

Historical Development of Universal Basic Education in Nigeria: Challenges and Prospects (1999-Present)

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Abstract. This paper is interested in the examination of historical development of Universal Basic Education in Nigeria: Challenges and Prospects (1999 – present). This is because universal basic education is a necessity for the socio-economic and political development of individuals and the nation. The effective provision of the education would influence effective realisation of the objectives of the provision; whereas inadequate provision would not. Thus this study examined in historical perspective, the provision of the universal basic education in Nigeria since 1999, the challenges in the provision, and the prospects of actualising its objectives. The research method used in the study is historical research method because the study is historical in nature. Thus it makes use of primary and secondary sources of data. The data were subjected to periodic and thematic analyses in the fashion of historical research. It was found that the Universal Basic Education helped in the mass enlightenment of many children and in providing pre-vocational skills for the beneficiaries. It was also found that the government could not make adequate fund available for the free education which resulted in inadequate availability of human and material resources, and in inadequate quality education. It was therefore recommended that the government should make more dedicated efforts in financing the universal basic education (because of its

benefits of mass enlightenment and socio-economic and political development). Further it was recommended that the Universal education be extended to the end of senior secondary school education for better realisation of the aforementioned benefits.

Key words: Universal Basic Education, Nigeria, challenges, prospects, Historical Research.

1. Introduction

Education is universally acknowledged as a potent tool for socio-economic and political development of individuals and nations. It is an investment in human resources which results in transforming the lives of individuals and societies. Education is such an indispensable tool to man and the society for sustainable development that a responsible government should make it an inalienable right of every citizen.

Nigerian government has made a number of commendable attempts towards revitalizing the nation's educational system, following the attainment of political independence in 1960. A remarkable attempt in this regard was the National Curriculum Conference which was attended by a cross-section of eminent Nigerians in 1969. The conference witnessed expressions of general dissatisfaction of participants with the

then existing system of education. It was criticized as being too theoretical and irrelevant to Nigeria's national and local peculiarities. A seminar of experts followed in 1973 where it was agreed upon that an independent and sovereign Nigeria needed a policy to guide its educational system. The outcome of the 1973 seminar was a draft document which eventually became Nigeria's National Policy on Education, 1977 (revised, 1981, 1998, 2004 and 2013).

Ojo (2006:102) observed that there had been various attempts at universalizing education in various parts of the country even before the Federal Government's Universal Primary Education (UPE) of 1976. Such attempts according to Ojo included the defunct Western region's free primary education of 1955, and the defunct Eastern region's free primary education of 1957. Moreover, the Unity Party of Nigeria's (UPN) free education at all levels of 1979 was a regional education policy aimed at giving adequate attention to the education of the people within the UPN controlled states of Nigeria (Ojo, 2006:103).

It is important to note that the Universal Primary Education (UPE) that was launched for all Nigerians by the Federal government of Nigeria in 1976 increased pupil enrolment phenomenally at the primary school level throughout the country. According to Tahir (2001:11) the UPE brought a phenomenal increase in enrolment from 6 million in 1976 to 12 million in 1980.

In spite of the laudable attempts made by Nigerian government to enable citizens acquire basic education, the problems of access, equity, quality, disparity, gender biases, inadequate facilities, insufficient funds and so forth confronted the education. However the Federal government felt that the free education should even be extended to the end of Junior Secondary Schooling (that is, it should not end at the end of primary school). This is because of the aforementioned advantages of mass enlightenment, and greater socio-economic and political abilities that the beneficiaries would be able to have. Moreover the beneficiaries would have more knowledge and skills for personal development and societal development. These

are good expectations. But was the federal government able to actualise these objectives in the process of the provision of free basic education, up to the end of Junior Secondary Schooling, since 1999? Did the free education encounter fundamental problems (challenges) that made the realization of the good objectives difficult? Could the challenges (problems) be addressed in ways that would make the initial aims of providing the free basic education eventually realizable? What can be done to help in addressing the challenges for the actualization of the good aims of universal basic education in Nigeria? (particularly in terms of mass enlightenment, and socio-economic and political development of the recipients and Nigeria as a whole).

