



BEYOND THE IVORY TOWER: RE-ENGINEERING HIGHER EDUCATION IN NIGERIA TO ADDRESS SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGES



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Abstract

This paper examines the potential for higher education in Nigeria to contribute to social development, particularly in the context of pressing challenges, such as poverty, inequality, and inadequate healthcare and education. The traditional role of higher education in Nigeria has been criticized for being disconnected from the needs of society and for prioritizing theoretical knowledge over practical applications. This paper argues that re-engineering higher education in Nigeria is necessary to address these challenges. It proposes a set of principles for re-engineering higher education, including community engagement, interdisciplinary collaboration, and experiential learning. The paper also highlights examples of initiatives in Nigeria that demonstrate the potential for higher education to contribute to social development. Recommendations are made for policymakers, educators, and other stakeholders to support the re-engineering of higher education in Nigeria.

Keywords: Re-engineering, Higher education, social development, and Nigeria.

Introduction

Re-engineering higher education involves a fundamental restructuring aimed at enhancing the quality and relevance of learning in tertiary institutions. According to Akpa (2019), re-engineering the educational system addresses contradictions, maladjustments, and paradoxes that undermine its functionality. It is essential for overcoming the systemic challenges that hinder the effectiveness, efficiency, and responsiveness of higher education to individual and societal needs.

A re-engineered higher education system focuses on functionality. As Asaju and Adagba (2014) note, functional higher education equips individuals with the knowledge and skills required for performing productive tasks and meeting development needs. This underscores the urgent need for quality education, that is, education that meets globally competitive standards.

According to Wike (2024), achieving this transformation in Nigeria depends heavily on increased funding and the elimination of corruption within the management of public tertiary institutions. Nwakudu, Boreh, and Ogbara (2014) also highlight how dwindling resources in the education sector have triggered numerous negative outcomes, such as the inability to recruit sufficient qualified academic staff, low morale due to poor salaries and working conditions, and a decline in research output and teaching quality. These issues have further led to widespread examination malpractice, reduced knowledge production, capital flight, overburdened staff, poor global university

rankings, and general inefficiency. Without adequate remuneration and conducive work environments, it is difficult to prevent corrupt practices in public tertiary institutions.

Society shapes the roles and functions of education, and both must evolve together. As societal needs change, so must the content, mode, and methods of education. Re-engineering higher education requires academic leaders to understand social dynamics and anticipate future developments. This means moving away from the current system that Ogonor and Igenegbai (2019) argue is plagued by the following issues:

- i. **Individualistic Competition:** Nigeria's current educational structure promotes a "winner-takes-all" mentality. The emphasis on individual achievement and certification fosters self-centeredness over collective development. Teamwork and collaborative skills, which are essential for national and global progress, are largely ignored.
- ii. **Teacher-Centered Pedagogy:** A predominant feature of Nigerian higher education is the lecture-based, teacher-dominated model, "talk and chalk." Students are expected to take notes and regurgitate information during assessments. This method does not foster critical thinking or prepare students for the realities of a rapidly changing world. Instead, it reinforces rote learning and a lack of innovative problem-solving.
- iii. **Rigid, Curriculum-Centered Learning:** Curricula are often static, with limited flexibility for adaptation by teachers and students. The process of revising curricula is slow, resulting in outdated content that fails to keep pace with global and societal changes. Akpa (2019) observes that the curriculum lacks sustainability relevance and innovation. It fails to reflect Nigeria's abundant natural resources and presents challenges in implementation, often leading to poor classroom management, absenteeism, and disengagement among students.
- iv. **Neglect of Technical and Scientific Skills Development:** Universities and polytechnics have distinct but complementary roles. While universities are expected to produce high-level manpower, polytechnics are designed to train technicians and technologists who can be self-reliant. However, in practice, this distinction is poorly observed. According to the Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN, 2014), 60% of university admissions should go to science and science-related courses, and 80% in universities of technology. Yet, non-science programs continue to dominate enrollment figures, undermining national goals of scientific and technological advancement.

Reasons Necessitating The Re-Engineering Of Higher Education

The re-engineering of higher education in Nigeria has become imperative due to a host of persistent challenges that continue to undermine the sector's effectiveness. Scholars such as Akpa (2019), Ojule (2020), and Jones (2020) have identified various compelling factors driving this need for transformation. One major concern is the paradox of rising unemployment amidst a clear shortage of manpower in key sectors of the economy. Many graduates face employability challenges, largely due to a mismatch between theoretical knowledge acquired in school and the practical skills demanded in the workplace. This gap highlights the urgent need to align educational curricula with industry expectations to enhance job readiness and national productivity.

