

Nexus of Access, Equity and Quality of University Education: Matching Graduates Skills and Employability for Sustainable Development Goals in Nigeria

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Abstract

The paper discussed the nexus of access, equity and quality of university education, and implications of matching university education and graduates' skills and employability for sustainable development goals in Nigeria. The paper conceptualized access, equity and quality of university education and developed a hypothetical model showing the links among the three constructs. It also showed the effect and outcomes of the balance of interplay among the concepts on producing graduates with employable skills that would ultimately lead to the achievement of sustainable development goals (SDGs). In the hypothetical model, the paper concluded that there appears to be a link among the constructs; access, equity and quality of university education. The paper recommended, among others, that the proprietors of universities in Nigeria should give sufficient attention to distribution of resources; such as improving infrastructures in the existing universities to provide for effective instruction and acquisition of skills required to drive the economy, allow for full implantation of university autonomy to enable university recruit and employ more academic staff to reduce the high lecturer-student ratio experienced in many programmes in the universities for quality instruction in the universities in Nigeria.

Keywords: graduates, skills, access, equity, quality, education

Introduction

Investment in university education from inception was tailored towards developing high manpower needs for the Nigerian economy. It was to produce accumulated human capital for the nation. It was seen as a high level or a specialized form of developing human capital, which is very significant to economic growth in the nation. The origin and the expansion of university education could be traced to the commission of inquiry set up in 1959, popularly called the Ashby Commission. The commission was saddled with the

responsibility of looking into the manpower needs for the nascent economy (Fafunwa, 1995).

The recommendations were hung on the fact that for the government to experience the expected economic growth, diligent attention was to be given to developing university education to produce high manpower that would meet the labour needs of the emerging economy. The Commission's recommendations marked a significant effort in the growth and expansion of access to university education in Nigeria (Iruonagbe, Imhonopi, & Egharevba, 2015).

The efforts of the Nigerian government in expanding access to university education was further stressed in the National Policy on Education (Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN), 2013) when it stipulates that university education would continue to make optimum contribution to national development by:

1. Intensifying and diversifying its programmes for the development of high-level manpower within the context of the needs of the nation;
2. making professional course contents reflect the national requirements;
3. making all students part of a general programme of all-round improvement in university education, to offer general study courses such as history of ideas, philosophy of knowledge, nationalism, and Information Technology (IT); and
4. making entrepreneurial skills acquisition a requirement for all Nigerian universities (FRN, 2013).

Providing equitable access to quality broad based university education is the core mandate of the university system. The focus is to develop a versatile stock of human resources with adequate skills to contribute to economic and general development of the nation.

Access, quality graduate-skill connectionism constructs

One of the concepts that have saturated discourse in the academic world is access and equity in educational opportunity at all levels of the school system. Conceptually, access to university education could mean conditions that promote full and equal opportunity for all to attain university education. Generally, according to Okeke in Nwogu (2015), access to education means free and unlimited, unhindered and unfettered opportunities at each level of education to obtain knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to optimally participate and contribute to societal development. He goes on to state that this definition of access to education covers the threshold of access, or enrolling, attending and completing, and possibly transiting to the appropriate level of education. Thus, lack of access to education or "barrier to educational access" means any of the following: failing to enrol in an educational institution; lack of opportunities to attend school regularly, inability to complete the prescribed programme of study (leading to school dropouts), inability to attain a set goal, and inability to transit to the next level of education (Aluede, Idogho & Inonike, 2012).

Specifically access to university, according to Adekile (2017), is the unbridled freedom and equal opportunity of a person who has met the requirements for admission into the university to gain admission, matriculate and eventually graduate having optimized the components of a university education towards the development of the person for successful assimilation into the working world. In this wise, applicant must have unbiased and robust educational opportunities at every stage for polishing of knowledge, skills and ability to participate in the improvement of the society.

