

Access, Quality and Equity in Nigerian Education System: Emergent Issues and Agenda For Action

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Introduction

Education is the pillar of developments in the world over; as such, nations and individuals have all agreed that the way out of various problems in life is through education. Thus, the educational standards set up by every nation must be challenging to meet the needs of the students and the society. Education enables individuals to fix themselves up in the society into which they find themselves. It equips individuals with the ability to explore the world and manipulate it for their survival. Potentials deposited in individuals are exposed through education so that they can acquire training and knowledge in a profession and earn a living in addition to cultivating good habits and developing the right attitude to work and life as good citizens. This is why in developing countries such as Nigeria, education is recognised as an instrument “par excellence” for effecting national economic development and access to educational opportunities is a right of every citizen in Nigeria, as enshrined in her constitution.

The education system in Nigeria is based on National Policy on Education (2013) which was first published in 1977 and revised occasionally in 1998, 2004, and 2007 to accommodate or include some important policy changes based on the realities of life. The policy document addresses the issues of imbalance in the provision of education in different parts of the country with regard to access, quality of resources and girls’ education.

Education is organized into 6 years of primary education, 3 years of junior secondary school, 3 years of senior secondary

education and 4 years of university, polytechnic or college education. The Federal Ministry of Education has the responsibility for the coherence of national policy and procedures and for ensuring that the states' policies operate within the parameters of national policy as adapted for local needs. Co-ordination of policy at the political level takes place through the National Council of Education. This is the highest policy making body, chaired by the Federal Minister of Education and includes all the State Commissioners of Education. This body is advised by the Joint Consultative Committee on Education, which consists of all the Federal and State Directors of Education, Chief Executives of education statutory bodies, and Directors of University Institutes of Education while the Director of the Federal Ministry of Education chairs the Committee.

There are Commissions established for different sub-sectors of the education system and are charged with various responsibilities for the sub-sectors (FRN, 2004). There is a National Primary Education Commission (NPEC), the National Secondary Education Commission (NSEC), the National Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-Formal Education Commission (NMEC) and the National Universities Commission (NUC). In addition there are other major role players at local government level, district level and in the immediate environment where the school is located. The system grew rapidly in the late seventies and early eighties. The growth was mainly in size and not in quality (Humphrey & Crawford, 2015). There have been problems in the implementation of policies for the expansion of the education system that have contributed to their failure to assist in the social and economic development of the country. Lack of capacity for planning and management, limited financial resources, inadequate information systems and monitoring systems are some of the problems that led to rapid and unplanned growth (Robert-Okah & Osiobe, 2014). More attention had been paid to the expansion of the system due to political pressures than from a concern about the provision of greater access to quality education.

Other problems are a result of a complex combination of need for greater access to education on the part of the society and political pressure on politicians to satisfy their constituencies, in return for continued political support. As a result, political decisions were taken in a number of areas including staff and administration appointments, as well as revision of admission policies. For example, merit as an admission criterion has been lowered to 12 percent of the new intakes into the Federal secondary schools and 40 percent for the Federal higher education institutions (Agile, 2018). Emphasis has been put on other criteria, such as set quotas for numbers of students admitted from the States into Federal institutions, quotas for students from the defined feeder zones and some discretion by administrators. Admission malpractice includes bribery, corruption, and nepotism in favor of less qualified candidates.

This has led to growing mediocrity as politics began to play more of a role than concerns about high quality academic standards. Examinations that determine access to the next level of education are fraught with cheating which has become embedded in many parts of the system. The introduction of special tribunals for speedy trials and stiff penalties has not stopped a practice that is deeply engraved in the system. Consequent upon this background, this paper sought to discuss emergent issues with regards to access, quality and equity of the educational system in Nigeria.

