

Challenges of Fuel Subsidy Removal on Academic Engagements of Undergraduates in Public Universities in South-East Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The study examined the challenges of fuel subsidy removal on academic engagements of undergraduates in public universities in south-east Nigeria. Two research questions guided the study. Descriptive survey design was used for the study. The population of the study was 268,340 students from 10 public universities in South-East Nigeria. The sample comprises of 1000 undergraduates in the universities. The sample was composed using the simple random sampling and purposive sampling technique. Data collected were analyzed using mean. Findings from the study indicates the ways in which fuel subsidy removal affects the education performance of students in these universities are very negative, and they include lack of adequate funds to manage the universities, poor academic results from students, lack of interest by teaching staffs, lack of interest in learning by students, rape, untimely death by cohabitation, unwanted pregnancy, cyber fraud, poor pay for lecturers and lack of research funding for lecturers. Furthermore, the study found that the ways to mitigate this effect of fuel subsidy removal include increasing lecturers pay, introducing student loan, making accessible research grants, introducing free education in Nigeria universities, introducing free transportation in universities, introducing free feeding school programs, and flexible car and house loans. The study therefore recommends that government must put into consideration of the consequences of their policies on students before promulgating sit, and at such, must role out palliatives that must cushion the harsh effect of subsidy removal on students in other to avoid a serious social and moral crisis that is imminent.

INTRODUCTION

Education is a very crucial part of human existence and growth, without which man's growth will be not be complete. It has been explained as a key to self-reliance, independence and freedom, which shapes an individual, communities and societies. Aregbesola (2023) defined education as that which is pivotal as an instrument for social, political, economic and all-round development. Sujana (2021), in another prism defined education as a social institution through which society's children are taught basic academic knowledge, learning, skills and cultural norms. It is pertinent to understand that education is an inseparable part of human life without which human life is incomplete. The importance of education includes its place as a tool for social development that is essential to promote change and development in the society; its ability to improve economic condition of the people and its general role that is fundamental in enhancing quality of human life (United Nations, 2022).

In Nigeria, formal education plays an important role in shaping human development and human destiny, as it provides people with the opportunity to learn, re-learn and un-learn for the purpose of becoming a better person. It is even safe to say that formal education is the most dominant type of education in this clime, as

majority of people who acquired education went through the formal education setting in Nigeria. Formal education is the form of education that takes place in a formal setting of a school, where a person learn basic, academic or other skill. This type of education goes through the stages of nursery school, though it is argued to start officially in primary through to secondary school, to university education accomplished under a curriculum, rules, regulations and set out guidelines (Ghandi, 2018). It is pertinent to note that formal education is characterized by its scheduled fees, chronological grading systems, and syllabus, taught by teachers and is planned and deliberate (Aysh, 2019).

Higher education is the highest echelon of formal education which primarily involves teaching, research and applied knowledge which include teaching for both undergraduate students pursuing a degree and even post-graduate degree students. The category of schools that fall under this includes polytechnics, colleges of Educational, monotechnic and Universities.

In Nigeria, University is at the core of formal education and encompasses courses of diverse disciplines, and also involves courses for persons that are pursuing undergraduate and also those of persons pursuing post-graduate degree in the university. To be qualified to undertake a course in a Nigeria university, one must have passed the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board Examinations and the University Tertiary Matriculation Examination respectively (Adeniran, 2015). At this level of University education, the undergraduates specifically undertaken a course or program to become a professional in a particular field of study which cuts across arts, social sciences and pure sciences and to graduate with different degrees like, BSc, BEd , BA , etc.

Despite the place of University education in the country, the government has continued to churn out and promulgate policies that affect the students' engagements in their academic education and as well takes a toll on their academic performance. One of such policy in recent times is the fuel subsidy removal policy which have had immediate negative consequences on the people in general and the academia in particular.

Fuel subsidy removal is the process of ending government financial assistance for citizens fuel usage, by causing prices to rise to market levels, and this usually leads to a hike in the pump price of fuel with significant economic and social consequences (Akinnibi, 2023). The impact this removal of fuel subsidy in the country has had on the populace is because this is the first time since the return of democracy that the removal is sustained (Felix, 2023). Ogunnode and Aregbesola (2023) posits that since the new president of Nigeria pledged full liberalization of the downstream sector, fuel prices has increased massively, and so do cost of food, transportation and other important commodities that people use. Thus, this removal have affected university students academic engagements in diverse ways.