Robert-Okah and Osiobe (2014) see access to university education as implying providing opportunity for everyone who is entitled to education to receive it. This means making it possible by removing obstacles which could hinder anyone who desires a university education from obtaining it. Achieving this requires that enough classrooms, laboratories and instructional facilities are provided for everyone. Over the years, Nigeria has made positive impact toward expanding access to university education. The supply side, expansion and increase in the number of universities in Nigeria, is unable to meet the demand side, as universities are unable to absorb the number of applicants subscribing yearly for admission. However, it is noted that the increase in the number of the universities, is a mark of significant effort to improve access to university education. This is evident in the increase in the number of universities from the six first generation of federal universities established between 1960 and 1970 to the seven second generation universities which were established to reflect the then 19 state structure, which brought the total of universities to thirteen in Nigeria. The government's efforts in expanding access to university education paid off as in 2019, the number of universities increased to 170; comprising 43 Federal, 48 State and 79 private accredited universities in Nigeria (NUC, 2019).

According to Obanya (2011), access means full and unfettered educational opportunity devoid of all types of exclusion; that which is crowned by successful learning and improved life chances for all classes of beneficiaries whose improved knowledge and skills, positive values and attitudes should contribute to reducing socio-economic inequities and poverty in the wider society. This submission brings to bear the maxim that improved access to university education could address equity issues as barriers to access are removed and opportunities are expanded for increased participation. Equity, therefore, implies that all segments of the society get their fair share of access to whatever educational opportunities that are provided (Oyebade, Oladipo & Adetoro, 2005). One of the aims of any effort to increase access in university education in Nigeria is to reduce inequities in education outcomes across geographic, income, age, gender, and other categorizations. Such inequities must not be focused on enrolment only, but also address completion issues (Adekile, 2017). According to Santiago, Tremblay, Basri and Arnal (2008), equity in education has two dimensions. The first is fairness, which implies ensuring that personal and social circumstances, for instance, gender, socioeconomic status or ethnic origin, should not be an obstacle to achieving one's educational potentials. The second is inclusion, which implies ensuring a basic minimum standard of education for all where everyone is able to read, write and do simple arithmetic. The two dimensions

are closely intertwined: tackling school failure helps to overcome the effects of social deprivation which often causes school failure.

Equitable tertiary systems are those that ensure that access, participation in and outcomes of tertiary education are based only on individuals' innate ability and study efforts. They ensure that the achievement of educational potential at tertiary level is not the result of personal and social circumstances, including factors such as socio-economic status, gender, ethnic origin, immigrant status, place of residence, age, or disability (Santiago, Tremblay, Basri & Arnal, 2008).

Access and equity are related constructs, which when existing without quality could mean churning out graduates without the skills to drive the economy. Quality of university education is a hydra-headed paradigm; it could be viewed as educational input and output analysis and the extent to which the teaching and learning facilities are accessible and effective in ensuring that the educational programmes meet the national objectives (Ayo-Sobowale & Akinyemi, 2011). Quality university education is largely determined by human resource availability inputs and funding. According to Nwanna in Lembani (2019), "adequate funding" and "human capital" are essential of inputs needed to derive an acceptable, desirable, beneficial, efficient and effective university education from the government, society, private agencies and stakeholder perspectives. Babalola (2002) also corroborated this by indicating that the public universities lack the financial resources needed to maintain the acceptable level of quality university education. Conversely, adequate financial resource availability to the university system has strong implications for quality delivery of university education. Where this assertion does not hold, quality of university education would be in doubt, particularly in the face of dwindling financial resources available to the federal government and the overwhelming inter and intra-sectoral demand of the economy that has further put strain on financial resources available to the university system Nigeria.

Furthermore, in addition to limited financial resource availability is the challenge of enrolment explosion without commensurate increase in human and material resources which potentially undermines quality university education. The wake of the high demand of university education in Nigeria has led to a sharp rise in students' enrolment. Available records have shown that by 2019, students' enrolment in public universities was put at 1,751,761 comprising 1,206,825 in the Federal and 544,936 in the state universities. It is also reported that there is only a total of 61, 282 academic staff servicing the enrolled student in the public universities consisting 39,856 and 21,426 in Federal and State Universities respectively (NUC, 2019). This situation has paved way to de-meriting gross academic staff-students' ratio which limits effective lecturers' interaction for quality university education graduates' output that would meet the labour market requirements that would justify the public and private investment in the university system.

