

**MULTI-FACETED TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT APPROACHES  
AS PANACEA TO HIGHER EDUCATION GRADUATE  
UNEMPLOYMENT IN NIGERIA**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper posits that if higher education graduate unemployment was only a mere suspicion in the Nigeria of the 1970s, it became an important social challenge in the mid-1980s. A review of the literature revealed that skills mismatch between the training offered by universities and skills required by the market, structural mismatch between middle and upper level manpower production, the scrapping of National Manpower Planning Board and poor attitude towards vocational training are the major factors currently fuelling graduate unemployment in Nigeria. This paper therefore develops a framework for a new policy orientation in matters of higher education employment in Nigeria which will not only take advantage of the existing strengths within the Nigerian economy but will open up massive employment opportunities for higher education graduates. This framework calls for the deliberate opening up of five economic domains for graduate employment, namely, the agricultural, mining, hospitality, vending and Information Communication Technologies. The paper identifies retraining and the provision of basic social amenities to Nigerian communities as catalysts to improved graduate employment in the country as these measures will contribute towards the reduction of social agitation within the communities.

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**Keywords:** Multi-track employment, Multi-faceted training, Higher education, Graduate unemployment, Graduate employment policy framework, Nigeria.

## RÉSUMÉ

Cet article démontre que si le taux de chômage élevé parmi les diplômés de l'enseignement supérieur n'était qu'une simple impression au Nigéria des années 1970, il est devenu un défi social important au milieu des années 1980. Une analyse bibliographique a révélé que l'incompatibilité entre les compétences acquises à travers la formation offerte par les universités et les compétences requises par le marché de travail; ainsi que l'incompatibilité structurelle entre les niveaux de production moyens et supérieurs par la main-d'œuvre; la chute du conseil national de planification de la main-d'œuvre et la mauvaise attitude envers la formation professionnelle sont les principaux facteurs qui causent le chômage des diplômés au Nigeria actuellement. Par conséquent, cet article développe le cadre d'une autre politique pour une nouvelle orientation en matière de l'emploi des diplômés de l'enseignement supérieur au Nigeria. Non seulement ce cadre profitera des points forts existants au sein de l'économie nigériane, mais il ouvrira aussi des possibilités d'emploi massives pour les diplômés de l'enseignement supérieur. Il prévoit l'ouverture délibérée de cinq domaines économiques visant l'emploi des diplômés, à savoir: l'agriculture, l'exploitation minière, l'hôtellerie, la vente, et les technologies de l'information et de la communication. Comme ces mesures contribueront à la réduction du trouble social au sein des communautés, cet article identifie les programmes de recyclage et l'approvisionnement des équipements sociaux de base aux communautés nigérianes comme catalyseurs à l'amélioration nationale de l'emploi des diplômés.

## Introduction

In addition to developing and promoting scholarship among beneficiaries of tertiary education, the goal of tertiary education in Nigeria is to “contribute to national development through high level relevant manpower training” (Federal Republic of

Nigeria, 2004 p.36). Through the few existing tertiary education institutions in the country between 1960 (the year of Nigeria's political independence) and the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Nigeria's tertiary education sector carried out its mandate as best as it could. For example, between 1960 and the 1980s, it supplied the country with high level manpower that eventually filled the employment vacuum created by the departure of colonial civil servants and the few jobs created within the private sector during the period under review (Biao, 2013).

Additionally, under the constant pressure of the actions of the Nigerian Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and in preparation for the declaration of the World Bank and other development partners' support for African higher education development (Teffer, 2009), Nigeria reformed its higher education policy in 2000 to allow *"for increased institutional autonomy, greater system differentiation, strengthened governance, and mechanisms for quality assurance"* (Sainta, Hartnett and Strassner, 2003). These same reforms sought *"to create a more flexible and responsive system of university teaching and research that, over time, will contribute increasingly to national innovation capacities, productivity gains, and economic growth"* (Sainta, Hartnett and Strassner, 2003).