These are the questions that this paper is interested in addressing such as to be able to arrive at the details of the issues and the prospects of actualization of the objectives of free basic education in Nigeria since 1999. The paper would approach the analysis of the issues using historical research method. This is because the study is historical in nature.

2. Research Method

This study is historical in nature for it examines historical development of Universal Basic education in Nigeria: challenges and prospects (1999 - present). It therefore employed historical research method. This implies the use of primary and secondary sources of data such as diaries, log book, interviews, policies, journals, and other related materials. The data are subjected to periodic and thematic analyses in the fashion of historical research. The analyses help in arriving at historical conclusions and sound recommendations.

3. Antecedents of the 1999 Universal Basic Education in Nigeria

The provision of basic education for national and individual development became a global phenomenon with the signing into law, the education charter of the United Nations Organisation in 1945. The United Nations General Assembly, according to Okorosaye-

Orubite (2008) proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 26, Part 1 of the Declaration states: everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally accessible to all on the basis of merit (p.1).

Membership of the United Nations became 100 in 1960 when Nigeria and many other African countries gained political independence and became member countries. Member countries were urged to include the provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in their constitutions for implementation in governance.

It is important to note that prior to Nigeria becoming a member of the United Nations in 1960, there were several regional and national attempts at universalizing basic education in Nigeria. Olubodun (2008:67) stated that the struggle for basic education started with the anti-colonial struggles in Nigeria, followed by the defunct Western Region's free education provision of 1955, and the free education provision of the defunct Eastern Region in 1957. By the early 1960s, there was free education in Northern Nigeria which was not in a large scale due to resistance to western education. There was the introduction of the Universal Primary Education Scheme of 1976 by the Federal Government of Nigeria. Also, a variety of Free Education schemes existed in Nigeria between 1979 and 1983. Moreover there was establishment of National Primary Education Commission by Decree 31 of 1988. The Commission was disbanded in 1991 (Olubodun, 2008:67).

The National Primary Education Commission was re-established through Decree No 96 of 1993 and charged with responsibilities similar to that of 1988.

At the international level there were various activities by various international bodies in support of provision of universal education for all by all nations. These international activities have impact on the Nigerian government such

that the government had to think seriously about providing free education for all in line with international pressure. Such activities include the following:

- Universal Basic Education and Human Rights (1948);
- the World Education Crisis Conference (1968);
- the Jomtien (1990) Conference on Education for All (EFA) for:
 - consolidating literacy, and numeracy;
 - acquisition of basic life and survival skills;
 - laying a solid foundation for life-long learning; and
 - due emphasis on access, equity, quality, relevance and efficiency.

Other follow-up conferences to Jomtien, emphasizing Education For All (EFA) include E- 9 countries- New Delhi (1991), Ouagadougou (1992), Minidaf VI/VII (1991,1998), the Salamanka Conference (1992), the OAU Declaration of Education in Africa (1997-2006), the Recife, Brazil (2000), and Dakar EFA Forum (April, 2000) on agenda for education in the 21st century (Ogundare, 2005:5; Olubodun, 2008:68).

All the aforementioned decisions to which Nigeria is a signatory are aimed at the provision of basic education for all. Hence, the Universal Basic Education (UBE) was launched on 30th September, 1999 by the Federal Government of Nigeria.

4. Objectives of the Universal Basic Education Scheme in Nigeria

This part of the paper examines briefly, the scope and objectives of the UBE scheme with a view to identifying the implementation, challenges or problems confronting the UBE, as well as the prospects of the UBE scheme for the beneficiaries. The objectives of the UBE scheme as stated by Obanya (2000:35-40) include the following:

- to develop in the entire citizenry, a consciousness for education and a strong commitment to its vigorous promotion;
- to provide a free universal basic education for every Nigerian child of school going age;
- to reduce drastically, the incidence of disinterest in formal school system through improved relevance and efficiency;
- to cater for the learning needs of young persons who for one reason or the other had interrupted their schooling through appropriate form of complementary approach to the provision and promotion of basic education;
- to ensure acquisition of the appropriate level of literacy, numeracy, communicative life skill and the ethical, moral and civic values for life-long learning;
- to provide programmes/initiative for early childhood care and socialization;
- to provide education programmes for the acquisition of literacy, numeracy life skills especially for adults (persons aged 15 years and above);
- to provide special programmes for nomadic population;
- to provide out of school, non-formal programmes for updating knowledge and skill of persons who left school before acquiring the basic needs for life-long learning;
- to provide non-formal skills and apprenticeship training for adolescents and youths who have not had the benefit of formal education;
- to start the formal school system from primary one to the end of the junior secondary school.

