

Academic Programme Development and the Participation of Relevant Interest Groups for Quality Manpower Production In Nigeria Higher Education

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Abstract

Quality manpower production is not just essential for national development, but very critical to national security and quick economic recovery in most of today's fragile economies of the world. This paper assessed the participation of prospective employers as relevant interest groups in the development of academic programmes in tertiary institutions and the adequacy of the skilled manpower being produced from these programmes in meeting the manpower needs of the economy. Academic Programme Development Evaluation Questionnaire (APDEQ) was designed, validated, tested for reliability (with an r-coefficient of 0.82) and administered on a stratified random sample of 88 Heads of Academic Units (HAU) of three categories of tertiary institutions (100% of population) and 35 Human Resources Managers (HRM) of five categories of companies (30% of population) within the Trans-Amadi Industrial Layout in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. Two research questions and one hypothesis were raised. The analysis of the survey results using weighted mean opinion and t-test statistics revealed that prospective employers of labour are not maximally participating in academic programme development in tertiary institutions and such programmes are not adequate in developing the quality of skilled manpower needed to meet the specific needs of these prospective employers. The implications of this result was discussed and the researchers concluded that the quality manpower production which is needed to address the rising graduate unemployment phenomenon cannot be achieved without the active participation of relevant interest groups in the development of academic programmes. Such programmes must then guide the production of adequate skilled manpower to meet the specific needs of the economy. The need to take concrete steps, both by the tertiary institutions and appropriate professional and regulatory bodies to actualize these were recommended.

Keywords: Academic Programmes, Interest Group Participation, Quality Manpower Production

1. Introduction

Aware of the fact that quality is a concept that lends itself to many definitions, this paper takes quality from the perspective of relevance. Okebukola (2002) sees quality as fitness for purpose. Quality is a multidimensional concept that pervades every action which goes into making the process of education worthwhile. In the light of the above, Akilaiya (2001) asserts that qualitative education signifies the ability of the products of a school to render useful services to the society and themselves. When products and services conform to standards, specifications or requirements, they are said to have quality (Babalola, Adedeji & Erwat, 2007).

Quality manpower production is a veritable tool for national development, especially in this period of global economic depression. It is pertinent that the manpower produced from the various tertiary institutions for the different sectors of the economy should possess relevant skills to meet the needs of the labour market and the larger society any time. Koko (2003) corroborates this by asserting that the production of quality manpower by universities ought to be a norm now rather than an exception. Since the world has become a global village, it is pertinent to develop internationally acceptable human capacity (Koko, 2003). It is important too that as the needs of the society change, the curriculum ought to be reviewed regularly so that the products of this programme will remain relevant to the changing needs of the society.

It is hardly in contention, that the labour market depends on the products of higher education. This makes it very necessary to involve the employers of labour in the development of academic programmes at the tertiary level. The skills acquired should be relevant to the needs of the economy for them to have useable quality. Manpower without much relevance and useable quality has always provided the basis for the existence of educated but unemployable graduates. The issue of unemployment could be tackled by ensuring quality in the course of developing academic programmes; so that functionally skilled manpower could be produced. Skilled manpower must be functional to the extent that skills acquired by the graduates are relevant for addressing the manpower needs and challenges of the economy in particular and the society at large.

The position above has always provided the most potent rationale for participatory planning in education. This is obvious, since the more participative a relevant interest group is in developing programmes for manpower development, the more supportive it would be in ensuring its full implementation, including the productive engagement of the products of the programme (Agabi, 2012). In the views of Onike (2008), participatory model of planning is a social process that requires the active participation of relevant specialists like curriculum specialists, students' representative council, teachers' union, parents' union and other relevant interest groups. It advocates functional involvement of all stakeholders and constant communication between planners and implementers. Participatory planning encourages setting implementation strategies and evaluation procedures together to ensure success. According to Rudolph (2010), participatory planning is difficult, time-consuming and requires skills and methods which may not be present at the required time. This scholar however sees a great deal of good potentials in participatory planning.