Access in Nigerian Education System

Equal educational opportunity is concerned with expanding access for every individuals in any society. It suggests the removal of any form of inequality which is considered undesirable or improper within the society which hinders access to qualitative education. Equality of educational opportunities means that individuals have equal access to education which is one of the goals of the philosophy of Egalitarianism. Gbenu (2012) suggest that the idea of equality with regards to education means equal rights to all regardless of any circumstances by way of birth, race, sex, tribe or challenges (disability). Therefore,

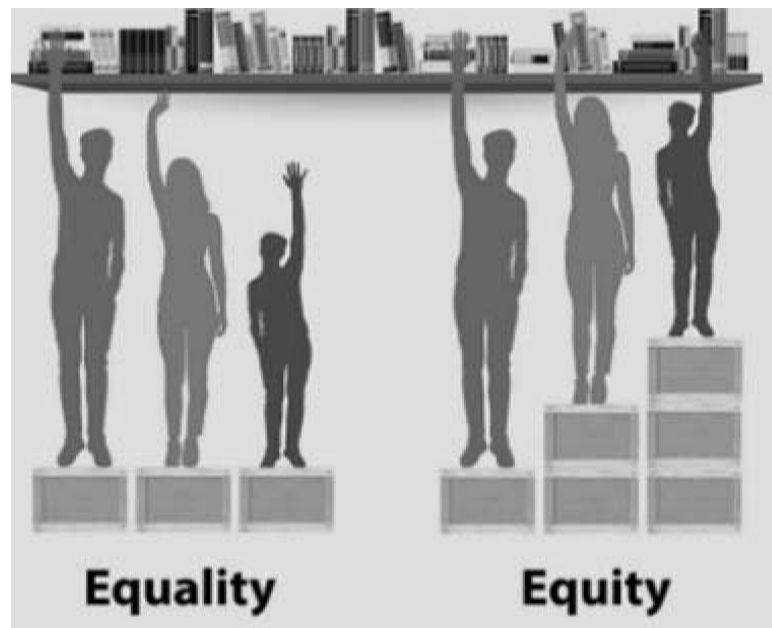
giving to the Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN, 2013), the Nigeria's philosophy of education is based on "equal educational opportunities for all citizens of the nation at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels, both inside and outside the formal school system. This translates that in order to attain a free, just and egalitarian society, Nigeria requires an atmosphere that is conducive enough to accommodate equal educational opportunities for all citizens at all levels. In essence, the principle of equality in education has the following features: (1) Education should be free, universal and compulsory to some extent; (2) No one should be left out for one reason or the other from opportunities of education and of fund in public education; (3) Equal social benefits – benefits of access to higher education, finance, influence, position, amenities and other social needs; (4) Equal educational benefits – learning outcomes, knowledge, and skills-knowledge and skill achievable in private schools should also be available in public schools; (5) Equal educational treatment – procedure and practices should be equal in all educational institutions, be it private or public and at all levels; (6) Equal distribution of resources and facilities – particularly teaching and learning facilities such as chairs, desks, classrooms, machines, tools, workshops, laboratories, equipment libraries, books, etc. (7) Equal opportunity to a large number of people for earnings through education – job opportunity for a large number of educated people.

The notion of equal educational opportunity is that the delivery of education to individuals ought to be completely based on capability. Thus, it entails the elimination of all non-natural barriers to education whether parental affluence, race, geographical location, religious belief or social status. Thus, in employment process, or admission to schools should not be centred on race, religion, ethnic, social or economic affluence but only on ability and capability. Access to education is the opportunity that every Nigeria child ought to receive freely from their parents or guardians that owe them the responsibility to enroll and facilitate the entry and encourage, sustain the enrolment of the learner in appropriate education programme. Thus, logical notion underlying the FRN (2013) is that every

Nigerian child will have a full access to quality education with academic or technical aptitude of individuals as the limiting factor. The consequence of this is that every Nigerian child would be given the opportunity to receive the best education that would make them self-sufficient and self-supportive to the limit of their ability regardless of the economic, political and religious prominence of the parents. Famade and Oyekan (2015) defines access as making it possible for everyone who is entitled to education to receive it. UNESCO (2003) also defines access to education as ensuring equitable access to educational institutions which is based on merit, capacity, efforts and perseverance. Access to education is making sure that all the sections of the society get fair share of any kind of educational opportunities that is qualitative and available to the society.

