

Indeterminate Employment Opportunities Available for Cooperative Graduates in Nigeria: Challenges and Remedies

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Abstract: The cooperative graduate is trained to emerge as an all-knowing-cooperative-expert at the zenith of his practice because he is taught to be a lawyer, accountant, finance and business management expert, magistrate and consultant. Many cooperative training institutes both in Nigeria and abroad are producing graduates with these prospects at different levels of cooperative professionalism capable of, and ready to render these valuable services to employers of labour. Unfortunately, many of these experts do not know where to find employment after graduation. This paper interrogated 314 diplomates and ambassadors of the cooperative department over a period of 4 years and identifies several employment opportunities available to them which include consultancy and self-employment. The paper also identifies the constraints they face especially that of ignorance of employers of labour and finally made recommendations that will help them become more visible in the employment market including mentioning cooperative courses as one of the invited disciplines during advertisement of business and management vacancies.

Keywords: Cooperative Graduate, Employment Opportunities, Quality Education and Training, Cooperative Expert

I. Introduction

Higher institutions bring about learning that moulds a lifetime, learning that transmits the heritage of millennia, learning that shapes the future. In addition to general education provided centrally, specialized training provides instruction in a wide range of education and business areas. The essence of education is to supply manpower to tend the grinding mills of the global economy (Garrovillas, 2008) and to realise man's full potentials. That is why the United Nations established four pillars of education namely- learning to be, learning to learn, learning to do and learning to live with others. Such education should promote effective communication, critical thinking, knowledge integration and social responsibility (Fabella, 2009).

A cooperative training institute is established as a specialised cooperative training centre to provide operationally focused training of the highest possible standard in a modern professional environment by the most efficient means for the enhancement of the student's abilities in cooperative administration, on the one hand, the benefit of the cooperative sector which he is specifically trained to administer, on the other hand and the development of society generally.

II. Literature Review

Business organizations are classified on the basis of ownership. The form of ownership has implications for the formation intricacies, growth and continuity of the firm, the methods of raising funds, extent of liability of the owners, the distribution of profits as well as management techniques. There are the Sole-Proprietorships, the Partnerships, the Joint-Stock Companies, the Statutory Corporations and the Cooperative Societies.

The International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) while issuing the Cooperative Identity Statement in 1995 defined a cooperative as *an autonomous association of persons, united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise*. It also issued nine cooperative values and seven cooperative principles as part of the special identity of cooperatives that makes it unique.

The principles of cooperation spring from the values and they are the guidelines by which co-operatives put their values into practice.

Cooperatives evolved from Britain, spread throughout Europe, to America and India and then from there to other developing countries. Unlike in Europe where cooperatives were formed through the initiative of voluntary leaders as self-help organisations, in India, government decided, for obvious reasons, to take an active part in the propagation and promotion of cooperative societies. This reflected in the Indian Cooperative Societies Acts of 1904 and 1912. The important innovation of the Indian cooperative law was that it initiated a new type of cooperative society: the state sponsored cooperative. The basic idea of this new scheme was to create autonomous, self-reliant cooperatives in the long run but to substitute the lacking technical knowledge and initiative of the rural population for a transition period by the know-how of officials of a specialised government agency headed by the Registrar of Cooperative Societies. This was the origin of the concept of the Classical British Indian Pattern of Cooperation; whose policy

highlights were hinged on the assumption that citizens of developing countries were mostly uneducated and would not be able to manage their joint cooperative businesses efficiently. In order to introduce cooperatives into such a country, there should be *an all-knowing cooperative expert*, called the Registrar, assisted by his professional staff, who would supervise the establishment and management of cooperative societies to ensure their success (Strickland, 1934). His assignment also included to understand the nature of everyday businesses and how to run them successfully. This was because such cooperatives were mostly made up of individual small businessmen and women. He was also supposed to understand the operations of several types of enterprises since cooperatives could be formed by farmers, artisans, IT professionals, hair dressers, pharmacists, doctors, educationists, salary earners, barbers, builders, shop-keepers, freelance writers, small manufacturers and processors, etc. He had to understand them and their businesses reasonably enough to be able to organise them successfully. This concept was then adopted by the British-colonial government as their introductory cooperative policy for developing countries, including Nigeria. This policy has therefore informed the nature of the curriculum of cooperative training in tertiary institutions in Nigeria and such other British-colonized developing countries; that is, one aimed at producing an all-knowing cooperative expert on graduation (Okoreaffia, 2016).

