

Promoting Sustainable Development through Policy Reforms in Higher Education

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Abstract:

In the dynamic world of global development, a thorough review of higher education policies is essential, as higher education institutions play a critical role in shaping a country's long-term future. This study examines the intricate relationship between policy reforms in higher education and the promotion of sustainable development in the Nigerian context, recognizing that sustainable development is a collective aspiration that must be actively pursued. The paper advocated that higher education is the springboard for sustainable development. As a result, there is a need for robust policies to enhance students' learning and knowledge acquisition, thereby facilitating their overall growth, which is critical for long-term development. Higher education and its objectives, current state of higher education, the concept of sustainable development, policy reforms and strategies for enhancing sustainable development through policy reforms were emphasized to attain this study's goal.

Keywords: Higher Education, Sustainable Development, Quality Assurance and Policy Reforms,

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Introduction

Higher education as the fulcrum for personal and societal advancement plays a crucial role in shaping the destiny of economies and civilizations. It encourages personal and societal progress, innovation and knowledge advancement. Higher education has consistently emphasized the transfer of knowledge and skills relevant to specific academic fields or professions. Ekundayo (2023) summed it up that higher education plays significant roles in the advancement of modern society especially in the promotion of economic growth. Despite its fundamental roles such as promoting progress, innovation, and economic growth, Nigeria's experience raises a key question: has the country achieved meaningful higher education outcomes? Many government programmes and policies designed to improve higher education remain unfulfilled, as documentation often fails to translate into implementation.

A common idea is that education may bring about change in a country's political, economic, technological, and social areas. Education nurtures individuals and fosters country prosperity, making it an essential prerequisite for growth and progress. For a country to grow and do well, its people need to be well-educated. The Federal Government of Nigeria made its position clear in its National Educational Policy (2004): education is important for the development of individuals, society, and the country as a whole. Obasanjo in Belo (2022) argued that education promotes productivity by enabling people to discover and use their creative potential to improve skills and techniques. This increases personal and societal effort. Thus, scholars define education as the process by which learners acquire the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes needed for intellectual and character development, thereby becoming self-reliant and responsible citizens. It is, therefore, essential for developing a quality workforce.

The role of higher education institutions in fostering sustainable development goals (SDGs), a post-Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) agenda with a collection of 17 global goals aimed at achieving a better and more sustainable future for all, has gained significance in a world that is becoming increasingly interconnected and undergoing rapid change. To effectively respond to the global challenges of climate change, resource scarcity, social injustice, and other sustainability issues, higher education must undergo a paradigm shift. Hence, contemporary higher education institutions need to ensure that their beneficiaries do not only specialize in their courses but also have the values, knowledge, and abilities needed to deal with the numerous and different problems that come up in sustainable development. Therefore, reforming the higher education policy is imperative to achieve these aims. In their opinion, Jaiyeoba and Ademola (2014) submitted that while it is impossible to overestimate the role that higher education plays in producing the next generation of leaders, innovators, and knowledgeable citizens, enduring problems such as access constraints, quality issues, and shifting economic conditions necessitate a thorough review of current policies. Policy reform is therefore essential because of the general belief that education can make the world a better place, affect how individuals act, make them think critically, and help students and researchers identify answers that help them attain their goals for sustainable development.

Higher Education in Nigeria

It is generally believed that higher education is important for personal growth, economic progress, and social change because it teaches students to think critically, acquire knowledge, and develop skills that help them engage with society and advance their careers. Higher education, often called postsecondary education, expands on the basic skills, information,



attitudes, and values that students gained in elementary and secondary schools. The National Policy on Education (2014) clearly stated that there are several avenues to higher education, including universities, colleges of education, polytechnics, monotechnics, and correspondence courses. Higher education is learning beyond the secondary level, culminating in the attainment of a bachelor's or advanced degree. The fields covered include Education, Sciences, Technology, Medicine, Engineering, Business, Law, Music, Arts among others. In this study, the term "higher education" and "university education" will be used interchangeably. Castells (1992) identified two primary factors that affect technology transfer and development: (i) University education, which he argued is essential for the technology industry as it cultivates the necessary production and management skills for utilizing and organizing new technologies and information transmission processes in sectors that manufacture and employ IT; (ii) He also noted that with the growth of science-based enterprises, universities serve as venues for integrating fundamental research.

