

The Economic Recovery and Growth Plan, National Universities Commission, Falling Academic Standards and Nigerian Development

Rose Mbatomon Ako

Department of Economics, Nasarawa State University, Keffi, Nigeria

Abstract

This paper examines education priorities, the contribution of national universities commission (NUC) to falling academic standards and Nigerian Education in the ECOWAS context. Education is crucial in development but it appears Nigeria's Economic Recovery and Growth Plan (ERGP) does not consider Education a priority sector despite its pre-eminence as a Sustainable Development Goal (SDG). The ERGP does not consider executing anything about education and improving human capital is not a priority. Also, its design indicates no lessons learnt from the fact that growth without development was a significant trigger for Nigeria's deep recession. Nigeria's economy which in 10 years (2005-2015) grew at about 6.3% annually only to plunge into a lingering recession in the 11th year in 2016 was not a case of "structural challenges" but structural neglect. Moreover, the ERGP's touted plan to "Introduce post-university skills development institutions (PUSDIs)" itself is a tacit admission to the failure of Nigeria's universities to deliver quality graduates and the government/NUC bears significant blame. Also, Nigeria with preponderance of universities does not measure up in competition in the 1000 world ranking. Furthermore, Nigeria's performance in higher education is one of the lowest in ECOWAS, being third from the bottom position with Government expenditure on Education as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) estimated at under 2%. A well-rounded multidimensional education is what sustains development and should be the practice championed by NUC contrary to current practices. It is instructive that Nigerian government commands the least vote of confidence (41%) from the citizens amongst the ECOWAS Member States. The paper recommends that as with the new global thinking and in line with SDGs, education should be a priority in Nigeria and universities should be treated as mind-set transformation agents for a future of solving the challenges of national development. The current one-dimensional tertiary education being championed by NUC should be replaced with multidimensional education and university curricula be redesigned for knowledge application. Multinational companies in Nigeria should be made to set aside a fraction of their profits for research support in universities as they do in other developed countries.

Keywords: *University education, Quality, Economic plan, Sustainable development*

Corresponding Author: Rose Mbatomon Ako

Background to the Study

The Economic Recovery and Growth Plan -ERGP

The first two opening sentences introducing the Economic Recovery and Growth Plan -ERGP document says “Nigeria has the potential to become a major player in the global economy by virtue of its human and natural resource endowments. However, this potential has remained relatively untapped over the years”. Wonderful; but then comes the irony. Of the eight deliverable outcomes projected by the ERGP for 2020 (see BOX 1), the ERGP is completely silent on developing the acclaimed “relatively untapped” human resource endowments of Nigeria. Still in the introductory section, we are told the ERGP is a Medium Term Plan for 2017 – 2020, that builds on the Strategic Implementation Plan (SIP) for the 2016 Budget and has been developed for the purpose of restoring economic growth while leveraging the ingenuity and resilience of the Nigerian people – the nation's most priceless assets. Again, the ERGP is silent on how the acclaimed “ingenuity and resilience of the Nigerian people – the nation's most priceless assets” is to be leveraged by the deliverable outcomes projected.

BOX 1: ERGP Deliverable Outcomes

1. Stable Macroeconomic Environment
2. Restoration of Growth
3. Agricultural transformation and food security
4. Power and petroleum products sufficiency
5. Improved Stock of Transportation Infrastructure
6. Industrialized Economy
7. Job Creation and youth empowerment
8. Improved Foreign Exchange Inflows

We are further told “the ERGP is also consistent with the aspirations of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), given that the initiatives address its three dimensions of economic, social and environmental sustainability issues”. The SDG concerning education is Goal 4 and it is specifically SDG 4.3 (see BOX 2) that is the focus of this paper. But then, the eight deliverable outcomes projected (see BOX 1) are largely economic with barely anything on social issues. We are also told “the ERGP aims to restore sustained economic growth while promoting social inclusion and laying the foundations for long-term structural change” and that its programmes and policies “requires a healthy, educated citizenry able to establish businesses that create jobs, a hardworking and productive workforce”. It is worrisome that while other countries in Africa in their vision plans for similar periods give high priority to education as instrumental in fostering socio-economic transformation in the lives of the people, Nigeria's ERGP does not consider Education a priority sector, neither does it indicate in any form that Education has “potential to drive growth and contribute to GDP growth”, has “ability to respond strongly to stimulus”, or that it has “the flexibility of production methods and capacity to innovate and generate large-scale employment”.

BOX 2: SDG4 on Education

SDG 4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

SDG 4.3. By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university

This is even as this ERGP document acknowledges “Human development indicators paint a bleak picture of Nigeria's health and education systems” and indicates three broad strategic objectives: (1) restoring growth, (2) investing in our people, and (3) building a globally competitive economy.

