

Universal Basic Education in Nigeria: Challenges and Way Forward

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Abstract: Education, defined as permanent change in behavior as a result of learning, consists of all efforts (conscious or incidental) made by a society to accomplish set objectives, which are considered to be desirable in terms of the individual as well as the societal needs. In all human societies, particularly the modern ones, education therefore remains one of the most powerful instruments for both the development of man and transformation of the human society. However, the efficacy of education as an instrument of transformation depends entirely on how the government manages the project meant for the upliftment of the educational system. In this study, the challenges facing the Universal Basic Education project are examined while it also proffers solutions to meet the challenges.

Key words: Universal, education, Nigeria, challenges, way forward, basic

INTRODUCTION

All over the world, primary education has been regarded as the most important as well as the most patronized by people. This perhaps may be due to the fact that it is the foundation of the whole educational pursuit, which is expected to provide literacy and enlightenment to the citizens. The importance of primary education can therefore be seen in the sense that all beneficiaries of the other levels of education by necessity have to pass through his level (Oni, 2008). What this means is that primary education defined as the education given in an institution for children aged 6-11 years plus constitutes the bedrock upon, which the entire education system is built. Indeed, the success and failure of the entire education system are determined by it and it is at the heart of the concept of basic education also defined as universalization of access of education (Oni, 2008).

Recognizing the importance of primary education, all governments in Nigeria (past and present) have placed premium on it by making primary education the center piece of their educational policies. Since the colonial period therefore, both colonial and independent governments in Nigeria have instituted one form of educational reform or the other. This indicates that there is a link between the past and present in the educational development of Nigeria. That is the country's historical antecedents have impact on how educational policies are formulated and implemented. Starting with the colonial period, Nigeria, having been colonized by Britain adopted

the British form of education, which consists of primary, secondary, sixth form as well as higher education (Fabunmi, 2005). However, the Islamic education had been in the Northern Protectorate before the amalgamation in 1914, so the Christian missionaries that came into the country through the Western Region were restricted from spreading both Christianity and western education to the Northern region.

The colonial administration, before independence, administered education through the use of education ordinances and education laws. These ordinances include the 1882, 1887, 1916, 1926, 1948 and 1952 Educational ordinances and Regional Laws of 1954. In 1954, the three regions (Eastern, Western and Northern) as well as the Federal Territory of Lagos had the power of making laws for its territory and citizens as a result of the adoption of 1954 Constitution. Consequently, the following regional laws on education emerged: Education Law of 1955 in the Western Region, Education Law of 1956 in the Northern Region and The Lagos Education Ordinance of 1957; hence, the beginning of the introduction of universal education in Nigeria.

The objective of this study, therefore, is to theoretically, identify the challenges facing the universalization of education at the primary school level in Nigeria and to suggest the way forward. In order to achieve this objective, the remaining part of this study examines the evolution of universal education in Nigeria; the objectives of universal education; its challenges and provides suggestions for the way forward.

THE EVOLUTION OF UNIVERSAL EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

In 1955, the concept of universalization of primary education began in the Western Region of Nigeria under the Premiership of Chief Obafemi Awolowo who introduced the free, universal and compulsory education, popularly referred to as Universal Primary Education (UPE). With the introduction of the UPE, there was an educational revolution, not only in the West but in Nigeria as a whole. In 1954, there were about 457,000 pupils attending fee-paying schools but by January 1955, the figure rose to 811,000 representing over 56% increase in the enrollment. The number of primary school teachers rose from 17,000 in 1954 to 27,000 in 1955. This was possible because the government had gone out to train teachers to meet the demands of the programme. The government of the Western Region had to increase the budget from £2.2 million in 1954 to £5.4 million in 1955, (Fafunwa, 1974; Oni, 2006). Actually, 90% of the budget on education was spent on primary education alone. By 1957/58 the recurrent expenditure on education from the funds of the region was £7,884,110, which covered personal emoluments, other charges, special expenditure and grants-in-aids (Taiwo, 1980).

