

## **Excellence in Nigerian Education: A Philosophical Perspective**

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**Abstract:** *Recently, there have been discussions on the efforts being made to provide Nigerians qualitative education by government: an attempt often couched in the phrase “excellence in education”. The paper highlights what excellence in education implies as well as the purpose of education in Nigeria and its constraints. It further analyses the reality of the catch phrase “excellence in education” and observes that the rhetoric behind it has defeated the objectives of the education system. Hence, the paper points out some essential imperatives of excellence in Nigerian education, which deserves adequate consideration and attention to ensure accelerated national development and a stable socio-economic and political climate.*

**Key words:** *excellence, curriculum, rhetoric, quality assurance, depth of knowledge, imperatives*

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### **I. Introduction**

Issues and trends in the Nigerian education system have agitated the minds of many as to the nature and type of education system being practiced, as well as the quality of its products. Ukeje’s (2000) comparative analysis of Nigerian education vis-à-vis three other Anglophone West African countries – Liberia, Ghana, and Gambia – in terms of social esteem, academic excellence, and professional rating shows that Nigeria scored very low. Wokocha (2007) also observes with dismay that the health of Nigerian education is in a deplorable state with basic infrastructures almost collapsing, and unsightly dilapidated structures abound. It is against this background that Osokoya (2008) infers that Nigeria’s education system has failed to usher in the desired expansion of available facilities and resources quantitatively and qualitatively with a view to producing a better and greater nation. In this regard, however, spirited efforts have been made to put education on the right track. The crowning effort of it all climaxed in the crafting of the National Policy on Education (which has been revised four times since 1977), and the recognition of the fact that: “Education is an instrument par excellence for effecting national development”. Unarguably, the intention as encapsulated in that document is to ensure and engender excellence in education.

#### **What is Excellence in Education?**

The etymology of the word excellence is traceable to the French word “excellere”, which simply means quality of being excellent. This implies that a thing or person could possess an inherently valuable quality that surpasses the quality in some other things or persons. In other words, excellence is used evaluatively to compare or analyse the content or worth of what is being referred to. For example, an art work could be described as an excellent piece because of the touch given to it by the artist in terms of creativity, materials, the scenery it evokes, and the aesthetic beauty it displays. The same cannot be said of an art work of inferior quality possibly because of lack of imaginative and creative ability, and inadequate attention and inputs. On the other hand, a person may be described as morally excellent if he/she exhibits impeccable character, or lives a near-flawless life style. Similarly, one who has distinguished oneself in academics could be described as having attained academic excellence. However, excellence tries to convey a good impression but often without imparting any concrete information. For instance, we talk of excellent proposal, centre of excellence, education for excellence, and so on. These are in abstract terms.

In addition, excellence is coterminous with the Greek word “arête” for outstanding fitness for purpose (en.wikipedia). In effect, it could imply a talent or quality which is “continuously moving target that can be pursued through **actions of integrity**, being forerunner in **terms of products and services provided** that are reliable and safe for the intended use.

MacAllister et al (2013), suggest three ways in which a person may exhibit “excellence”. For them: Excellence may involve a person surpassing in performance; surpassing one’s own previous performance; having good personal qualities (virtues) in high degree. Each of these notions of excellence may well have educational merit (p.155).

In this regard, excellence is viewed from the superlative degree of comparison of activities, performance and moral behaviour of individuals. Hence, excellence could be seen as a value that serves as a springboard for hardwork, diligence and virtuous life by which individuals within a group are appraised; or by which an individual appraises his past performance vis-à-vis the present. While individual's performances are assessed, the same apply to systems, e.g., economic, political, and education systems – their efficiency, productivity, quality and relevance. In other words, excellence in education should be seen in the quality of the services provided to the learners; the quality of the products and their behaviour, which would engender positive national development, as well as stable socio-economic and political climate. An educational system therefore could be regarded as excellent if it satisfies comparatively the purpose for which it was established in relation to other international educational systems. This being the case, we can then ask: Can Nigerian education system be adjudged as excellent? Has it satisfied the goals, aims and aspirations which it is expected to serve?

