

NIGERIA AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE FUTURE OF TERTIARY EDUCATION IN THE NEW NORMAL

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to assess the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on tertiary education in Nigeria. Consequently, the new normal in education has been in the spotlight since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The mainstream discourse is in favor of online education as the new normal during the pandemic and even in the post-pandemic world. This reflection first examines education in the context of the United Nations' 2030 agenda through the lens of social justice. It then makes a strong case for a caring, inclusive and equitable approach to education as the new normal for the post-COVID-19 era. The role of technology in the new normal as well as in education in general is viewed from the past experiences. The paper argued that the normal - whether new or old - in education should first and foremost embody technology as a means, not an end, although education would be unimaginable without technology. The paper concludes by appealing to stakeholders in education to learn from decades of research and practice in the field of open and distance education. Therefore, the effects of the pandemic on tertiary education system in the country is very important, as it is the institutions through which the youths are prepared for the future and which needs to be adjusted to the changes of the "new normal." This paper is a qualitative study with desk research and document analysis as the main research methods. The study collected secondary data from TV and radio reports, newspapers, scholarly articles, and updates from International Infectious Diseases Institutions like the John Hopkins Centre and the World Health Organization.

Indexing Terms: Covid-19, Pandemic, New Normal, Education.

Introduction

Education occupies a very unique position in the national development of any nation. It is for this reason that the Nigerian government put in place the machinery to ensure that every Nigerian has access to education through its National Policy on Education (NPE) and spending heavily on education in the immediate periods after independence, which compares poorly not only to those of developed Western nations but also to other African countries like Ghana and South Africa.

Going by the country's 1997 and 2000 budget estimate, the Federal Government of Nigeria's expenditure on education was below 10% of the overall budget. Which means that the money appropriated to the education sector amounts to only 8.67% of the total budget of ₦4.92 trillion, which is below the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) recommended baseline for 26% of national budgets in order to impact national development.

Apart from the gross underfunding of the education sector is the long-running misunderstanding between the Federal Government and the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), a union of university academic professors founded in 1978 that at the eve of the pandemic in Nigeria precipitated a nationwide strike of affiliated institutions had disrupted the academic calendar of higher institutions for months. The country has not recovered from its perennial problems of socio-political and socio-economic dimensions which the pandemic has brought to the fore. This is apart from the fact that Nigeria was also dealing with large lassa fever outbreak when the indexed covid-19 case was confirmed.

This paper in its attempt to do justice to the topic examines the concepts of the indexed terms, to thereafter discuss the causes of the covid-19 pandemic and its perception by Nigerians; and its effect on; and the future of education in New Normal Nigeria before offering some recommendations.

Covid-19 Pandemic

In conceptualising the indexed terms used in the paper, a pandemic is the worst case scenario in the realm of infectious diseases. When an epidemic spreads beyond a country's borders, that's when the disease officially becomes a pandemic. Historically, the corona virus is not the first widespread disease that the world has faced, with the World Health Organization listing up to previous 20 global pandemic and epidemic diseases (WHO, 2020). These ranges from symptomatic, asymptomatic to lethal, with viruses and bacteria transmitted from animals and insects to humans.

Official statistics from international health authorities show that, as at September 2021, Africa had recorded more than 200,000 death tolls caused by Covid-19 (AfricaNews, 2021). Even before being declared a global pandemic Paulo-Macapagal (July 20-21, 2020), noted that the state of affairs on the continent had already nosedived due to lack of unpreparedness and the instability of all countries by the magnitude of the effect of the virus leaves them in a state of calamity to act swiftly during the outbreak of the pandemic.

For instance, Nigeria with an estimated population of over 250 is reported to have put little or no measures in place to curb the virus until it recorded the first case of the pandemic, even though there was an ample opportunity to have prevented or, at worst, delayed the spread of the virus in the country. Like Nigeria, many other countries were slow in acting to curb or manage the virus until it spread and was declared a matter of health emergency around the world. It was after this that various governments in Africa changed their slipshod strategy and started acting

swiftly to put measures in place to manage the spread of the pandemic when its spread in their country could have been prevented (AfricaNews, 2021).

To comply with the advised health regulations, African countries, too, had to shut down their economy and major factories and limit people's interactions by putting in place lockdown measures. For a continent with an unstable economy and poverty, keeping its people out of their daily jobs and shutting the major means of livelihood had huge effects on the continent. Consequently, more people had been hurled into poverty while many people lost their jobs.