The feat achieved by the Western Region in terms of the UPE led the Eastern Region to embark upon its own 8 years free education scheme. Thus, in February 1957, the universal primary education scheme was launched in the Eastern Region using the fire-brigade approach. The government started the programme without adequate planning; thus, the needed finances for thorough execution were grossly inadequate. Summarily put by Oni (2008), almost everything, except the pupils, was absent. Unfortunately, due to pressure and lack of time for proper preparation, the schools were staffed by untrained teachers, therefore of low quality. The programme failed in just 1 year of its implementation (Oni, 2008).

The free and universal education programme was not limited to the Eastern and Western regions of the country. The Lagos Colony, a Federal Territory also floated its own scheme in 1957. At its inception, there were 96 primary schools with 50,182 pupils. These pupils had 1,646 teachers (Fafunwa, 1991). The Northern Region had been introduced to the Islamic form of education ever before the Christianity (Western) education came into the country. Islamic education came into Nigeria by over 300 years before the arrival of Christian education around the 1840s (Oghuvbu, 2007). Hence, the region did not bother itself to embark on providing the Western education for its citizens. It seemed to be comfortable with the Islamic education, so they opted out of the race for in

the provision of free universal primary education (Oni, 2008). So, the Northern region education was some however retarded because the curriculum of education revolved round reading the new testament, the catechism and the commandments in Yoruba. Classes were held in churches and teachers' salaries were paid from church funds. Then, Muslim parents did not wholly approve of such Western education because it was a Christian education in a Christian environment. Their fear was that their children would be converted to Christianity through such education.

Since independence, a lot of education laws, policies and edicts have been put in place, depending on the type of government being experienced in the country. In 1979, the constitution puts education on the concurrent list, which implies that the responsibilities and authority in education would be shared among the three tiers of government, i.e., federal, state and local governments. Between 1983 and 1999, a military era, decrees such as decree No. 16 of 1985, decree 26 of 1988 and decree 36 of 1990 were promulgated in Nigeria to guide and regulate the conduct of education in the country. A major policy made by the federal government was put in place in 1977; this was tagged the National Policy on Education. This policy was the outcome of a seminar convened in 1973 after the National Curriculum Conference. The 1977 policy has been revised thrice, i.e., 1981, 1998 and 2004.

Since independence therefore, the general guiding principles of education in Nigeria is the equipping of every citizen with such knowledge, skills, attitudes and values, which will give him the opportunity to derive maximum benefits from his membership of the society. The origin of extending education to all in Nigeria dates back to the era when the Western Region government under the premiership of late Obafemi Awolowo launched the free Universal Education (UPE) (Eddy and Akpan, 2009). As a political response to the UPE programme in the Western Region, the Premier of the Eastern Region launched his own UPE in the region. The general objective behind their respective educational programme was basically to increase primary education access to benefit children of school age. While, the UPE programme in the west was characterized by story of success, the same cannot be said of UPE programme in the Eastern region as it was characterized by a short period of planning resulting into numerous problems.

As can be shown from the foregoing, the universalization of primary education in Nigeria initially was a regional project. That is each region including the northern region tried to develop its own programme of promoting education among its citizens. The process of making universalization of primary education a national

project started with the Obasanjo's regime in 1976 during the military rule. For the 1st time in the history of Nigeria, the UPE programme that originally started as regional project was redesigned by the national government to provide education for the Nigerian citizens by changing the content of UPE (Eddy and Akpan, 2009) to encompass the following philosophy of education as articulated in National Policy on Education. This philosophy emphasizes: the development of the individual into a sound and effective citizen, the full integration of the individual into the community and the provision of equal access to educational opportunities for all citizens at all levels of education both inside and outside the formal school system.

