

Town-Gown Relationship: A Compelling Synergy for Functional Higher Education in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The importance of the synergy between town and gown in achieving a functional education cannot be overemphasized. Previous studies have looked at the adequacy and relevance of the curriculum to national needs, the funding of the system, plant and facility adequacy, and learners' psychosocial factors, but not much has been done on examining the vital roles of the host communities in achieving the laudable aims of having a functional higher education system in Nigeria. This study adopted a qualitative approach to analyzing the roles of town-gown relationships in achieving functional higher education in Nigeria. Specifically, the study examined the concept of functional education in Nigeria, reviewed the implications of functional higher education in Nigeria, determined the contributions of town-gown relationships to functional higher education in Nigeria, and suggested possible ways to sustain functional education in Nigeria. Among others, it was suggested that university leaders should be encouraged to partner and collaborate with the host communities; this will foster a more functional and efficient higher education system and mutually beneficial outcomes such as capacity building, improved security, job creation, and increased economic growth and development.

Keywords: Town-Gown, Relationship, Synergy, Higher Education

INTRODUCTION

Globally, education is regarded as an instrument for societal development. It refers to the acquisition of skills, knowledge, attitudes, and values needed to unlock human potential for the transformation of lives and society. Education is also a socializing agent that equips all its beneficiaries with the necessary tools such as knowledge, skills, attitude, cultural values, language, and social skills to enable them to conform the desires/demand of their society (Paulley, & Buseri. 2019). It is no gainsaying that education is the engine room of growth and development of any nation.

According to Birabil and Ogeh (2020), education in Nigeria is structured into four levels namely; pre-primary, primary, secondary, and tertiary education. Tertiary education is otherwise known as higher education and it is generally the peak of education in all countries of the world which produces high-level man-power for national growth and development agenda. In Nigeria, the goals of higher education involve; contributing to national development through high-level manpower training, provision of accessible and affordable quality learning opportunities in response to the needs and interests of all Nigerians, provision of high-quality career counseling and lifelong learning for self-reliance, reduction of skills shortages, promotion of scholarship, entrepreneurship and community service, ensuring national unity and promotion of national and international synergy for needed growth and development (FRN. 2013).

It is therefore important to interrogate the extent of attainment or fulfillment of these laudable goals considering the current recent developments in the Nigerian higher education sector and this is where functional education comes in.

Functional education is how well higher education goals are being achieved concerning the realities of our daily lives as a people.

Functional education is education that is pertinent to the learner's present and future requirements, issues, and goals and it is based on the occurrence and changes in the learner's cultural environment. It is an education that places more emphasis on the capacity to carry out useful activities than establishing ideological conformity. It is the practical effect of education on individual and group needs of the society.

Functional education is what Nigeria needs to effectively harness its abundant human and material resources to catch up with Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and be numbered among the developed economies of the world. The Oxford Advanced Learners English Dictionary defines the word "functional" as an adjective used to describe anything practical and useful, having a function working or being able to work. Thus, functional education is education that is practical and useful to the beneficiaries and the society at large. Then, one begins to wonder why beneficiaries of the Nigerian higher educational system seem not to be solving myriad of socio-economic and other challenges to our national development agenda. Different stakeholders have shown concerns about how reflective our higher education is on the society because a qualified mechanical engineer in Nigeria still patronises a local mechanic workshop when his/her car is faulty. The country is one of the nations of the world blessed with abundant crude oil but we lack the technology or human resource to refine it. The refineries in Nigeria are either moribund or constantly under maintenance. Nigeria is also proud of very brilliant professors of economics, political science, and the like but these expertises appear not to positively reflect the current situation of the Nigerian economy. There were cases of graduates of universities having difficulties simply expressing themselves in English language or writing a simple error-free letter. There are limits to what graduates of lower levels of education (primary and secondary education) as restrained by their objectives but what do we say about full fledge beneficiaries of higher education that are meant to take the lead, supervise, innovate, and foresee likely problems of a course of action and put formidable measures in place to prevent or curtail them. The current study sees it surprising that Annan-Brew and Arhin (2022) found that student-teachers do not face supervisory challenges through their education and practices. It was, therefore, curious to explore more if the level of challenges is minimising. This is perhaps not the current situation of the Nigerian education output deliverables!

The implications of having a dysfunctional higher education as Nigeria appears to be witnessing are but are not limited to; poor human capital, insecurity, corruption, resource wastages, high attrition rate (resentment to higher education), poor economic power, low value of the local currency (Naira) as against international currencies, turning the country to dumping ground as local production will be very low, avoidable perennial epidemics and health hazards, poverty, unemployment, poor national income, bad governance and so on.