New Normal

According to Lynas (2020), several conspiracy theories and myth had been spread or originated concerning the origin, cause and spread of the corona virus. Among them are; the 5G radio frequency communications network; that the virus does not attack young people; the virus does not spread in warm climate; the high in-take of "Ogogoro" or "Akpeteshi" (local gin) will boost ones immunity against COVID-19; that the COVID-19 virus does not actually exist and that it is a plot by globalist elite to take away the freedom of others; and, that the pandemic is being manipulated by big pharmaceutical companies to produce and sell drugs (Lynas, 2020).

However, it must be noted that as long as the world has not found a cure or a vaccine for Covid 19 societies may have to adjust to a "new normal" meaning a new way of living and going about our lives, work and interactions with other people. This implies that we may have to live in the "new normal" for a very long time.

Many diseases caused by the viruses have no cure to this day, not even the common cold and there are no vaccines for many diseases either. But countries have learned to adapt our lifestyle to live with them. For instance, HIV (AIDS), it has been around since the 1980's and possibly even before then, although not as widespread and there is still no vaccine for it but anti-retroviral drugs that can control, but not cure it. But the world had to adapt to having HIV in the world.

Societies might have to adapt to Covid19 too, until a cure or vaccine is found. Unlike HIV, Covid19 is a lot contagious and infectious, and is not readily associated to a certain lifestyle. Therefore, our level of adaptation and the changes that have to be made in the lives of the people is much higher. These adaptation and changes are considered the "new normal."

As talks about a "New Normal" in the way people work, live and carry out almost every other activity increase, the education of the present and next generation of Nigerians should not be left out. The pandemic has proven that it is practically impossible to slow down the changes and transformations currently happening to education in Nigeria. At best, what can be done is to put in modalities to deal with and fit into many of these changes so that Nigerian students will not be left out of receiving uninterrupted and quality education in learning institutions.

Education

Akinpelu (1981) defined education as the act or the process of imparting or acquiring general knowledge, developing the power of reasoning and judgement and preparing oneself or other intellectual for a productive life, while Pidlisnyuk (2010) from the perspective of economic productivity, viewed education as an instrument for training human resources to optimize productivity by encouraging technical progress and promoting cultural conditions conducive to social and economic change."

In the history of many developed countries of the world today, the role of education has taken center stage in almost everything that has contributed to genuine development. This is why

a lot of investment in human and capital resources is often made on education and attention is paid to it to guard against real or perceived threats. For the country, the role of education is not different, even though not so much attention is paid to raising the standard of education in many countries on the continent. The utility of education extends beyond training the citizenry to become adept at professions that will generate financial returns for them and economic output for society.

To further underscore the importance of education in the national development of nations, Aminu (2019) quoting Mansur (2013), averred that any responsible government will joke with its education sector. To underscore this importance, the Nigerian Government recognizes that literacy education will help equip individuals with the knowledge skills and attitudes needed for economic self-sufficiency, poverty reduction and sustainable development (NERDC, 2013).

When properly managed, education empowers the individual with the tools to analyze issues, explore accessible information, and consider available options toward attaining enlightened decision-making. Moreover, it makes possible critical thinking that propels the educated mind to scrutinize facts, opinions, and events to achieve objective thoughts and make independent judgment. In essence, an educated person can conceive thoughts for and by themselves and relate with the world based on their reflections and appraisals rather than merely and entirely relying on other societies' actions or thinking deeply about issues and their conclusions. In essence, education engenders critical thinking and self-reflection.

But to say the least, education is a non-negotiable prerequisite for the economic emergence and prosperity of nations. The "Asian Tigers" and various Latin-American nations that have strived to achieve economic dominance in the past century all credit a huge part of their success stories to their vibrant education sectors. This is not hard to find, as human capital development invariably translates to economic development. (Morris, 1996)

Over the past years, the sector has experienced massive and constant growth globally and has consistently triumphed over many of its challenges. COVID-19 however, constitutes a challenge facing the education sector which has never been seen before as it has compelled all agents and stakeholders to adjust to the "New Normal". The pandemic has managed to disrupt the frontiers of learning in Nigeria as in other countries of the developing world

The effect of Covid-19 pandemic on Education on Nigeria's Tertiary Education

The pandemic had disrupted the lives of students and teachers in various ways, depending on their levels. Human Rights Watch research study conducted across various African countries indicates that pre-existing factors aggravated the closure of schools caused by COVID-19 (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely affected education through schools and universities closure (World Bank, 2020). Approximately 1.725 billion students were reported to be affected by closure of educational institutions across the world amid the COVID-19 outbreak. The school closure was to protect health and safety of students (UNESCO, 2020).