Efficient cooperative education and training are crucial in the effective management of the cooperative sector (Chukwu, 2012). In a very broad sense, management of the cooperative will include everyone who has a role to play towards the establishment and running of the cooperative and whose decisions affect the wellbeing of cooperatives. Therefore, management of cooperatives in developing countries like Nigeria should begin from the government policy makers including the Minister responsible for cooperative matters. Reflecting the roles expected of him towards cooperatives, he needs cooperative education which is multi-faceted. He will usually rely on the advice of the Registrar (now called the Director) of Cooperative societies and his staff especially since he has to present memos on cooperatives to the President or Governor for policy matters. The most critical person in this set-up is the Director and his staff.

The cooperative field staff namely the cooperative inspectors and the cooperative assistants are usually government civil servants who are meant to be constantly in direct active contact with the individual cooperative societies at the grassroots level. Their activities determine, to a great deal, the rate of development of these cooperatives. They carry out functions delegated to them expressly or impliedly by the Director including promotional duties that lead to the organisation and registration of cooperatives, supervisory duties, educational duties, legal duties like audit, inspection, inquiry, examination, arbitration, amalgamation, division, liquidation, etc. They need proper education and training in cooperatives to be able to function effectively. Such training will veer into wide areas including principles and practice of management, business, marketing, law, economics, arbitration, procurement and supply chain, accounting auditing, production, banking, finance, office management and administration, etc.

There are several institutions in Nigeria today and indeed abroad that offer formal training in cooperative management. They include the federal and state-owned Cooperative Colleges, Polytechnics and Universities. Beyond the shores of Nigeria are several other institutions offering courses leading to certificates, diplomas, degrees, etc in cooperative management. The different curricula for the cooperative management programmes in these institutions usually cover general studies courses, management courses, business courses and then core cooperative courses.

Additionally, and maybe, most significantly today, the cooperative graduate is also taught the virtues of honesty, self-help, self-responsibility, caring for others, social responsibility, equity, etc as these are the underlying values upon which the cooperative concept is founded. These values digest into the character and behavioural pattern of the average cooperative graduate making him more dependent and trustworthy than the average graduate of today.

In general, cooperative students in these institutions are taught what other business/management students are taught and in addition, they are taught specialized courses in cooperatives, since one must understand how businesses are managed generally before specializing in the unique area of management of cooperative concerns.

III. Methodology:

Many cooperative graduates referred to as diplomats of the department and ambassadors were interacted with between 2018 and 2022. Many of them turned in reports of their experience after graduation while we maintained interaction with them in a WhatsApp platform where many relevant issues were discussed. Data received from 314 of them were analysed using tables, frequencies and expert consultations and conclusions.

a. Findings on the Employment Opportunities available to Cooperative Graduates:

Graduates of cooperative management have several employment opportunities.

- i. As management/business graduates, they are offered employment in fields and organizations relating to: -

(a). Development (b). Marketing (c). Agriculture (d). Administration (e). Management (f). Economics (g). Commerce (h). Solidarity Groups (i) Finance (j). Member-based organisations (k). Not-for-profits (l) Banking, etc. (Diplomats Reports, 2018).