Furthermore, in order to meet the objective of “investing in our people”, “the Federal Government will invest in health and education to fill the skills gap in the economy, and meet the international targets set under the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)” and this is supposed to “Improved human capital”. Moreover, occupying position 4 out of 17 on the list of SDGs clearly indicate education should be of high priority. Nevertheless, regarding education, the ERGP merely contains some sound bites and clever jargons without much substance since “to achieve the objectives of the ERGP, the key execution priorities, are completely silent on education (see BOX 3). Hence, while the ERGP document contains few “Education Strategies” including to “Improve the quality of education by strengthening quality assurance” and key activities such as “Review and restructure the education curriculum in line with international best practices” as well as “Introduce post-university skills development institutions (PUSDI)s”, executing anything about education or Improving human capital is not a priority in the ERGP. Moreover, the ERGP's touted plan to “Introduce post-university skills development institutions (PUSDI)s” itself is a tacit admission to the failure of Nigeria's universities to deliver graduates with requisite skills to develop the country.

BOX 3: ERGP Key Execution Priorities

- (1) Stabilizing the macroeconomic environment
- (2) Achieving agriculture and food security
- (3) Ensuring energy sufficiency (power and petroleum products)
- (4) Improving transportation infrastructure
- (5) Driving industrialization focusing on Small and Medium Scale Enterprises

Objective of the Study

This paper aims to bring out some food for thought in the debate concerning the continued lack of adequate attention and lip service to education by successive governments in Nigeria. Specifically, the paper examines how this could be contributing to falling academic standards in the Universities and Nigeria's continued under development in the context of growth versus

development. The paper also investigates the role of the national universities commission (NUC) and how the NUC could be contributing to falling academic standards in the Universities. The state of Education affairs in Nigeria is also situated in the ECOWAS context.

Methodology

The study employs desk review methodology whereby pertinent documents from various sources are reviewed. Building up on the introductory review of the ERGP document, other documents reviewed include the Nigerian Government's NUC Act, The World Bank's World Development Reports (WDR), United Nations Reports (UNDP's Human Development Reports, UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report and Sustainable Development Goals) as well as the Global Competitiveness Report of the World Economic Forum. Along with these documents, relevant studies/research reports in literature are reviewed.

Following this introduction, Section Two presents discussions on the concepts of Growth and Development and the focus of Nigeria while Section Three dwells on the Importance of Education in Development. Section Four discusses the role of NUC and the falling academic standards in Nigerian universities while Section Five concludes with some policy recommendations.

Should Nigeria's Focus be on Growth or Development: The Difference?

Growth and development can both be negative but for the purpose of this review, the focus is on their positive aspects. The difference between growth and development is not just semantics. Growth indicates a quantifiable change in size while development indicates a transformation or improvement of structure. The growth in physical size is measurable and refers to physical change whereas development is physical as well as social or psychological change. Growth means an increase while development implies improvement in quality. All things being equal, growth should lead to development but we know all things are never equal in real life. This means there could be growth without development. For instance, the proceeds of economic growth could be wasted or retained by a small wealthy elite as Nigeria's recent recession exemplify. On the other hand, the advent of development must necessarily engender some growth. Growth means becoming bigger or larger or having more importance and is related to quantitative improvement while development is related to both quantitative and qualitative improvement. Hence, growth is contained in development. Growth can be instantaneous but development necessarily is gradual.

When we say development is shown by the qualitative improvement of circumstances, it means that as something develops, the quality of the whole improves. Hence, the advance of economic development in a country implies quality standards all round. When countries are referred to as developed and developing or under developed, the issue at stake is structural transformation. The developed countries have transformed their structures whereas the under developed or developing countries have structures not yet transformed.

In this context, it appears developers of the ERGP and the policy makers behind it did not learn much lessons from Nigeria's deep recession and the fact that growth without development played a very significant role in triggering the recession (Ako 2017). It is instructive that an economy which in the 10 years between 2005 and 2015 grew at an average 6.3 per cent annually only to plunge into a lingering recession in the 11th year in 2016 was not a case of "structural challenges" but structural neglect; whereby the economy is highly dependent on the oil and gas

sector which accounts for just 10 per cent of GDP whilst neglecting the other sectors that account for about 90 per cent of GDP. Just like other national plans before it, the ERGP is largely growth oriented. Unless and until policy makers understand the differences between growth and development and that the two are not synonymous and focus appropriately, Nigeria will yet remain in a quagmire of stunted development with unending cycles of growth without development. Nigeria is classified a developing nation for a reason and yet, here we are AGAIN with an ERGP clearly focusing on growth and not development. The pertinent question here is when will Nigeria learn? It is the people that develop a place. Develop a people and the place will become developed. The persistent preoccupation of government and policy makers with “macroeconomic stability” at the expense of people's development as amplified in the current ERGP makes no sense in Nigeria's current underdevelopment. Moreover, this is a sad but true reflection of the falling academic standards in Nigerian Universities i.e. playing to the gallery and lip service; for which the government/national universities commission (NUC) bears significant blame.