Having a functional education is a continuous process that transverses generations and most importantly, this type of education that is craved globally needs multilateral relationship exchange among the training hubs (higher education institutions: gown) and the society (town). This relationship seems to be sacrosanct for a nation to witness functional education. Each society has its peculiar needs and the gown must be well informed to prepare potential outputs (graduates) that will adequately fulfill their personal needs and that of the larger society. (Miller & Malone. 2019)

According to Denins (2022), the town-gown relationship is the cordiality that exists between higher education training institution and their host communities. This relationship between universities and host communities must be continuously mutually beneficial to both parties to ensure sustainable growth and development of both institutions. (Tekleselassie & Ford. 2019). Therefore, examining the need for a town-gown relationship as a compelling synergy for functional higher education in Nigeria is paramount.

Statement of the Problem

Nigeria's educational system annually produces graduates who are largely dependent on nonexistent white-collar professions and lack the skills necessary to become independent.

Discussions in a variety of fora and places indicate that Nigerian university graduates lack the necessary employable skills. Agina-Obu and Osere (2020) opined that the majority of school dropouts are not prepared to handle today's issues. As a result, unemployment has reached a very shameful level, which contributes to societal vices including kidnapping, despondency, oil bunkering, poverty and so on. These social vices may be a result of Nigeria's educational system's weak foundation. The country is highly certificate oriented now that almost every parent wants higher education for their children not minding whether the child/ward has what it takes to acquire and make good use of higher education. The situation is so worrisome that, a non-holder of higher education certificate is not seen as a complete being in Nigeria. However, a graduate of a vocational apprenticeship mostly performs better than higher education certificate holder in the same field. Then we begin to ask ourselves; what is wrong with the functionality of Nigeria's higher education that graduates find it difficult to practice what they have learned on campus in order to be self-reliant and also contribute to the society?

Previous researchers have looked at the adequacy and relevance of curriculum to national need, funding of the system, plants and facilities adequacy, learners' psychosocial factors.

Owan, Emangbe, Denwigwe, Etudor-Eyo, Usoro, Ebuara, Effiong, Ogar & Bassey (2022) researched into curriculum management and graduate programmes' viability. Similarly, Okon, Ntamu & Phoebe (2020) conducted a study on psycho-social factors and students' attitudes towards learning in higher education while Ubogu & Israel (2023) worked on financing tertiary education in Nigeria. However, much has not been done in examining the vital roles of the host communities in achieving laudable aims of having a functional higher education system in Nigeria.

It is, therefore, imperative for all stakeholders to collectively put measures in place at ensuring that all levels of the nation's educational system reflect the current and future needs of the people if the Nigerian state would return to the good path of national prosperity.

Objectives of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the influence of the town-gown symbiotic relationship on the functionality of Nigeria's higher educational system. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. examine the concept of functional education in Nigeria.
2. review the implications of functional higher education in Nigeria.
3. determine the contributions of the town-gown relationship to functional higher education in Nigeria.
4. suggest possible ways towards sustaining functional education in Nigeria.

CONCEPT OF FUNCTIONAL EDUCATION

Functional is an adjective derived from the noun 'function' which ordinarily means a public ceremony, an event, or a social gathering (Delahunty, 2010). When we talk of the functions of something, we mean the abilities of a thing in its action. It could also mean the purpose, aim, or goal of a thing. Therefore, for something to function, it means achieving the purpose, intention, or goal of bringing it to action. The term functional refers to a thing or system concerned with its practical use or purpose.

Functional education refers to an educational approach that focuses on equipping students with practical skills and knowledge that can be directly applied in real-life situations. (Vaisanen & Hirsto, 2020). This approach emphasizes the development of competencies that are relevant to the needs of individuals, communities, and the workforce.

According to Lim & Kim (2018) education is the culmination of all the procedures by which a child or young adult develops the abilities, skills, attitudes, and other societally beneficial behaviors.

Functional education can, therefore, be referred to as a form of education that stresses the instrumental value of all education in such a way that every student leaving school will possess the right kind of knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, and character necessary to give the recipient (learner) a start and able to apply acquired knowledge and skills in making a livelihood for himself/herself and becoming a participating, contributing and fulfilled citizen (Peretomode, 2021). A skilled and productive education is what is referred to as functional education. Also, Nanwana (2017) stated that people's ability to apply their technological know-how, abilities, and competencies to be independent and raise their standard of living is made possible by education. Education promotes initiative and self-effort to make a person a useful contributor to society.