Since 1977 therefore, the Federal Government of Nigeria through the National Policy on Education stipulates that every child has a right to equal educational opportunities, irrespective of any real or imagined disabilities. According to this policy, education is supposed to equalize opportunities so that any individual, regardless of background can achieve success. The schools are expected to provide vocational training and preparation for later professional specialization. The schools are also expected to introduce them to activities not related to work-appreciation of arts, the development of interest and hobbies, the inclination and skills to engage in recreational activities and the like. In essence, the thrust of education is manpower development, which is aimed at national growth and development. This is why the country made its policy on education to revolve round the philosophy and goals of the nation. The philosophy of education, as derived from the national goals are the development of the individual into a sound and effective citizens; the full integration of the individual into the community and the provision of equal access to educational opportunities for all citizens at all levels of education both inside and outside the formal school system.

THE UNIVERSAL BASIC EDUCATION: ITS NATURE AND OBJECTIVES AND FEATURES IN NIGERIA

The concept of the universal basic education may not be a new idea totally. From all indications, the Universal Education can be regarded as an offshoot of the Universal Primary Education (UPE) scheme, which was launched in the country in 1976. As usual with Nigeria, this scheme was abandoned mid-way (Aluede, 2006). The fact that the scheme, i.e., UPE had something to offer perhaps led to the re-introduction of the programme in another name and concept known as Universal Basic Education in 1999. The Universal Basic Education (UBE) is a policy reform

measure of the Federal Government of Nigeria, aimed at rectifying distortions in the basic education. UBE is conceived to embrace formal education up to age 15, as well as adult and non-formal education including education of the marginalized groups within the Nigerian society. The National Policy on Education, 2004 section 3 defines basic education as a type of education comprising 6 years of primary education and 3 years of junior secondary school. The policy stipulates that the education shall be free and compulsory. This scheme shall include adult and non-formal educational programmes at primary and junior secondary school levels for both adults and out-of school youths. The UBE has three main components-universal, basic and education. Universal here means the programme is for everyone irrespective of tribe, culture or race and class (Aluede, 2006; Eddy and Akpan, 2009). The term basic depicts that which is a fundamental or essential thing that must be given or had. It is on this factor that every other thing rests on. Without it, nothing may be achieved. It is the root for acquisition of any knowledge (Eddy and Akpan, 2009). Hence, UBE can be seen as that type of education that every individual must have. It should not be a privilege but a right and it should be the sum total of an individual's experience.

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 (UBEC Annual Report). The Universal Basic Education Commission in its annual report in 2005 listed the objectives of the Universal Basic Education 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.

In order to achieve 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. It was titled Act to provide 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 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. Although, this Act covers both the State and the Local Governments, 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. To ensure that the UBE project enjoys a wide coverage, the Act provides sanctions for parents who fail to send their children and wards to school. Also in order to ensure that poverty is not a hindrance to schooling, the project provides free textbooks in core subjects as well as abolishes tuition at the primary school and at the junior secondary school levels. The enactment of the UBE Act has a legal implication, which makes it compulsory for provision of universal, free and compulsory 6 years of primary education and the first 3 years of secondary education.

From the various objectives of the UBE stated above, the child should have a continuous, uninterrupted stretch of education for 9 years from primary school to the 3rd year of the junior secondary school. Apart from this, the UBE scheme plans catering for the adults who have been out of school before they acquired the basic skills needed for lifelong learning in form of non-formal programmes. So, the UBE programme is planned in such a way that it shall provide non-formal skills and training for youths who have not had the benefit of formal education (Dare *et al.*, 2008). The new scheme has therefore, changed the education system from 6-3-3-4 to 9-3-4. It is expected that there shall be a smooth transition from the primary school (6 years) to the junior secondary school (3 years). This also translates to no entrance examination into the junior secondary school. It is also expected that junior secondary schools shall be an autonomous body, not having much to do with the senior secondary school. In order to achieve this, all states of the federation have given the junior schools their autonomy. Thus, the junior secondary schools operate as separate bodies, having their own principals, vice-principals and members of teaching and non-teaching staff.

From the foregoing, it can be seen that the UBE programme in Nigeria has its own unique features. First and foremost, the scheme makes it compulsory for every government in Nigeria to provide free, compulsory and universal basic education for every child of primary and junior secondary school age. Secondly, it enforces all parents to ensure that their children or wards attend and complete their primary education and junior secondary school as stated in section 2 of the Act, which provides some fines for any breach of the Act.