The Importance of Education in Development

The importance of education has been highlighted over the years by various world bodies such as The World Bank and United Nations in their reports and programs (World Development Reports -WDR, Human Development Reports and Sustainable Development Goals). These world bodies recognize that education systems are inevitably embedded in complex social, political, economic, and cultural contexts.

For instance, WDR-2006 considered the role education plays in reducing poverty and inequality whereby it was demonstrated that an educated workforce is necessary for a high national standard of living and that increasing the human capital of the poor is likely one of the most effective ways to reduce poverty and increase upward economic mobility. The WDR-2007 and WDR-2013 touched on the importance of skills accumulation as a part of a youth or jobs agenda and demonstrated that schooling, skills, and the knowledge that result from them improve employment and productivity, health outcomes, quality of governance, and many other outcomes. In the WDR-2012, education as a marker, and driver, of gender equality is highlighted while in the forthcoming WDR2018, The World Bank is focusing on realizing the promise of education for development “to provide guidance on how to expand the scope and quality of education around the world”.

The Concept Note for the forthcoming World Development Report 2018 has four main points including: that (i) education is a powerful driver of both individual and national well-being, but it could achieve much more than it is now achieving; and that (ii) promoting universal learning and skills is the priority now—because while the world has achieved massive growth in school participation in recent years, many systems have struggled to ensure that students learn and acquire relevant skills, at a time when jobs are changing rapidly.

The WDR2018 Concept Note further posits that promoting learning and skills at scale requires much more than getting these interventions right: it requires careful attention to the technical, political, and social challenges of aligning an education system toward delivering relevant learning and skills. According to this Concept Note, getting education right is clearly a core responsibility of public policy and that education is a foundational building block for achieving nearly every other development goal. The Benefits of Education cover economic and non- economic benefits, for both individuals and societies (Poverty and Shared Prosperity reports 2016 and 2017, WDR2018 Concept Note).

Individual Benefits of Education in Development

At the individual level, education is the most powerful and consistent tool for escaping poverty—and increasing access to education can help close social gaps linked to different forms of exclusion such as gender, disability and others. One of the most vigorous results in microeconomics is that schooling usually leads to increased earnings of about 6 to 12 percent for each year of education. Hence, educating people is the definite way to extricate them from poverty since education is a powerful instrument for eradicating poverty and promoting shared prosperity. Additionally, education's benefits are not just economic. “Even controlling for income, education improves health, resilience, and life satisfaction, and its benefits are manifested across generations, as education inhibits the intergenerational transmission of poverty”. This implies “educated individuals lead healthier lives and are more engaged citizens, and their families end up healthier and better educated—reducing the intergenerational transmission of poverty” (WDR2018 Concept Note).

National and Social Benefits of Education in Development

At the national level, education has been shown constantly to strengthen sustained growth and development. Theoretical models consistently consider human capital as a significant determinant of growth in developing or developed nations. Also, beyond its direct impacts, education increases the returns to other investments and policies. For instance, education enables individuals to make better use of financial or health products and to adopt and disseminate new technologies. This multiplier effect is implicit in many theoretical models of growth, which suggest an interaction between physical and human capital. Empirical studies also indicate education was the critical factor that enabled countries to take advantage of other reforms and investments or technological breakthroughs such as the export-oriented policy reforms in East Asia, (WDR2018 Concept Note).

At the community and societal level, education increases productivity, economic growth, social capital and leads to better-functioning institutions and service delivery. Education multiplies the effects of other interventions and policies, such as agricultural extension, provision of health care, or improvements in infrastructure etc. Furthermore, improvements in society-wide governance depends on well-educated citizens and government officials. Education can also engender greater social cohesion, and since human capital is difficult for others to appropriate (unlike natural resources or even physical capital), wealth built on human capital can create fewer incentives for conflict than other types of wealth. Finally, education has been consistently associated with reducing behaviors that have negative externalities such as smoking and crime (WDR2018 Concept Note).

BOX 4: SDG4 on Education

SDG 4.7. By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development.

Global Benefits of Education in Development

Education was one of the keys to the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) whose target was 2015, and it is still fundamental to the current Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) whose target is year 2030. Education was number two MDG and it is currently number four SDG (see BOX 2). Additionally, UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report (GEMR 2016) reviews the ways in which education can contribute to all of the Sustainable Development Goals. The GEMR 2016 discusses target 4.7 of SDG 4 which is on sustainable development and global citizenship and touches on social, humanistic and moral purposes of education. Target 4.7 (see BOX 4) explicitly links education to other SDGs and captures the transformative aspirations of the new global development agenda (GEMR 2016). In the new thinking, higher education is recognized as the instrument of development in the new knowledge economy whereby the new modes of economic growth are dependent on knowledge and information technology (WDRs –various).