Nonetheless, removal of subsidy has affected university students engagement in such forms as poor school administration as a result of increase in gasoline, teaching program, learning program, school supervisions and students overall attendance to their academic activities (Ogunnode and Aregbesola ,2023). Habila (2023) posits that this fuel subsidy removal policy has led to hyperinflation within and outside their school premises and is now causing many students to drop out of school as they struggle to meet up with their academic obligations.

First was the floating of naira in the foreign exchange market which helped to cause a sharp increment in commodities across the country given that Nigeria is an important dependant country. Oleju (2023) posits that expectedly the combine effect of the fuel subsidy which triggered unification of naira exchange in the foreign exchange, has expectedly transportation cost, and has skyrocketed with food prices reaching all time high in the country, and transport fares having over 100% increase across all routes. Thus, the increment in fuel, and naira exchange has a biting effect on the students across all factors, and had enormous effect on their academic life.

Hitato (2023) notes that the removal of fuel subsidy has brought about economic hardships for students and this has had a very significant effect on them; for instance, many universities such as Lagos state university have increased their school fees from 16000 naira to 109,000 due to the fuel subsidy removal as they find means to have enough funds to manage the university logistics. In the same Lagos state university, students have been complaining that their upkeep money has been eroded by the rising cost of food items and transportation causing some of them to go hungry at some point; at same time, the cost of accommodation has also increased as landlords of students hostels were beginning to increase the hostel rents (Adebisi,2023). At the premier university in Nigeria, the University of Ife, it is reported that many students reverted from the use of the tricycle to the use of their foot, and this was done because the students were trying their very best to manage cost- at this time, students who have issues with trekking under the sun had no other option than to trek under the sun (UI Report,2023). All these have a direct consequence on the academic performance of the students as some of them now go hungry to study, while some now prefer to trek to their lecture halls, thereby coming late to classes and subsequently failing their class works and examinations.

More so, with the loss of interest by the students to academic activities due to lack of food and money occasioned by subsidy removal, the students are now prone to crime such as cultism that has become rampant, rape and other immoral acts from the students as they find easy means to make money to augment the little their parents give them which is now not enough due to subsidy removal (Ake,2023).

The implication of subjecting the students to such hardship is enormous considering that in some Nigeria universities today, some students are the one catering for themselves due to paucity of funds at home or death of parents (Okeke,2023). Thus, this situation of hardship comes with a whole lot of psychological breakdown for them, and push some of them into hustling for more hours to make money thereby leaving their academics to suffer which leads to a mixture of poor results, absenteeism from classes, lack of adequate sleep that leads to depression and extreme cases suicide (Obidah,2023). All these are the direct means through fuel subsidy removal directly affect university students in the country; yet there are other indirect ways it still affects their academic performances.

Another means which fuel subsidy affects the university is the teaching program which is on the side of the teachers. Since the increment in the pump price of fuel without increment in university lecturers salary, most of them have show laxity in their teaching efforts as some can no longer cope with the cost of transportation to school and back (Aregbesola, 2023). The implication of this poor attitude of teachers to their teaching responsibility have a serious impact of the students as learning as some of the students are taught little of their curriculum and are prone to fail their exams and will even poor at practice of their learned courses when they graduate. On a wider scale, fuel subsidy removal will contribute in churning out of half baked graduates given that the lecturers are now barely available to teach the university students.

Again, due to fuel subsidy removal, universities have reduced their logistics such as fuelling of their power generating sets to power laboratories for student use. A survey across universities in some parts of the country indicates that computer laboratories, engineering laboratories, chemistry and physics laboratories among others are barely functional across the country since the removal of the subsidy on fuel (Ekundayo,2023). The reason attribute to it is that the budget of gasoline and fuel for these laboratories can no longer fund it and this has led to cancellation of students lab schedules for courses were laboratory practice is most important and is compulsory.

