

Universal Basic Education Programme for Global Competitiveness: A Need for Paradigm Shift

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Abstract

When the goal of UBE, “Education For All” (EFA) which is in line with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) was envisaged from the conception of the scheme, little did anyone know that fourteen years after, the policy would not make a significant achievement in competing with systems in other developed nations of the world. Recent reports show that it would take Nigeria more than 70 years before all children will have access to primary education. This paper is a call on needed paradigm shift in UBE for global competitiveness. The paper x-rays the matters arising in the scheme to include the quota policy, placing of ceiling on the number of pupils to be registered in a state among others. The paper also highlighted some envisaged problems of the implementation of the programme to include policy standard and objectives, policy resources, inter-governmental communication and enforcement, the characteristics of implementing agencies and the economic, social and political conditions and as well the disposition of policy implementers. The paper called for paradigm shift in the area of human, financial, infrastructural resources as well as quality assurance and social mobilization. Suggestion is therefore made that the scheme should be given attention like any other sector.

Keywords: Basic Education, Universal, Competiveness, Implementation, Education for All

Introduction

Education is a process of acquiring skills, obtaining relevant knowledge and aptitudes in order to survive in this technological world. It is the process whereby individuals are provided with the means, tools and knowledge for understanding their society and its structures. Education, needless to say, is a priority sector in every well-meaning society. Thus, Burtch (2006) referred to it as a major force in economic, intellectual, social and cultural empowerment. Its value in bringing about character and attitudinal change ranks as important as its ability to reshape human potentials for desired development.

In realization of the important role which education plays as an agent of national development and globalization, there has been agitation for more functional, qualitative and quantitative education all over the world. This agitation and concern for quantity and quality education is reflected in the inauguration of Education for All (EFA) in Jomtien (Thailand) in 1995 and Dakar in 2000. This was followed by a meeting called by the 56th General Assembly of the United Nations to discuss the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

In pursuit of this, Nigeria’s educational system has witnessed a catalogue of changes in policies and programmes. In fact, many of the changes in educational policies in Nigeria have been described as the product of confusion (Ayeni, 2000). There is therefore, a high level of uncertainties, which is beclouding meaningful planning in Nigeria’s educational system. This can be very dangerous particularly as the future of Nigeria and Nigerians will be determined by the level of education her nationals have acquired.

With the introduction of Universal Basic Education, it is believed that development of Nigeria will be accelerated because of inherent values in education. Attesting to this, Preece (2006) submitted that education is a proven contributor to reducing poverty. The Universal Basic Education’s mission is to serve as a prime energizer of national movement for actualization of the nation’s UBE’s vision, working in concert with all stakeholders. This will mobilize the nation’s creative energies to ensure that education for all becomes the responsibilities of all (Ejere, 2011). The Universal Basic Education Commission in its annual report in 2005 listed the objectives to include: ensuring unfettered access to 9 years of formal basic education, the provision of free, universal basic education for every Nigerian child of school-going age, reducing drastically the incidence of drop out from the formal school system, through improved relevance, quality and efficiency and ensuring the acquisition of appropriate levels of literacy, numeracy, manipulative, communicative and life skills, as well as the ethical, moral and civic values needed for laying a solid foundation for lifelong learning.

The achievement of the above-mentioned objectives and indeed the UBE’s vision and mission of the Scheme, an Act tagged UBE Act was enacted on the 26th May, 2004. This Act made provision for compulsory, free, Universal Basic Education and other related matters. Following the enactment of the Act, the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) was established. The Act provides three sources of funding for the

implementation of the UBE, which are;

- 1) Federal Government Grant of not <2% of its consolidated revenue fund; funds or contributions in the form of federal guaranteed credits and local or international donor grants.
- 2) The state government can only benefit from the Federal Government block grant meant for the implementation of the UBE if it can contribute at least 50% of the total cost of the project. This is to ensure the state's commitment towards the project.
- 3) The Local Government is to contribute its quota too to the implementation of the scheme.

The question then is, to what extent are these objectives achieved to meet global competitiveness?

