Distance technical and vocational education and training – a panacea for gender equity and youth employment: The case of Nigeria

ABSTRACT

Since the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) hosted the Youth Forum as part of its General Conference in Paris in October 2007, the question has remained: “How are developing countries progressing with the employability of the youth, thereby facilitating their transition from school to work?” In this paper, the authors use a qualitative study to investigate the critical issues involved in the question raised above. They do this by advancing the case of adopting technical and vocational education and training (TVET) through distance as a holistic strategy to boost the competitive workforce, especially in developing economies – such as Nigeria. In addition, this strategy is checked against gender-based discrimination in employment levels in the country. The authors stress that youth integration in the workplace requires gross sectorial policies that enhance gender parity and the capacity to generate employment opportunities.

Key words: youth, technical and vocational education and training (TVET), gender parity, distance education

INTRODUCTION

Although the definition of ‘youth’ varies from country to country, the authors of this paper have adopted the United Nations’ (2013) definition of ‘youth’ as persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years. This definition is used because the paper focuses on youths who should bridge the gap between schooling and employability. According to the Advocates for Youth (2008), half of the people in the world are children and young people, and about 85% of them live in developing countries, mostly in extreme poverty, while only a fifth (20%) live in upper middle- and high-income countries.

Young people are among those who are most affected by the economic, social and environmental challenges of today, including the poverty and deprivation the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) aim to alleviate (UNESCO, 2011). There is a need for governments worldwide to start re-thinking how to tap into the potential of young people. When young people are not in contact with the education system or the labour market, they cannot develop key skills for meaningful employment (Population Reference Bureau, 2013). According to the International Labour Organization (2013), 73.4 million young people – 12.6% – are expected to be out of work this year.

Another issue is female equality. In the countries with available data, more young women than men are classified as NEETs – young people who are not in education, employment or training (Population Reference Bureau, 2013). Globally, governments have come to realise the importance of an educated society for the economic power of a nation. One of the ways to open access to education is through distance education.

This qualitative study indicated that adopting technical and vocational education and training (TVET) through the distance mode is a holistic strategy to boost a competitive workforce, especially in developing economies. The case of Nigeria was used to establish how far developing countries have progressed with the employability of the youth. This was checked against gender-based discrimination in the employment levels of the country.

EMPLOYABILITY OF THE YOUTH AND TVET

The youth’s transition from school to work is a major challenge for families and education authorities (International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP), 2007). Interest in TVET is increasing worldwide because of its focus on skills, which are vital for poverty reduction, economic recovery and sustainable development (UNESCO, 2013).
TVET comprises formal, non-formal and informal learning for the world of work. It enables young people to obtain knowledge and skills from basic to advanced levels across a wide range of institutional and work settings and in diverse socio-economic contexts (UNESCO, 2013). In this context, TVET has to be understood as being a ‘service provider’ for individuals, the economy and society, thus creating a symbiotic relationship between TVET and the labour market (Usman & Pascal, 2009).

UNESCO (2013) asserts that TVET should be a top priority in the quest to tackle global unemployment, as young people comprise 41% of the world’s unemployed people (United Nations, 2013; UNESCO, 2013b). Areas that will be addressed by TVET include the following:

- Enhancing stakeholders’ participation in governance
- Improving the relevance of TVET
- Expanding access to TVET and improving quality and equity
- Adapting qualifications and developing pathways that provide young people with skills that are relevant to the labour market
- Increasing investment in TVET and diversifying financing
- Promoting TVET to make it more attractive for learners, families and all other stakeholders (UNESCO, 2013b)

Although the Commonwealth nations have made giant strides in TVET, persistent challenges include developing a lifelong learning culture in the professional training sectors, improving public perception of TVET as a track fit only for the less academically endowed and representing a ‘dead end’, and setting up an effective governance and monitoring structure in TVET systems (Mohadeb, Sukon, Soonarane & Auckbur, 2012).

EMPLOYABILITY OF THE YOUTH IN NIGERIA

Globally, skill acquisition is acknowledged as a means of transforming and empowering young people with appropriate competencies. The need to provide employability skills to the youth of Nigeria underpins the focus on improving TVET in Nigeria.

