

THE ROLES OF OPEN UNIVERSITY EDUCATION IN NATION BUILDING

By

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1.0 Preamble

It is a great pleasure and honour for me to deliver the 1st National Open University of Nigeria Alumni Association Annual Lecture on 24th March, 2022, titled, “The Role of Open University Education in Nation Building”. I am specially honoured by the presence of the Vice Chancellor of the University, Professor Olufemi Ayinde Peters and the Director, Directorate of Advancement and Linkages, Mrs. Omorogieva E. Ileka, as the Chief Host and Host respectively. I equally appreciate the President of the Association, Mr. Abdul-Hadi Muntaka Dabo, the Secretary-General, Mrs. Anthonia Okwunu Ahmodu, other members of the Executive Council and the entire members of the National Open University of Nigeria Alumni Association for inviting me to present this paper at this epoch-making occasion.

The theme of the lecture is relevant and apt, especially at this period when the country is championing a new course for the direction of its education and for re-building the nation. The Nigerian economy has been affected by many economic, socio-cultural and political challenges, which represent imminent threats to the development of the nation, and have caused instability in the education sector. For instance, the economy was in recession in the first, second, third and fourth quarters of 2016, and continued in the first quarter of 2017, and the COVID-19 pandemic threw the economy into recession in year 2020. The cumulative effect of such economic misfortune on the Nigerian education sector cannot be easily quantified. This lecture, therefore, provides stakeholders the opportunity to determine the roles of open university education in re-building the nation.

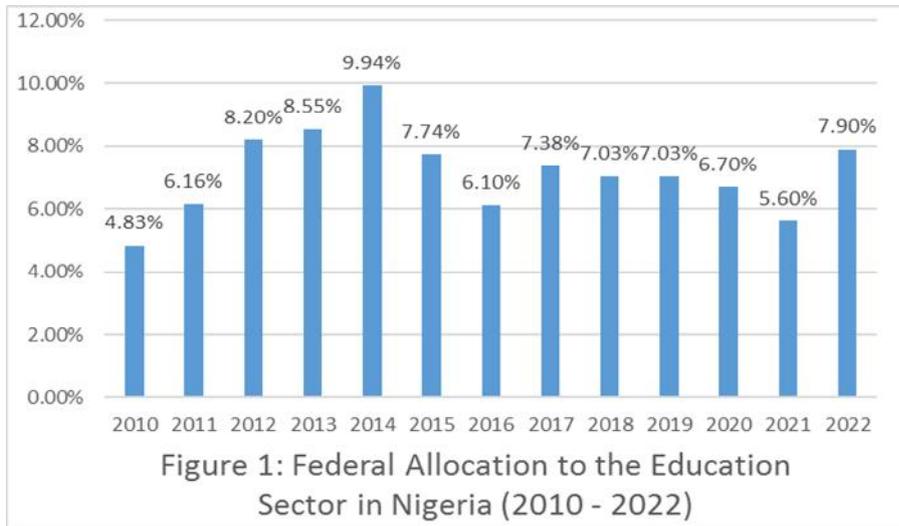
Therefore, the specific objectives of this lecture are to:

- examine the state of education in Nigeria.
- appraise the roles of open university education in the service of the nation.
- review the 21st century skills required in open university education for nation building.
- discuss the roles of Alumni Association in the service of the nation.
- examine some contending issues affecting open university education and nation building.
- suggest ways to enhance the contributions of open university education to nation building.

2.0 The State of Education in Nigeria

Globally, the education sector has been recognized as the bedrock of national development. However, allocations of funds by the Federal and State Governments to education have consistently depicted lack of commitment to the sector. Evidently, a comparative analysis of the allocation to education over the years showed that funding for education in Nigeria persistently revolve around seven percent of the national budget. For instance, the budget proposal to education, which over a decade, was highest at 9.94% in 2014, decreased progressively to 6.7% and 5.6% in 2020 and 2021 respectively, before a marginal increase to 7.9% in 2022 (Figure 1). A comparative analysis of budget allocation in Ghana, indicates that Ghana allocated 13.7% and 12.9 % of government spending to education in

2021 and 2022 respectively. The scenario indicates that Nigeria has not made adequate investment in the education sector.