### **The Purpose of Education in Nigeria**

It would not be unnecessarily irrelevant to attempt a brief historicisation of the purpose of western education in Nigeria because it will help to assess how far Nigeria has fared in achieving excellence in education at certain periods. Three basic epochs are identified: the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial periods. These three distinct phases have basically three different but somehow related purposes of education in Nigeria, each period tended to give the impression of being excellent at the time. Ayandele (1976) and Adesina, et al (1983) observe that the Christian missionaries blazed trail in the development of western formal education in Nigeria, and that they aimed at equipping their adherents with minimal literacy and numeracy skills so that they can read the Bible and sing from the Hymn books. In effect, the purpose of education at that period was to produce those who would serve as interpreters, catechists, lay – readers, teachers, clerks, etc., in line with the evangelistic aims of the missionaries. In addition, the pioneering missionaries in Nigeria stressed character development and industrial education. It has been observed that two of the three goals of the Christian missionaries – literary and moral education were achieved to a large extent to the neglect of the vocational education. Adesina et al (1983) state the reason for this ugly development thus:

When the people found that clerical posts were better paid, they flocked to them. Literary education conferred prestige and honour to the individual benefactors. It was logical for parents, therefore, to prefer “book” knowledge to “industrial” education ... (p.6).

However, this situation did not change tremendously even during the period of full colonial government control of and participation in the provision of educational programmes and facilities. The colonial administration in Nigeria did not make radical departure from the literary education already introduced by the early Christian missions, rather, through statutory policies, it enlarged the scope of the purpose of education in Nigeria. For example, Abiri (2003) observes that some of the policy decisions that guided the provision of what was considered as excellent education for Nigerians included the following, among others:

- i. That great importance be attached to the teaching of religious and moral instruction relevant to the conditions and daily experience of the pupils.
- ii. That vernacular textbooks be prepared, and the contents and methods of teaching be adapted to African conditions, life and experience.
- iii. That the education system should inculcate in the learner the idea that vocational career is as honourable as the clerical (p.52).

But in practice, much attention was not given to vocational education. The reality was, in the view of Obanya (2004), that the colonial government deliberately oriented education towards employment, as school education was aimed at placing the recipient in pre-determined service roles in the colonial system.

It is evident that the colonial government's educational policies were not genuinely geared towards educational excellence, which would make Nigerians acquire education comparative to their counterparts in Europe and America. For Adewoye (1973), this was because the colonialists were not interested in producing well educated Nigerians, who could challenge the status quo. In effect, the colonial government did not intend to give Nigerians an educational system that could facilitate rapid development in all spheres, especially in science and technology. This was as a result of the poverty of the curriculum content and disparity in the administration of education in the defunct three regions.

At independence, Nigerian education system still wore colonial cloak. The recommendations of Ashby Commission Report of 1960, though acknowledged as a milestone, aimed at two objectives, which made far – reaching projections (Taiwo, 1980):

- i. To upgrade Nigerians who are already in employment but who need further education; and
- ii. To design a system of post-secondary education which will, as a first objective, produce before 1970 the flow of high – level man-power which Nigeria is estimated to need; and to design it in such a way that it can be enlarged, without being replanned, to meet Nigeria's need up to 1980 (p.124).

This vision turned out to be grossly myopic and elusive as a result of social unrest and political instability in the country a few years after independence (i.e., 1965 – 1970). The search for educational excellence led to the 1969 National Curriculum Conference and consequently the birth of National Policy on Education (1977), which has been revised severally in line with prevailing national needs. Nigeria (2012) gives reasons for these revisions.

Any meaningful review of the National Policy on Education is informed by the need to address noticeable gaps in the content and provisions that emerged in the course of implementation of the 4<sup>th</sup> edition (2004), and unpublished 5<sup>th</sup> edition (2008) of the NPE. There is also the need to maintain currency, relevance and to ensure that policy documents not only remains in tune with emerging trends in education, but also that it sets the framework for positioning Nigerian education to better serve the needs of the country (p.4).