As at 5th January 2020, update from United States based John Hopkins Centre for Communicable diseases obtained on Cable News Network (CNN), the world has recorded about 85.5 reported cases of Covid-19 infections. About 57.3 million recovery cases and 1.85 million deaths while there are almost 3 million reported cases, 2.4 million recoveries and almost 68,000 on the African continent. Nigeria on her part has 62,000 confirmed cases of the infection, about 58,000 thousand recoveries and 1,100 (NCDC, 5th January 2020 daily update).

It was reported that the pandemic has resulted in the shutting down of schools and postponements of examinations in about 215 nations of the world (Abid Haleem et al, 2020). No doubt, the closure of schools, due to the global pandemic, has brought about a massive disruption to tertiary education across continents. After the outbreak of the virus in March 2020, and the health authorities established that the spread of the pandemic is being expanded by social and physical interactions, it became necessary to limit social interactions.

With the closure of schools as a health measure and in light of deficient infrastructure provision for virtual schooling in Nigeria, many students across the country stopped receiving education. As expected, when students are kept out of school, the consequences are often beyond normal. For one, the students are rerouted to other endeavours capable of keeping them engaged and fulfilling the necessities for daily survival. Where this continues for long, the need to receive any form of education becomes secondary.

As a matter of fact, higher education in Nigeria has always been in need of urgent interventions. For an educational system that was barely surviving the rapid growth in the world's educational outlook, the pandemic obviously had an unprecedented effect and in a bid to salvage what was left of the academic year, institutions such as private secondary schools and universities in Nigeria began to adopt distance learning models.

This was carried out mainly over the internet, using video conferencing, collaborations, and communications software amongst other programs that enhance virtual learning. Though this virtual learning model seemed to work in the country's private schools, the government-owned universities could not equally implement it and bring back students to learning, even though they were out of the four walls of the traditional classrooms.

According to Onyema (2020), Covid-19 pandemic created multiple problems for education sector leading to decreased education opportunities for underprivileged learners and those in rural areas. This had brought to the front burner the crushing inequality that defines everyday life of Nigerians and creates massive divides between the haves and the have-nots. Moreover, unlike face-to-face interactions, virtual learning requires that students own some seemingly basic electronic gadgets required to receive transmission to connect to teaching online. However, due to the endemic poverty level, these basic gadgets are somewhat beyond the reasonable reach of most Nigerian students, particularly those who study in public institutions. Moreover, the perennial problems of electricity and the high cost of connectivity and data in countries like Nigeria also aggravated the predicament of the students and their instructors.

Thus, there was a situation where only a small percentage of young Nigerians could easily afford the basic needs for the education of the future or had easy access to them, while a larger majority of their colleagues found it extremely difficult to have access to these tools. In addition, the implementation of virtual education in most Nigerian schools has been nothing short of dismal, as fewer topics and less content are taught, with the students becoming responsible for their education (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

Besides the above, the effects of the pandemic have also taken a toll on the integrity of education in developing countries like Nigeria, this is because the absence of real-time interactions between learners and teachers, as it used to be known, has drastically reduced the passion that is always put into the transfer and receipt of knowledge between the two groups. Since many teaching and learning frameworks in the usual school settings no longer apply, there is less motivation to ensure best practices of good school teaching and learning during virtual

schooling. This explains why there is a decrease in the commitment given to academic work by students. In addition, the pandemic also fostered cheating in exams for students, since there were hardly any mechanisms put in place to ensure that students stayed in line with the expected ethical behavior of academics while writing exams.

This situation triggered the exhibitions of other factors which are inimical to maintaining the integrity of education in Nigeria. For instance, there were reports of a rise in unethical academic behaviors such as contract cheating. This involves students outsourcing their academic coursework to other people to help them with their assignments with the agreement to pay upon completion.

The effects of COVID-19 on education in Nigeria, though largely detrimental to academic learning, have exposed many inadequacies in Nigeria's educational system. The feebleness of the fabrics of educational infrastructure of the country creates its tendencies to easily fall off upon an unexpected pressure such as a pandemic like COVID-19. Besides, the effects have already shown how, due to the neglect of the education sector, there are quantifiable implications on the future of education on the country.

To conclude this section, it has been observed that the effects of the pandemic has really shown that there must be a radical shift from the status quo as there is now a "New Normal" created by the pandemic which the perspective of tackling the endemic problems of education in Nigeria must align with to make progress.