Quality and Equity of Nigerian Education

Quality refers to fitness to purpose in relation to the user and customer needs. It can also be seen as the conformity of a product to standards, specifications or requirements. According to Uzoka and Igwe (2015), quality may be defined as the sum of composite of the properties inherent in a material or product. Quality education on its own can be seen as relative term because what constitute qualitative education varies between countries based on their economic resources, value system, educational goals and philosophies among others. Although inequality of educational opportunities may exists in many parts of the world especially in developing countries such as Nigeria, Nwogu (2015) posits that equity suggests equal treatment and equal advantages to individuals in the society. Quality education improves the quality of the work force by raising the levels of its skills and efficiency. Equity in education, as illustrated in Figure 1 means to accommodate individuals from different background to have access to quality knowledge, skills and attitude that is relevant to the objective of their educational system. While equality means giving equal treatment to all students, equity means going further to give intervention to those who need it at the right time, place and using the right way (IRIS, 2018).

Figure 1: Equality Versus Equity in Education

Source: IRIS (2018).

Equity and equality in educational system are very important factors affecting the education outcome. By and large the general outcome of quality education is a progressive increase in productivity and efficiency. Quality education enables people to express their full potentials and capacities. Aja *et al.* (2014) posits that learning environment (process) and students' outcomes (graduates) are under the umbrella of equity and quality of education. The graduates in this case should be able to prove their worth by their level of performance in the competitive labour market among other challenges that will confront them in the society. Therefore it can be affirmed that comparability and international competitiveness of qualifications are a central feature of quality education. The indices for measuring quality education may be categorized

into measures of the productivity of the educational system and inputs indices.

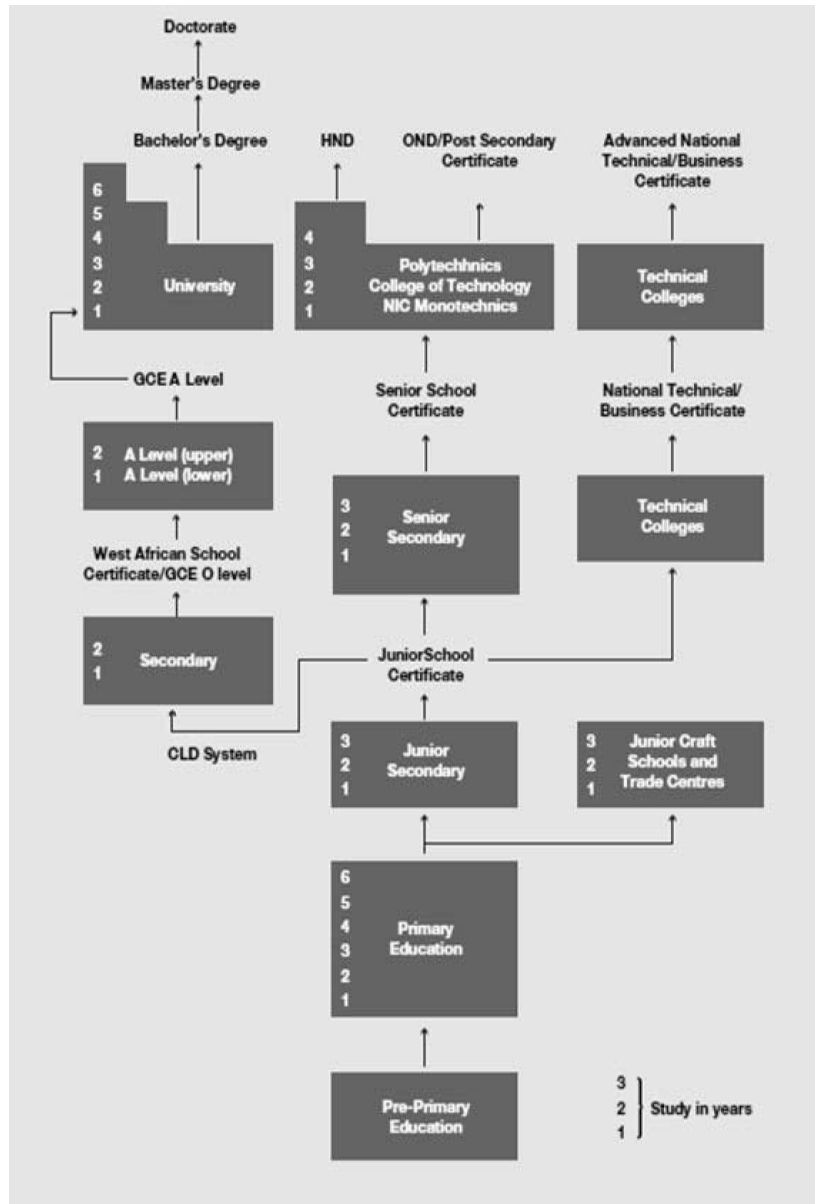
An education system uses inputs in terms of human and nonhuman to produce desired output after going through a process. If the inputs into education are conceivably measured and related to outputs by using various procedures, the result of such comparison is regarded as the productivity of the educational system. Thus, productivity is a ratio of inputs to outputs both in terms of quality and quantity. Some of the variables under factors-inputs indices are quantifiable while some are not. Those that are unquantifiable include school climate and the general tone of the school, discipline, moral and spiritual training. Quantifiable ones include: (a) quantity and quality of inputs to education, (b) relevant curriculum, (c) appropriate teaching methods and the quality of teaching aids, (d) adequate and suitable infrastructural facilities, (e) students-teacher ratios, and (f) students-classroom ratios, among others (Gbenu, 2012).