The UBE Scheme commenced in Nigeria in 1999, while the UBE Act was signed into law in 2004. The UBE Act drew its legislative authority from section 18 (3) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, which enjoined government to provide free and compulsory basic education (Olubodun, 2008:70; NEDS, 2010:20). It is important to note that the UBE has since 2004 been

domesticated in all states of the federation for effective ownership and delivery. Also, the National Integrated Early Childhood (NIEC) Policy was approved in 2006 to guide inter-sectoral intervention on children aged 0-5years. Since then, the State and Local Governments have assumed more visible roles in driving the UBE process and providing effective partnerships with the federal agencies charged with Basic Education delivery.

In the area of finance, the UBE Act provides for the utilization of 2% of the Consolidated Revenue Fund (CRF) for basic education delivery. 70% of the fund is reserved as a matching grant for the implementation of state level projects, while 5% of the 70% UBE Matching Grant is allocated for Early Childhood Education, 60% for primary education and 35% for junior secondary education. The funds are utilized as follows:

- 70% for infrastructural development;
- 15% for supply of instructional materials;
- 15% for care-giver/ teacher professional development.

The following are some of the major decisions taken to enhance effective implementation of the UBE scheme in Nigeria:

- Separation of Junior Secondary School (JSS) from the Senior Secondary School (SSS) as well as separation of Primary School from the Junior Secondary School where such arrangement exists. This is with a view to improving the effectiveness of implementation of the UBE scheme with reference to access and quality control, tracking of funds, as well as making the implementation of the programme compliant with the stipulations of the UBE Act and the National Policy on Education, both of which stipulate the current 9-3-4 education structure in Nigeria (that is 9 years in the basic school, 3 years in senior secondary school, and 4 and above years in the tertiary institutions);
- Approval of the Universal Basic Education Commission's (UBEC's)

recommendation by the National Council on Education (NCE) that Continuous Assessment (CA) shall be the dominant instrument for evaluating Learning Achievement at the basic education level. Thus, there will be only one final examination at the end of JSS 3 to be conducted by states and/or existing examination bodies approved by government;

- Transition from primary to junior secondary schools would not only be automatic but would also be total. This is in conformity with the section of the UBE Act that emphasizes free, compulsory and uninterrupted 9-year Basic Education in Nigeria.
- Abolition of the National Common Entrance Examination in order to enhance the implementation of the universal nature of the UBE, and to ensure 100% transition rate from primary VI to JSS 1.
- Streamlining of the over-crowded nature of subjects offered at the basic education level; the NCE approved a subject structure as the new 9-year basic education curriculum.
- The 9- year basic education curriculum has been developed by the National Education Research and Development Council (NERDC). The curriculum is expected to be refocused to meet the goals of the National Economic Empowerment Development Strategies (NEEDS), Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (Olubodun 2008:75-76).

The above imply that appropriate opportunities are provided for the basic education of every Nigerian child of school going age. Parents and guardians have an obligation in ensuring that their children and wards avail themselves of the opportunities, and that sanctions await persons, societies, or institutions that prevent children and youths from benefitting from the UBE scheme (Osokoya, 2008:23). The Federal Government of Nigeria deserves commendation for this laudable initiative which though, not totally devoid of challenges, holds bright

prospects for the development of the beneficiaries and for Nigeria as a nation.

5. Implementation Challenges of the Universal Basic Education in Nigeria

This part of the paper discusses some of the challenges confronting effective implementation of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) scheme in Nigeria.

According to Olubodun (2008:81), there was poor implementation of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) scheme due to lack of political will on the part of some state Chief Executives who did not share the vision of the UBE. Olubodun maintained that such State Chief Executives were opposed to the centralization of the control of basic education sub-sector in Nigeria.