Universal Basic Education: An overview

Basic Education means the type of education, in quality and content, that is given in the first level of education. However, there are variations in its scope and duration from country to country. In Nigeria for instance, basic education was equated with six years of primary schooling in the past. Currently basic education is extended to include the three years of Junior Secondary School. Universal Basic Education (UBE) is conceived to embrace formal education up to age 14 or 15, as well as adult, Normadic and non-formal education including education of the marginalized groups within the Nigerian society.

In a clear form, Universal Basic Education (UBE) is a reformed programme in Nigeria's basic education delivery (from primary one, all through to junior secondary school class 3) and is to reinforce the implementation of the National Policy on Education (NPE) in order to provide greater access and ensure quality throughout the Federation as it is free and compulsory (Adomeh, Arhedo & Omoike; 2007). UBE is a scheme and process of fulfilling the aim of Education For All (EFA) as endorsed at the World conference on education held in Jomtien in 1990. According to the world conference on education, basic education is made free and available to all and sundry, thus emphasizing free access, equity, efficiency, literacy, numeracy and lifelong skills for all.

Universal Basic Education: Matters Arising

The Universal Basic Education as introduced by the Federal Government of Nigeria has been described as a laudable development by scholars and policy evaluators, but it appears that it is leaving many issues unresolved which are likely to bedevil the programme just as the UPE scheme was. The name 'Universal Basic Education' ordinarily would have suggested that every Nigerian child, without exception would have access to basic education without hindrance (Aluede, 2006). Now that a ceiling has been placed on the enrolment figures for each state of the federation, it is obvious that limitations have been introduced. The question is, through this measure, is it possible to realize the national aspirations of building a land of bright and full opportunities for all citizens? Perhaps, at this juncture, it will be necessary to address the question that has been asked by Enemu, (2000).

(a) While placing a ceiling on the number of pupils to be registered in the states, would the programme still be qualified as 'universal' or "Education For All"? The answer to this question is obvious that the policy of criteria for enrollment had defied its name that was implied.

(b) Does the placement of ceiling on enrolment figures not portray the UBE scheme as yet another device for strengthening and perpetuating the principles of 'quota system in admission? This is not only impeding the implementation of UBE scheme but also against national integration as well as unity in diversity.

(c) Does the fact that one comes from the so called educationally advantaged state render one also educationally advantaged and vice versa? This policy of quota system enrollment is a clear loss of essence. With these policies, UBE has really become an instrument to unjustly deny promising Nigerian children in some areas access to or right to education

(d) Will the UBE scheme not attract similar counter balancing schemes by states whose sensibilities have been injured by the measure of deprivation as it happened when the Quota Admission Policy Scheme was introduced in higher institutions of learning in Nigeria?

(e) Will such states not run a counter primary education scheme or even subsidize private schools that will render UBE meaningless?

A critical analysis of these off targets of this scheme is a signal that the programme policy itself was an *obiter dictum* during its conception to meet the demand of the international organization. Hence, the policies of the UBE programme can be said to be statements without fact, theoretical propaganda if its current trend is not reverse.

Envisaged Problems of the implementation of UBE Programme

Just one year to the target year in the achievement of UBE goals which is in line with MDGs, there are indications that the recent prophesy of Amaka, and Laju (2014) that it may take more than 70 years before all children will have access to primary education in Nigeria, may come true . Factors that may lead to this failure of

the UBE programme in Nigeria are examined within the framework of the conceptual model of implementation propounded by Horn and Meter (1975):

Policy Standards and Objectives

Nigerian government at all levels is characterized by fanciful policy formulation but with ineptitude in setting into motion the necessary machinery for its implementation. To Ejere (2011), a general policy problem in Nigeria is that of inadequate and poor data which poses planning difficulties and invariably implementation challenges of projects and programmes. The source reiterated with respect to the UBE programme that unreliable data makes it difficult to make adequate projections in terms of expected enrolment, required teachers, infrastructural needs and equipment. These without reasonable doubt are needed for evidence based planning and budgeting for basic education. An action plan, which is one of the conditions that the UBEC requires each state government to fulfill prior to accessing available UBE intervention funds (UBE-IF), is most at times neglected by state governments. Failure of many states to meet up with the condition of coming up with an action plan as when due impede the effective implementation of the UBE programme.