In addition, they have six core professional areas of employment namely: -

- ii. Cooperative Consultancy: These are cooperative experts who operate self-employed consultancies where cooperative societies/unions/apexes, donor agencies, organisations, institutions and governments can engage them in different aspects of the cooperative profession. They charge fees for their services and earn a living through it. Although the Nigeria Cooperative Societies Act of 2004 does not expressly provide for this aspect of work, there are several implied provisions in the legislation (Section 36 where the society is empowered to appoint her auditor; Section 37 where the Director can authorize a person to conduct an inquiry; Section 40 where the Director is empowered to appoint a suitable person as liquidator of a cancelled society; Section 49 where the Director is empowered to appoint an arbitrator/arbitrators, Cooperative Regulation 37 where the committee of a society can delegate the preparation of its annual accounts; etc.) The Institute of Cooperative Professionals of Nigeria (ICOPRON) has streamlined the qualifications for cooperative consultancy in order for it not to be an all-comers affair especially now that the cooperatives are arousing renewed interests within the national and international communities. Fellows of the profession now stand out distinctively as such cooperative consultants in practice.
- iii. The cooperative movement: This includes the primary and secondary cooperative societies/unions, the state and national apexes and federations. Altogether, they constitute the cooperative movement. They are the people operating the cooperative concept and require the services of cooperative graduates. In many areas where the cooperatives are not viable enough to employ their own staff, the Director has been known to second his staff to assist the cooperative/s. However, this has been criticized severally as tending to impede on the autonomy and independence of the cooperative. The expected practice is a situation where the cooperative unions and apexes will employ cooperative graduates themselves and second them to their different cooperative affiliates in schedules as the Travelling Secretaries of the past while they share the cost through the affiliation fees they pay.
- iv. International Donor Agencies: There are donor/aid agencies interested in the cooperative concept or which use the cooperative ideology to extend aid/support to communities and societies. They have to employ cooperative graduates to be able to do so efficiently and effectively. Examples include the International Bank for Reconstruction and Developing (IBRD/World Bank), International Opportunities Industrialisation Centre (IOIC), Pro-Poor Agencies and many others.
- v. Management of Organisation-Based cooperatives: Most multinationals and indeed major players in the organized private sector encourage the formation of staff cooperatives. This is because, these cooperatives tend to stabilize the organisation's activities by removing the incidence of IOU, salary advances and staff loans from the organisation and generally help in improving the welfare and standard of living of staff. Some have been known to establish staff cooperative housing estates, consumer shops, welfare schemes, staff clinics, etc. Consequently, the management of these organisations promote the cooperative by employing cooperative graduates for the staff cooperative. These are employees of the multinationals/organisations but posted or seconded to assist the staff cooperative. Examples include Federal Polytechnic, Nekede Staff Cooperatives; Shell Staff Cooperative in PH and in Lagos; NNPC Staff cooperative in PH and Agip Oil Staff cooperative, Petrochemical Eleme Staff Cooperative; Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) Staff Cooperative; Nigeria Security Printing and Minting Company Staff Cooperative; EFCC staff cooperative; etc. in other cases, the staff cooperative will employ the staff herself and they will become staff of the staff cooperative.
- vi. The Academia: In the different institutions (Cooperative Colleges, Polytechnics, Universities, etc) where cooperative courses are offered, they employ qualified cooperative graduates to teach the various cooperative subjects. These people also carry out researches in the cooperative field. At present these are high level staff with post-graduate qualifications but the United Nations resolution at the end of the activities of the International Year of Cooperatives (ICA, 2012) to the effect that cooperative course should be taught at both primary, secondary and tertiary schools so that people will start early to understand the cooperative concept will soon mean that lower qualified cooperative graduates may find teaching jobs in primary, secondary and commercial schools.
- vii. The government: The different tiers of government in Nigeria namely, the local government, state government and the federal government all have provisions for Cooperative Departments in their scheme of services. In the local government, the cooperative is a unit under the department of Social Development. In the state governments, the cooperative is a department that is not uniformly placed – variously under the Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Poverty Alleviation, Ministry of Commerce & Industry or even a Ministry of its own – Ministry of Cooperative Development. Under the Federal

Government, the cooperative has a department under the Federal Ministry of Agriculture and a unit under the Federal Ministry of Labour and Employment. These employ cooperative graduates to carry out their mandates.

- viii. Mutual/group cooperative: It is now in vogue for undergraduates of tertiary institutions to learn one skill or the other while in school. Indeed, this has become a federal government policy which has reflected in the setting up of entrepreneurship centres in schools. The objective is that every graduate will be trained in a skill which will act as a fall-back option. Graduates of cooperatives who are trained in the same skill can also form their own cooperative with a view to assisting each other to organise their individual businesses, leveraging on their social capital (Okoreaffia, et al., 2023) to procure in bulk in order to reduce unit costs as well as increase their business income in line with the cooperative idea. That way, all the training and education they acquired in business, entrepreneurship, management, finance, marketing, cooperative organisation and administration etc will be put to test as they will need to deploy such knowledge into practice (Okoreaffia, 2013).

b. Further Findings on the Challenges of Cooperative Graduates in the Employment Market in Nigeria

- i). Narrow Knowledge of the Cooperative Concept/Programme.