Jimoh (2007), posits that Nigerian graduates cannot compete favourably for jobs with their counterparts from other parts of the world due to the nature and quality of academic programmes they are exposed to in their various courses of study. This may explain why fresh graduates are sent on training when employed. Since the British Standards Institute (BSI), according to Babalola, Adedeji and Erwat (2007:242) sees quality as the "totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bear on its unit ability to satisfy stated or implied needs", the products of higher education are expected on graduation to go back to their immediate and remote communities and prove their worth by performing maximally in the competitive labour market. The challenge of ensuring quality in the production of higher education graduates is not the concern of teachers and educational institutions alone, but also that of all the interest groups in education including employers of labour, who are the major consumers of the products of these institutions.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The Nigerian labour market is replete with higher education graduates who cannot find jobs. Many graduates from the Nigerian tertiary institutions find it difficult to pass the competitive job selection tests. Even when jobs are available, some are unemployable. In many instances, many newly employed graduates have had to be re-trained by their employers to meet the demands of their assignments. Besides, many industries even prefer employing foreign graduates to those locally trained. In this period of dwindling economic fortunes world-wide, and rising level of unemployment, sustainable economic development will depend largely on society's ability to attune its skilled manpower development programmes to meet the needs of its economy.

The fact that most employers of labour in the Nigerian private sectors are reluctant to recruit indigenous graduates or even believe that such graduates have to be re-trained to meet their own employment needs calls to question the process

of curriculum development in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Are the relevant interest groups making adequate contributions to curriculum development? Are the programmes of instruction in various disciplines adequate to equip graduates to be functional? These are the issues of concern to the researchers. This is because if the fore-going posers are answered in the affirmative, then graduates of Nigerian Higher Institutions would be found employable and functional among employers of labour in the Nigerian labour market.

The study therefore examined the participation of employers of labour, like the civil service commission and members of the organized private sector in designing academic programmes at the tertiary education level. The relevance of academic programmes in these institutions in developing appropriate functional skills from the various disciplines to meet the specific manpower needs of prospective employers was also examined.

1.2 Purpose of the study

1. To find out the extent of participation of interest groups in the development of academic programmes of tertiary institutions.
2. To ascertain the adequacy of the academic programmes of Nigerian tertiary institutions.

1.3 Research Questions

1. To what extent do relevant interest groups participate in the development of academic programmes of tertiary institutions?
2. How adequate are the academic programmes of tertiary institutions in ensuring the production of relevant skilled manpower?

1.4 Theoretical Basis

This study is anchored on the principle of participatory planning in education, which is one of the democratic models and also one of the fundamental principles of educational planning. According to Duncan (1988) the democratic theory was first propounded by John Locke and Rousseau. This theory explains the fact that all stakeholders should be involved by participating in planning and decision-making. This principle contends that curriculum and programme planning can only be made functional and relevant if all those whose interests are to be affected are involved in its development. This is true because only those who participate in decision-making will find justification for supporting the implementation of such decisions. Besides, participation provides them the opportunity to ensure that their various peculiar manpower and skill needs are adequately represented during this period of programme development.

2. Methodology

This is a descriptive survey study. The phenomenon of academic programme development, with regards to who is involved and how adequate it is in addressing the needs of the labour market and the society at large for quality manpower in tertiary institutions was examined and described in this study.

The study involved the use of all the 88 heads of academic units (HOA) in three tertiary institutions in Rivers State (one for each category). The samples also included a stratified random sample of 35 of five categories of companies and financial institutions operating in Trans-Amadi Industrial Layout of Port Harcourt (30% each), which are identified on the Industrial Directory for the areas. The industry categorization include oil and gas associated companies, banks and financial institutions, manufacturing, food processing/beverages and drinks, as well as distributive trades/services companies. Companies that fall into these major categories constitute about 85% of companies within the Trans-Amadi Industrial layout. The choice of this layout is predicated on the fact that it houses about 70% of major companies with employment size of tertiary institution graduates not below 5 personnel in Rivers State (Rivers State Ministry of Industry, Trade and Commerce, 2011).

Academic Programme Development Evaluation Questionnaire (APDEQ), weighted on a modified four-point Likert-typed scale was designed by the researchers, properly validated and tested for reliability ($r= 0.82$). The instrument was administered on the 88 heads of academic units of three tertiary institutions and 35 Directors of personnel of the sampled companies. The results of the data collected were analyzed using mean for the questions and t- test for the hypothesis.

3. Results and Discussions

Interest groups participation in academic programme development

The participation of the various interest groups in the development of academic programmes in tertiary institutions was surveyed using nine interest groups. The result of the evaluation is presented in Table 1.