The Learning Crisis

In a changing and multifaceted world, education and knowledge are increasingly becoming the foundation for - and drivers of - economic, social and institutional growth (Awiti, 2014; Bloom et al., 2006). Education's higher institutions thus influence the economic competitiveness of individual nations and regions. As the global economy and the nature and demands of jobs change, due to global integration and the growth of the digital economy, education systems and the types of skills imparted at various levels of education may need to change to ensure that the range of skills acquired are relevant. Also, the quality of the programs aimed at delivering those skills will become even more relevant (WDRs –various).

However, despite gains in access to education, it has been observed in recent times that schooling does not necessarily lead to learning and this undermines the potential benefits of education. In this respect, recent assessments of student learning have highlighted that many children and youth are leaving school unequipped with the skills they need for life and work, and often without even the most foundational literacy and numeracy skills. Although tertiary enrolment have surged, evidence is mounting that students are learning far too little in many countries, relative both to the countries' own learning standards and to common-sense expectations about what schooling should deliver— as well as to the demands from the labor market (WDR2018 Concept Note). In Nigeria, this evidence is exemplified in recent times by universities being forced to conduct post-Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examinations (post-UTME) since 2005 to confirm quality of prospective students before offering admissions. These post-UTMEs were briefly proscribed in 2016 but have been re-introduced in 2017. Moreover, different universities also apply different UTME cut off (minimum) marks to ensure maintenance of university specific standards. The WDR 2018 is billed to present evidence on the proximate causes of the learning crisis—such as poor readiness to learn, shortcomings in teacher preparation, inputs that never reach the classroom, and education and training systems that do not link well to societal or economic needs. The costs of these learning and skills deficits will grow as markets continue to globalize and technology transforms the world of work (WDR2018 Concept Note).

Tertiary Education, the National Universities Commission and Falling Academic Standards in Nigeria

Tertiary Education in Nigeria

Tertiary education ranges from short courses to bachelor, master and doctoral programmes and tertiary institutions vary widely in terms of size, cost, courses, procedures and quality. However, global enrolment in tertiary education doubled from 100 million in 2000 to 207 million in 2014 but disparity across and within countries is huge (GEMR 2016). For instance, in the fifty seven (57) years since independence, the education system in Nigeria has evolved from only one institution of higher education –Yaba College founded in 1932 in Yaba to the University College Ibadan in 1948 to almost 500 tertiary institutions in 2017. Of these tertiary institutions, about 153 are universities with a further 200 applications for private universities pending approval in 2017. The classification of these tertiary institutions in Nigeria is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Types and Ownership of Universities Recognized by NUC

INSTITUTION	OWNERSHIP		PRIVATE	Total Number
	PUBLIC			
	Federal	State		
Universities	40	45	68	153
Polytechnics	26	45	41	112
Monotechnics	35	28	5	68
Colleges	33	50	71	154

Sources: NUC and JAMB

However, differences in national policy structures and resources, and in institutional missions, pose considerable barriers to a meaningful global measure of quality in tertiary education. Hence, university rankings attract attention because they are simple to understand, but such rankings are usually based on research rather than teaching quality or student learning. In this respect, it is of concern that Nigerian universities are consistently missing in the ranking list of 1000 universities worldwide. The current QS World University Rankings features 18 African universities, 9 of which are in South Africa and 5 from Egypt. Ghana, Morocco, Uganda and Kenya have one entrant each in the 1000 university ranking. It should be of great concern that other countries in Africa with fewer universities meet the 1000 world ranking but Nigeria with preponderance of universities does not measure up. Thus, while the number of universities in Nigeria has grown significantly and Nigeria may have the highest number of universities in Africa, this growth has not translated into improvement in quality.

The National Universities Commission's (NUC) Quality Assurance and Falling Academic Standards in Nigeria

Education Quality Outputs/Outcomes/Impacts

Gerner (1971) argues that education may be viewed, at least in part, as a deliberate process of production which requires Input-Output Model to evaluate its performance and impact on economic development. Input-output analysis in economics refers to the study of the effects that different sectors have on the economy as a whole, for a particular nation or region. The Input-Output analysis requires not only the inputs invested in, the processes required to transform the inputs into products and the products themselves but also the pertinent relationships to achieve the stated goals (Stufflebeam and Shinkfield, 1985). The Model

postulates that the quality and quantity of inputs and the quality of the process determines the quality of the output/outcome of an education industry. For instance, the quantity and quality of lecturers, students, learning materials and lecture rooms, curricula and teaching methodologies and how they interact in the learning process determine the quality of outputs/outcomes.