Young people make up two thirds of the Nigerian population (Advocates for Youth, 2009). Those who drop out of school, and even those who manage to pass, lack the skills to compete in the rather weak economy and tight labour market, and battle with poverty and unemployment (Alhassan & Tyabo, 2013).

According to the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004), the goals of technical and vocational education are as follows:

- Provide trained manpower in the applied sciences, technology and business.
- Provide the technical knowledge and vocational skills necessary for agricultural, commercial and economic development.
- Provide training and the necessary skills to individuals to become economically self-reliant.

These goals are laudable, but the implementation of the programme has fallen short of expectations. Nigeria, like most developing countries, would need to get over weak political will and unstable governance.

Before the UNESCO Youth Forum, high unemployment led to increasing poverty and serious social problems in Nigeria; coincidentally, there was a decline in TVET enrolments (UNESCO, 2013c). Less than 1% of secondary schools were oriented towards technical and vocational skills (Alhassan & Tyabo, 2013).

Therefore, there is a need to revitalise TVET to improve economic opportunities for young people, and Nigeria is in the process of institutionalising the six-level National Vocational Qualifications Framework (NVQF). This is being done in collaboration with industries that are involved in developing national occupational standards, work-based verification and the continuous assessment of trainees. Plans are underway to introduce entrepreneurship education in secondary schools (Alhassan & Tyabo, 2013).
YOUTH EMPLOYABILITY IN NIGERIA: THE GENDER ANGLE

Citing the World Bank (2005), the National Gender Policy (2006) asserts that Nigeria is a highly patriarchal society in which men dominate all spheres of women's lives. Women are in a subordinate position, and male children are preferred over female. The case is not different in India (a similar context) where data shows that women represent about 50% of the adult population, but only 33% of the labour force, perform nearly 66% of all working hours, receive only 10% of the world average income, and own less than 1% of property (Gaba, 2007).

Constitutionally, the principle of non-discrimination in section 2 of the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria falls short of the desired result of giving males and females equal opportunities to advance socially, physically, educationally, politically and economically. Evidence abounds that gender-based division of labour, disparities between males' and females' access to power and resources, and gender biases in rights and entitlements remain in Nigeria (National Gender Policy, 2006). These disparities have a significant impact on the economic growth of the country.

Education is regarded as a key factor in overcoming the barriers that women face and the basic tool for empowering women and bringing them into the mainstream of development (Gudhlanga, Magadza & Mafa, 2012). The development of flexible skills through TVET provides a valuable opportunity in this regard. However, fewer girls than boys enrol in and complete TVET. In addition, girls and women from Northern Nigeria and rural communities are generally at a disadvantage with regard to education (Obaji, 2005). The statistics below show samples of variations in gender parity ratios in enrolments in technical colleges and in employment status in Nigeria.

Table 1: Enrolment, gender parity ratios and female participation in technical colleges in Nigeria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Gender parity ratio (GPR)</th>
<th>Percentage of female participation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2005/06</td>
<td>70 303</td>
<td>11 353</td>
<td>81 656</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>13.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006/07</td>
<td>55 713</td>
<td>9 502</td>
<td>65 215</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>14.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007/08</td>
<td>57 724</td>
<td>10 423</td>
<td>68 147</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>15.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008/09</td>
<td>59 984</td>
<td>10 556</td>
<td>70 543</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>14.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009/10</td>
<td>63 429</td>
<td>10 759</td>
<td>74 188</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>14.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010/11</td>
<td>73 843</td>
<td>13 557</td>
<td>87 400</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>15.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual average</td>
<td>63 499</td>
<td>11 025</td>
<td>74 525</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>14.79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: National Board of Technical Education (NBTE) (2011)

In Table 1, the ratio for technical colleges in 2005/06 was a mere 0.16, which increased very marginally to 0.18 by 2007/08. By 2010/11, the ratio remained at 0.18. This ratio implies that over the period, for approximately every 23 males enrolled, only four females were correspondingly enrolled (23:4). This can also be viewed as an overall average of 14.8% female enrolment.