Source: Adeoye, *et al.*, 2020; Udo, *et al.*, 2020; The Premium Times, 24 October, 2020; 27 October, 2021

At this juncture, it might be necessary to unravel the misery behind the preparation of the national budgets that have consistently earmarked low allocation to the education sector in Nigeria, if one considers the intentions of our leaders before assumption of leadership position in the country. For instance, in 2010, General Muhamadu Buhari, before he became the President of Nigeria, made a paper presentation to the Joint Education Stakeholders Action Coalition (JESAC) in Abuja, and stated thus:

I can assure you that I will suggest a minimum of 26% of the national budget in consonance with UNESCO's well-grounded recommendation, in consultation and cooperation with the National Assembly. This percentage I intend to graduate upwards with time and with results.

Buhari, 2010

However, the reality did not support the above assertion when he became the President in 2015. After a thorough review of the implications of the inadequate funding of the education sector, the President, Federal Republic of Nigeria, Muhamadu Buhari, rightly summarized his concern for the sector, as follows:

The state of education in Nigeria calls for a serious concern . . . The problem is no longer a secret that the quality of education in Nigeria requires greater attention and improvement . . . our country is facing numerous challenges in education and all other sectors . . . With an estimated 13.2 million children out of school, high illiteracy level, infrastructural deficit and decay, unqualified teachers, and inadequate instructional materials, to mention some of the challenges, we can clearly see the effect of decades of neglect that education sector has suffered.

Buhari, 2017

Similarly, the Nobel Laureate, Prof. Wole Soyinka described the state of education in Nigeria in a more pathetic way:

We are in serious trouble, education wise in this country. Let me not kid you; it's horrifying . . . We are really very low, education-wise.

Soyinka, 2019

The implication of the poor state of education, emanating from inadequate funding and infrastructural decay due to poor planning and execution of policies, is that the education sector can only contribute sub-optimally to nation building. In many developed countries, funding for education comes from different sources including public funding (subventions, special research funds and investment expenditures in the form of physical development, provision of equipment for the laboratories, workshops, studios and libraries), private funding (donations from alumni and other philanthropists), International Organizations, and Internally Generated Revenue. The situation in Nigeria has proved that government cannot fund education alone. As Ajayi and Ekundayo (2006) maintained, funds allocated to education should not merely be considered as an expense but a long term investment of benefit to the society as a whole. This position was shared by the United Nations Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, thus:

Investing in Education is the most cost-effective way to drive economic development, improve skills and opportunities for young women and men, and unlock progress on all 17 Sustainable Development Goals... Financing education is indeed the best investment we can make for a better world and a better future.

Guterres, 2017

The benefits derived from adequate funding of education sector are reflected on a societal level in terms of lower unemployment rates, better health, lower crime rates, more involvement in societal activities, higher tax returns and other trickle-down effects.

3.0 Establishment of Open University Educational in Nigeria

The goals of introducing open and distance education in Nigeria, outlined in the Revised National Policy of Education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, FRN, 2014, p.50) are to: provide more access to quality education and equity in educational opportunities; meet special needs of employers by mounting special certificate courses for their employees at their workplace; encourage internationalization, especially of tertiary education curricula; ameliorate the effect of internal and external brain drain in tertiary institutions by utilizing Nigerian experts as teachers regardless of their locations or places of work; and encourage life-long learning opportunities.

The idea and processes that led to the establishment of autonomous open university in Nigeria have been variously documented by researchers and the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). Although, some universities had earlier operated open and distance education as part of university education, open university education only became fully

operational following the establishment of the National Open and Distance Education Programme in 2001, and subsequently the National Open University of Nigeria in 2002.

At this juncture, one must be quick to applaud the government and the management of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). Right from inception, NOUN, as an open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution, developed disaster-proof education, using Information and Communication Technology (ICT). The University started the right digital tools; and the right learning activities. The programmes are flexible, cost-effective and learner-centered. In 2020, the global health threat (COVID-19) brought the world to a standstill, with the disruption of the education system. Many traditional universities were closed, leaving teaching and learning to be interrupted. However, teaching and learning continued uninterrupted at NOUN with different interactive and captivating educational technology, in the midst of the rapidly changing, uncertain, dynamic and engaging (RUDE) economy, making National Open University of Nigeria to be a key factor in nation building. Thus, the University has justified the purpose for which it was founded.

Some of the features of open university education that have to be modelled by the traditional universities in order not to be left behind in the development process are:

- **Accessibility and flexibility**

Open university education enables students to learn at their own pace and provides flexibility in terms of where the learning process happens. Students can access class content from any location through their mobile devices, which helps them become more self-directed learners.

- **Increased communication and collaboration**

Open university education makes it easy for all stakeholders (university administrator, teachers and students) to communicate with each other.