THE CHALLENGES OF THE UBE PROGRAMME

Although, the new Universal Basic Education Scheme started on study in 1999, it did not take off at the same time in various states of the Federation. The implication of this is that its full assessment may be too early, considering the time it actually took off at the state level. However, as young as the scheme is some of the challenges it is facing, both at the Federal and State levels are obvious. The world over, ability to allocate enough funds for a programme remains the greatest challenge that a programme can have. This is also the case with the funding of the Universal Basic Education in Nigeria. Between 1999, when the country returned to participatory democracy and 2009, the central government has spent >₦1.13 trillion on the education sector alone, with little to show for such a huge expenditure (Olanrewaju and Folorunso, 2009) (Table 1).

From the Table 1, it is evident that the Federal Government has not spent up to 15% of its total budget on education in the last 10 years of uninterrupted democracy. The highest allocation so far was in 2008, when it allocated 13%. This pattern of allocation, as mentioned-above, which is below the UNESCO's threshold that is 26% of the total budget is certainly affecting the implementation of government policy on education and in particular the Universal Basic Education since its inception. This position has been well captured by Dike (2001) and Igbuzor (2006), when they observed that the government is in the habit of allocating less money to the education sector and consequently, limits the successful implementation of the programme. It is also instructive to note that the phenomenon of corruption is compounding the problem of shortage of funds in the implementation of the UBE programme. Even, where the allocated fund is not enough, the little that is made available is usually embezzled by corrupt Nigerian officials working in SUBEB offices across the country. The recent case of corruption of the managers of primary schools in Kwara state is a good example.

Table 1: Federal government allocation to education sector (1999-2009)

Years	Allocation (billion)	Percentage
1999	23.047	11.20
2000	44.225	8.30
2001	39.885	7.00
2002	100.200	5.09
2003	64.760	11.83
2004	72.220	7.80
2005	92.590	8.30
2006	166.600	8.70
2007	137.480	6.07
2008	210.000	13.00
2009	183.360	-
Total	1.130 trillion	0.00

Olanrewaju and Folorunso (2009)

Another major challenge to successful implementation of the UBE scheme is lack of proper planning on the part of the government (UNESCO, 2000). One of the factors responsible for the improper planning is faulty census exercises. Almost all the census exercises carried out so far in Nigeria, either before independence or after have been marred with massive irregularities (Oni, 2008). The national population census exercise has always raised political hysteria leading to hyper inflation of census figures, which makes it impossible to know the exact figures for school age population. What this means is that the national population census that is supposed to provide reliable data for planning and implementation has always been politicized with its attendant wrong figures (Dare *et al.*, 2008). The consequence of the foregoing is that just like the present census figures, the previous census data were also full of imperfection and lapses that they could not be of good use in planning. This shortcoming is particularly visible in 2006 census when the enumerators were reported to be found filling and thumb printing the forms themselves when they realized that they might not be able to cover their areas before the end of the exercise (Anonymous, 2006). The resultant unreliable statistics has led to poor projections. Since, the available data do not allow for proper projections, there is no way that the facilities on ground will be adequate for the number of children in school. This poor projection is a factor that has affected the universality of primary education in Nigeria. This problem has been reflected in the provision of structures such as classrooms, laboratories and even quality teachers since 1976, when UPE Scheme was introduced (Oni, 2008) and indeed the situation is the same with the present UBE scheme.

This inadequacy in terms of population data has also affected the provision of instructional materials such as textbooks, laboratory equipment, audiovisual materials, etc., which in themselves constitute another major challenge to successful implementation of the UBE programme. Many of the schools do not have these materials and where available, they are in adequate and outdated (UNSECO, 2000; Oni, 2008; Dare *et al.*, 2008). The overall problem regarding general inadequacy of infrastructure, teaching materials and amenities in the Nigerian educational system is well captured by Ezekwesili when she said... the physical infrastructure is below standard and gross insufficient... the basic amenities such as water and light are seriously lacking... Ogunjimi *et al.* (2009).