The statistics of polytechnics in tables 2 and 3 below are not much better. For instance, in Table 2, enrolments at the polytechnics increased slightly from 214 391 in 2005/06 to 225 171 in 2010/11. Gender parity ratios also recorded a decline from 0.71 in 2005/06 to 0.62 in 2010/11, and total enrolment shows an overall average of 38.57%. Also in Table 3, the gender parity ratio at out-turn level between 2005 and 2011 showed a mere 0.68.
Table 2: Enrolment, gender parity ratios and female participation in polytechnics in Nigeria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>GPR</th>
<th>Percentage female participation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2005/06</td>
<td>125 592</td>
<td>88 799</td>
<td>214 391</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>41.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006/07</td>
<td>114 307</td>
<td>72 285</td>
<td>186 592</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>38.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007/08</td>
<td>105 701</td>
<td>63 672</td>
<td>169 373</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>37.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008/09</td>
<td>105 129</td>
<td>58 572</td>
<td>163 701</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>35.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009/10</td>
<td>102 380</td>
<td>63 741</td>
<td>166 121</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>38.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010/11</td>
<td>136 123</td>
<td>89 048</td>
<td>225 171</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>39.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual average</td>
<td>114 872</td>
<td>72 686</td>
<td>187 558</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>38.57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: National Board of Technical Education (NBTE) (2011)

Table 3: Gender parity ratio at out-turn level in polytechnics in Nigeria 2005–2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>GPR</th>
<th>Percentage of female out-turn level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2005/06</td>
<td>9 434</td>
<td>6 660</td>
<td>16 094</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>41.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006/07</td>
<td>16 844</td>
<td>12 065</td>
<td>28 909</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>41.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007/08</td>
<td>14 131</td>
<td>9 862</td>
<td>23 993</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>41.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008/09</td>
<td>10 305</td>
<td>5 962</td>
<td>16 267</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>36.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009/10</td>
<td>5 330</td>
<td>3 561</td>
<td>8 891</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>40.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010/11</td>
<td>52 927</td>
<td>45 586</td>
<td>98 513</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>46.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual average</td>
<td>11 209</td>
<td>7 622</td>
<td>18 831</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>40.20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: National Board of Technical Education (NBTE) (2011)

The picture is not different for teaching staff in TVET institutions in the country. For instance, for every five male teachers, there is one female teacher (NBTE, 2011). This is shown in Table 4, which indicates that the gender parity between 2005 and 2011 was only 0.18.

Table 4: Gender differences in employment status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employment status</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed (age 15–24 years)</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed (age 15 and above)</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Underemployed (age 15 and above)</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


FRESH EFFORTS THROUGH THE NATIONAL BOARD OF TECHNICAL EDUCATION (NBTE)

In view of the dismal statistics cited above, the country, through its National Board of Technical Education (NBTE), is making fresh attempts to correct gender disparity.

Firstly, the Board has adopted the Federal Ministry of Education’s four-year strategic plan for the development of the education sector from 2011 to 2015, under TVET, which acknowledges the need for women to acquire the knowledge and skills that would develop their potential and contribute to the nation’s economy. Secondly, the Board has recently been involved in expanded specialised programmes sensitising its people to women’s and girls’ participation in TVET, entrepreneurial programmes that would
produce women and girls who can create jobs for themselves, and the establishment of a Gender Desk to coordinate gender activities (NBTE, 2011). The desk was an outcome of the Commonwealth of Learning Workshop on Flexible Skills Development held in 2012.

Within its short tenure, the Desk has also worked with Women in Technical Education and Employment (WITED), a polytechnic organ aimed at identifying factors impeding women’s participation in technical education, training and employment. Through collaborative efforts with WITED, it hopes to develop the polytechnic curricula, taking into cognisance of gender issues, and the restriction of admission policies towards the increased intake of girls for technology-based programmes.

It has also prepared a roadmap for the development of the female gender in TVET with the aim of promoting and protecting the rights of women and girls towards participation in technical and vocational training, science and technology education, providing gender-sensitive training, and the training of rural women in literacy, agriculture and health education.