Leadership and governance within higher institutions also contribute significantly to the challenges facing the sector. Weak managerial capacities, poor supervisory systems, a lack of visionary and transformational leadership, and limited entrepreneurial direction continue to stifle institutional growth. These deficiencies have created an environment where inefficiency thrives and innovation is stifled. Resource management further exacerbates the problem. Higher institutions often suffer from poor allocation, utilization, and oversight of resources, leading to gross inefficiencies. As Akpa (2019) notes, there is an evident failure to establish a meaningful relationship between inputs and outputs. Compounding this issue is the chronic underfunding of higher education in Nigeria, where the national budgetary allocation falls far below UNESCO's recommended 26% benchmark for developing countries.

Academic staff are also deeply affected. Lecturers are frequently underappreciated, poorly motivated, and subjected to irregular payments of salaries, allowances, and fringe benefits. This situation fosters a growing trend of brain drain and contributes to the declining quality of the teaching workforce. Labour unrest has become a recurring feature of Nigeria's higher education landscape. Frequent strikes result in the loss of valuable instructional time, truncated academic calendars, and inadequate curriculum delivery. This, in turn, leads to the production of ill-equipped graduates lacking in essential skills and professional confidence. Another critical issue is the deplorable state of infrastructure across many institutions. Facilities that should support effective teaching and learning, such as libraries, laboratories, workshops, and studios, are often outdated, under-resourced, or altogether absent. The lack of student-friendly environments hampers the overall academic experience and limits the potential for innovation and discovery.

In an age dominated by rapid technological advancement, the deployment of information and communication technology (ICT) in Nigerian higher institutions remains significantly inadequate. The sector continues to lag in the adoption of digital tools and platforms necessary for efficient teaching, learning, and administration. Furthermore, the internationalization of higher education in Nigeria remains weak. Collaborations with institutions in other countries, which are crucial for enhancing academic standards, fostering global competitiveness, and driving institutional reform, are either minimal or uncoordinated. Agih and Major (2013) observe that the lack of a coherent national strategy for international partnerships has resulted in fragmented, often disadvantageous agreements driven by individual institutions rather than national interests. This undermines opportunities for capacity building, academic exchange, and sustainable global relevance.

Lastly, the pervasive influence of anti-social behaviors such as corruption, cultism, and criminality within campuses poses a serious threat to the integrity of higher education. A disturbing number of students are involved in internet fraud, sexual harassment, intimidation of peers and lecturers, and other deviant acts that compromise not just academic standards, but the overall purpose of tertiary education.

In light of these challenges, re-engineering higher education is not just necessary, it is urgent. It demands a holistic transformation that addresses structural inefficiencies, revamps curricula, fosters innovation, and repositions Nigerian higher education to meet the evolving needs of society and the global community.

Social Development Challenges In Nigeria

Nigeria grapples with a wide range of social development challenges that continue to hinder its economic growth and the general well-being of its population. These challenges are deeply rooted in systemic issues such as poverty, infrastructural inadequacies, limited access to education and healthcare, insecurity, and governance deficiencies.

A significant proportion of the Nigerian population lives below the poverty line, struggling daily to meet basic needs. Income inequality continues to widen, fostering social discontent and obstructing national progress. Poverty in Nigeria is more than a lack of income, it reflects an inability to achieve a socially acceptable standard of living, one that ensures dignity and opportunity for self-advancement. Infrastructural deficiencies further compound the situation. Reliable electricity, clean water, good road networks, and adequate sanitation remain inaccessible to many. These deficits impact both rural and urban communities, severely limiting productivity, business opportunities, and access to basic services.

Education and healthcare sectors are similarly challenged. In many regions, particularly rural areas, children are deprived of access to quality education, a factor that restricts their future prospects and capacity to contribute meaningfully to national development. Meanwhile, the healthcare system is chronically underfunded, resulting in inadequate facilities, shortages of trained personnel, and a high prevalence of preventable diseases. Maternal and infant mortality rates remain high, and access to essential medicines and modern healthcare technologies is limited.



Security is another major obstacle. Widespread violence, ranging from terrorism and insurgency in the northeast to banditry and kidnapping across various regions, has led to large-scale displacement, fear, and instability. These conditions deter investment, displace communities, and disrupt education and economic activity. In such environments, sustainable development becomes a daunting challenge. Governance issues further aggravate Nigeria's social woes. Corruption remains a pervasive problem, diverting public resources from critical development projects and eroding trust in public institutions. Weak governance structures and institutions fail to deliver essential services effectively and equitably. Uneven distribution of resources has intensified regional disparities, creating additional layers of marginalization and resentment.

High unemployment, particularly among the youth, contributes to growing social unrest. Many young Nigerians face bleak economic prospects, which fuels disillusionment and increases vulnerability to crime and radicalization. Marginalized groups, especially women, the disabled, and ethnic minorities are frequently excluded from full participation in society, limiting the nation's capacity to harness its diverse human capital. Overpopulation further strains already overstretched resources, while environmental degradation, including pollution and deforestation, threatens both human health and long-term sustainability.