Another challenge confronting the Universal Basic Education programme in Nigeria is dearth of enough physical facilities. For the UBE to meet the minimum standards in the provision of meaningful basic education in the country, physical facilities have to be provided in appropriate quantity, quality and size. Osokoya (2008:24) pointed out that the large size of the country and the attendant high population growth rate has put a great strain on the available resources provided by government.

Lack of reliable and relevant educational database such as school population of children aged 6-15, school enrolments, and enrolment projections. Nigeria is observed not to have reliable data. This situation has given rise to a great deal of imperfection and lapses in published educational statistics which could not be of good use in planning. Osokoya (2008:24) stated that this was a major factor that led to the failure of the defunct Universal Primary Education (UPE) in Nigeria.

Inadequate teaching personnel with relevant qualifications and motivation have been among the sore points of the Universal Basic Education scheme in Nigeria. At the inception of the UBE in the year 2000, there was the need for additional 772,338 teachers for a successful

take-off (Osokoya, 2008:25). According to Osokoya (2008:25) and Okpanachi, (2012:39) geographical disparities worsened the situation because some Nigerian states had teacher-pupils ratio as high as 1:70 and above, instead of the universally accepted ratio of 1:40.

Another challenge confronting the UBE scheme implementation is inadequate funding. Severe budgetary constraints in Nigeria had contributed to the slow pace of educational scheme implementation, particularly the UBE and had led to heavy dependence on donor assistance. It is important to note however, that the present political government in Nigeria has considered the challenges very seriously and has started taking steps to correct the inadequacies in funding, supply of facilities and teachers (Buhari, 2016:2, 3, 45).

6. The Prospects of UBE in Nigeria

It has been observed from the foregoing that the Universal Basic Education (UBE) scheme covers three main areas: societal mobilization for full involvement in the promotion of education; meeting the educational needs of a wide variety of persons along a wide spectrum; and laying solid foundation for life-long learning (UBE, 2003, 1- 2). It follows that the UBE is planned to ensure in the beneficiaries, the acquisition of appropriate levels of literacy, numeracy, manipulative as well as communicative life skills. Thus, the UBE scheme of the Federal Government of Nigeria has commendable objectives; although it has encountered a lot of challenges.

However, since the UBE could help in mass education and provision of socio-economic and political abilities it is important to continue to pursue the actualisation of the scheme. The actualisation would increase the level of enlightenment of the masses and participation in developmental activities. It should reduce unemployment if pursued to the senior secondary school level wherein the students learn not only the pre-vocational subjects taught in the junior secondary schools, but also vocational subjects that would make them immediately employable after their senior secondary school education. Therefore the UBE

when pursued to the senior secondary school level would be of better advantage to the beneficiaries and the nation. It would help in the immediate provision of employment. It would reduce social insecurity, it would increase the national gross domestic product, and it would promote innovation and social relevance of citizens for national and international development. All these are lofty benefits of education worldwide and they are found in the national philosophy of education in Nigeria (FRN, 2013: section 1). It would therefore be a realisation of the philosophy of education in Nigeria if the UBE could be extended to the senior secondary school level. It would make the education to have great prospect compared to the present level wherein the abilities are not adequately explored.

7. Conclusion

The UBE scheme in Nigeria is a commendable educational pursuit. However it needs to be extended to the Senior Secondary School level for it to be able to help the recipients in the acquisition of basic vocational skills that would make them immediately employable after their studies. In addition it would help the recipients and the society in terms of social relevance of the recipients and gross domestic product of the nation. Moreover there is the likelihood of reduction in social insecurity when the education is extended to the Senior Secondary School level.

8. Recommendations

It is recommended that the UBE be pursued with greater vigour by government; and that the recipients demonstrate sense of appreciation by contributing remarkably to the gross domestic product of the nation.

Although this cannot be feasible until the government pursues the UBE scheme up to the end of Senior Secondary Schooling – whereby the recipients would have been exposed to the study of various vocational subjects. The government can pursue the scheme up to the Senior Secondary School level with proper planning and determination. This is what is done

in developed nations and they are reaping the benefits. Nigeria and other developing nations can do the same for similar benefits.

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