- **Higher engagement rates**

Open university education has tools that help teachers make the class material more interactive for students, such as creating personalized learning paths where students can achieve their goals.

- **Increased students' achievement**

When students are engaged with class materials, they become more productive. Open university education allows students to easily monitor their progress through class content and identify the areas where they need to improve.

- **Save time on teaching activities**

Open university education provides automation that replaces rigorous and expensive manual teaching and learning. Lecturers are able to organise their teaching materials stored in a centralized location and easily make available to the students.

4.0 Open University Education in the Service of the Nation

Globally, education sector has been recognized as the bedrock of national development. Both the conventional and open university education have similar roles to play in nation building. However, the difference in their roles is in the mode of delivery of lectures and the tools employed. Open university education adopts modern technology, which facilitates teaching and learning. As learner-centered university, open university education provides answers to academic questions and problems of learners, compared with the conventional university education that is lecturer-centered. In the light of the foregoing, the main roles of open university education can be reviewed as follows:

4.1 Human Development

To address the challenge of human development, open university education has played key role of producing skilled human resource for the development of the nation. The open University of Nigeria, for instance, has produced graduates who are strategically found in different sectors of the economy – corporate business, government organisations, politics, academic and religious organization – and contributing their quota to the development of the country. The University has created opportunity for human capital investment by people who are gainfully employed, but desirous of furthering their education to acquire a university degree.

4.2 Entrepreneurship and Skills Development

In the era of technological change and global competition, it is essential to nurture the entrepreneurial and innovative spirits of youths for prosperity of the society (Obamuyi, 2018). The impact of entrepreneurship education has been to enhance skills development (Oluchi, 2018) and foster entrepreneurial attitude (Dada, 2020). Thus, open university education offers entrepreneurship courses which help students to become successful entrepreneurs. As Dada, Obamuyi & Jesuleye (2021) affirmed, universities are knowledge creation hubs where knowledge is created and developed in graduates and transferred for economic growth and development of nations. The skills received from business practitioners, policy makers and researchers during entrepreneurship education assist the students to be productive (entrepreneur) and/or employable (intrapreneur). The open university should, therefore demonstrate to students how to improve on their personal entrepreneurship competencies and understand the key roles of technology and innovation in business development.

4.3 Employment Generation

Open University education provides accessible and flexible opportunities for people to work and study at the same time. Thus, those who missed the chance to secure higher education at the early stage of life, have the opportunity to acquire university degrees without resigning from their jobs. Also, the students who enrolled in open university education have the opportunity to acquire university degrees and secure better jobs in future.

4.4 Poverty Reduction

Open university education creates opportunity for all citizens (both young and old) to acquire higher education, equip them with critical and creative thinking skills and thereby

enable them secure a profession that will make them to be employed and be self-employed. The opportunity to secure jobs or create jobs will generate income which will assist individuals to break the vicious circle of poverty and ultimately contribute to nation building. Also, the opportunity for people to work and study at the same time will help to reduce poverty.

4.5 Industrial Development

Open university education research outputs emanating from industry-targeted studies have the tendency to contribute to the industrialisation process of the nation.

5.0 Open University Education and the 21st Century Skills for Nation Building

For the open university education to be relevant and significantly contribute to nation building, the 21st century critical skills of technological and entrepreneurial engagements must be acquired and adopted by the students. The skills required for nation building in the emerging global economy are generally referred to as the 21st century critical skills for employment, decent job and entrepreneurship. According to Dunbar (2015), skills encompass the combination of technical, cognitive and behavioural competencies, which enable a worker to acquire and retain decent work, including entrepreneurship and business know-how. The International Labour Organisation (2005), argues that failure of the youth to find job may be linked to lack of relevant skills and training opportunities, low demand for the skills in which young persons have trained, or to changing demand in the labour market.

Therefore, to boost students' employability and self-employability, the university must ensure that they are equipped with the following 21st century critical skills - analytical thinking, creativity and innovation, adaptability and flexibility, digital innovation, good communication, leadership, emotional intelligence, quantitative analysis, teamwork, project management, strategic management, and other entrepreneurial survival skills (entrepreneurial networks and collaboration). Lack of the skills demanded by employers may lead to long periods of job seeking and higher unemployment.

The open university should be reminded that the students will only be hired for their skills, and the values they can bring to the society. Therefore, there is need to introduce students to the strategies of multi-skilling. By acquiring skills relevant to technology, coupled with education and vocational training, the students will be able to understand and prepare for both the opportunities and challenges in the labour market.