<Table 1 about here>

Based on the weighted mean as identified with double and single asterisk in table 1, the government regulatory agencies, heads of academic units and lecturers are the most involved interest groups in academic programme development in universities, polytechnics and colleges of education. In addition, professional bodies have moderate input in the development of programmes in universities and polytechnics. Other relevant bodies like the National Manpower Board, members of the organized private sector and Labour unions are not involved at all (see weighted mean opinion scores in table 1 for these groups ranging between 1.00 and 1.91, all of which are within the disagree and strongly disagree response mode).

This clearly shows that beside government through its regulatory agencies like national Universities Commission (NUC) that exercises their powers of regulation, and heads of academic units of these institutions that exercises their statutory mandates, no other interest group is significantly involved. Members of the organised private sector that are the next largest employers of skilled manpower do not make any contribution to the content of programmes developed for tertiary institutions. It is not surprising then that these non-participating interest groups find it difficult to engage the products of these training institutions even on practical internship exercises, like the Student Industrial Work Experience Scheme (SIWES). This is because adequate participation of all interest groups in academic plan development will not only ensure the determination of appropriate and relevant educational needs, but will also engender co-operation for implementation of such educational plans by all the interested parties (Agabi, 2012).

3.1 Validation of opinion of employers and heads of academic units on participation

Studies employing opinion surveys have frequently been challenged on the premise of subjectivity, yet opinion has and will continue to determine actions or inactions, which in turn shape performance and history. Researchers' best way of navigating this treacherous opinion water is to find a way of validating such opinion in suspect. The researchers therefore compared the opinion of employers of labour and heads of academic units of these institutions on their extent of participation using t-test statistics at 0.05 significant level and the summary of the result is presented in Table 2.

<Table 2 about here>

The t-test comparison of the mean opinion of heads of academic units of tertiary institutions with those of employers of labour in table 2 yielded a t-value of 1.40, which is less than the t-critical value of 1.96 at 121 degree of freedom (df). Consequently, the null hypothesis of no significant difference is not rejected, as no significant difference in the opinion of the two categories of respondents was found.

This result clearly demonstrates consensus of opinion by labour employers and producers of skilled manpower who are naturally on the opposite of the discuss divide. This is a clear evidence of high validity of the opinions surveyed, considering the fact that the heads of academic units (who are at the centre of academic programme development) and employers of labour (who are potential consumers of the institutions' products) are on the two different sides of the divide. Significant difference in opinion between the two groups would have put the opinion result in suspect, depending on who has a stronger opinion.

3.2 Academic Programme Adequacy

To provide a concrete basis for validating the problem already established, the researchers also evaluated the adequacy of these academic programmes in meeting employers' skill development needs from five perspectives. The result of this evaluation based on prospective employers' opinion survey is summarized in Table 3 using weighted mean.

<Table 3 about here>

The research evidence in Table 3 clearly shows that prospective employers of skilled labour consider academic programmes of these institutions as largely inadequate in many areas. In fact, the programmes are considered very adequate only in inculcating theoretical knowledge in the university (mean = 3.66) and in building professional ethics in the Colleges of Education (mean = 3.50). They are considered moderately adequate in the development of managerial skills, but not adequate in developing entrepreneurial skills in all the three categories of institutions (see respective mean of opinion assessment in table 3). The programmes are moderately adequate in inculcating theoretical knowledge in the polytechnics (mean = 3.24) and College of Education (mean = 3.16); building practical skills in the polytechnics (mean = 3.000 and professional ethics in the university (mean = 2.70) and the polytechnics (mean = 2.58). This is clear evidence that the academic programmes of these institutions are most deficient in the development of practical and entrepreneurial skills (see respective mean opinion scores for these programmes in table 3).

The deficiency of university programmes in developing adequate entrepreneurial skills is confirmed by Sofoluwe (n.d.) in his evaluation of the entrepreneurial content of some university programmes in Nigeria. Okebukola (2002), corroborates the above evidence, when he asserted that the reluctance of private establishments to engage graduates of

our local institutions is only casting aspersion on the adequacy of their skill development programmes in meeting their specific manpower needs. This evidence makes more relevant, the recommendation by Onuka (2006), that manpower training institutions need to conduct training need assessments before developing training programmes and carrying out training programmes.

4. Implications for Quality Manpower Production

Quality skilled manpower remains a critical resource factor in the sustainable development of developing societies like Nigeria. The growing level of graduate unemployment in the Nigerian labour force demonstrates the countries inability to functionally manage its manpower resources to effectively address its manpower development needs..