The paucity of funds to operate the labs due to subsidy have grave consequences for the students in particular and the wider society at large, due to the nature of graduates that will be out in the society in few years and what it implies for the citizens- that is a situation where a medical practitioner is not grounded in practical courses and nurses as well not well grounded in practical's which is the fundamentals of their

practice; this will increase Nigeria death rate which is already worsening and among the highest in the continent (Ojo,2023).

In recent times, there have been increased cases of cyber fraud, other internet related activities around finances, rape and cohabitations among undergraduate students in Universities (Ake,2023). While the preponderance of these socially and morally bankrupt behavior is generally among the younger generations, there are serious correlation between the prevalent of it to the recent fuel subsidy removal in the country which has had a very harsh economic implications. Ogaraku (2023) posits that students who before now does not indulge in the moral acts of cohabiting with their fellow students are now deeply in the act because majority of the female students are now finding a means to survive in the university environment; again, others who are looking for economic cushion outside the university go out to meet male folks in hotels and guest houses outside the school compound. The implication of such behavior Ogunnode and Aregbesola (2023) argues is that students are at risk of having unwanted pregnancy which will directly lead to stoppage of their academic activities and failure of their exams, as it is almost impossible to cope with pregnancy as young teenage girls in the university. On the other hand, the male folks have now enmeshed themselves in the acts of Internet fraud in the face of subsidy removal, according to National Bureau of Statistics (2023), over 200 hundred university undergraduates in the country has been arrested between May to November 2023, which is the period when the fuel subsidy was removed; such acts by the students that engage in them will lead them to taking their academic activities very unserious and finally result to failure as well.

However, there might be some interventions in this regard if government pay attention and make efforts to increase university subventions and as well attract international bodies to fund some courses in the university; it is only through this way that university education will likely be able to circumvent the challenges associated with fuel subsidy removal.

However, despite the challenges of fuel subsidy removal in the current dispensations, it is pertinent to posit that it have come with diverse challenges on the students and the society at large, yet little or no empirical efforts have been made to equate these consequences on the university students, this gap in literature necessitates this study.

Research Questions

The following research questions were posed to guide the study:

1. What are the effects of fuel subsidy on the academic performance of undergraduates in South-East Nigeria?
2. What are the possible ways to mitigate the effects of fuel subsidy removal on academic performance of undergraduates in South-East Nigeria?

METHOD

Descriptive survey design was adopted in the study. The population of the study comprised 268,340 regular undergraduate students in the 10 public universities in South-East Nigeria. Simple Random sampling technique was used to obtain 5 out of the 10 public universities in the region. Then purposive sampling was used to obtain one faculty from each of the universities with the record number of undergraduates' students. Then, simple random sampling technique was used to obtain two departments from each of the faculties to give rise to 10 departments. Finally, simple random sampling was used to obtain 100 students in each of the 10 sampled departments to give rise to 1000 undergraduate students.

To establish the reliability of the instrument, trial testing method was used on 50 undergraduates of Delta state University, Abraka, which was outside the study area. The reliability was calculated using Cronbach

Alpha for each of the subsections. At the end of the analysis, the scores obtained were 0.83 for effects of effects of fuel subsidy removal on academic performance of university students in south-east and 0.81 for possible factors that could mitigate the effects of fuel subsidy removal on students academic performance. The results showed high reliability of the instrument. The instrument has two parts, A and B. Part A sought information on the respondents. Part B sought information required to answer the research questions. It has 1 & 2 and these were concerned with information regarding research questions one and two. Part A contains 15 items while part B also contains 9 items, making a total of 24 items. The four point response mode of strongly Agreed (SA = 4 points), Agree (A = 3 points), Disagree (D = 2 points) and Strongly Disagree (SD = 1 point) was adopted in the study. The questionnaire was administered to the respondents by the researchers with the help of 20 research assistants, who were paired for each of the 10 faculties. Administration of the questionnaire was done during the first semester of 2022/2023 academic session. All copies of the questionnaire distributed were collected back because of on the spot delivery method and collection technique applied. Mean was used to analyze the data. The four point response mode used, informed the use of mean 2.50 as the cut-off point for decision. The decision rule was that mean scores of items of 2.50 and above were regarded as positives while mean scores below 2.50 were regarded as negative.

RESULTS

Research Question One:

What are the effects of fuel subsidy on the academic performance of undergraduates in South-East Nigeria?