Measuring quality involves measuring outputs from the education system and secondly examining the educational processes which produce these outputs. These two approaches can be used separately or together. From the input side according to Robert-Okah and Osiobe (2014), quality of education can be gauged through students' capacity and motivation to learn and the curriculum or the subjects to be learned. Other ways of inferring quality from the input side are teachers who know how to teach and can actually teach, time for learning and the requisite tools for teaching and learning. The output indicators for measuring quality of education would be qualifications and the levels of competence in performance of the outputs (students) using the body of knowledge and skills acquired. In addition, the effective performance of the outputs in the job competitive market, their impact on moral conduct and serviceability in the society are also indicators for measuring the quality of education. The feedback from the job market and society generally is important to the education system for evaluation of both the educational processes and outputs.

Emergent issues in Nigerian Education System

The National Policy on Education made recommendations for a system of education that segmented the system into 6 years of primary education. The six years of primary education are part of the 6-3-3-4 system described earlier. The system was designed to allow an exit point after nine years of schooling to continue careers through apprenticeships or other vocational training programs. The objectives for primary education put emphasis on a balance between physical and intellectual development. The objectives are stated as follows: (1) To widen access to basic education; (2) To eliminate present inequalities in enrollment and between urban and rural; (3) To ensure greater retention; (4) To ensure long-term permanent literacy for those children who had completed the program. Figure 2 illustrates the summary of Nigerian educational system.

Figure 2: Nigerian Educational System



Source: Federal Ministry of Education (2018).

Primary Education

The rate of dropout at this level of education is very alarming. For instance, the United Nation Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2016) report revealed that about 15 million children under the age of 14 are still out of school across Nigeria. Primary school completion rates are generally very low. The recorded average completion rates are 62% for girls and 59% for boys. The average completion rate at the end of primary education as a percentage of enrollments in grade 1 are on average reported to be 55%, with a transition rate of 50.3% to secondary school. More so, it is estimated that about 80% of the primary schools in Nigeria are located in the rural areas (Humphrey & Crwford, 2015).