In the education sector, especially at the tertiary level, the challenges are particularly acute. Inadequate funding of higher education institutions has led to dilapidated infrastructure, poor staff remuneration, and reduced opportunities for academic research and innovation. Many universities lack sufficient classrooms, libraries, laboratories, and accommodation, hindering effective teaching and learning. The emigration of skilled academics, commonly referred to as brain drain, weakens the system and deprives students of quality mentorship and training. Frequent strike actions by academic staff disrupt academic calendars, causing extended periods of inactivity and loss of academic momentum.

The quality of higher education is further undermined by academic fraud, corruption, and widespread indiscipline, all of which compromise the credibility of certificates and the integrity of the academic process. Insecurity on campuses, especially in conflict-prone areas, creates an atmosphere of fear and instability, unsuitable for learning or research. Moreover, the persistent high rate of graduate unemployment points to a significant disconnect between academic training and labor market demands. The limited capacity of universities to accommodate growing student populations leads to overcrowding, which diminishes the quality of education.

Strategies For Re-Engineering Of Higher Education In Nigeria

To confront these multifaceted challenges, a strategic re-engineering of Nigeria's higher education system is crucial. Such re-engineering must address both systemic issues within higher education and broader social development needs. The curriculum must be reformed to reflect individual, national, and global realities, with a strong emphasis on relevance, technology, and practicality. In today's knowledge-driven world, education systems must shift away from theory-heavy content towards applied learning, especially in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). As Obanya (2010) asserts, this transformation requires a significant change in teaching strategies to incorporate more practical, technology-enhanced methods.

To make education more responsive to national development needs, curricula should equip students with practical skills for self-employment and job creation. Integrating entrepreneurship and innovation into academic programs will encourage problem-solving, independence, and economic participation. Furthermore, research and development should be prioritized and aligned with Nigeria's developmental challenges, ensuring that academic output contributes directly to sustainable solutions. Funding remains a cornerstone of successful reform. Government funding must be significantly increased to meet the infrastructural, staffing, and research needs of higher education institutions. At the same time, alternative funding models, such as partnerships with the private sector, international agencies, and non-governmental organizations, should be explored to diversify revenue streams. Transparent financial management practices are essential to ensure that funds are used effectively and equitably.

Improving infrastructure is also imperative. Upgrading physical facilities like classrooms, laboratories, libraries, and student accommodations will foster a conducive learning environment. In tandem, investment in ICT infrastructure will enhance teaching, learning, and research, making higher education more dynamic and globally competitive. Strengthening research capacity is equally vital. This includes the provision of research grants and fellowships, as well as training opportunities to build the competencies of researchers. Encouraging collaborations between academia and industry can promote innovation and practical problem-solving, linking theoretical knowledge with real-world applications. Finally, promoting employability must be central to educational reform. Emphasis should be placed on skills-based training and the development of competencies that match labor market needs. Stronger industry-academic partnerships can facilitate internships, apprenticeships, and job placements, ensuring that graduates are work-ready. Encouraging entrepreneurship as a viable post-graduation path can also reduce reliance on formal employment and foster economic resilience.

Through these concerted efforts, Nigeria's higher education system can become a powerful catalyst for national transformation, capable of addressing the country's deep-rooted social development challenges and positioning it for a more prosperous future.

Conclusion And Recommendatons

Conclusion

This paper has explored the vital role of re-engineering higher education in Nigeria as a strategic approach to addressing the country's persistent social development challenges. It proposed a framework for reform that aligns higher education with national priorities and highlighted existing innovative programmes that demonstrate the transformative potential of a reimagined higher education system. The analysis underscores that the traditional "Ivory Tower" model is no longer sustainable in the face of contemporary societal demands. There is an urgent need for a more engaged, responsive, and forward-thinking educational paradigm. To truly contribute to social transformation, higher education institutions in Nigeria must embrace approaches that prioritize community engagement, foster interdisciplinary collaboration, and promote experiential learning. These elements will better equip graduates with the competencies and mindset necessary to navigate and address the complex realities of Nigerian society. In conclusion therefore, a re-engineered higher education system can serve as a powerful driver of inclusive and sustainable development.

Recommendations

In light of the findings and conclusions drawn in this paper, several key recommendations are proposed. First, policymakers should formulate and implement supportive policies and programmes that facilitate the re-engineering of higher education, with particular emphasis on adequate funding for innovative and transformative initiatives. Second, educators must adopt dynamic teaching methodologies and curricula that prioritize real-world problem-solving through community involvement, cross-disciplinary cooperation, and hands-on learning experiences. Finally, institutional leaders are encouraged to provide strong leadership and strategic direction by ensuring the availability of resources, infrastructure, and institutional support necessary for the successful implementation of reform-driven initiatives. Through collective commitment and action, Nigeria's higher education system can be repositioned as a catalyst for national development.

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