Similarly, Madumere-Obike (2006) referred to functional education as an activity that transforms a person from a parasitic consumer to an effective and creative producer. It is that education that is geared towards developing the individual to his full potential such that the learner will be able to put into practice what he has learned and use it to produce something meaningful.

Implications of Functional Education

The goal of functional education is to maximize each person's potential. Education must have certain characteristics or positive effects to fulfill its function of being functional. Earlier scholars came up with some of the features of functional education such as the following: relevance, accessibility, empowerment, self-reliance, involvement of stakeholders in its design; equipping recipients to harness potential, emphasizing the acquisition of practical skills and knowledge for gainful self-employment (Fuandai, Shiaki, & Gbari, 2007).

The implications of functional education are multifaceted and can have significant impacts on individuals, society, and the economy. Here are some key implications of functional education:

Relevant Workforce Skills: Functional education aims to prepare students for the demands of the job market by equipping them with practical skills that employers seek. This can help reduce the gap between education and employment, ensuring that graduates possess the necessary competencies to excel in their chosen fields. By aligning education with the needs of the job market, functional education can contribute to higher employability rates and better job prospects for individuals.

Enhanced Problem-Solving Abilities: Functional education emphasizes critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making skills. Students are encouraged to apply their knowledge in practical scenarios, enabling them to analyze and solve real-world problems effectively. This cultivates a problem-solving mindset and fosters creativity, enabling individuals to adapt to dynamic environments and contribute to innovative solutions.

Improved Entrepreneurship and Innovation: Functional education nurtures an entrepreneurial spirit by encouraging students to identify opportunities and develop the necessary skills to turn ideas into action. By emphasizing creativity, risk-taking, and business acumen, functional education can empower individuals to become entrepreneurs and innovators, driving economic growth and creating employment opportunities.

Addressing Socioeconomic Disparities: Functional education can play a vital role in addressing socioeconomic disparities by providing equal opportunities for all students, regardless of their backgrounds. By focusing on practical skills and competencies, functional education equips individuals with the tools needed to overcome barriers and achieve economic mobility. This can contribute to reducing social inequality and promoting inclusive growth.

Lifelong Learning: Functional education promotes a lifelong learning mindset by instilling a love for learning and the acquisition of new skills beyond formal education. The practical nature of functional education encourages individuals to continuously update their knowledge and adapt to evolving circumstances. This prepares individuals for a rapidly changing world where the ability to learn and adapt is crucial.

CONCEPT OF TOWN-GOWN RELATIONSHIP

The concept of town and gown originated from the university towns of medieval times, and the relationship at the time was hostile. The 'town' in this context refers to the host communities of universities while the 'gown' refers to the universities.

Town-Gown Relationship recognizes that universities and the communities in which they are located are interdependent and can contribute to each other's growth and development. The term "town" represents the local community, while "gown" symbolizes the academic world of the university (Babalola, Ojo, & Aluko, 2019).

According to Olusanya, & Ideh (2017), the adversarial relationship was borne out of among other things, the autonomous and independent nature of the universities to demand favourable conditions from host community administrators or move to another community.

Town and Gown relationship is a particular kind of partnership between higher institutions and their host towns that promotes growth and development through projects that create capacity and disseminate information.

This connection establishes knowledge and economic influence on the development of the community and institution growth for international competitiveness. It goes without saying that to produce the high-caliber graduates necessary for institutional and societal development, universities and the cities in which they are located need to work closer together (Ogola-Emma & Amini-Philips, 2021).

Types of Town-Gown Relationship

There are different types of relationships that exist between universities and non-academic host communities. The three major types identified in this study are;

1. **Commensalism Relationship:** This is a relationship whereby either the university (gown) or host community (town) benefits while the other derives neither benefit nor harm. Such a situation is not encouraged but relatively do happen when the management of universities are indifferent to the interest of host communities in employment, capacity building, information dissemination, corporate social responsibilities. This usually brings about conflicts, social unrest, and academic disruption and often defeats the attainment of higher education goals.
2. **Parasitic Relationship:** It refers to a kind of relationship that subsists between the town and gown whereby one enjoys maximum benefit while the other party suffers. For instance, this could happen

when higher institutions are sited where farmlands, markets, or host community's historical treasures exist. Such governmental efforts are usually resisted by residents of communities and usually lead to social conflicts. It could also happen when host communities perform traditional rituals or atonement to deities without giving adequate notice to the management of the educational institutions resident with them for appropriate measures to be put in place to forestall avoidable calamities which at times leads to loss of lives and breakdown of law and order.