The New Normal and the Future of Education in Nigeria

COVID-19 is not the first epidemic that the world has faced in recent years. Nigeria has had its fair share of fast-spreading, highly contagious, viruses like the Ebola virus in the past. However, the currently ravaging pandemic is on a scale that is beyond comprehension, given that other epidemics were eradicated without far-reaching changes to the daily lives of the majority of Nigerian people. COVID-19, with its ravaging speed and global spread, promises to do that and even more than far-reaching changes to the daily lives of the Nigerian people, as the statistics have shown the effect of the pandemic on the overall socio-political economy of countries (Ewang and Wormington, 2021).

The effects on education have clearly shown that there has to be a refocusing of the current educational system in Nigeria. This is not that it will not only just compete with other standard educational systems across the world, but will be flexible enough to adjust to emergencies such as the one created by corona virus without necessarily having rippling effects on the progress and trajectory of learning. In this light, it is important to work toward fitting the educational system of Nigeria into the operations of a "New Normal".

As talks about a "New Normal" in the way we work, live and carry out almost every other activity increase, the education of the present and next generation of Nigerians should not be left out. The pandemic has proven that it is practically impossible to slow down the changes and transformations currently happening to education in developing countries like Nigeria. At best, what can be done is to put in modalities to deal with, and fit into many of these changes so that Nigerian students will not be left out of receiving uninterrupted and quality education in learning institutions across Nigerian. Failure to flow with the times and adapt may result in problems of catastrophic proportions on the country.

There is no doubt that the current educational system has done a lot in its own way to prepare students for living in real life. However, recent experiences and exposure to the 21st-century realities have shown that these preparations might not be enough to meet the demands of the future and the realities of societies.

Examinations and assessments have been the bedrock of educational systems all over the globe for several centuries, with the former being utilized to determine whether students have learned their coursework in a manner sufficient for them to proceed to the advanced phases of education. Both of them are the mechanisms used to grant diplomas, degrees, and other instruments of certifications to students.

However, the pandemic changed schooling, which has had attendant effects on the conception and implementation of what we used to know as examinations. In the past, the subsisting approach was for students to pass through rote learning and then be given to regurgitate what they have supposedly learned in closely monitored and invigilated examination halls without recourse to help or assistance. This means that students do not necessarily have to be physically situated on their respective campuses to receive instructions.

Education becoming borderless means that, going forward, students do not need to converge on the campus to get their assessments written. There is the need to scrutinize the abiding, traditional technique of doing things to incorporate the "New Normal" into the conception and execution of examinations.

One thing to admit is the fact that the pandemic has completely disrupted the mode of learning. To cope with this state of affairs, the teaching and learning content, methodology, and systems may need some overhaul to fit the new medium of knowledge transfer.

Conclusion

The paper concludes that the country needs to key to the "New Normal," The country has to restructure its education system that will usher in a new and robust method of educating its youth through the restructuring and retraining the agents responsible for passing across knowledge so that there can be a seamless transformation into the "New Normal."

Information Technology (IT) education as an instrument for economic and social transformation should play a key role in the reform context through systematically growing and sustaining the culture of reform. At present, there are discernable gaps in the ICT initiatives and infrastructural deficiency at all levels in the context of using education to empower the people.

Finally, COVID-19 has come with a new global worldview of work and lifestyle. And in revamping its education for transformation, there is a window of opportunity for the country to take advantage of today's global information technology access. In summary, the paper will advocate for the declaration of a state of emergency in education sector of the country.

Recommendations

For all of these benefits to be realized, several modalities have to be put in place.

- i. Nigerian schools largely lack the tools of basic technological and digital interaction in the information technology age. As such, the first port of call to harnessing technology to better education as well as the future of the average Nigerians is to make these facilities available in their schools.

- ii. Achieving this will also mean a closure of the poverty gap that exists in the country, as the adoption of technology in the learning mode requires every learner to be carried along to achieve equal learning opportunities.
- iii. To do this, the endemic poverty and the problem of access to the things that ease adoption have to be solved. The gap between the haves and have-nots has to be addressed.
- iv. It is important that the necessary policies that will support the establishment of a system that accommodates credible conduct of the New Normal virtual examinations and the infrastructure that will make it easy in conducting these examinations in preparation for real-life are put in place in Nigeria.
- v. There is no denying that in Nigeria the level of infrastructure that fosters easy learning and teaching is either absent or inadequate. It, therefore, means that before the country's educational system can key into the New Normal and implement the changes it brings, the endemic problem of infrastructure has to be addressed.
- vi. This, calls for political will in the form of an increased allocation of resources in the educational system. To remedy this trend, the paper recommends that government should increase funding to the education sector with a view of meeting the 26% threshold set by UNESCO.

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