Objectives of Higher Education

The federal government, through the National Policy on Education (2004), lists the seven goals of higher education as follows:

- i. contribute to national development through high-level, relevant workforce training;
- ii. develop and instil proper values for the survival of the individual and society;
- iii. develop individuals' intellectual capability to understand and appreciate their local and external environments;
- iv. acquire both physical and intellectual skills that will enable individuals to be self-sufficient;
- v. encourage and promote scholarship and community service;
- vi. forge and solidify national unity; and
- vii. foster national and international understanding and connection.

A brief examination of these objectives indicates that higher education is crucial for sustainable growth, and it is expected that Nigeria's educational system will be highly responsive to fulfill these goals. However, the following question remains unanswered: Is it accurate to say that higher education graduates have met the federal government's objectives? Do individuals pursuing higher education possess the necessary skills for independence? Is it possible for students in higher education to examine the role of partnerships and collaborations among academic institutions, industry stakeholders, and local communities in advancing sustainable development projects within these contexts? Oguzor (2011) argued that Nigeria, with its varied population and rich cultural legacy, is at a crossroads in its development and faces numerous obstacles in its higher education system. This aligns with these enquiries. Oguzor's assertion, therefore, necessitates policy changes to achieve sustainable development through enhanced altitude.

Current State of Higher Education in Nigeria

Nigeria, characterized by a burgeoning population and aspirations for socioeconomic advancement, faces significant challenges within its higher education system. Despite commendable efforts to enhance access, the industry still faces numerous challenges such as inadequate funding, poor infrastructure, academic corruption, dysfunctional quality control mechanisms, brain drain among others. It is evidently clear that pursuing a higher degree in Nigeria continues to pose significant challenges because demand for higher education consistently outstrips the available capacity, resulting in intense competition for admission.



The significance of funds to any consequential organization cannot be overstated. The reason is that they are the basic means by which individuals and material resources can be utilized to achieve the objectives of the organization. Bello (2015) observed that insufficient funding for secondary schools substantially impairs principals' leadership effectiveness by compromising their leadership qualities. The same situation could also be applicable to higher education. Onokerrhoraye in Asiyal (2013) contended that a major constraint to attaining academic excellence in Nigerian universities is financial constraints, which force many academics and non-academic staff to work under difficult circumstances. In Nigeria, instances abound of universities still experiencing non-befitting lecture rooms, substandard lecturers' offices, outdated textbooks in the library, and nonfunctional laboratories, among others; a probable reason for these abnormalities could hinge on finances. Ogunode & Abubakar (2020) affirmed that the Nigerian government's inability to objectively adopt and implement the UNESCO-recommended 26% funding formula for education negatively impacts the performance and sustainability of higher education.

The quest for adequate infrastructure in Nigeria's tertiary education sector cannot be underestimated, as it is the bedrock of the development needed for a successful, standard, and quality education. Inadequate infrastructure, including well-furnished lecture halls, befitting staff offices, ideal student hostels, uninterrupted power supply, and a good road network within the school, is common in most higher institutions in Nigeria. It is axiomatic that the adequacy or inadequacy of these facilities will either enhance or hinder effective teaching and learning. Adejomo (2017) summarized that there is a general belief that the condition of the school's learning environment, especially its infrastructure, has an important impact on students' academic performance and effectiveness.

Brain drain, the massive movement of professionals from developing to developed countries in search of greener pastures, is another unpalatable reality in higher education in Nigeria.

Over the past decades, there has been a mass movement of brilliant and talented lecturers to other sectors of the economy. Some of the lecturers left Nigerian universities to join the business world, some joined politics, while others left Nigeria for foreign countries, and this has negatively impacted the higher education sector because brains that would have been very useful in developing educational institutions and Nigeria as a whole have nearly left the profession and country for more lucrative professions and countries. This situation has reduced the scope for seasoned and senior lecturers in universities to mentor younger researchers.

Poor policy implementation, which is generally believed to be a critical factor in the abysmally low performance of Nigerian higher education graduates in the world of work, also needs to be revisited. Free opinions held that Nigerian policies were well formulated, but the problem lies in translating theory into practice by the implementers. Some opinions also advocated for a review of the curriculum due to increase in societal needs. Many factors, including underfunding, ineffective use of human and material resources, and institutional policies, inhibit policy implementation.