3. **Symbiotic Relationship:** *This form of relationship is one in which organisms, people, or things exist together in a way that benefits them all. That is, there exists a strategic partnership at ensuring that the town as well as the gown maximally benefits from their co-existence. This relationship ensures peace and safety, employment generation, capacity building of locals, enhanced corporate social responsibilities, and mutual collaborations on multi-dimensional areas to sufficiently achieve the goals of higher education and the developmental strides of the host community.*

Contributions of Town-Gown Relationship to Functional Higher Education in Nigeria

There are immense benefits that can be derived from a symbiotic town-gown relationship. Tertiary education is a social institution in which every agent of socialization needs to have a good relationship with immediate and far communities and towns for improved productivity. This relationship when established between the institution and the towns surrounding the institutions leads to success among them. Town and gown relationship has a two-way symbiotic arrangement between the institution and the town through which they cooperate for the realization of the goals of the school and that of the community (Bakwai 2013).

Tata and Abdullahi (2014) therefore stated that a school is a mini society that needs a good relationship with the towns surrounding it for it to function effectively, and the communities also need school for its survival and progress.

The function of the community towards maintaining and supporting its relationship with the school and which ultimately leads to the development of education cannot be overemphasized. It is a known fact that, there can never be an educational institution on air but in towns and communities. The towns normally provide lands in which the schools are built as well as providing potential learners for enrolment in an educational institution. The town also funds schools, gives accommodation, provides security and facilities to it, and helps greatly in the improvement of the performance of students and the general development of education. Educational institutions utilize community resources in teaching and learning and at the same time, derive their curriculum from the community. It is through the symbiotic relationship that members of the town donate a lot of materials to their immediate school like buildings, furniture, equipment, and teaching materials including computers, textbooks, and writing materials.

According to Iqbal (2021), higher educational institutions are vital actors within the global knowledge economy, central players within emergent innovation systems, and active agents that can play a driving role in the innovation process and commercialization of knowledge that would develop within the towns. They also organize programmes for market women and artisans as well as training programmes on governance for village heads and traditional rulers, community development committee members (CDC); and training programmes for drivers, auto-mechanics, and electricians among others. Academics in universities do engage the towns in solving perennial health challenges and fixing roads and drainages to prevent floods and other deadly environmental challenges. The gown also helps in complementing towns' efforts in agricultural production with modern technology and most times give free or discounted consultancy to host communities for enhanced productivity. A community that desires long-term economic growth can help to secure a positive competitive stature if its current and future businesses have both a reliable supply of skilled labour and access to innovative, creative product development possibilities. In this respect, institutions of higher learning which are located in the community can be good assets for economic growth and be of great service to the business community while the sustainability of such higher institutions can also be assured

through a well-structured and balanced strategic partnership.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper examined the sustainability of functional higher education in Nigeria through strategic partnerships between the higher educational institutions and the society towards the attainment of laudable goals of this level of education for the advancement of growth and development of the nation. Education is expected to prepare man for challenges in life. Its objective is to make man function and live in society. It is, therefore, imperative that our higher education graduates achieve their ultimate goals. It is when their goals are achieved that they can be seen to have self-actualized and also contribute to the society where they live. This is largely possible if the potential of the synergy between the town and gown are well explored.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To achieve a functional higher education through a symbiotic town-gown relationship therefore, the following recommendations were made:

1. University leaders should be encouraged to partner and collaborate with their host communities by having regular meetings with them on contemporary issues affecting both parties. Encouraging these partnerships can lead to capacity building, improved security, job creation, increased economic growth, and enhance higher education functionality.
2. There is a need for government to foster community involvement in the provision of higher education. By involving members of the community in the decision-making process, it can help to build trust and foster a more positive relationship between the town and gown.
3. Community stakeholders (employers, traditional leaders, youth associations, religious bodies, market associations etc) should endeavor to always provide a conducive environment for the sustainability of the gown.
4. Academics should be encouraged to carry out community-based research initiatives that address local issues and needs. By working together, the town and gown can leverage their unique strengths to find innovative solutions and drive positive change in the community.
5. Execution of corporate responsibilities of the gown should be community-engaging for effective feedback, continuous maintenance and attainment of intended outcomes.
6. Value exchange mindset should be given utmost priority between the town and gown, as this can lead to greater understanding, appreciation of each other's perspectives, and readiness to contribute to each other growth and development.
7. Joint entrepreneurship, small business development ventures, and sporting collaboration among others should be encouraged among students and local youths for robust partnerships.

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