The infrastructure and facilities remain inadequate for coping with a system that is growing at a rapid pace. The school environment is therefore generally not conducive to learning due to the physical condition of most schools and lack of teaching and learning resources. The annual population growth rate, estimated at 3.3 percent (NBS, 2018), contributes to the problem of the large numbers of children that are out of schools. The financial crisis left existing facilities inadequately maintained and has retarded progress in building new facilities. The National Policy on Education prescribes that the teacher-pupil ratio should be 1:40. The classrooms are overcrowded and in some instances schools have operated with teacher-pupil ratios of 1:76. The national teacher-pupil ratio reported in 2018 was 1:41 (FRN, 2018). A program for classroom building, to support the implementation of a scheme for universal primary education was either never developed or if it was, it was not successfully implemented. The estimated enrollment figures for the 2017/2018 school year were estimated to be 16,191 thousands school children, with an annual growth rate of 2.0 percent which of course affects the quality of education at advanced stages such as secondary schools.

Secondary Education

Education at this level is supposed to be offered free of tuition although students are expected to pay levies as a

contribution to the costs of running the schools. Secondary education is divided into three years of junior secondary and three years of senior secondary school. The education that is offered at this level has two purposes. The one purpose is to prepare pupils to exit school with the necessary skills to find employment, and the other is to prepare them to continue with academic careers in higher education. The Federal Government funds Federal Government Colleges (FGCs) and the rest are funded by the State governments. The administration, management and funding of the schools are shared between the State Ministries of Education, the National Secondary Education Commission and other agencies as prescribed in the legislation. The students are channeled through placements into specific programs after the completion of junior secondary education (FRN, 2013).

The options are senior secondary schools, technical colleges, vocational training centers, or apprenticeship schemes. Placement into different streams is determined by the results obtained from the continuous assessment processes and tests that are supposed to determine academic ability, aptitude and vocational interest. In addition to individual results, a formula aiming at achieving 60% for senior secondary schools, 20% for technical colleges, 10% for vocational training centers, and 10% for apprenticeship schemes is used. The approach adopted for the curriculum has been an integrated curriculum as opposed to emphasis on single subjects. The Comparative Study and Adaptation Center in 1984 and the Federal Ministry of Education in 1985 provided guidelines for this integrated approach. Implementation of the curriculum, however, indicates that the teachers as implementers never understood the underlying approach. Teachers continued to teach the way they themselves were taught (Okoroma, 2005). The failure in implementation was due lack of support through rigorous re-training of teachers and continued support at various quotas in Nigeria.

A quota system for admission into the federally controlled secondary schools, based on merit, feeder zone and discretion, was introduced due to shortages of space in the schools. The

estimated enrollments in 1994 for secondary schools were reported to be 4.4 million, with an expected annual growth rate of 10.4 %. Inadequate planning and funding as well as the inadequacies of the monitoring processes for the implementation of national policy on education contributed to a lack of classroom space in the sub-sector. The national average for teacher-pupil ratio at secondary level was estimated at 1:29 in 2015. It can be safely assumed that the range in the figures would be substantial between rural and urban areas resembling the patterns at the primary school level, with higher ratios in rural areas. There were no data available on the retention rates in junior secondary education. The transition rate from junior to senior secondary schools was estimated at 96%. That from senior secondary to higher education was estimated to be about 66% for the 2017/2018 academic year.

Emerging issues with regards to quality and access to this level of education includes shortages of teaching and learning resources needed for meaningful education to take place. For example, schools did not have workshops for the practical subjects and those that had them were not adequately equipped and thus not functional (Humphrey & Crawford, 2015). In the sample used for Oyo State, over 50% of the schools had not even installed equipment provided by the government in 1987 due to lack of expertise, inadequate basic facilities such as space, and lack of amenities such as electricity. There were disparities similar to those experienced in other areas of education with regard to urban and rural schools, between boys and girls, and in the transition from junior secondary school to senior secondary schools, that favored boys. Other issues include poor quality of tests and other instruments used as well as differences in scoring and grading of various assessment instruments which are similar to problems associated with vocational schools.