Academic corruption is another plague bedeviling higher education in Nigeria. Observation shows that the limited funds made available for the development of programmes, research, infrastructural facilities, among others, are sometimes diverted for personal use by those at the helm of affairs. Chinyere & Chukwuma (2017) contended that public funds made available to lecturers to conduct groundbreaking, demand-driven research to solve Nigeria's socio-



economic and political challenges are misappropriated by those who are expected to be above board. This was corroborated by the Premium Times (2020) report, which stated that the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TET Fund) accused lecturers across the country's public tertiary institutions of diverting research grants to build homes, purchase cars, and engage in other frivolous activities. However, corruption is not limited to money alone; instances abound in Nigerian higher institutions where male lecturers request for sex in return for higher scores from the female students, brilliant students also extort their weaker counterparts by requesting for money, food or personal needs in return for assignments while some students were equally observed to bribe their lecturers with exotic gift items in order to have a good grade. It can be inferred from the above assertions and scenarios that corruption has deeply penetrated the fabric of higher education in Nigeria.

Concept of Sustainable Development

To be sustainable means to think about social, economic, and environmental challenges in order to make progress and improve people's lives in the future. The economy, society, and the environment all depend on each other. According to UNESCO (2012), a successful civilization ensures that its people have access to clean air, safe drinking water, and other essentials. You also need to live in a healthy place. Sustainable development produces enduring effects on both current and future conditions. Briggs (2008) defined sustainable development as a process that protects the environment, meets people's needs, and gradually improves their lives. He concluded that human well-being and the long-term implications of current actions, including global cooperation, must be considered in sustainable development to formulate effective and enduring solutions. The purpose of sustainable development, according to UNESCO (2009), is to address long-term issues in the economy, society, the environment, and the world as a whole, as well as issues of extreme poverty and various forms of social and economic inequality. One of the most important things for long-term growth is learning. It incorporates teaching and learning strategies that motivate students to learn more and think in new ways. This helps them grow and keeps them going in many areas of their lives. In the 1970s, there were numerous meetings worldwide to educate people about the environment. One of these was the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, which initiated the push for education for sustainable development (Wals and Kieft, 2010). The Council of the European Union (2010) says that education for sustainable development is vitally crucial for creating a society that will last. It also emphasises that this issue should be the main emphasis of both formal and informal learning. UNESCO (2014) states that the goal of education for sustainable development is to equip people with the values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge needed to build a future that will last.

Conceptualizing Sustainable Development in Higher Education

UNESCO (2009) affirmed that education for sustainable development provides everyone with access to high-quality education that helps them acquire the attitudes, habits, and lifestyles necessary for positive social change and a sustainable future. Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) concurrently addresses the three pillars of sustainable development: the economy, society, and the environment. This has a lot to do with culture. ESD teaches people the skills, beliefs, and perspectives they need to make choices that improve their lives at home and around the world.



Beneficiaries of higher education need to learn to be creative, inventive, and rational so they can be independent and fit into society, particularly in a knowledge-driven era marked by rapid information expansion. Calde and Clugston (2003) argued that for higher education to continue improving, it needs a broad plan that goes beyond traditional academic boundaries and includes environmental, social, and economic factors. The major goal is to establish a learning environment where people can learn more than simply how to get high grades; it should teach youngsters the values, information, and skills they need to deal with problems now, as well as what future generations will require. The triple bottom line paradigm is part of the holistic approach. It shows how social responsibility, environmental sustainability, and economic viability are interlinked in institutions' activities and decisions.

Ariguzo (2020) emphasized that educating students about global challenges and social responsibility is a crucial aspect of contemplating sustainable development. To ensure that higher education beneficiaries have the right academic qualifications and are working to make the world a better place, they should be involved in their communities, engage in service-learning projects, and demonstrate their commitment to social justice. An effective conceptualization of sustainable development in higher education requires robust measurement and assessment tools, including metrics to assess institutional performance in meeting sustainability goals, evaluate the impact of research projects on societal challenges, and measure graduates' contributions to sustainable practices in their professional endeavours.