The 2000-2003 Nigeria's higher education policy reforms were partially promulgated in response to the already worrisome and increasing graduate unemployment trends. The beginning of graduate unemployment in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular may be traced to the 1980s world economic recession (Hepp, 2005). It was during this period of one of the world debt crises, that Nigeria introduced the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) (Ogbonna, 2012) that squeezed life out of many sectors of the economy, a situation which in its turn threw a number of people out of well paid jobs and made it difficult for a growing number of the products of the Nigerian higher education to get employment. Although some amount of graduate unemployment incidence was suspected after the Nigerian civil war, *"Diejomaoh (1979) in a study conducted at the human resource unit of the university of Lagos found that the incidence of graduate unemployment between 1965 and 1972 was not a serious problem"* (Elegbede, 2011). It was therefore beginning from the 1980s that Nigeria's graduate unemployment came to the fore as an issue of concern and from this period on, Nigeria's graduate unemployment has not stopped being a topic of national, regional and international discourse.

This paper seeks to appraise the current situation of graduate unemployment in Nigeria with a view to enunciating possible solutions to this social menace that seems to have defied all remedies for more than three decades.

### **Higher Education in Nigeria**

Higher or tertiary education in Nigeria is a four-stage institutional frame of education. At the peak of this institutional hierarchy are universities while the monotechnics make up the base of the institutional frame. *“Tertiary education is the education given after secondary education in universities, colleges of education, polytechnics, monotechnics including those institutions offering correspondence courses”* (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004 p.36).

Of all the types of reference institutions constituting higher education in Nigeria, the universities are the most respected and from them, much is expected. Therefore, while the current discussion refers to all the institutions within the higher education gamut in a general manner, the discussion of graduate unemployment focuses on the universities and their products.

The first university was established in Nigeria in 1948. That university was known as the University College Ibadan (Omole and Sarumi, 2002). Between 1948 and the year 2014, the number of approved universities has grown exponentially and it now stands at 131(a number of yet to be approved universities operate within the country) (National Universities Commission, 2014). Forty-five polytechnics and 37 colleges of education currently exist in the country (Commissions of Polytechnics and Colleges of Education, 2014).

These more than 200 higher education institutions churn out thousands of graduates on an annual basis who are expected to contribute to national development through gainful employment. Unfortunately, over the last three decades or so, employment and/or the right employment are not always available to be accessed by these graduates.

### **Higher Education Graduate Unemployment in Nigeria**

Unemployment arises in *“a situation where someone of working age is not able to get a job but would like to be in full time employment”* (Pettinger, 2013). There exist different types of unemployment including *“demand deficient unemployment”*,

“*structural unemployment*”, “*real wage unemployment*”, “*frictional unemployment*” and “*voluntary unemployment*” (Castells-Quintana & Royuela, 2013; Pettinger, 2013).

Demand deficient unemployment occurs when, as result of cut back in output because of lack or slow level of demand of goods and/or services, organisations lay off or do not employ personnel that consequently remains out of work. Structural unemployment is caused by mismatch of skills wherein the available workforce possesses only skills that are not suitable for the available jobs or where skilled workers are unable to relocate to the location where their skills are needed. Real wage unemployment or classical unemployment arises when wages are set too high to permit the hiring of more employees than organisations can otherwise pay. Frictional unemployment or search unemployment is the time lapse between the time an individual searches for job and the time s/he gets an employment while voluntary unemployment refers to a situation where an individual decides not to take up employment as a result of a variety of reasons including lack of adequate incentives (Pettinger, 2013; Castells-Quintana & Royuela, 2013).

All but voluntary and classical unemployment are unemployment types impacting higher education graduates in Nigeria. While graduate unemployment began gradually during the SAP days, as stated earlier, three decades later, it has assumed alarming proportions so much so that labour experts themselves have come to describe the phenomenon as overwhelming.