In the Input-Output analysis, we may differentiate outputs from outcomes/impacts in that Outputs relate to "what we do" while Outcomes/impacts refer to "what difference is there" (Wetengere 2016). In this sense, the outputs of the education system include academic achievements, changes in attitudes and behaviours, productivity on-the-job and good citizenship. Other attainments of quality education are linked to community participation, learner confidence, enhanced life-skills and the capability to make responsible choices and resolve conflict. According to UNICEF (undated), Quality outcomes are what students know and what they can do as well as their attitudes and the expectations they have for themselves and their societies. On the other hand, Schreyer (2009) and Fraumeni et al. (2008) define the output of the education sector as the effect of education processes on the level of competences (the amount of knowledge, skills, understanding and attitudes) students have attained or possessed after completion of studies. This is also referred to as investment in human capital (OECD, 2010).

In this respect, many universities especially in Africa (including Nigeria) continue to prepare graduates to become loyal employees in white collar jobs wherein graduates can pass examinations but they cannot think for themselves. The graduates regard self-employment as a second class type of job or at best a temporary business such that once an employment vacancy materializes, they tend to opt for employment. These type of graduates can pass examinations but they cannot think for themselves (Awiti 2014, Werrema 2012, Wetengere 2016). Moreover, those who opt for self-employment have established projects/businesses like bars and shops which do not match their professions. Hence, university education in Nigeria may not necessarily prepare graduates to use their knowledge and skills to exploit the abundant resources that the country is endowed with. According to Awiti (2014), the current processes of training and learning have spoon-fed students instead of making them curious and creative such that the students are taught to think the way of their lecturers instead of building critical thinking and instead of building capacity to identify and solve problems. Hence, students have learnt to complain or to blame others for their failures.

For instance, a study conducted by the Inter University Council of East Africa (IUCEA) indicates 56 percent of graduates in East Africa lack the basic and technical skills needed in the job market and do not meet the needs of private sector employers and chief executives and those of the larger society (Awiti, 2014). This is because most university curricula and teaching strategies do not prepared students for the real life by building capacity for eager investigations or eagerness to learn more about something or the ability to make or form something new. They also do not prepare students for the objective analysis and evaluation of an issue in order to form a judgement nor the process of working through details of a problem in order to reach a solution and imagination nor the ability to form mental images of things that are not present to the senses or not considered to be real. These competences are expected if the graduates are to be the agents of economic development in their environment. To be able to do so, Awiti (2014) recommends the curricula must change appropriately.

Functions of NUC and Falling Academic Standards in Nigeria

One of the several functions of NUC is to ensure that university graduates attain a minimum level of competence in their fields of study. This is achieved via NUC's mandate to draw up benchmark minimum academic standards (BMAS) for all disciplines in Nigerian universities. Therefore, the process of quality assurance in Nigerian universities is carried out through the development of BMAS for and accreditation of academic programmes. The BMA Sare in respect of course content, staffing (academic, technical and other supporting staff), equipment, space as well as a uniform application of the course system and grade point average. BMA Together with the accreditation exercise, ensure that graduates attain a certain minimum level of competence in their academic pursuits so that they come out as productive and effective members of the society with enough background to make meaningful contributions to national development (Fafunwa 1990).

Accordingly, quality assurance in the Nigerian higher education system broadly consists of internal and external mechanisms (Okebukola and Sambo in Shabani, Okebukola and Sambo 2002). The internal mechanism is made up of all activities towards the attainment of set standards at the Departmental, Faculty/School and University Senate/Board of Studies levels as well as the involvement of examiners as peer assessors. External mechanisms of Quality assurance on the other hand involve the accreditation conducted on behalf of the Federal Government by appropriate statutory agencies to ensure that at least the provisions of the Minimum Academic Standards are attained, maintained and enhanced. The accreditation exercise is to eradicate intellectual mediocrity and the NUC's aim is not to scrap university programme (s) but rather to identify viable and unviable programmes and make appropriate recommendations to proprietors concerned (Anumnu Esther -undated).The accreditation exercise is also aimed at assuring employers and other members of the community that graduates of all academic programmes taught in Nigerian universities have attained an acceptable level of competency in their areas of specialization, thus making them suitable for employment and for further studies (Okebukola and Sambo in Shabani, Okebukola and Sambo 2002). However, those programmes found deficient during an accreditation exercise would have to be up-graded in order to satisfy the required minimum standards.