Amaghionyeodiwe and Osinubi (2012) contended that sustainability principles should be incorporated into the various academic disciplines. They argued that sustainable growth in higher education is a function of the entire campus environment, rather than focusing solely on the curriculum. The integration of sustainability principles into the existing curriculum and a cross-disciplinary approach that fosters innovative solutions across disciplinary boundaries should be emphasised because a sustainable campus culture provides students with an immersive learning experience that aligns with classroom principles. Implementing eco-friendly practices in campus operations, promoting waste reduction, enhancing energy efficiency, and facilitating sustainable transportation are notable examples of this approach.

In acknowledging the importance of tertiary education for achieving long-term sustainability, UNESCO (2012) succinctly affirms that mobilizing education to transform the lives of children, youths, and adults is the crux of a sustainable development vision. The years of primary, secondary and tertiary education are considered critical in this regard. Oyekan (2000) equally affirmed that children should be well equipped to discover appropriate solutions to meet tomorrow's requirements and concerns. Qualitative University education thus becomes sacrosanct for youths to meet future challenges and fit into society.

Policy Reforms

Reform is a lengthy process that begins with identifying, investigating, and analyzing the issue, culminating in evaluating the program and deciding whether to continue or terminate it. It entails developing a few policy ideas, testing them, implementing them, and providing feedback, among other things. The goal of the global agenda for educational reform is to improve education and, ultimately, make people better citizens.

Reforms to higher education policy are particularly crucial for helping schools grow in environmentally friendly ways. The reforms are needed because they provide higher education systems, especially in Nigeria, with a clear plan for addressing the challenges they



face. Policy changes serve as a catalyst for transformation, providing the guidance needed to realign the higher education landscape with sustainable development principles. Akinmusuru (2009) noted that one of the key reasons for changes in higher education policy is to meet the sector's evolving needs. His argument posits that policy changes are proactive responses by institutions to evolving circumstances. This allows them to quickly adapt to new situations and ensure that the lessons they teach remain relevant and valuable. He concluded that technological, cultural, and economic changes constantly affect schools.

Adelabu and Adepoju (2007) and Jimoh (2010) submitted, respectively, that reforms to higher education policy are necessary for long-term success, offering distinct arguments. Their approaches are systematic, aimed at addressing issues, fostering innovation, bridging gaps, and significantly contributing to national development agendas. They serve as a pivotal point for transformation. Findings indicate that strategic policy reforms are crucial for steering Nigeria's higher education system toward a sustainable, impactful future. This directly supports the overarching objectives of sustainable development by producing graduates who are academically proficient and possess the values and skills necessary to address urgent societal and environmental challenges.

Policy Frameworks in Nigeria

There are numerous laws that govern Nigeria's higher education system, and these laws have changed over time to address emerging challenges and demands. Policy frameworks define the norms for institutions, academic standards, and the sector's overall direction. These frameworks give Nigerian higher education a structure that helps it. The most important aspect of these frameworks is the National Policy on Education (NPE), which delineates the overarching objectives and guiding principles for the entire educational system, encompassing higher education. The NPE, first put in place in 1977 and revised since then, demonstrates the government's commitment to delivering high-quality education, supporting national development, and addressing equity and access issues. The National Universities Commission (NUC) Act, along with other sector-specific regulations, provides a comprehensive framework that delineates specific policies related to higher education (Adelabu & Adepoju, 2007).

The NUC is particularly important for overseeing universities in Nigeria. It was established in 1962 and reorganized by the NUC Act of 1974. It develops rules, sets criteria for schools, and ensures that colleges remain good. The Commission's key ideas focus on setting research criteria, developing a new curriculum, and accrediting schools. The goal is to improve teaching in American schools. Nigerian colleges have their own rules and regulations in addition to the country. These frameworks are usually based on the NUC's values, but they can also demonstrate what each school stands for, what it aspires to achieve, and what it believes in. The National Minimum Standards and Establishment of Institutions Acts give colleges the power to amend their rules to better meet their requirements and aspirations.

Despite existing policy frameworks, significant issues remain (Amaghionyeodiwe & Osinubi, 2012). To maintain relevance amid implementation gaps, financial constraints, and rising social expectations, higher education policies require continual evaluation and revision. The current focus is on ensuring that policy fosters sustainable growth in higher education and sparking debate on targeted reforms. As Nigeria aims for global academic leadership, evaluating and strengthening existing policy frameworks is essential.