From the economic point of view, public and private investment in education is to enhance and build a stock of human resource, strengthen its skills to be employable, which would

engender high productivity for economic growth and development. The connection therefore is, access to university education demands that the system provides knowledge and skill to meet the requirements for the economy as reported by Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) which admitted that:

One of the main objectives of higher education is to provide its graduates with the skills needed to succeed in the labour market. This mission is especially important in the context of today's innovation-driven, skills-based, globalised economies. It also corresponds to one of the main expectations of students, namely that they will be able to get a good job at the conclusion of their studies (OECD, 2017: 9)

One of the goals of university education in Nigeria is to develop skills that allow graduates to do well in the labour market. This appears not to have been the situation; as employers of labour over the years have continued to raise concerns over the employability of graduates of the university education system which seem to be professionally or technically qualified but unemployable; this is largely attributed to the deficiency in the skills or competencies needed for the available jobs.

Conceptually, graduate employability could also be viewed as the ability to have acquired skills that are necessary for getting, keeping and being successful in a job. These may, among others, include skills and attitudes that enable employees to get along with their colleagues, to make critical decisions, solve problems, develop respect and ultimately become strong ambassadors for the organization (Sodipo, 2014). It is the capability of a graduate to gain, maintain and possibly obtain new employment they require.

Employability of an individual, in most cases, depends on the graduates' knowledge, skills and attitudes acquired in the course of his training; the way these assets are used and deployed; presentation of assets to potential employers and the context within which the individual works, e.g. labour market and personal circumstances. According to Babalola (cited in Edinyang, Odey, & Gimba, 2015), employability skills denote characters that may make an individual attractive to potential employers. These skills and competencies are directly linked to the needs of the labour market.

University education system producing graduates that are employable entails graduating individuals that are highly skilled, knowledgeable with practical and intellectual prowess of thinking ability to solve problems in the world of work and providing solutions to their immediate communities. Adedeji and Oyebade (2019) provided empirical evidence in a study in Nigeria, which revealed that one of the major factors responsible for the high rate of unemployment is not only that there are insufficient jobs for those who want them, but that job seekers do not have the skills necessary to fill the existing vacant positions. According to them, the situation of unemployment occurs when students are not equipped with relevant skills that meet the demand of the employers of labour. This is a pointer to and suggests that emphasis made on access to university education without essential regards to the quality in the process of graduate production could lead to skill gap. Also,

the phenomenon is worsened when the curricula in operation in university education in Nigeria do not provide requisite skills taking into account the demands of the labour needs of the economy. The result of this is the skills gap or skills mismatch in the world of work and employability.

Worrisome is the concern that university education graduates transiting from school to the labour market are unable to find jobs that correspond to their academic trainings and qualifications leading to high unemployment rate. The National Bureau of Statistics' (NBS) Labour Force Survey, placed unemployment rate at 27% in second quarter of 2020 (FGN, 2017). Nigeria Economic Alert (2020) lamented that:

An examination of the unemployment rate by level of education shows that 41% of the labour population with a bachelor's degree are without employment. The unemployment rate among bachelor's degree holders is higher than the 18% for people with vocational skills. The unemployment rate for people with vocational skills is also lower than people with master's (23%) and doctorate degrees (23%). What this means is that there could be more vocational or blue-collar job opportunities than white collar jobs in Nigeria pointing to the large size of the informal economy, where most blue-collar jobs operate. . . It also means that a university degree is not an assured route to gainful employment and policymakers should be thinking about strengthening the country's vocational training to prepare young people for worthwhile and productive blue-collar careers.