Many people do not have a good knowledge of the cooperative concept and details of its academic programmes. It is on record that many of the students who studied cooperative courses in tertiary institutions in Nigeria did not also know what cooperative was all about before commencing the programme while some who heard about it prior, did not have a good understanding of the concept before enrolling in the programme. In the same vein, employers of labour do not quite understand the cooperative programme well. This means that cooperative graduates are misunderstood at the employment market leading to their unjust neglect and low morale.

- ii). Non-specific advertisement for cooperative vacancies

Most advertisement of vacancies in the business and/or management sector will request for graduates of marketing, business administration, economics and related fields without a specific mention of cooperative economics and management. Even advertisements in the social-economy will mention sociology, rural development, agricultural economics, economics and other related fields without a specific mention of cooperatives and rural development. Needless to emphasize that the course contents of these programmes are related with that of the cooperative graduate even wider but the advertisements do not portray that fact.

- iii). No compelling law on professionalism

In most cases, there is no law compelling employers of labour to engage people in their core areas of training. This is why you find people from a certain academic background employed in sectors very different from what they were trained in especially in places where who-you-know plays a key role. They claim to make up through professional and on-the-job training. This means that even where there are specific vacancies for cooperative management graduates, the employers of labour, even when they understand the cooperative programme, still employ people from other academic backgrounds claiming that they are the same with cooperative graduates, just to patronize their relations and friends.

- iv). Occupier attitude of sponsoring organisations

As it is in vogue today, most multi-nationals, joint-stock companies and public corporations/companies facilitate the establishment of staff cooperatives in order to reap the advantages of enhanced staff welfare at minimum cost to them. However, the management of some of these sponsoring organisations more often than not plant their persons in the key positions in the cooperative. Most times, the management will second their organisation's staff to manage the cooperative without giving the cooperative the freedom to employ qualified cooperative graduates to manage their affairs. This is seen as a form of support to the cooperative but if not done with professionalism, will hinder the employment opportunities of the cooperative graduate in addition to the consequent ineptitude that will be occasioned by the professional mis-match.

v). Schemes of Service of the Governments of Nigeria: As mentioned earlier, the different tiers of governments in Nigeria provide for the employment of cooperative officers in their cooperative departments. The template for use is usually the scheme of service. This contains the job description which outlines clearly the scope and nature of work which the employee is to perform; the entry qualifications and experience required for appointment; the salary scale; and the conditions for career progression.

The current scheme of service for the 774 unified local governments in Nigeria was published in 2006 by the Local Government Department, Ministry of Inter-Governmental Affairs, Youth Development and Special Duties. It makes provisions for 2 cadres for the cooperative unit namely;

1. Cooperative Inspector cadre which has four posts from GL 04 to GL 07.

The core entry qualification is School Certificate/General Certificate of Education, Ordinary Level and then the cooperative training that follows. This is satisfactory considering the duties and responsibilities of the cadre.

2. Cooperative Officer cadre which has eight posts from GL 06 to GL 14.

The core-entry qualifications are the Certificate of the Chartered Institute of Secretaries and National Diploma in Cooperative Studies from a recognised training institution; and for the graduate level, a Higher National Diploma in Accounts is required. The certificates of the Chartered Institute of Secretaries are irrelevant in cooperative practice considering the duties and responsibilities of this cadre. Also, apart from the National Diploma in Cooperative Studies, a Diploma in Cooperative Studies is also adequate as there can be a difference between the two. Finally, the HND in Accounts provision for graduate employment is a gross mistake. The curriculum of the Accounting Department of Polytechnics does not contain even a single course on cooperatives. One wonders why this scheme will exclude specific mention of graduates with HND in Cooperative Economics and Management, who are trained for the duties and responsibilities of the job, only to provide it for those that are not qualified.

Also, by 1st May 2000, the Office of the Head of Service of the Federation published the scheme of service for the States' and Federal Civil Service as approved by the National Council on Establishments (a body of all the states Permanent Secretaries in charge of establishment with their counterpart at the federal level as chairman).