In the light of this, the continued denial of university autonomy by the NUC as well as its various attempts to usurp from the universities the internal mechanisms for quality assurance under various guises is not only counterproductive but could be contributing significantly to falling academic standards in Nigeria. Universities ought to produce scientifically and culturally literate graduates with capacity to assess evidence and communicate clearly as well as capacity for curiosity, creativity, critical thinking, problem solving and imagination; all of which are necessary skills and attitudes required to meet the existing and emerging problems of development. Bearing this in mind, the continued penchant of government regulators to put square pegs in round holes for political correctness and/or political patronage has done more harm than good regarding academic standards in Nigerian universities.

For instance, the NUC website contains the profile of its current Director of Academic Standards who is described as a well-rounded educationist with Bachelors in Education (B.Ed.) degree in Islamic studies and a Ph.D. in Education Psychology. This could imply the sum qualifications of Islamic studies and Education Psychology are not just publicly touted as "well-rounded" by the NUC but made the current face of academic standards in Nigerian universities. For starters, the NUC publicly describing this kind of qualification as well-

rounded is turning the truth on its head. This state of affairs can be further interpreted to mean academic standards in Nigerian universities are now being rooted in the mind-set of the Muslim religion and Islamic thinking since Islamic studies is about the study of the Muslim religion and psychology has to do with mind-sets. This ought not to be and the government/NUC should not continue to toy with issues of academic standards in Nigerian universities. The question to be asked is: what will be the mind-set of such a Director of academic standards and what will be his focus given his background? Is there any wonder the educational standards in Nigeria continue to go downhill? A Muslim can indeed be a Director of academic standards at NUC but bearing in mind majority of universities in Nigeria (public and private) are NOT Islamic religion based universities, s/he ought to be suitably qualified to spearhead academic standards in Nigerian universities that can produce literate graduates with capacity for curiosity, creativity, critical thinking, problem solving and imagination; all of which are necessary skills and attitudes required for education to play its pivotal role in Nigeria's economic development.

Secondly, the accreditation exercises of NUC are riddled with rampant corruption whereby universities have to part with significant millions of naira in bribes (gifts) to get favourable accreditation reports by the visiting teams made up of staff of NUC, Federal Ministry of Education (FME) and consultants as the author is aware. In this manner, NUC staff live larger than life lives and frequently behave like emperors rather than the public servants they are. A visit to the office of the NUC Executive Secretary would make one wonder if one is in the office of a public servant given the elaborate ostentatious furnishings. This apparent taste for ostentation has made NUC and Federal Ministry of Education staff involved in accreditation visits corruption (egunje) partners such that the Ministry which should be supervising the NUC is actually being dictated to by the NUC in the name of "NUC autonomy"; since the NUC is the government arm generating the illicit bribes from universities to the benefit of both NUC and FME staff. Hence, if the external mechanisms for quality assurance in the Nigerian universities by NUC & co. are corruption riddled and not necessarily focused on quality assurance, how can we then expect the internal mechanisms of quality assurance of the universities to be devoid of corruption, since the universities have to meet up with the corruption demands of NUC & co? Corruption breeds corruption and if the head is rotten, the body must necessarily become rotten. The NUC thus bears significant blame for the current falling standards in Nigerian universities.

In addition, NUC's apparently one-dimensional promotion of university postgraduate diplomas (PGD) as the sole bridging programme for university postgraduate education is further eroding the quality of university education. It has also made university education one-dimensional in Nigeria and universities are no longer at liberty to admit for graduate studies based on undergraduate academic transcripts. The world recognizes obvious linkages in the socio-economy (World Bank 2016) and now considers poverty multidimensional; yet NUC is actively promoting one-dimensional education in Nigeria. This ought not to be for sustainable development. A well-rounded multidimensional education is what sustains development and should be the practice championed by NUC. Moreover, these PGDs which have fast turned into money making machines for universities, have further overstretched academic staff and the PGD students themselves mostly see it as a mere end to a means as the author is aware. The introduction of PGD in the BMAS by NUC in collaboration with university administrators has thus led to spikes in corruption and the significant lowering of academic standards in Nigerian universities generally.

It is Furthermore and in relation to its accreditation functions, the NUC continues to prevent and/or hamper university autonomy. For instance, the NUC's statutory function to develop BMAS in respect of course content, staffing (academic, technical and other supporting staff), equipment, space as well as a uniform application of the course system and grade point average is now being surreptitiously over extended at the expense of university autonomy. In this respect and in furtherance of its apparent emperor-like mentality, the NUC now seemingly acts as a "Teachers' Commission" for universities and is apparently trying to "regulate" the qualifications of academic staff of universities after the fact in very bizarre manner. In this bizarre manner, the NUC can accredit a university and/or a program but still turn around to declare graduates of such accredited universities and/or programs not qualified to teach in the programs for which they are specifically certified by accredited universities. These kind of unacceptable irregularities being generated by the NUC are possible precisely because of the aforementioned "Nigerian factor" of putting incompetent and/or unqualified people in positions where they are unable to think through problems, let alone solve such problems i.e. putting square pegs in round holes. The loser can only be the Nigerian educational system of which academic standards bear the brunt.