Access, equity and quality connections in university education are important variables that require equal attention for attaining the socio-economic development. Figure 1 provides graphical illustration of the connection between the variables.

Model of the nexus among access, equity, quality and graduates' employability

Access and equity, quality and relevance and system strengthening are the three results areas in the Federal Government's Ministerial Strategic Plan (MSP). The MSP was developed to address the dilemmas of the education sector in Nigeria, and to key into the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by year 2030 (Federal Ministry of Education, 2016); the initial plan covered the period between 2016-2019. In developing the model, three variables, access, equity, quality, were selected to illustrate the link between the three constructs. As efforts are made in improving any of the variables, there is a ripple effect on the others. The model figure provides a logical link between the three variables, access, equity and quality. In the model, access and equity are result areas university education system should seek to achieve. Access and equity in university education is improved with equal distribution of educational resources. When resources are optimally utilized in teaching and learning, this promotes quality university education. The promotion of quality university education enables the university system to produce graduates with relevant skills for employment in both white- and blue-collar jobs. The

interactions between access, equity and quality would provide effect on the university education and the overall impact is visible in the outcomes; the achievement of the SDGs.

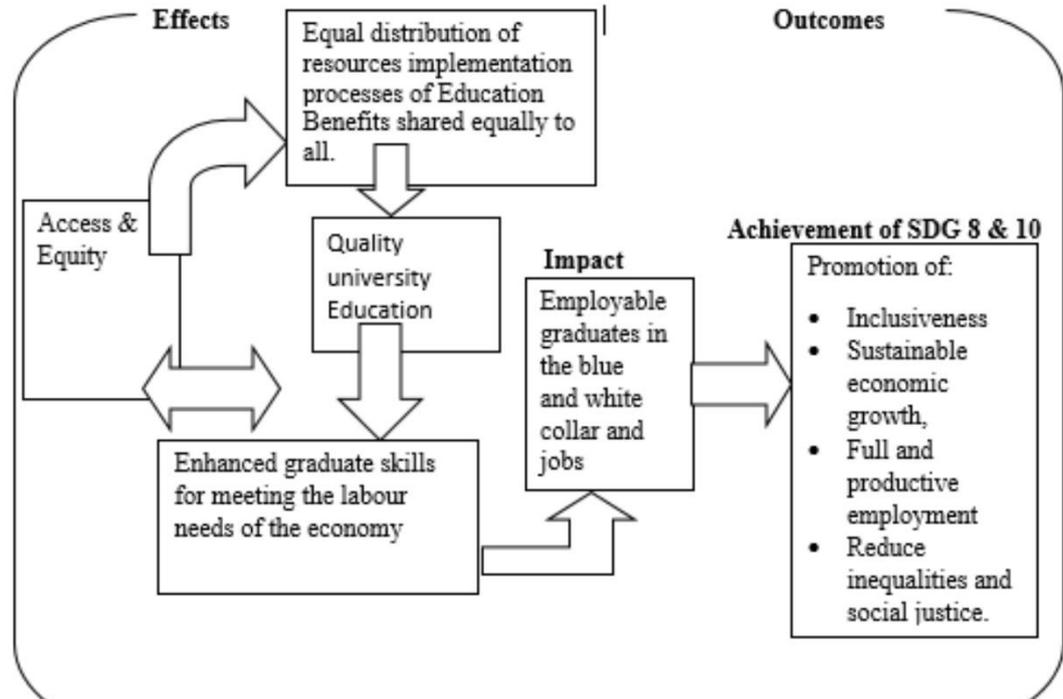


Figure 1: Model framework of the nexus of access, equity, quality and graduates employability

Source: designed by the authors

Discussion of the model

The figure 1 presents a model framework that depicts a relationship between the concepts of access, equity, quality university education and graduate employability. The framework provides a nexus between the concepts and the achievements of SDG goal eight and ten.