Table1

S/N	Items	X	Dec
1	Crime increase is an effect of fuel subsidy removal	2.87	Agreed
2	Untimely Death from cohabitation	2.90	Agreed
3	Rape	3.0	Agreed
4	Cyber Fraud (Yahoo)	2.78	Agreed
5	Birthing and Selling of Babies by students	2.89	Agreed
6	Poor Research Output by Lecturers	2.90	Agreed
7	Insufficient remuneration of lecturers	3.0	Agreed
8	Poor Teaching Attitude by Lecturers	2.77	Agreed
9	Lack of Interest in Teaching by Students	2.94	Agreed
10	Poor academic results	2.76	Agreed
11	Lack of funds to run universities	2.88	Agreed
	Increased in naira in the fx market	2.90	Agreed
Total Cluster		34.59/12 2.88	Agreed

Data in table 1 showed that respondents agreed to the items with a mean score above 2.5. Stated clearly, the cluster mean of 2.88 indicates that respondents agreed to the fact that removal of fuel subsidy has numerous

negative effects on university students in south-east and the effects include lack of adequate funds to manage the universities, increase in naira exchange in FX market, poor academic results from students, lack of interest by teaching staffs, lack of interest in learning by students, rape, untimely death by cohabitation, unwanted pregnancy, cyber fraud, poor pay for lecturers and lack of research funding for lecturers.

Research Question Two:

What are the possible ways to mitigate the effects of fuel subsidy removal on academic performance of undergraduates in South-East Nigeria?

S/N	Items	X	Dec
1	By Increasing Lecturers salary	2.85	Agreed
2	By introducing students loan	3.0	Agreed
3	By Making accessible lecturers research grant	2.87	Agreed
4	By introducing free education in universities	2.94	Agreed
5	Introducing free transportations within universities	2.90	Agreed
6	Introducing School Feeding programs for universities	2.78	Agreed
7	Increasing Overhead and subventions for universities	3.0	Agreed
8	Flexible Car and House Loan Plans for University Lecturers	2.88	Agreed
Total Cluster		23.22/ 2.90	Agreed

Data in table 2 showed that respondents agreed to the items with a mean score above 2.5. Stated clearly, the cluster mean of 2.90 indicates that respondents agreed to the fact that there are possible ways to mitigate the effects of removal of fuel subsidy on university undergraduates, and the means to do that include by increasing lecturers pay, introducing student loan, making accessible research grants, introducing free education in Nigeria universities, introducing free transportation in universities, introducing free feeding school programs, and flexible car and house loans.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The data collected for this study were analyzed and interpreted, and the following findings were made:

Fuel Subsidy removal has a very negative effect on University undergraduate students, and such negative effects include lack of adequate funds to manage the universities, poor pay for lecturers and lack of research funding for lecturers- the import of this findings is that there was a noticeable drop in number of students who are attending classes, participating in general school activities and as well the lecturers whose salary have not been increased could not possibly pay for journal papers in USD; all these reduced the academic performance of university students; study of Ogunode et al (2023) supports this finding were they found that fuel subsidy removal increase the cost of running schools, affected teaching program, learning program and reduce school supervision activities in Nigerian educational institutions. Poor academic results from students, lack of interest by teaching staffs; a study by Okpe et al (2023) supports this finding as their own study found that university lecturers are facing financial difficulties after the removal of fuel subsidies. More so, the study also revealed that the university lecturers did not receive any financial incentives during

and after the fuel subsidy removal which caused lack of interest in teaching by lecturers. Lack of interest in learning by students due to hunger, rape, untimely death by cohabitation, unwanted pregnancy, cyber fraud were all part of the pointers to the effect of the new economic realities in the country, as students who cannot cope with the new economic realities either dropped out or took to other vices; these findings are in agreement with that of Umeji and Eleanya (2021) that found that in the removal of fuel subsidy, the students will suffer more in the form of higher transport fare and increased price of food items and other commodities. More so, Sani (2023) further found that removal of fuel subsidy have made more students vulnerable to rape, and co-habitation as they find means to survive the sudden hardship, while Fatima (2023) among others found that young boys have now resorted to internet fraud and illicit means to get money to cook; the hardship of fuel subsidy removal. Increased in naira exchanged in the market which led to increased hardship in all sectors were also found to be the effect of fuel subsidy. Oleju (2023) also support this finding were the study found that unification of dollar and fuel subsidy removal contributed to all round hardships on students academic performance.