Policy Resources

Inadequacy of policy resources tends to undermine the successful implementation of the UBE programme. Many researchers such as Opoh (2011) and Mezieobi, Fubara and Mezieobi (2013) revealed that overcrowding and shortage of classrooms (a situation where students learn under trees shade), poor sanitation facilities and teaching equipment are militating against effective teaching and learning in the schools. According to Isangedighi (2007), the teacher is a significant factor in the quality and standard of education at all levels. But the basic education level in Nigeria according to Ejere, (2011) is plagued by acute shortage of professionally qualified teachers. Sadly, Oloruntoyin (2011) stressed that many of the buildings were erected in the late 1950s and early 1960s with mud blocks. Today they are not only a health hazard but also potential death traps. In fact, in many areas, classes are being held in the open during the dry season and when the raining season sets in children are crowded into the few available ramshackle buildings.

Inter-governmental Communications and Enforcement

Base on the Universal Basic Education Commission Standard Action Plan, various government agencies at the three levels of governance in Nigeria –federal, state and local government are involved in the implementation of the UBE programme. However, it has been observed that many agencies / parastatals involved in the UBE implementation have brought fragmentation and conflict of roles / responsibilities (Ejere, 2011).

Though the federal government takes the lead in setting policy and financing basic education through transfers to states, financial responsibility for basic education is split largely between the states and local governments. Local Governments, for instance, are charged with paying the salaries and allowances of primary school teachers. Despite the shared responsibility for UBE financing by the three tiers of government, funding has remained an issue.

Another case in point is the lukewarm attitude of many state governments to the Federal Teachers Scheme (FTS) that is meant to assist them with needed manpower. Despite the importance of the FTS to quality UBE delivery, numerous teachers under the scheme have suffered untold hardship in their states of deployment particularly with regard to accommodation which the states are to provide. To make matter worst, in some states (Cross River inclusive) when UBE teachers finish their mandatory 2 years service, do not absorb them into their teaching service automatically as envisaged.

The Characteristics of Implementing Agencies

Policy formulation and implementation in Nigeria are often plagued by a number of factors. Very often, laudable policies formulated by government go into thin air at the implementation stage. The effectiveness of policy implementation is largely determined by the efficiency and competence of governmental implementing agencies. Because corruption is of serious concern in the Nigerian society, the issues of proper utilization of funds and accountability are critical. It is obvious that not all funds allocated for the UBE programme are used for the intended purposes due to high level of corruption in key implementing agencies and wasteful spending. Today, most primary and junior secondary schools in many parts of Nigeria are not being effectively monitored and supervised by the appropriate agencies in order to maintain uniform national minimum standards.

Therefore, Nigeria cannot be said to possess the required executive capacity to effectively implement the UBE programme on a national scale, as there is lack of high quality personnel in the implementing agencies especially at the state and local government levels. In evaluating the UBE, Santcross., Hinchliffe., Williams., and Onibon (2009) report that the Nigerian education sector suffers from weak capacity at the institutional, organizational and individual levels.

The Economic, Social and Political Conditions

Owing to the nature of primary education and the school system in general, government gives less concern to issues of funding, provision of infrastructure and supply of qualified and experienced teachers. Given the obvious importance of teachers, problems in supporting newly qualified teachers and a lack of career development opportunities in school settings often combine to make teachers' effectiveness difficult. Policy environment is a critical factor in policy implementation. Dwindling economic fortunes worsen the problem of underfunding of the programme.

Hidden cost of education is also negatively affecting the achievement of the UBE objectives. These are associated costs of sending children to school such as uniforms, textbooks, note books, pencils, biros and even Parent Teachers Association (PTA) levies. Despite declarations that the UBE is meant to be free and compulsory, many children are not in school because of hidden costs.

The Disposition of Policy Implementers

The outcome of nonchalant attitude on the part of Nigerian policy implementers is gross poor implementation and low performance. The attitude or behaviour of policy implementers tend to affect its performance. Many implementers seem to lack commitment to the achievement of the goals of the UBE programme.

Teachers are expected to play pivotal role in the implementation of the UBE programme, yet sufficient attention is not being paid to their motivation to the utter neglect of policy essence. Several studies (Ajayi, 2007 & Omokhodion, 2008) have shown that teachers in Nigeria are poorly motivated. In fact, teachers had in recent times embarked on chain of industrial actions before government accepted 27.5% pay raise for professional teachers across the states. Even now, this pay rise is yet to be fully implemented in some states.