Also in this context that the recent lowering of UTME cut off marks for universities in Nigeria to 120/400 or 30% has been described as lowering the bar for half-baked students who consider university education as merely a rite of passage to get university degrees that reduce in value daily. Accordingly, the Vice Chancellor of the University of Ibadan - Nigeria's premier and highest ranking university, Professor Idowu Olayinka opined "it should worry Nigerians that 30% is now acceptable for admission into universities.....Yet we complain about the poor quality of our graduates.... You can hardly build something on nothing". (Tayo 2017). Similarly, commenting on the state's successive feats of first position in the National Examinations Council (NECO) exams in Nigeria recently, the Ekitistate governor is reported to have noted that developing education is different from infrastructural development. The governor ascribed the state's educational feats to giving teachers their due respect and not meddling into their administrative affairs (Ani 2017). In so far as this is true, the continued lack of autonomy for universities significantly contributes to falling academic standards in Nigeria.

Education in Nigeria in the ECOWAS Context

Education and Human Development

From Table 2 below, the Nigerian government does not report on its capital expenditure for education. Investigations reveal the government aggregates it under the Social and Community Services subhead which comprises expenditures for education, health, and other social and community services. This is the kind of deliberate and entrenched lack of integrity and seriousness on the part of government that makes it almost impossible for both career civil servants and elected government officials to be held accountable for non-performance on important developmental goals such as education and health. In this respect, the Federal Ministry of Finance and the Office of the Accountant-General of the Federation are completely responsible for this shoddy and highly suspicious state of affairs which could be an avenue for covering corruption.

Table 2: ECOWAS Countries Education Achievements

HDI rank	Country	Govt Expd on Educ (% of GDP)	Empl to Pop ratio	Labour force participation rate
122	Cabo Verde	5	60.9	68.3
139	Ghana	6	72.1	77
152	Nigeria	???	53.1	56.3
162	Senegal	..	51.7	57.1
166	Togo	4.8	74.6	80.9
167	Benin	4.4	70.9	71.7
171	Côte d'Ivoire	4.7	60.6	67
173	Gambia	2.8	54	77.3
175	Mali	4.3	60.6	66.2
177	Liberia	2.8	58.4	60.9
178	Guinea-Bissau	2.4	67.2	72.7
179	Sierra Leone	2.8	64.5	66.8
183	Guinea	3.5	80.9	82.3
185	Burkina Faso	4.5	81.1	83.5
187	Niger	6.8	62.9	64.7

Source: HDR 2016

It is very telling and should be a great embarrassment to the Nigerian government that a UN world document on human development continues to report lack of data to establish Nigeria's position on human development in education. Nevertheless, from available data for ratio of employment to population (53.1) and labor force participation rate (56.3) and in the ECOWAS context, Government expenditure on Education as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) in Nigeria is probably under 2%. It is also very telling that Nigerian government does not report disaggregate expenditure on Education as a percentage of GDP.

It is not surprising therefore that Table 3 reports that only 41% of Nigerians trust the Federal Government i.e. the government of Nigeria commands the least vote of confidence (41%) from the citizens amongst the ECOWAS Member States even though the Education quality is reported to be about average. Burkina Faso has the top position with a vote of confidence of 67% from her citizens.

Table 3: ECOWAS Countries Perception of Wellbeing

HDI rank	Country	Education quality	Health care quality	Standard of living	Overall life satisfaction, index	Confidence in judicial system	Trust in national government
122	Cabo Verde	..	..	..	..	..	..
139	Ghana	61	48	34	4	62	44
152	Nigeria	55	48	36	4.9	56	41
162	Senegal	36	32	30	4.6	77	62
166	Togo	35	22	28	3.8	50	50
167	Benin	38	34	32	3.6	55	51
171	Côte d'Ivoire	55	38	31	4.4	58	64
173	Gambia	..	..	..	..	..	..
175	Mali	34	30	35	4	45	62
177	Liberia	36	40	29	2.7	47	47
178	Guinea-Bissau	..	..	..	..	..	..
179	Sierra Leone	40	37	46	4.9	54	65
183	Guinea	37	29	38	3.5	47	61
185	Burkina Faso	54	33	31	4.4	59	67
187	Niger	54	33	55	3.7	72	58