Strategies for Enhancing Sustainable Development in Higher Education through Policy Reforms

As students, educators, and governments learn more about the importance of addressing sustainability challenges, the need for changes in higher education policies to support sustainable development is likely to grow. This change shows that the school is committed to training future leaders who can make a huge difference in making the world a better place for everyone. Therefore, the subsequent areas warranting focus for policy reforms include, but not limited to the following areas:

Improved funding

The significance of funding for delivering effective and high-quality higher education cannot be overstated. This appears to be a significant issue for the effective delivery of higher education curriculum. Onwueme (2001) noted that educational financing in Nigeria has faced numerous issues over the years, thereby arguing for the financial backing of higher education by all three tiers of government. He concluded that insufficiently supported higher education may result in the inability to meet defined goals, thereby obstructing both individual and societal advancement.

Curriculum Review

The curriculum, a potent tool for the school to achieve its educational objectives, needs to be updated to align with societal demands. Due to ethical issues in Nigeria, such as corruption, youth unrest, political assassinations, sexual violence, abduction, substance misuse, and the pursuit of quick wealth, it is imperative to incorporate courses that foster discipline and morality among the beneficiaries of higher education. UNESCO (2008) asserted that curricula across Africa must be updated to prepare young individuals for a continually evolving landscape of science and technology. Ogbechie in Gbenu (2012) equally affirmed that the existing curriculum in the nation's educational institutions fails to cultivate students who are informed, proficient, innovative, and globally competitive, which is essential for the country's university system. He advocates for a reevaluation of education to address the requirements of the 21st century.

Lecturers' Motivation

Motivation is a crucial element in organizations because it is one of the means through which individuals can collaborate to assist the organization in achieving its objectives in the most effective and efficient manner. Nicolson (2009) defined motivation as a system that fosters an individual's enthusiasm for performing their duties with pleasure and a strong interest in achieving both organizational and personal goals. Ibukun (1990) asserted that when an individual attains optimal satisfaction, he consciously endeavours to realize his goals. Ngoka (2012) opined that employees demonstrate enhanced productivity when given the opportunity to meet their needs within an organizational framework. Belo (2023) summed it up that motivation is a precondition for effectiveness. The presentations of the aforementioned and various other scholars suggested that motivation relates to the factors or events that affect, direct, and drive specific human behaviours towards the attainment of organizational goals. Lecturers must therefore be exceptionally motivated to communicate information effectively both substantively and contextually to their students. This can be achieved by ensuring timely salary payments and other benefits, providing an enabling environment for lecturing, improving ICT, and promoting their engagement with



contemporary pedagogical techniques through attendance at conferences, workshops, seminars, and in-service training, among others.

Quality Assurance

Implementing consistent monitoring and evaluation systems is essential because it underpins educational successes. Oyewunmi and Fatoke (2015) contended that quality assurance is an extensive procedure designed to preserve the integrity of outputs, delegating the responsibility for quality to the educational institution and demonstrating itself through its engagements with clients. It is generally believed that for higher education in Nigeria to achieve sustainability, it must be relevant in both content and context. Hence, clear metrics and assessments that facilitate tracking progress, identifying challenges, and implementing adjustments to enhance the effectiveness of policy reforms must be put in place. This evaluation fosters a culture of continuous improvement and accountability.

Alteration in Parental Attitudes

Parental involvement undeniably impacts a child's educational results, whether beneficially or detrimentally. Therefore, if higher education is integral to individual and societal progress and sustainability, the hesitance of certain parents to actively participate in their children's education must be transformed. Parents' inability or unwillingness to effectively fulfill their responsibilities may hinder the sustainability of higher education.

Embracing Global Benchmarking and Collaboration

Global benchmarking and collaboration must be adopted. Adhering to international standards and best practices improves the competitiveness of Nigerian higher education and strengthens a collective global commitment to sustainable development.

Conclusion

This study has proven that a higher degree is important for long-term growth. The study shows that every university is expected to embrace sustainability as part of its core tenets to prepare students for the globalized world, as subpar higher education could make it harder for people and society as a whole to attain their goals. To enhance sustainability, the school system needs to evolve significantly so that people can learn more, gain more knowledge, and become better people.

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