Needed paradigm shift for Effective Implementation of the UBE Programme

For a public policy or programme to solve the social problem for which purpose it was designed, successful implementation is imperative. The following strategies could be adopted to ensure the successful implementation of the UBE programme.

a. Human Resources

According to Isangedighi (2007), the teacher is a decisive element of any instructional setting that decides the mood of the class. His qualification and experience determine his productivity. In most cases Nigerian basic school teachers who are overloaded with the task of teaching the students are not even qualified to teach, (Opoh, Unimna & Ogbaji 2014). To overcome this problem of acute shortage of qualified and trained teachers to cope with expected increase in students' number, there is need for the training of teachers in the right quantity and quality. They should also be made to benefit from training and capacity building for the acquisition of pedagogical skills.

b. Financial Resources

A major challenge facing the UBE and implementation of the curriculum at this level is funding in the mist of rising demands and cost of education. To address this worsening problem, governments at the local, state and national levels must shoulder higher responsibility for boosting basic education by allocating more funds to the sector. Adedeji, Okemakinde, and SSempebwa, (2008) affirm that finance is one of the problem confronting the education sector owing to a drastic reduction in both the actual and proportion of government fund allocated to the education sector, despite the UNESCO's recommendations of allocation of 26% of a nation's national income to the sector. Contrary to this recommendation, Nigeria in the past five years allotted just 6.4%, 7.5%, 8.4% , 8.7% and 10.69% of her annual budgets to education in 2010, 2011, 2012 , 2013 and 2014 in that order. Ladan (2012) reported that the low level of fiscal allocation to the sector which is below the UNESCO's threshold of 26% of the total budget certainly affects the implementation of government policy on education in the country and in particular the Universal Basic Education since its inception.

c. Infrastructure

To enhance the learning environment, massive investment in school infrastructure improvements is needed. There is need for a complete overhaul of primary education infrastructural facilities, monitoring of its leadership, teachers and use of resources for education by multi-stakeholder's forum. Every primary and junior secondary school according to Ejere (2011) should be provided with adequate infrastructure and other physical facilities like classrooms, laboratories, libraries, computer centres, potable water, electricity, toilets and furniture.

d. Quality Assurance

Nigeria is a country with a culture of anything goes, characterized by utter neglect and abandonment of projects without a call to order. Quality control through effective monitoring and proper evaluation should be conducted on a regular basis at the various stages of the UBE programme. More attention should be paid to school inspection, monitoring and evaluation as a quality control strategy to check the quality of the delivery of the UBE programme (Ejere, 2011).

e. Social Mobilization and Enforcement

The success of UBE plan depends on the commitment and support from stakeholders such as parents, community members, teachers, church and donor agencies, and all levels of government. There is need to ensure sustained community participation and ownership of basic education. As such, public enlightenment and social mobilization should be a continuous process in UBE implementation so as to engineer full participation by all sections of the Nigerian society particularly at the community level.

Summary and Recommendations

The Nigeria educational system has been engulfed in the quagmire of policy failure signaled by confused catastrophic changes in the educational policies. This has made Nigeria educational policies like the judge's obiter dictum where policies are just made to satisfy the international community's demand at the moment of conception. Issues such as quota admission system, placement of ceiling on the number of pupils to be registered are gross abuse of peoples' right and contradict the "education for all (EFA)" policy. Hence, recommendations are made thus;

1. If the power, rail, oil and agricultural sectors deserve special attention by government, the education sector deserves the more funding from government. They should be a nationwide UBE awareness and enrollment campaign similar to that of the national immunization programme, general election dates, national census and even the awareness created for the ongoing national conference.
2. Since all the three tiers of government have concurrent responsibilities for education provision in the country, financial resources for executing the UBE programme should be adequately provided for in their annual budgetary allocations. Government at all levels should improve the funding of education by legislating the adoption of minimum allocation of at least 30% to education, and approved funds should be released to implementing agencies as at when due without delays.
3. In order to access the UBE intervention fund made available yearly, states should endeavour to promptly fulfill their counterpart obligations. States indicted over failure to forward their counterpart funds should be severely sanctioned to act as deterrent to other states.
4. Anti-corruption agencies such as the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC) and Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) should monitor closely the disbursement and utilization of UBE funds at all levels of governance.

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