As a general situation, about 75% of Sub-Saharan Africa’s youths were found to be unemployed during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Devlin, 2014) and about sixty percent (60%) of Sub-Saharan Africa’s higher education graduates have specifically been found to be out of job annually through the last one and a half decades (Association of African Universities, 2013). In Nigeria, the graduate unemployment situation has been found to be much worse and more dramatic. Nwagu (2014) submitted that between 2006 and 2011 the incidence of graduate unemployment increased three fold from 7million to about 19million unemployed graduates. Adejimola and Olufunmilayo (2009) reported that about 80% of the graduates find it difficult to get employment every year. So worrisome has the situation become that “*The minister of finance, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, recently said she is losing sleep over the issue of unemployment in the country.*” (BusinessDay, November 19, 2013). Recent events have come to reveal even a more heart-breaking image of graduate unemployment in the country.

Not long ago, a Federal Government agency put up an advertisement for recruitment and on the D-day, the mammoth crowd of applicants was too much for the officials of the agency to control, resulting in the death of some of the applicants due to exhaustion. Similarly, another agency of the Federal

Government recently opted for recruitment through online registration, perhaps to prevent the kind of mayhem discussed above and reduce the number of applicants, but at the end of it, 120,000 applications were received – all jostling for 25 vacant positions (BusinessDay, November 19, 2013).

What then are the causes of higher education graduate unemployment in Nigeria?

### **Reasons Accounting For Higher Education Graduate Unemployment**

A number of recent studies have highlighted the possible causes of higher education graduate unemployment in Nigeria. These studies include those of Nwagu (2014), Akinyemi, Ofem and Ikuenomore (2012), Bassey and Atan (2012), Adawo, Essien and Ekpo (2012), Anho (2011), Ajayi, Adeniji and Adu (2008) and Babalola (2007), to cite but a few.

Skills mismatch between the training offered by universities and skills required by the market (Akinyemi, Ofem and Ikuenomore, 2012; Adawo, Essien and Ekpo, 2012; Adeyemo, 2011; Anho, 2011; Ajayi, Adeniji, and Adu 2008, and Babalola 2007, structural mismatch between middle and upper level manpower production and the scrapping of National Manpower Planning Board (Babalola, 2007), unavailability of market information (Bassey and Atan, 2012; Babalola, 2007) and personal and social insecurity (Adawo, Essien and Ekpo, 2012; Babalola, 2007) were some of the factors identified as being the root causes of graduate unemployment in Nigeria.

Other causes of graduate unemployment have been found to be low quality of education resulting in deficiency in the use of English language and lack of critical thinking ability among graduates (Akinyemi, Ofem and Ikuenomore, 2012), poor social and economic infrastructures (Adawo, Essien and Ekpo, 2012; Babalola, 2007), attitude towards vocational training (Babalola, 2007), neglect of the agricultural sector (Babalola, 2007) and slow growth of labour demand (Nwagu, 2014).

A number of recommendations as to the manners in which the highlighted inadequacies may be addressed have equally been made. The reintroduction of the National Manpower Planning Board (Akinyemi, Ofem and Ikuenomore, 2012) has been advocated. Also, the promotion of entrepreneurial skills training and agricultural development on a national scale have been suggested (Nwagu, 2014; Babalola, 2007). Partnership between the university and the private sector, including the industrial and commercial sectors (Adawo, Essien and Ekpo, 2012; Ajayi, Adeniji, and Adu, 2008; Babalola, 2007), has equally been advocated.

### **Past Efforts at Tackling Higher Education Graduate Unemployment**

Beginning from the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a number of initiatives aimed at combating graduate unemployment have been embarked upon by various sectors of the Nigerian society.

As stated earlier, the Nigerian Federal Government granted autonomy to university administrations (Sainta, Hartnett and Strassner, 2003) with a view to encouraging them to embark on the development of various study programmes whose aim would be to open up various and greater employment opportunities for their graduates. However, education in itself does not create jobs (Thompson, 1981). Therefore no matter how hard the universities tried to diversify their curricula, unless deliberate efforts were made by all tiers of government to open up new areas of employment commensurate to the various types of training received by graduates, graduate unemployment will remain a discourse for a long time to come. The opening up of new employment spheres demand huge capitals which are held only by governments and the private sector.