It is clearly evident from this study that the most critical interest groups in the effective management of skilled manpower resources are not involved in policy development on manpower production. Largely for this reason the contents of the academic programmes do not adequately satisfy the requirements of employers of labour particularly in the area of practical skill development, entrepreneurial skills, managerial skills and professional ethics. It is not surprising then that most employers of labour are reluctant engaging graduates of this system.

This result has serious implications on quality skilled manpower production for the Nigerian economy. As long as this practice is sustained, the level of graduate unemployment in Nigeria will continue to rise. The associated wastage from investing in skills that are not relevant can not only be imagined, but the nation's quest to grow its economy out of the present depression through the production and engagement of quality skilled manpower to stimulate local production and improve its local content quotient will remain a mirage.

5. Recommendations

Sustained economic development in developing societies like Nigeria is highly dependent on the nation's ability to direct its active production resources, like skilled manpower (which are in most cases idle) to meet the needs of the economy. This can only become a reality if such skilled manpower resources are qualitatively and functionally trained and retrained. To achieve this, participatory planning must form the basis for the development of curriculum, and training programmes for all the manpower training institutions. In this regard, appropriate legislation must be enacted and enforced to ensure greater involvement of the organized private sector, the National Manpower Board and other interest groups in the development of training and retraining programmes for the various tertiary institutions.

Government, through appropriate laws should ensure that these relevant interest groups show greater support (as statutory obligation) to these tertiary institutions to sustain the quality assurance initiatives. This can take the form of direct project funding, sponsoring action researches, regular constructive engagement of these institutions on matters affecting the quality of their output and the like. This will ensure that these interest groups will begin to take proactive steps to ensure that they benefit from their own investments through quality and focused participation in manpower development policies and initiatives.

The quality of manpower development policies and programmes is not just based on who are involved in its formulation, but more importantly on how sufficiently informed and guided participants are. Heads of academic units (who in most cases are not trained educational planners) and other participants in academic programme development in Nigerian tertiary institutions should be trained on academic programme development prior to the development or modification of programmes. They should also be adequately guided by the national manpower development policies (usually developed by the ministry of national or economic planning), the analysis of periodic national manpower survey reports (usually carried out by the National Manpower Board), the guidelines for formulation of admission policies (usually provided by the Joint Admissions and matriculation Board) and the specific academic programme's minimum benchmark guidelines (usually provided by the various institutions' regulatory bodies).

Above all, government policies on manpower development must be professionally informed and it must enforce total compliance to appropriate regulations and guidelines on programme development and skilled manpower production through strict monitoring and supervision. This is the only way the nation can check the continued waste of valuable resources developing skilled but irrelevant manpower (poor quality), while the economy is still deficient in some critical skills seriously needed for quick economic recovery and development.

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Table1. Mean assessment of interest groups participation in academic programme development in tertiary institutions

S/N	Interest groups	Category of Institutions		
		University	Polytechnic	College of Education
1	Lecturers	3.32*	3.60**	2.90*
2	Government (through regulatory agencies)	3.70**	3.00*	3.80**
3	National Manpower Board	2.10	1.98	1.88
4	Organised private sector	1.46	1.77	1.90
5	Parents	1.20	1.00	1.36
6	Students	1.10	1.42	1.56
7	Labour Unions	1.91	1.64	1.34
8	Professional Bodies	3.00*	2.64*	2.00
9	Heads of Academic Units	3.40*	3.71**	3.00*

The criterion mean used was 2.50.

** = Interest groups with high level of participation.

* = Interest group with moderate level of participation.

Table 2. Weighted mean, Standard Deviation and t- test of the opinions of employers of labour and heads of academic units on participation in academic programme development in tertiary institutions

Respondent Categories	N	Mean	SD	t-calculated	t-critical	df	Remarks
Heads of academic units	88	2.61	0.20	1.40	1.96	121	Not sig.
Employers of labour	35	2.57	0.24				

$P < 0.05$

Table 3. Mean assessment of academic programme adequacy in tertiary institutions

S/N	Adequacy parameters	Category of Institutions		
		University	Polytechnic	College of Education
1	Theoretical knowledge	3.66**	3.24*	3.16*
2	Practical skills	2.30	3.00*	2.09
3	Professional ethics	2.70	2.58	3.50**
4	Management ability	2.60	2.72	2.86
5	Entrepreneurial skills	1.76	1.34	1.60

The criterion mean used was 2.50.

** = *Very adequate*

* = *Moderately adequate*