Another challenge of the UBE scheme is the drop-out rate in primary schools considering the aims and objectives of the scheme, which is education for all school age children. The Demographic and Health Survey (DHS)

conducted in 2003 revealed that only 60.1% of all the children of primary school age were attending primary school at the time of the survey. In particular, boys had a higher Net Attendance Rate (NAR) of 63.7% as against that of the female, which was 56%. Similar discrepancy is also noticeable in the children's attendance rate in school of the urban areas and the rural areas. In the urban areas, the NAR was 69.5%, while in the rural areas, it was 55.7%. In order to show the drop-out rate, it was revealed by Ogunjinmi *et al.* (2009) that out of the 42.1 million children below 14 years of age, only 25.8 million representing 61.2% of the total population was in school. At the secondary school level, only 30% of the population that should be in school is in school in Nigeria. Primary school net enrollment/attendance between 2000 and 2007 was 63%. The drop out rate for the girl-child is 44%, while that of the boys in secondary school is 39.3% (Olanrewaju and Folorunso, 2009).

From the foregoing, it can be seen that the drop out rate depicts the level of access to education by the Nigerian children, which by implication betrays the universalization of education in Nigeria. Many reasons have been adduced for inadequate access to education, which includes costs of schooling (cost of books, equipment, uniform, tuition and examination fees), illness, poverty and economic benefits of education. This then explains why in general terms, any time tuition and all other fees are abolished; there is increase in enrollment in schools. This is not peculiar to Nigeria as Igbuzor (2006) observed that enrolment rate fell by 5% in Malawi, 2 years after fees were introduced into the school system in 1980. Similarly in Tanzania, enrolment surged by as much as 1.5 million children, when fees were abolished in primary schools in January 2002.

One other reason that could be the cause of drop out is that many children do not start education, i.e., schooling at the right age of 6 years. For instance, only 36.6% of all the 6 year olds were attending primary schools at the time of the demography and health survey in 2003. The implication of this is that the remaining 63.4% is outside of the school system. At 17 years, which is the official graduation age from secondary school, 7.8% of all children were still in primary school. It was also found that 8.7% of the population was still in secondary school at 24 years when they ought to have left school. The delayed entry into the school or education system results into children dropping out of school and entering the labour market with limited qualifications. This invariably makes them live less productive lives. This has led the country into having a less educated population, which brings poverty amongst the citizens.

Since, the UBE scheme is expected to solve the problem of dropout in the system, it is unfortunate that the scheme is yet to achieve this objective. This scenario has been well captured by Obasola (2008), when she observed that:

Nine years after the Universal Basic Education was first introduced and 4 years after it was signed into law, children of school age still roam the streets, hawking one type of goods or the other... from Kano to Ibadan and Lagos to Enugu, children are still seen at motor parks, along the expressways, especially where there is traffic snarl, hawking goods and dashing in between cars, trying to make as much profit as possible.

This situation as described above poses a serious challenge to successful implementation of Universal Basic Education programme.

That is even when adequate fund is made available to fund needed infrastructure and to purchase the necessary instructional materials and to train quality teachers for the scheme, the problem of getting the children to teach would continue to be in Nigeria due to the attitude of some Nigerian parents, who would normally subject their children or wards to child labour.

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Though there are challenges in the implementation of the Universal Basic Education scheme, they are not insurmountable. The solution lies with both the government and the people. Being a people oriented programme, the people should be properly educated about the scheme by emphasizing educational guidance for the parents. In particular, the parents need to be educated on the need to give their children the basic education for a lifelong education. The government should have the political will to put into effect the Act that stipulates penalties for parents who refuse to send their children or wards to school. Stemming from this, the government, especially the state and local governments should put in place an educational police force who would go out to arrest children of school age who are not in school during school hours. Any child arrested should have his/her parents charged before the court for contravening section 2 (2) of the UBE Act. The educational police force must visit the major roads in the cities, mechanic villages, artisan workshops to fish out any child learning a trade but <16 years of age. These children should be questioned and their parents be invited for interrogation. It is assumed that if education police are put in place at the state and local government

levels, the drop out rate shall be reduced to the minimum, if not totally eradicated. To do this, the government should popularize this section of the UBE Act through, the nation's media, especially the radio. The enjoyment of government services by parents such as medical services should be made contingent upon the production of a certificate that they have their children in school. In addition, the Homegrown School Feeding Programme, a United Nation project emanating from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of Education for all in the year 2015, being currently practiced in some states, should be extended to other states of the federation in order to further boost the primary school enrolment.