Credible and accelerated collaborative works equally began between Nigerian universities and corporate organizations and industries in the country during the period under review. For example, such collaborations resulted in donations by industries and corporate organizations of laboratories and lecture buildings to universities across the country and in promises of employment to potential graduates of selected universities in the country (Babalola, 2007). Additionally, a few well established universities did enter into potential mass production partnerships with industries in the areas of the development of environmentally friendly cooking stoves, the use of “*municipal solid waste*” for the purpose of generating fuel and electricity and the use of “*poultry, cow and kitchen wastes*” for the production of biogas (Ojolo and Oke, 2007; Ojolo, Dinrifo, and Adesuyi, 2007; Ojolo and Bamgboye, 2005).

However, while the number of universities kept growing throughout the last decade and a half, the number of industries and corporate organizations kept decreasing in Nigeria as a result of social and corporate insecurity engendered by terrorist activities. Therefore with all the good intention and support towards promoting university-industry collaboration, the efforts can only yield negative results in the absence of sizeable industrial activities and a minimal enabling environment that could first and foremost promote the growth of industries in both quantitative and qualitative terms.

Even before university-industry-corporate world collaborations began to be taken most seriously, the pre-21<sup>st</sup> century period witnessed a loud call for the development

and expansion of the informal sector of the economy as a means of combating graduate unemployment (Omolewa, 2001; Geo-Jaja, 1990). Yet, while

..the informal market and self-employment are sometimes described as the best available remedy for a chronic scarcity of jobs and the attendant dangers of unrest in developing countries (e.g. De Soto, 1998), in fact success in that realm typically requires three complementary kinds of resources to at least some initial degree: start-up funds; opportunities to access viable markets on reasonable terms and with some level of equity and security; and the requisite skills, experience and/or and knowledge. The first two types of resources are typically quite hard to come by in rural and depressed urban environments... (Easton, 2014 p.159).

In a sum, numerous efforts, including higher education policy reforms, university-industry-corporate world collaborations and the stimulation of the informal sector for job creation, have been deployed in both the distant and recent past to address graduate unemployment within Nigeria; yet, the challenge remains colossal and daunting. Which way forward then?

### **Quo Va Dis?**

Judging from the current intractable nature of graduate unemployment, acknowledging the fact that the growth in the number of industries and job opportunities has continually trailed behind the growth in the number of higher education graduates, noting that a number of initiatives have been rolled out to address this challenge at various times in the lifespan of Nigeria and realizing that not one of these earlier initiatives has been effective enough to put a dent into the graduate unemployment problem of the country, alternative solutions are here suggested.

Only a multi-pronged solution and a multiplicity of approaches can realistically address the Nigerian graduate unemployment in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is because the issue has now grown into a monster that cannot be wrestled out of existence through a single shot-solution.

Consequently, it is recommended that the government of Nigeria should urgently prioritize five domains within which employment should be massively created within the next decade. These domains include agriculture (crop, animal, fisheries farming), mining, hospitality, vending and information and communication technologies (ICTs).

The choice of these five domains was informed by current and immediate future realities concerning the Nigerian social and economic performances. These domains



are areas within which activities attract huge earnings and they are also domains within which there still exists plenty room for expansion and accommodation for potential new entrants. For example, despite Nigeria's renowned performance within the petroleum sector, agriculture remains the dominant economic activity and the mainstay of the economy. In 1999, 2000, 2008, and 2010, agriculture contributed 41%, 43%, 42%, and 32.5% of Nigeria's GDP, respectively, against 18% and 20% derived from petroleum (Banful, Nkonya & Oboh, 2009; Index Mundi, 2013). Also, about 70% of Nigerians are involved in subsistence farming (Ragasa, Babu, Abdullahi and Abubakar, 2010). In addition to petroleum and natural gas,

Nigeria also has large deposits of gold, tantalum-niobium, lead, zinc, coal and bitumen. The Mining and Minerals Decree (Law No. 34 of 1999), invests all mineral rights in the federal government. Currently the solid mineral sector in Nigeria is underdeveloped. In 2006, the Ministry of Solid Minerals Development (MSMD) completed the revalidation of 1,450 mining licenses, including 33 provisional approvals (Natural Resource Governance Institute, 2014).