The essence of the revision is that it ensured a re-visit of the Nigerian Philosophy of Education with emphasis on the needs of young people and adults, national socio-economic needs and aspirations, and the demands of curricula content. It could be argued that what is being referred to as the Philosophy of Nigerian Education seems to be a ruse because it has no Nigerian ideological base, hence the curricula content has not adequately addressed the needs and aspirations of Nigerians. Indeed, the national goals of education appear unrealistic given the trend of events in Nigeria because “national consciousness and national unity” are eminently threatened; “the inculcation of the right type of values and attitudes for the survival of the individual” is almost absent, while “the acquisition of appropriate skills” and the development of relevant abilities and competencies are not given the attention they deserved. It could also be argued that the inherent inconsistencies and contradictions in the philosophical framework of Nigerian education system are the cogs in the wheel of her educational excellence.

### **Realities of Excellence in Nigerian Education**

Since the introduction of the 6-3-3-4 system in 1976, and the subsequent formulation of the “Magna Carto” in 1977, Nigeria claims that she has provided her citizens with excellent education framework that could take the nation to greater heights in technological and scientific development. The loftiness of this ambitious policy and the programmes embedded in it was applauded, but the implementation was riddled with constraints that almost marred the intentions behind the programmes. Hence, the question: What are the bases of the realities of excellence in Nigerian education? The answer could be found first in the curricula emphasis; what constitutes the body of knowledge, the values, skills and attitudes that are desirable in society? What should be done by the school, the teacher, the learner, and the government to ensure excellence in education?

The fact remains that the curriculum both as content and process gives flesh and life to educational activities. But in the Nigerian context, it seems that the basic questions underpinning the curriculum are neglected or ignored, while greater emphasis is laid on quantitative aspect of it to the detriment of the qualitative dimension. In other words, attention was focused on the number of the products of the education system rather than on the quality of the products. Adesina et al (1980) observe that the curriculum was not functional in that it was essentially examination centred, and that it depended on rote – learning with very little or no attention to developing the mental and manual skills of its products. Carr in Fajana (1978) describes this situation as “encyclopaedic learning” which led to nowhere. This obnoxious colonial legacy has not been effectively expunged from our educational system. It has been observed that the curriculum in the colonial period did not make enough provision for science and technical education (Fajana, 1978). The effect of this situation has to a large extent affected the scientific and technological development of Nigeria. Even now that science and technical subjects are being emphasized, most schools are deficient in laboratories, technical workshops and their relevant equipment as funds meant for these facilities are diverted to private ends. At the end, we have scientists and engineers who “know that” but do not “know how”.

Another reality of excellence in education in the Nigerian context is that it has become a catch-phrase freely used by political demagogues at important fora, especially when presenting their parties’ manifestoes. The rhetorics associated with excellence in education is not uncommon for Gillies (2007) cautions that:

... if excellence is used too liberally and vaguely in educational discourse, then there is a very real danger that the word will lose its very meaning, and that there will be diminished potential to identify pupils achievements that are genuinely outstanding... (p.156).

MacIntyre (1991), in a similar vein contends that the use of the term excellence in recent times bears the hallmarks of public rhetoric that invokes an idiom of agreement that conceals as much as it reveals. In this regard, Gillies (2007) maintains that much of the rhetorical emphasis seems to be on the provision of excellent schools rather than on excellent performance among individuals. This assertion captures the true picture of educational excellence in Nigeria, where some state governments lavishly provide spacious and well-furnished classrooms, but with poorly motivated, ill-equipped and inadequately trained manpower. Genuine excellence in education can best be measured in terms of the performance and quality of the products of the system. It is apparently clear that what most politicians do care so much about is the percentage of the contracts awarded for

building of schools, provision of facilities and procurement of equipment. Who are the persons that utilize these infrastructural facilities? In most cases, in the rural areas, these facilities are allowed to waste and decay as some schools have become the habitats of reptiles, rodents, and even hide-outs for criminals and terrorists.