More so, it was also found that there are possible ways to mitigate these negative effects of fuel subsidy removal on University students in South-East and these ways include-by increasing lecturers pay, flexible car and house loans. and making accessible research grants,; Studies of Beaton and Clarke (2016) also identified increase in Lecturers remuneration as one of the ways in which federal government can ameliorate the effects of fuel subsidy removal in the academic sector, to avoid drop in teaching standard, more so, Layode-Kowo (2023) also found that increment in the salary of university teachers and introduction of flexible loans for cars and houses will help cushion the economic effects of the subsidy on them, and help not to decrease their attrition attitude. More so, introducing student loan, introducing free education in Nigeria universities, and free transportation in universities were all found to be ways to mitigate such; studies have however concurred with this finding as Ake (2023) found that federal government willingness to introduce student loans and free transportation are means in which federal government deployed to reduce the negative effects of fuel subsidy removal on the student academic activities. Introducing free feeding school programs; another study by Adinnu (2023) found introduction of free food programs across the university as one of the ways to curb the effects of fuel subsidy like co-habitation, unwanted pregnancy, crime-like internet fraud and other hunger induced problems.

CONCLUSION

The removal of fuel subsidy no doubt has dire consequences across all sectors. However, the education sector which is the energy house of the every nation has had it very bad in the face of this. Given this, the study from the available data found that fuel Subsidy removal has a very negative effect on University undergraduate students, and such negative effects include lack of adequate funds to manage the universities, poor pay for lecturers and lack of research funding for lecturers and also it was found that there are possible ways to mitigate these negative effects of fuel subsidy removal on University students in South-East and these ways include-by increasing lecturers pay, flexible car and house loans. and making accessible research grants. From the findings made herein, the study concludes that the university education in Nigeria have had it very difficult to grapple with the negative effect of the fuel subsidy removal, and the group of people who are at the receiving end of it are primarily the undergraduate students as many have had to resort to socially dangerous lifestyle and morally decayed acts to sustain their stay in the university. While the above stated is the present reality, one can say that it has enormous consequences if not properly checked by the government as the education culture will be badly affected while the next generation of leaders will not emerge- this will lead to serious socio-economic and political consequences capable of drawing the nations growth backward. Thus, the social and moral outcomes of this present realities in the economy could be addressed by orientating the students on the need to adjust to the economic realities and as well manage properly palliatives provided by government; it is through this that the students will be able to avoid social and moral temptations brought about by this hardship.

IMPLICATION FOR THE STUDY

A study of this nature is quite imperative given that if it is not conducted, the country's academic sector will continue to suffer given the multi-faceted negative consequences occasioned by the removal of fuel subsidy. At such, this study is germane and timely to identify the salient consequences of the fuel subsidy removal on the students and look for way out to solve the issues; this is because if the issues are not tackled immediately it will contribute significantly to the already challenges Nigeria university education.

More so, government will have empirical data on this instead of speculation, and it is expected that this study will compel the ministry of education, youths and sports and humanitarian affairs to immediately swing into action to rescue this situation, which failure to will lead to a very serious socio, education and moral decay in the society due to fuel subsidy removal. On the premise of this, this present study is very germane and timely.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. The federal government marshal out palliatives that will help to cushion the effects of the fuel subsidy removal on university students in the country; by this the government is do plan out financial and food palliatives for students in university as a means of supporting them in the era of harsh economic realities.
2. Government introduces free buses and other means of transportation for students to cut the cost of transportation which have become the major reason students boycott lectures. This could be achieved by donating buses for universities to provide ride to and fro for students attending lectures in universities.
3. Government implement school feeding program as in other countries were students get subsidy on food and groceries in the market and eateries; it is expected that government continue a thorough implementation of this from the previous administration by religiously supervising its holistic implementations.
4. Overhead cost of running the institutions is increased to be able to fund infrastructures like laboratories and workshops that students use for learning. This can be achieved by reviewing education budget for universities to have enough funds to navigate the present economic realities occasioned by fuel subsidy removal.

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