Vocational Schools

The National Board for Technical Education (1994) adopted an integrated approach to vocational and technical education. The underlying philosophy was based on the belief that a broad

introduction to vocational and technical education was better than the compartmentalized single subject approach. But teachers never understood the integrated approach to teaching pre-vocational subjects and there was no support mechanism to assist them in the implementation of the transition from single subject approach to the composite teaching approach. Overall the implementation of the terminal objective has not been successful. Some of the hindrances to success have been due to: lack of support by the schools, policies that required the implementation of a quota system, and the feeling of some teachers that the system was not based on systematic logic. The quota requires that 10% of the students be channeled into vocational and technical education. Public perceptions on the status of blue-collar jobs also created problems. Parents and students were not keen on blue-collar careers in a society in which social advancement depended much more on academic careers which hinders both the quality and access to vocational schools in Nigeria. Lastly, state governments facing a shortage of resources were not keen on running expensive technical education programs. As a result, more students were encouraged to opt for less expensive academic programs.

Tertiary Education

The Nigerian higher education system is comprised of universities, polytechnics and colleges of education offering programs in areas such as science and technology, humanities, teacher education and agriculture. It is the largest and most complex form of education system on the continent. There are many public universities and approval has continuously been sought for the opening of public and private universities. The other higher education institutions are estimated to be over 139 in number. The Federal Ministry of Education has responsibility for 25 universities, 13 Polytechnics and 19 Colleges of Education. The remaining higher education institutions are primarily controlled and funded by the State Governments, although private higher education is now getting started. Issues here are mainly those affecting the university system. It is assumed that the trends observed in the Federal

universities are similar to those that are found in State universities and other components of the higher education system. The university sub-sector in itself is diverse and complex due to its organization into institutions funded by the Federal government and institutions that are funded by the State governments.

The system has expanded rapidly in terms of the numbers of institutions established, new programs, and the numbers of students admitted at higher education institutions. For example, in the period between 1962/63 to 1992/93 the number of institutions increased from 4 to 31. By 1992/93 the enrollment figures were 58 times greater than in 1962/63, i.e. the enrollment figures increased from 3,646 to 216,200 and the graduate output grew from 425 to 46,975 in the same period (Agile, 2018). Demand for greater access to higher education continues unabated due to its social benefit, especially in a society in which social mobility depends largely on the level of education acquired. Nigerian higher education institutions operate at a higher capacity than they were originally established for, yet the demand for access continues to rise. High unemployment rates of graduates, particularly in their specific fields of training, remains a problem, but this has not served as a deterrent to those seeking access into institutions of higher learning. The need for higher education is partly based on the fact that those with higher education qualifications have a better chance of securing a job in a tough market compared to those without higher education qualifications. Such surpluses make the system wasteful because training is obviously not matched to the needs of the economy (Nwogu, 2015). More so, the higher education system has been criticized for being inefficient and ineffective, making it irrelevant to the needs of a new democracy. For the most part, major issues in higher education are similar to those in most countries around the world.

There are also issues that are unique to the Nigerian context like cultist practices that impact negatively on the activities of higher education institutions. Problems such as access, quality, funding, efficient and effective management, and governance

have been mentioned in the literature as some of the major issues facing the Nigerian higher education system.