The desire for excellence in education would be a wishful thinking and a far cry if there is no attitudinal change among the clients of and the stakeholders in education. In simple terms, the attitude of the learners, teachers, parents and policy-makers towards certain disciplines has to change for the better. There have been notions that girls find science-related disciplines difficult. For Awofala (2007), it is clear that males and females, in view of their biological structures are naturally different. Hence, the disparities between the scholastic achievements of girls and boys have been attributed to biological and sociological factors (Klein, 2004). The result is that there are many more males than females in engineering, medicine or any science-related careers which are physically demanding and use advanced mathematics beyond arithmetic (Fennema, 1979). Klein (2004) further observes that while the biological approach notes hormonal influences on the differential functioning of sexes, the sociological perspective connects these differences to social norms and various stereotypical views of gender roles. How, then can excellence in education be attained in the presence of intergroup, ethnic and socio-economic differences manifested in various gender-related norms, stereotypes and societal expectations?

It has been observed that teachers' attitude to different success abilities of boys and girls significantly affect their individual performance. Schlosser and Algozzine (1980) are of the view that teachers give boys more credit for creativity and independence, whereas girls are seen as behaviourally more conforming. The general but wrong notion among students, parents and even teachers is that mathematics and physics are not easy-areas for girls. This notion has been debunked by Kimpall (1989) thus:

Girls' obedience manifests as adapting to teachers instructions regarding how to learn, while boys are more independent in their choice of ways to study. Sometimes, precisely because of their internalization of learning strategies recommended by instructors, girls solve mathematical problems better than boys.

This assertion however is at variance with what some studies in Nigeria reveal. For example, Awofala (2007) observes that "more females than males exhibit negative attitudes towards mathematics". This attitude has its origin in the negative impact of indigenous education, which is male – centred and as such gives the males undue advantage over their female counterparts (Nwafor, 2009).

With the above scenarios, the reality of excellence in Nigerian education would be difficult to attain because gender disparities, whether they are biological or sociological factors, cannot be easily stamped out unless the strong misconceptions about the education of women are corrected, and women not only placed on the same pedestal with men, but also given equal opportunity to prove their worth in various disciplines and spheres of life. However, the reality of excellence in Nigerian education can also be actualized where certain imperatives are taken into consideration.

### **Imperatives of Excellence in Nigerian Education**

Educational excellence is far more than a catch-phrase or slogan to be bandied about in a care-free and thoughtless manner; it should be seen as a conglomeration of processes, activities and procedures that make for the actualization of societal goals and desirable developmental outcomes. The outcomes are in terms of human and material development. In this regard therefore, such education system ought to possess certain essential ingredients that make it thick and strong, commendable and realistic. Some of the imperatives of excellence in education are briefly discussed below.

#### **Curriculum: Nature and Content**

Any education system that worth its salt necessarily must have a body of prescribed learning experiences under the school supervision, designed to provide the learner with the best possible training and experience to prepare him for the society of which he is a part or to qualify him for a trade or profession (Good in Aggarwal, 2002). The nature and content of the curriculum to a large extent determine the plausibility of an educational system to be regarded as excellent both in theory and in practice. The nature of any curriculum depends on the nature and needs of the society, and this in turn influence the curriculum content. The curriculum of Nigerian education appears to have lacunas which cast some slur on the entire education system from the bottom to the top. This is as a result of the poor quality of the curriculum (Akpochafo, 2007). The fact that there is acute unemployment among young graduates, and that the products of our education system are being denied recognition in foreign countries pointedly lend credence to the above submission. The Nigerian curriculum is devoid of proper interdisciplinary integration because the conventional boundaries between the pure/exact and the social science have not been broken. This therefore makes it difficult for learners to acquire knowledge and method of understanding nature and its related phenomena, as well as the means of harnessing nature's resources for solving human problems (Obanya, 2004).