The framework shows that increased access could lead to a rise in equity in the provision of university education, ‘all things been equal’. Equity is achieved when there is equal distribution of resources in implementation processes of educational programmes and education benefits are shared equally to all; the result from this is quality university education. Equity engenders inclusion in university education among gender and youth from different socio-economic status, removing all barriers associated with increased access to university education in Nigeria. Where individuals have equal access to quality university education, graduates’ skills would be enhanced for meeting the labour needs of the economy. The impact therefore would be employable graduates in the blue and white collar jobs. Finally, the outcome would be the achievement of SDG goal leading to the promotion of inclusiveness, sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, social justice and reduced inequalities. Inbuilt in the model framework is

the cause effect relationship; effect, impact and outcome in a proposed balance among access, equity and quality of university education. In addition, this will build a knowledge-based economy to promote youth employability. This in part, would be addressing SDG goals one and four which essentially seek to end poverty in all its forms everywhere and to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (FGN, 2017)

Furthermore, this corroborates the work of Sala, Planas, Masjuan, Enciso (cited in Navarro-Cendejas & Fachelli, 2018), who proposed a dependency model that assumes a significant correspondence between the educational profiles of graduates and the jobs they fill – with provision matching and responding to the demands of the workplace. This assumption presupposes that quality university education system provides to the students, to a large extent, determines the profiles of the graduates for available jobs who will in-turn contributes to economic growth and development.

Access and equity are closely related constructs; the expansion of tertiary systems presents multiple opportunities that enhance the ability of disadvantaged students to participate in university education. According to Obanya (2011), lack of access to higher education, and securely acquired knowledge and skill, is both a part of the definition of poverty, and a means for its diminution. Sustained access to meaningful learning that has value is critical to long term improvements in productivity, the reduction of inter-generational cycles of poverty, demographic transition, preventive health care, the empowerment of women, and reductions in inequality.

Conclusion

The continuous government's emphasis on the provision and expansion of access to public university education over the years is commendable. The connections among access, equity, quality university education, and graduate skills for the world of work are critical to the achievement of SDGs. Unequal emphasis on one variable over another in the provision of university education is detrimental to producing graduates with skills that meet labour market requirements for employment. The hallmark of an equilibrium approach in expanding access, ensuring equity, and quality delivery of university education for a graduate output with relevant skills that would create, design, and operate production of goods and services to drive economic growth and the achievement sustainable development goals in Nigeria is desirable.

Recommendations

In the light of the conclusion which commended the efforts of the government in the improvement of access to public university education in Nigeria, going beyond access, the paper recommends the following:

1. The proprietors of universities in Nigeria should give sufficient attention to the development of infrastructure in the existing public universities to provide for effective instruction and acquisition of skills required to drive the economy.

2. The Federal and State Government should stop further establishment of new university that are being used to score cheap political points, but to concentrate on equipping the existing universities to world class standards.

3. The Federal government through its regulatory agency, the National Universities Commission, should urgently call for curriculum review to align with the current realities, to develop curriculum that de-emphasises academic to skill-based contents for graduates' employability to drive the economy.

4. The Federal and state government should allow for full implementation of the law of university autonomy to enable universities to recruit and employ staff to reduce the high lecturer-student ratio experienced in many programmes in the universities for quality instruction in the university.

5. The proprietors of universities in Nigeria should pay attention to the provision of material resources to equip workshops, laboratories and libraries for a robust skills acquisition.

6. Nigerian university system should intensify town gown relationship through graduate internship scheme to enable graduate acquire work skill for increase employability.

7. In this era of information and communication technology and innovation, there is need for a continuous development of internet infrastructure such as improving bandwidth for sharing of information across the globe.

Limitation and future research

The study was providing a theoretical basis of the three related concepts which have implications for producing graduates with relevant skills for employment. The limitation of the study is that it did not develop instrument to measure the concepts of access, equity and quality of university education; further research could be conducted on assessing indicators of the concepts of access, equity and quality of university education: implications for matching graduates' skills and employability. This would provide more empirical evidence on the link between the concepts.

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