The hospitality industry in Nigeria is a virgin domain which promises to be a cash spinner. While a few states, including Cross River, Enugu and Lagos states, have begun exposing and exploiting some of their own hospitality resources, much remains to be developed in this sector.

The practice of vending (retail trade by the corners of streets) is currently an unregulated trade practice not only in Nigeria but in the whole of Africa. As crude as it currently is however, it has proven to be a fairly good instrument against extreme poverty in many parts of Africa.

.. almost three-quarters of street traders are their household's main breadwinner. Approximately one-third of street trader households have no other earners (Motala, 2002 p. ix).

Additionally, when the total economic activities happening in the streets are examined, it usually turns out that a huge chunk of national economic exchanges are transacted through this informal sector of the economy in Africa.

The economic value of the informal economy is measured in terms of the flow of goods and money in the economy and the employment that it generates. "In peak season, some 28 tonnes of cooked mealies are sold every working day to commuters arriving in the central city. This amounts to a daily turnover of around ZAR 200000,31 and in a five-day week, a turnover of around ZAR 1 million." (Motala, 2002 p.12).

All that is needed in this informal sector therefore, is a bit of organization that can turn the sector into a huge employment hub.

The domain of Information Communication Technologies is one sector within which the near totality of unemployed Nigerian graduates can make a living if this domain were to be developed. This is because ICTs are of natural attraction to the youth and activities within the domain have been known to generate substantial financial returns as well as keeping the youth productively engaged. For example, Hernando and Nunez (2004) opined that the “contribution of ICT inputs to output and labour productivity growth” usually tends to be significant.

In order to successfully open up the five domains of employment advocated here, four major steps need to be taken. First, a deliberate and substantial budgeting aimed at funding the provision of infrastructural support for the establishment of the domains need to be undertaken. Second, unemployed graduates need to be sensitized on the need for them to consider making a career within any one of the five domains. Third, a gigantic national retraining facility needs to be conceptualized and put in place with a view to receiving fresh higher education graduates who will be equipped with skills that would facilitate their access to one or all of the opened up domains of employment and fourth, the campaign for the opening up of the five domains of employment must be sustained for at least a decade if a significant positive result is to come out of the recommended policy framework.

One additional way of fighting higher education graduate unemployment in the country is to reinvigorate the Nigerian Foreign Aid Service which enables Nigeria to supply higher education graduate level manpower to other less endowed countries on the African continent. Through an Aid Programme such as this, not only would Nigeria be contributing to partially solving its own graduate unemployment, it would equally be helping to develop manpower in other countries within the continent.

The success of this whole graduate employment campaign is hinged upon the existence of a conducive social environment. Growth in graduate employment will thrive only within an atmosphere of social security. The surest way of providing social security is through the enhancement of a sense of belonging within the Nigerian communities. The sense of belonging of Nigerian communities would naturally be enhanced through adequate provision of modern social amenities and the provision of minimal infrastructure that promote and guarantee not only a minimum standard of living but also a means of gainfully exploiting one’s skills.

### **Conclusion**

The recognition and acceptance of the fact that higher education graduate unemployment does exist within the borders of Nigeria is one important step that leads to the hope that this social menace would someday be given the attention that it deserves. The knowledge of the sheer magnitude of the challenge is another factor that would help to devise the appropriate ways and means of tackling this challenge.

Judging from the high unemployment statistics and the hurting lived experiences of jobless graduates, it can safely be concluded that the graduate unemployment scenario of Nigeria has reached a shouting situation that cannot be solved using one panacea only. An effective solution to Nigeria's higher education unemployment necessarily demands a multi-track approach and a sound graduate employment policy, the framework of which was enunciated earlier in this article.

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