The curriculum issues seem to be compounded by the absence of curriculum supervision. Effective implementation of a curriculum undoubtedly depends to a reasonable extent on the adequacy of instructional materials, e.g., textbooks, school equipment, among others. It has been argued that the development of necessary instructional materials has not been systematic because of reliance on expensive foreign instructional materials coupled with the fact that curriculum supervision by governmental agencies is a matter of routine (Adesina et al 1983). In an ideal and dynamic situation, curriculum supervision is expected to be a control mechanism for systemic improvements and basis for initiating reforms based on feedbacks gathered during the period of the exercise.

### **The Presence of Qualified Teachers**

Another imperative for excellence in education is the presence of qualified and adequate number of teachers. An education system that has a cream of competent teachers in a good number will definitely, all things being equal, produce people of high intellectual ability; men and women who would be development-oriented. It is evident that no education system could rise above the quality of its teachers (Nigeria, 2004), it could also be argued, in the same vein, that no student/pupil can rise above the quality of his teacher. Hence, adequate numbers of well-trained and well-equipped and motivated teachers are indispensable for educational excellence. The snag here is that the quality of teachers has been compromised by the quantity of educational institutions at all levels. The scenario in Nigeria in many states of the federation is lamentable because most schools are grossly understaffed and ill-equipped, coupled with over-crowded classrooms that throw the principle of 1:30 teacher – student ratio (Nigeria, 2004) into the dust bin. The contention here is that excellent educational policies are worthless unless there is an efficient and sufficient eminently qualified number of teachers to implement the goals, aims and content of the school curriculum, the outcomes of which could be seen in the quality of its products in terms of intellectual outputs and moral conduct.

### **Quality Assurance**

The much vaunted educational excellence in Nigerian focused much on quantitative dimension of governments efforts to provide education for virtually all her citizens without any serious attempts at ensuring qualitative education at all levels. The argument here is that for the past one and a half decades, there had been astronomic increase in the number of educational institutions at all levels by government, voluntary agencies and individuals. In this regard, Onwuka (2014) observes that while this is being done, little or no emphasis is placed on the quality of education given to students in those institutions. For this reason, it is necessarily important that quality assurance be not only emphasized, but also build into the system, so that the expectations of manpower users in relation to the quality of skills and knowledge acquired by the products of the system could be satisfied or met. In essence, quality assurance should be seen as control mechanism that ensures that appropriate academic standards are maintained and enhanced in and by the various programmes at all levels (Fadokun, 2005).

In effect, government agencies such as examination bodies like West African Examination Council (WAEC), National Examination Commission (NECO), Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB), National Universities Commission (NUC), and so on, should recognize quality assurance as a global yardstick to measure the relevance and currency of the educational system. The importance of quality assurance vis-à-vis the products of the educational system is further expounded by National Universities Commission (2004) as a “key component of successful internationalization; a mechanism for building institutional reputation in competitive local and global arena and a necessary foundation for consumer protection”.

This sounds laudable and lofty, but constraints in its implementation have ridiculously reduced its significance. The challenges include lackadaisical attitude of teachers and students, examination frauds, incessant industrial actions, poor motivation and irregular payment of teachers’ salaries, among others.

### **Inadequate Funding**

The success or failure of any education system stems principally from the adequacy or inadequacy of funds to execute all plans and projects that would engender excellence in education. Adequate funding of all educational policies and programmes at all levels is a critical factor that cannot be ignored, overlooked or neglected without disastrous consequences. Jekayinfa et al (2010) observe that the resources needed for qualitative education has been on the decline since the introduction of Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) in the late 1980s, and that this has led to the production of half-baked graduates. It is evident that Nigeria has not comply with the UNESCO’s recommendation that 26% of the annual budget be spent on education. Hence Obikoya in Akpochofo (2007) argues that Nigeria’s performance vis-à-vis other African countries is abysmally low when their expenditure on education is compared based on the gross national product (GNP) as shown in the table below:

Countries	% GNP
Angola	4.9%
Cote d'Ivoire	5.0%
Ghana	4.2%
South Africa	7.9%
Tanzania	3.4%
Mozambique	4.1%
Uganda	2.6%
<b>Nigeria</b>	<b>0.7%</b>

A critical analysis of the above shows that Nigeria misplaced her priorities, having given education an undeservably low spending, which implies neglect of the foundation stone for her development. In effect, sufficient funding of the education system is a sine qua non for excellence in education.