Source: HDR 2016

Education and Global Competitiveness

The *Global Competitiveness Report (GCR)* produced by the World Economic Forum (WEF) provides comprehensive assessment of national competitiveness worldwide, including insight into the drivers of world productivity and prosperity. The report captures various aspects of competitiveness in 12 pillars, which make up a Global Competitiveness Index (GCI). The 12 pillars of the GCI have 3 sub-indices: Basic Requirements; Efficiency Enhancers and Innovation & Sophistication Factors to highlight stages of economic development. Higher education where universities belong is considered as an efficiency enhancer under Pillar 5. From Table 4, all the ECOWAS countries perform poorly in terms of global competitiveness and Nigeria is at the bottom 10% in overall ranking still struggling with basic requirements in the factor driven first stage of economic development. Although Nigeria has the highest ECOWAS competitiveness in terms of efficiency enhancers, higher education is not responsible for the efficiency score since Nigeria's performance in higher education is one of the lowest in ECOWAS, being third from the bottom position. Nigeria's relatively high competitiveness in terms of efficiency enhancers within ECOWAS is driven mainly by Pillar 7 on Labor Market Efficiency.

Table 4: Subindex Efficiency Enhancers -Pillar 5

ECOWAS Region	GCI rank		SUB-INDEX: Efficiency Enhancers		Pillar5: Higher Education & Training	
	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score
Nigeria	127	3.39	85	3.88	125	2.86
Ghana	114	3.68	91	3.84	99	3.77
Côte d'Ivoire	99	3.86	96	3.73	109	3.36
Senegal	112	3.74	111	3.54	111	3.29
Cape Verde	110	3.76	121	3.40	79	4.15
Gambia	123	3.47	123	3.31	108	3.39
Mali	125	3.46	124	3.29	122	2.93
Benin	124	3.47	125	3.29	117	3.09
Liberia	131	3.21	129	3.19	130	2.73
Sierra Leone	132	3.16	134	2.95	133	2.56

Source: World Economic Forum (WEF) GCR 2016–2017

Conclusion

It is worrisome that unlike other African countries in their vision plans for similar periods, Nigeria does not give high priority to education as instrumental for fostering socio-economic transformation in the lives of the people. Nigeria's ERGP does not consider Education a priority sector, neither does it indicate in any form that Education has “potential to drive growth and contribute to GDP growth”, nor that it has “ability to respond strongly to stimulus”, or that it has “the flexibility of production methods and capacity to innovate and generate large-scale employment”. Hence, while the ERGP document contains few “Education Strategies”, executing anything about education or improving human capital is not a priority in the ERGP. Moreover, the ERGP's touted plan to “Introduce post-university skills development institutions (PUSDI)s” itself is a tacit admission to the failure of Nigeria's universities to deliver graduates with necessary requisite skills to develop the country.

It appears developers of this ERGP and the policy makers behind it did not learn much lessons from Nigeria's deep recession and the fact that growth without development played a very significant role in triggering the recession. It is instructive that an economy which in the 10 years between 2005 and 2015 grew at an average 6.3 per cent annually only to plunge into a lingering recession in the 11th year in 2016 was not a case of “structural challenges” but structural neglect; whereby the economy is highly dependent on the oil and gas sector which accounts for just 10 per cent of GDP whilst neglecting the other sectors that account for about 90 per cent of GDP. Just like other national plans before it, the ERGP is largely growth oriented. Unless and until policy makers understand the differences between growth and development and that the two are not synonymous and focus appropriately, Nigeria will yet remain in a quagmire of stunted development with unending cycles of growth without development. It is the people that develop a place. Develop the people and the place will become developed.

This is a sad but true reflection of the falling academic standards in Nigerian Universities; playing to the gallery and lip service; for which the government/national universities commission (NUC) bears significant blame. A well-rounded multidimensional education is what sustains development and should be the practice championed by NUC. It is instructive

that Nigerian government commands the least vote of confidence (41%) from the citizens amongst the ECOWAS Member States.

Recommendations

The paper therefore recommends as follows:

1. As with the new global thinking and in line with SDGs, education should be a priority in Nigeria and Nigerian universities should be treated as mind-set transformation agents that enable graduates to build capacity for curiosity, creativity and critical thinking for a future of solving the challenges of national development. To this end, university education should be made more relevant to societal needs.
2. The current one-dimensional tertiary education being championed by NUC be replaced with multidimensional education and university curricula be redesigned for knowledge application.
3. University education must be thematic, driven by research, innovation and problem-solving based approaches. To this end, bureaucratic bottlenecks that prevent universities' consultancy services from competing favourably with their counterparts in the labour market should be removed.
4. The National Universities Commission (NUC) should ensure and/or protect university autonomy and academic freedom and also ensure that university curricula emphasizes indigenous technology and cultural heritage.
5. Multinational companies operating in Nigeria should be made to set aside a fraction of their profits for research support in universities as they do in other developed countries.

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