graduate skill sets in ways that should increase their attractiveness to potential employers. It can be achieved through the following means:

- Oral presentation
- Performance assessment
- Use of real-world examples in teaching
- Group working
- More projects in final year to develop independent learning skills
- Employers involvement in teaching and assessment
- Increase weighting in assessment for problem-solving and numeracy skills and lower weighting for theoretical knowledge

3. Student Work Placement
Structured work experience as part of degree courses should be introduced for all courses. This can be in the forms of course-related part-time and holiday paid jobs, industrial training, industrial- based project work of different kinds, etc.

4. Development of Careers Services Unit
Each university should develop careers service unit. The role of this unit may include:

- To ensure that employability skills are embedded in course content ,
- Monitor the teaching and assessment of employability skills,
- Capture information on students' employment outcomes roughly six months after the one- year compulsory National Youth service Corp, in a job of graduate quality.

5. Stand-alone generic skill courses.
Where it is necessary, stand-alone courses should be introduced to fill gaps in students' skills in mathematics, grammar, IT, etc.

6. NUC accreditation
   NUC should introduce a measure of university performance that captures graduate labour market performance in the accreditation of departments.

7. Improve funding.
   It will be difficult to talk about enhancing the employability of Nigerian graduates without considering the issue of funding. The emphasis should not merely be on more funds, but should be more on improving the funding process. In other words, emphasis should be on:

- A more rigorous analysis on what should be funded, with strong emphasis on those things that are likely to ensure the acquisition of the employability skills in particular and have a multiplier effect on university education;
- Programming activities and projects in accordance with available fund;

- Avoiding wastage, corruption and misapplication of funds; and
- Diversification of sources of funding.

CONCLUSION

Ensuring the employability of Nigeria graduates is part of a wider problem of bringing the entire educational system back to life and nay the nation. This paper has simply presented a frame-work for analyzing the problem of the unemployability of our graduates. All the issues may not have been exhausted but if the paper succeed in provoking further realistic and intensive national dialogue aimed at solving what the author considers a national disgrace (unemployable graduates), then the paper would have achieved one of its purposes.

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