6.0 Alumni Association and Service to the nation

The relationship between an institution and its alumni has significant impact on the development of the institution, and hence influence the pace of nation building. It is on record that the National Open University of Nigeria has produced notable Alumni who are adequately prepared to provide financial, intellectual and physical supports to their alma maters. They are in position to contribute to the university's budgets, scholarships and endowments. In addition, the infrastructural facilities that can be mobilised through the Alumni's assets {time, talent and treasure (3Ts)} are critical to nation building. Therefore,

for the open university to realise maximum benefits from the Alumni and contribute to nation building, the University management must ensure that students are well treated during their studentship. The need for smooth relationship has been succinctly expressed:

Alumni are more likely to be donors, if they are very satisfied with their student experience, if they are involved and engaged as alumni with the university, and if they are kept informed about what is happening . . . Simply put, the stronger the relationship, the more likely they are to be donors.

Pearson, 1999

On a close examination of the programmes of the National Open University of Nigeria Alumni Association for the 11th Convocation ceremony, I observed that 25th March, 2022, has been scheduled for the dinner/award night and launching of the sum of one billion naira (₦1,000,000,000.00) for the development of an Alumni Village. It is expected that the Alumni will use their time, talent and network to mobilise the fund through their friends and relatives, and corporations where they have influence, apart from the annual and special contributions from the Alumni.

On a personal note, the President and other members of the Alumni Association are well appreciated for the great support for their alma mater. Equally, I want to congratulate the Vice Chancellor of the University and the Director, Directorate of Advancement and Linkages for producing graduates who are conscious of giving back to their alma mater for the purpose of closing the financial and infrastructural gaps in the education sector, thereby contributing to nation building. It is apparent that the Management has maintained a healthy relationship with the alumni for the University to attract this huge amount from the Alumni Association at a time when many alumni are quitting their relationships with their Universities. Indeed, this kind of gesture by the Alumni can only be possible where a robust relationship has been established between the University and the alumni association.

However, the kind gesture from the Alumni must not be taken for granted by the management of the University, as it has to be symbiotically maintained and nourished for the overall development of the university and the nation at large. On the part of the University, attention to students' welfare should go beyond the period of schooling. The University must be duly concerned about their after-school engagements, and provide direction for their career and family development. The University should apply the 4Rs of fundraising:

- Research (25 percent of fundraising process)
- Romance (60 percent of fundraising process)
- Request (5 percent of fundraising process)
- Recognition (10 percent of fundraising process)

The University must guide against the observation of Hinson (2020) with regards to the universities in Africa and alumni relations:

. . . universities in Africa do not know where their graduates go, what they go on to do, how they are using their training and skills, what advice they might have to improve their alma maters, or which of them may be instrumental in fundraising efforts.

Hinson, 2020

7.0 Contending Issues Affecting University Education and Nation Building

This section identifies some contending issues affecting the contributions of open university education to nation building in Nigeria. These include:

7.1 Inadequate Funding

Evidence from the annual budget allocation to the University education has clearly demonstrated that the sector is grossly under-funded in Nigeria. The University is faced with rising costs from both capital and recurrent expenditures in the face of dwindling subventions from the government. The fund generated from students' fees are even tied to specific items which cannot be re-ordered. Therefore, the University are faced with the problem of providing quality education in the midst of scarce resources and increasing enrolment of students. For open university education, the problem becomes more pronounced in view of the level of technology required, maintenance of the study centres and payment of other ancillary services.

7.2 Corruption in the Education Sector

Corruption had emerged as the main obstacle to the development of the education sector in Nigeria. Corrupt practices in the sector include: embezzlement and diversion of funds, equipment and school supplies; procurement fraud; examination misconducts; sexual exploitations; and bribery. As established by Adeyemi and Obamuyi (2010), corruption has negatively affected the development of Nigeria. The Transparency International Corruption Perception Index (CPI) scored Nigeria 26, 25 and 24 points in 2019, 2020 and 2021 respectively. The CPI measures the perceived levels of public sector corruption in a given country on a scale of 0 (perceived to be highly corrupt) to 100 (perceived to be totally corruption-free country). This implies that some of the funds that would have gone to the development of the education and other critical sectors of the economy are swindled to amass wealth by few Nigerians.