### **Government Commitment and Political Will**

The intention of government world-wide has always been to provide its citizens excellent education system; a system that is not only utilitarian and functional, but also one that would be of international standard. In Africa, and indeed Nigeria, this appears to be a wishful thinking and a ruse, because of government's attitude towards her educational policies and programmes. For example, on many occasions in Nigeria, some ministers of and commissioners for education appointed by government were either medical doctors, lawyers, etc., who do not know the nitty gritty of education as a discipline. This no doubt encourages mismanagement of funds, and wrong and/or non-implementation of vital aspects of educational policies. In essence, corruption and mismanagement of available resources have adversely affected government's commitment to her avowed promise of educational excellence (Jekayinfa et al., 2010). The decline of interest and commitment on the part of government aptly demonstrates her inability and lack of political will to translate her good intentions into reality for sustainable national development.

### **Recommendations**

From the foregoing, it is pertinent to make a few suggestions as to how to make excellence in education a more realistic endeavour in Nigeria. First, the current curriculum should be reviewed with a view to ensuring reforms that would address the problems facing the education system. This implies giving science and technology priority attention since they hold the key to open vistas that would launch Nigeria on the lane of fast development. It is therefore suggested that curriculum should not only emphasize integration, but also depth of knowledge and performance as opposed to breadth of knowledge. In effect, curriculum reform should also take vocational and entrepreneurship education into serious consideration so that literary education can be de-emphasised, and acute unemployment minimized.

Again, the cream of teachers in the education system should comprise dedicated and competent men and women, who would not only inculcate worthwhile knowledge and skills in their students, but also virtues that would make them good and worthy citizens. In essence, the emphasis should be on teachers whose interests do not conflict with their professional ethics; teachers who would not combine their duties with personal interests such as trading, politicking, etc. The need to train and re-train teachers whose minimum qualification should be the first degree or its equivalent, so that they will be abreast with current developments and innovations in their profession cannot be overstressed.

In addition, excellence in education could be a well conceived lofty ideal, but without effective and careful implementation, it would be worthless and meaningless. Hence, its implementation should be in the hands of experts in education and related disciplines; it should not be politicized to avoid sluggish or non-implementation of programmes and projects that would engender development.

Furthermore, Nigerian government has often times diverted budgetary allocations for education to other sectors. Hence, funding of education in Nigeria is still less than 13 per cent – far short of UNESCO's recommendation of 26 per cent (Kalusi, 2014). It is high time Nigeria started to judiciously implement to the fullest the funding of education. This could be facilitated by the establishment of some statutory agencies on implementation of funds to act as checks and balances between the source of funding and its recipients. To give teeth to the agencies, stringent legislative measures be meted to corrupt officials who misappropriate funds to serve as deterrent to others. Adequate funding of education will provide the necessary textbooks, equipment, qualified and competent manpower, and other infrastructural facilities; and even facilitate repairs or renovation of dilapidated structures. All these would be possible, if government would change its laissez faire attitude and show sufficient commitment and demonstrate reasonable political will to providing excellence in education in Nigeria.

## II. Conclusion

It is obvious that Western education has been introduced in Nigeria for over two centuries, yet she is yet to find her feet firmly on the educational landscape, in spite of several efforts and policy initiatives. Until education is not politicized and rhetorics divorced from the real intentions of government and political actors, genuine and realistic excellence in education will continue to elude Nigeria, and development strides would progress at millipede speed. Therefore, excellence in Nigerian would be feasible if the critical components of the education system are properly examined with a view to effecting reforms that would engender overall development that would touch all segments of society positively.

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