Concern has been raised about the decline in the quality of the Nigerian higher education system. Earlier literature indicates that the quality of education in some Nigerian institutions in the 1970s was comparable to high quality education offered by top world universities. The quality of education offered by higher education institutions at the present time has deteriorated substantially. The poor quality of many Nigerian university graduates has accelerated. As a result, there is high unemployment amongst graduates especially in fields such as engineering. There is also concern about the lack of recognition of Nigerian degrees by overseas universities. The quality of higher education programs at both undergraduate and post-graduate levels at Federal institutions is the responsibility of the Nigerian University Commission through its accreditation activities. There is need to rethink the accreditation processes in order to promote and restore quality in the system of higher education. It is often assumed that the accreditation process promotes quality too. This has obviously not been the case in the Nigerian system of higher education. There is need to focus on quality promotion activities such as the provision of adequate resources linked to institutional plans, rationalization of academic programs in institutions, and in the regions, through cooperation activities, and staff development programs.

Agenda for Action

1. **Infrastructural Development:** A shortage of space currently exists in all the sub-sectors of the educational system. The expansion of the education system, mainly through the introduction of universal primary education, has put pressure on education facilities that did not expand at the same rate as the school population. The need for provision of adequate education facilities at all levels of education is urgent.
2. **Human Resource and Capacity Development:** The development of human resource capacity for the delivery

of an effective education is critical. There are human resource needs for administration, management, research and teaching as well as for support and technical staff. Lack of well-trained human resources is a problem in almost every area of education. There is an urgent need for capacity building in the various Commissions charged with responsibility for governing and managing different aspects of education. Planning, supervision and monitoring mechanisms for the entire education system have been very weak.

3. **Access and Equity in the System:** Access in education remains an issue at all levels of education. The demand for access has not been fully met in a society where social mobility depends more on academic achievement than anything else. The issue of access has been manipulated by various regimes as a source of political power and in seeking political support. The entire system reflects privilege and differentiation, with merit and quality usually the victims. Gender disparities in enrollment numbers are quite evident in the system as a whole and particularly noticeable in completion and in retention rates. Although government has made efforts to address some of these issues, a lot more work needs to be done to make the programs effective.
4. **Quality:** The decline in quality of education in Nigeria has been a major concern due to the rapid expansion in student numbers without comparable expansion in resources, staff and facilities. Poor quality at all levels of education is compounded by a lack of instructional materials for effective teaching and learning. There is a shortage of textbooks in the schools due to the high cost of books. The problem is more serious at higher education levels.
5. **Funding Mechanisms:** Government funding of education has been inadequate. The revenue collected through fees constitutes an insignificant proportion of the revenue of the institutions. Inadequate funding of education has been one of the most significant causes of the low access and quality of much of the education offered at all levels. A sustainable financing arrangement must be developed if

Nigeria is to regain the ground it has already lost and become a serious player in the new global economic, social and political order. Financial efficiency is critical and could be attained through the improvement of administrative and management practices, rationalization, much better and more realistic planning.

6. **Curriculum Relevance:** Issues about the relevance of the curriculum for the needs of Nigerian society have been indirectly referred to in the context of the failure to teach science, technology, and business studies effectively. The country needs to pay much greater attention to the development of high-level skills through post-graduate training for the production of new knowledge to meet the needs of Nigerians in their daily lives and for national survival in the global economy.
7. **Examination Malpractice:** Intense competition for access to the system has led to widespread cheating in examinations for the purpose of obtaining higher scores to improve the chances of gaining admission to the next level of education. Cheating takes place in all areas for which examinations are required. Legislation has been passed to discourage this behavior, but enforcement has not been effective in addressing this problem. Another factor contributing to examination malpractice is the early channeling of students into specific areas of study based on examination scores.

Conclusion

Major educational transformations are required in the Nigerian education system. The tasks ahead are many and overwhelming. It is quite clear that it will be impossible for these emerging issues to be tackled by the Government of Nigeria alone or with the help of a few international partners. The involvement of major Nigerian stakeholders, complemented by multiple partnerships with international agencies, NGOs, foundations, will be essential if the goals and potential of Nigeria are to be realized. The experience already gained through the implementation of various projects by the

World Bank in the sector, particularly with the involvement of local stakeholders, has demonstrated the value of ensuring community ownership of projects. Lessons learnt from past experiences should inform future plans in the reform and development of education in Nigeria.

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