7.3 High Level of Poverty in Nigeria

The poverty situation in Nigeria is appalling. The Statista (2022) affirmed that an estimated population of 88.4 million people in Nigeria lived in extreme poverty. The report indicated that around 44.7 million men and 43.7 million women in the country lived on less than \$1.90 a day. It was also revealed that 12.9 percent of the global population in extreme poverty were found in Nigeria as of 2022.

The scenario confirmed the argument that many of the indigent students may not be able to complete their programmes as scheduled due to inability to pay school fees, buy course materials and acquire the necessary tools for digital learning. This serves as a contributory factor to increase the rate of drop-outs in the educational institutions. From the forgoing, there is the need to break the vicious cycle of poverty in Nigeria in order to enhance the contribution of the education sector to nation building.

7.4 High Unemployment Rate

Most countries in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) face high unemployment rates, especially youth unemployment. The COVID-19 pandemic made many Nigerians to lose their jobs and companies were forced either to close down or downsize the work force. According to the survey by the World Bank (reported in the Daily Trust, 17 July, 2020), 42 per cent of Nigerian workers lost their jobs between March and June 2020, due to snowball effects of the pandemic. The implication is that there is a glut in the labour market, which is already saturated with number of unemployed youths. For instance, the unemployment rate increased from 23.9% in 2011 to 30% and 33% in 2014 and 2022 respectively. The Stutern Nigerian Graduate Report (2018) showed that 60% of new graduates earn less than ₦50,000 as a first job monthly, and that 1 in 5 graduates earn below ₦20,000.00 as a first job monthly salary. The foregoing demonstrates that unemployment or under-employment is a key factor to consider in the design and implementation of open university education programme in the country, as it has a severe effect of enrollment and performance of financial obligations by the students.

7.5 State of Infrastructural Facilities

The infrastructural challenges facing education sector in Nigeria include poor internet connectivity and services, high cost of computers and accessories, and epileptic power supply. Open university education, by the design, thrive on the availability of all the aforementioned facilities. Therefore, absence or near absence of these facilities poses grave challenges to the capacity of the universities to provide quality and standard teaching services required in the 21st century, as well as meeting up with the rising cost associated with the acquisition of necessary technology for undertaking open university education by the students.

7.6 Project Implementation

The formulation and delivery of educational projects and programmes, sometimes, are not carried out on the basis of their merits, rather on the basis of political patronage, ethnicity and religious affiliations. Therefore, growing the education sector and building the nation demand that the country produces exemplary leadership, who are ready to judiciously manage the resources of the country and implement sustainable projects. While dealing with the issues of corruption and governance, it is necessary for the management of open university to design and implement appropriate policies for project implementation.

8.0 Measures to Enhance the Contributions of Open University Education to Nation Building

The paper has provided basic evidence of the roles of open university education in nation building. In an attempt to stress the important roles of open university education and build a virile nation, there is need to ruminate over the following basic questions:

- Do the challenges facing the education sector provide opportunity for the government and other stakeholders to work together to enhance educational development in Nigeria?
- What government actions and interventions would be needed to address and discourage mismanagement of fund in the education sector?
- What strategies and measures are essential to ensure maximum contributions by open university education to nation building?

These questions are not the only considerations to make in attempt to build the nation, but they are meant to indicate that quality education will only be achieved, if the policy makers and Nigerians are ready to work together and tackle each of the challenges headlong.

But what are the implications of the foregoing for the future? There is urgent need to adequately allocate more funds to the education sector by all stakeholders in order to improve on the three areas of access, quality and systems strengthening. There must be a deliberate effort to formulate a policy that will address the menace of corruption in the education sector and hold education officials accountable for their actions and inactions. The activities of all the anti-corruption agencies must be integrated, with emphasis on transparency and accountability in the education sector. Government should provide adequate infrastructure to cater for the level of technology required for teaching and learning in open university education programmes. There should be continuous stakeholders' interactions that must include the Alumni for improved performance for open university education in Nigeria.

The resources of the nation must be properly managed to solve the problem of inappropriate funding for the education sector, unemployment and inadequate infrastructural facilities.

9.0 Conclusion

The paper has shown that open university education is key to nation building. However, the education sector had not realized its full potential in Nigeria due to inadequate funding, corruption, poverty, unemployment, resource mismanagement and governance issue. Therefore, it is sacrosanct for all the stakeholders in the education sector to be proactive on all issues relating to educational development and nation building. Finally, there is need for the Management, Staff and Students to recognise and be thankful to the National Open University of Nigeria Alumni Association for their contributions to the development of the University.

Thank you.

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