It is the Board’s hope that investing in women and girls would be one that would increase productivity in Nigeria and promote sustainable growth, peace and health (NBTE, 2013). Nevertheless, all these would remain a dream without opening wider the doors of educational opportunities to its teeming youth populace. A major means of achieving these lofty goals is through distance education.

**DISTANCE EDUCATION TO THE RESCUE**

Distance education is now a worldwide phenomenon due to its ability to meet the escalating demand for higher education (Braimoh, 2003). According to Holmberg (1982), this mode is the form of education that covers the various forms of study at all levels that are not under the continuous, immediate supervision of tutors present with their students in lecture rooms or on the same premises. Its unique characteristics include the following:

- The quasi-permanent separation of teacher and learner throughout the course
- The influence of educational planning, and the preparation of learning material and support services
- The use of technical media, print, audio, video and computer
- The provision of two-way communication to facilitate interaction
- The quasi-permanent absence of an individual or a learning group throughout the length of the learning process (sometimes with occasional meetings) (Keegan, 1990, 1998)

Previously, distance education students were thought to be older people who had been previously denied access to education. However, this demographic profile is changing, as younger people choose to study through distance education. For instance, in South Africa, distance education students include the younger generation (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2012.). According to the IIEP (2007), as a result of education expansion, the transition from school to work is taking place later as young people study for longer.

Distance education is about inclusion, and could thus be seen as an intervention to deliver social change (Tait, 2013). According to Tait, it has the ability to include people in places who would otherwise have been excluded, it supports the inclusion of women where their independent movement is not possible, and permits the participation by groups otherwise shut out by cost.

It has its own drawbacks, such as cost and capital intensity, time constraints and other pressures on faculty, the isolation of students from instructors and peers, and a lack of skills in time management and discipline by the students (Helman, 2003; Sherry, 1996). However, most of these can be alleviated by using effective technology where applicable, and having proper quality assurance mechanisms in place.

Revitalising TVET should be aligned with flexible skills in order to attract youth integration in the workplace. Flexible learning relates more to the scheduling of activities than to any particular delivery
mode (Commonwealth of Learning (COL), 2012). An understanding of flexible skills increases choice for learners (that is, who they learn with, and where, when and what they learn).

There is ample evidence that open and distance learning (ODL) has availed many opportunities to women (Gudhlanga et al. 2012; Ofoegbu & Ojogwu, 2006). Education not only provides knowledge and skills to improve livelihoods, but it empowers women to take their rightful place in society and the development process, and gives status and confidence in decision-making (Gudhlanga et al. 2012). This is in line with the objectives of ODL in Nigeria, which include the following (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004):

- Widening access to education in order to ensure equity and equality of opportunities, with the emphasis on female education.
- Developing education as an instrument for poverty alleviation, especially in the rural areas.
- Providing all learners with avenues for the acquisition of flexible and qualitative education that will be accessible anywhere, at any time and through an appropriate and a cost-effective medium.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the realities confronting governments worldwide on the valuable role of the youth in the economic development of their countries, the focus is now being shifted to alleviating unemployment and poverty in this group. The problem is more visible in developing countries, where there is a need to bridge the gap between the haves and the have-nots.

Furthermore, women are an untapped pool of talent that can be explored and mobilised. The traditional female jobs are fading away and there is a need to encourage them to diversify into other areas. In order to encourage this, TVET is being touted as having the capability not only to create jobs for the youth, but also to correct gender inequality. The distinctive characteristics of distance education have made it more attractive for gender and youth education (Tait, 2013). The following is recommended:

- Expand training opportunities to increase access for, and ensure equity of women and vulnerable groups.
- Prospective employers should participate in the design, review and implementation of the TVET curriculum, in order to enhance income generation for the programme.
- Strengthen the TVET sector through adequate funding to address the key issues mentioned.
- Increase participation in gender awareness in TVET, particularly in rural areas, in order to achieve gender parity.
- Increase the quality and quantity of gender-responsive vocational education and training institutions in rural areas.
- Develop targeted strategies to allow young people, irrespective of gender, to access formal and non-formal vocational education and training.

REFERENCES