The issue of funding should be looked into properly. The situation whereby every government claims to be spending a lion share of its budget whereas the reverse is the case should be addressed. Whatever allocation is given to education the overhead cost, i.e., salaries and allowances should not be added to the allocation. Salaries should be treated as a separate component. It is only when this is done that the actual amount allocated to education shall be meaningful. The government expenditure should be closely monitored to prevent embezzlement by the people charged with responsibility of managing the scheme. With adequate funding, the provision of more schools (primary and secondary) should be of concern to the government. The National Policy on education recommends that the teacher-pupil ratio shall be 1:40 at the secondary school level while that of primary school shall be 1:35 (section 19 g). This ratio has not been met in the urban areas. The present government-state and local-should put up more schools to achieve the stipulated ratio in order to avoid overcrowding, which is inimical to effective teaching and learning. The junior secondary schools should be planned as neighbour hood schools as stated in the National Policy on Education to relieve students from trekking long distance before getting to school.

Since the provision of more schools automatically translates to provision of more quality teachers, the government should make provision and prepare for training of qualified teachers in Nigeria. In this regard, the colleges of education as well as faculties of education in the Universities should wake up to their responsibilities in giving adequate and qualitative training to the prospective teachers. As much as there is need to train a lot of teachers to fill the classrooms, quality must be the watchword. Hence, there is also the need to retrain the existing teachers to reshape their orientation towards qualitative education in Nigeria. Teachers should also be positively motivated to ensure dedication from them. That is the conditions of service for teachers should be improved to keep them on the job.

The state Ministries of Education, as the evaluation body for the UBE scheme cannot afford to go to sleep because the evaluation and monitoring of the programme lie mainly on them. Therefore, the Ministries in collaboration with the State Universal Basic Education boards must be empowered to carry out their responsibilities. Schools should be visited regularly, not to witch hunt, but to ensure that the teachers are performing as expected of them. The visits should not be sporadic so as to put the teachers and the principals on the alert. The students records, too, should be evaluated by the ministry. The Ministry's unit on adult and non-formal education must ensure that the various programmes on adult and non-formal education are properly structured and monitored. These programmes should be taken as a very important aspect of the scheme. The Universal Basic Education commission's impact must be felt at the state and local government levels. The state Universal Basic Education boards at the state level must also visit schools to ascertain that the resources sent to schools are properly handled.

Finally, the Nigerian government should endeavour to conduct a national census that will be devoid of political undertone. Proper and accurate data shall enable proper and accurate projection, which will help the education planners and government plan ahead. This will not bring embarrassment such as not having enough teachers, resources for both teachers and students. To get accurate population data, the government should start to think about emphasizing vital registration system by strengthening the present ad hoc vital registration scheme.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the evolution of universalization of education since 1955 and other attempts of various governments in Nigeria to provide basic education for its citizens in the context of the challenges facing the Universal Basic Education scheme in particular. Some of the challenges mentioned in this study are inadequate funding; poor planning due to incomplete data; the inability of the scheme to reduce the rate of drop outs; inadequate facilities in form of physical structures, instructional materials and even quality teachers and corruption. These challenges were found to be militating against the objectives of the UBE programme. In view of these challenges, the study has suggested certain measures that the country can put in place to help achieve the desired goals of the scheme. The study therefore, suggests intensive campaign among parents to enlighten them about the values of education;

to put into effect the relevant UBE Act; to ensure that fund should provided on the basis of needs and not what the government can afford as it is presently the case and adequate training of teachers to man the schools under the UBE programme.

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