The cooperative department under this scheme of service has 3 cadres namely;

1. The Cooperative Inspector cadre which has four posts from GL 04 to GL 07.

The core-entry qualification to this cadre is the School Certificate/GCE O/L and is considered adequate for the duties and responsibilities. It is followed by training in a cooperative college.

2. The Cooperative Officer cadre which has seven posts from GL 06 to GL 013.

The core-entry qualifications into this cadre are the Certificates of the Chartered Institute of Secretaries, Diploma in Cooperative from cooperative colleges and OND in Cooperative Studies from other institutions. The graduate level requires an HND in Accountancy or Business Administration.

Like discussed earlier, the certificate of the Chartered Institute of Secretaries is not relevant for the duties and responsibilities of the Cooperative Officer and should not qualify. The present curricula for Accounting and Business Administration do not contain even a single course in cooperatives. It is therefore wrong to require an HND in these fields as entry qualifications especially to the exclusion of holders of HND in Cooperative Economics and Management.

3. The Registrar of Cooperative Societies cadre which has eight posts at the states level from GL 08 to GL 16 and nine posts at the federal level from GL 08 to GL 17.

The core-entry qualification for this most important cadre is the possession of a degree in Arts, Economics, Agriculture, Law, Business Administration or Accountancy from a recognized university. If we remember that the Registrar, considering his duties and responsibilities, is supposed to be an all-knowing cooperative expert, then we will all agree that these qualifications are inadequate. At present, none of the curricula of these programmes offers a course in cooperatives. Some that did in their previous curricula (e.g BAM) have dropped it in their recent review. No mention is made of the degree holder in Cooperative Economics and Management/Cooperatives and Rural Development, etc produced every day from Nigerian universities and beyond. Where a degree holder, other than in cooperatives must be employed as a Registrar, that is, if there are states that are so handicapped, the officer must first attend a post-graduate course in cooperative in any nearby institution.

IV. Recommendations:

- i. There is the need for cooperative education to be taken to primary and secondary schools in line with the United Nation's resolution at the events marking the International Year of Cooperatives, 2012. That way, the cooperative idea will be appreciated by the young and leaders of tomorrow. Also, cooperative education should be targeted at policy makers and the public from where employers of labour will also benefit and treat cooperative graduates more favourably.
- ii. Advertisements for vacancies in the general management and business sectors should include cooperative courses as qualifying academic requirements too. This will also help the cooperative management graduate.
- iii. The government should introduce the employment policy where core professional vacancies can only be filled by professionals in that field. This way, all the core positions designated for cooperative management graduates will be left for them as they are now in sufficient numbers.

- iv. In the same vein, when an organisation facilitates the establishment of a staff cooperative for her workers, it should allow such a cooperative to employ qualified cooperative graduates. Where it must assist further, it should employ such cooperative graduates too instead of seconding staff from other departments to manage the staff cooperative.
- v. Obe (2000), recognizing the short-comings of the schemes of service in his preface, stated that, like all dynamic structures, they will be subject to regular updating and review revealing that some issues are currently receiving necessary attention as requested by some professional bodies etc and recommendations will be sent to the National Council on Establishments after appropriate job evaluation. This is already overdue.
- vi. The Institute of Cooperative Professionals of Nigeria (ICOPRON) should reach out to other professional bodies and agencies in the campaign to make the cooperative discipline better appreciated. All professionals of the cooperative discipline should also strengthen the ICOPRON to be able to pursue the arduous task before it.

V. Conclusion:

Cooperative management graduates should be able to find employment in Nigeria given their high-quality training in business, management, agriculture, group dynamics, skills and technology. We agree that good relationships, responsible contacts and other positive biases influence access to employment in today's Nigeria but performance and efficiency still depends on your character and training. It is only when our cooperative graduates are employed and they fail to perform that we can accept, as inclusive, the indictment by Faust (2010) that despite all the support, most professional training institutes have allegedly failed to produce graduates with the required skills and know-how needed by the economy. Every cooperative professional must therefore be involved and committed to ensuring that there is a future for the cooperative sector in Nigeria as already assured in many other parts of the world.

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