

Emerging Issues in the Achievement of the Mandates of the Universal Basic Education Programme in Nigeria

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Abstract

Despite the efforts of the federal Government of Nigeria at establishing equal educational opportunities for all children of school age and to gradually eliminate illiteracy and ignorance in the Nigerian society through the introduction of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme, the successful implementation of the programme has been a serious challenge. This paper therefore, examined the emerging issues in the achievement of the objectives of the UBE programme in Nigeria. The paper discusses the meaning of Basic Education and the mandates of UBE as provided for in the UBE Act of 2004 in Nigeria. The paper further identified and discussed the contemporary issues in the attainment of the objectives of the programme, which include: funding, teacher quality and quantity, gap between policy formulation and implementation, non-implementation of sanctions on erring parents, politics of enrolment figure and unreliable data and inadequate quality assurance measures. The paper among others recommends that there should be adequate provision of funds for the programme, re-organisation of the system of teacher preparation for the UBE schools, provision of the appropriate sanctions to the erring parents as provided for in the UBE Act and the creation of child-friendly learning environment.

Keywords: emerging issues, achievement, mandate, universal basic education, programme

Education has been described as a major factor that oils the wheels of a nation's development. In fact, it is regarded as one of the most important instruments of change in the world today. It is a means of raising a lively and industrious citizenry. According to the Federal Ministry of Education (2000), education does not connote mainly formal schooling – but it is a close articulation of the formal, non-formal and informal approaches. All over the world, education has been recognized as the bedrock of individual and national development. This is why every society strives to accord education the much-desired recognition as an agency of national transformation.

Human beings by nature always look for ways of improving, and since education has been identified as a major instrument of achieving the quest for improvements, many nations always try to devise means of making it available for every member of the society (Okafor, 2008). Therefore, the massification of education has become a global phenomenon after the First World War (1914-1918) and the Second World War (1939-1945).

As far back as 1948, the United Nations Organization (UNO) declared that member states should make education free and compulsory, at least at the elementary and or primary levels, while serious efforts should be made to increase citizens' access to other levels and forms of education (Salawu, 2011). As noted by Ogunsanya (2000), the African charter to which Nigeria was a signatory in 1961 at Adis-Ababa, Ethiopia, re-affirmed the UNO's declaration and enjoined its members to embark on Universal Primary Education.

The acknowledgement of the role of education in national development gave rise to the demand for Universal Primary Education (UPE). The Jomtien Conference in 1990 has speeded up movement towards 'Education for All' (EFA) throughout the developing nations. The first attempt at introducing Universal Primary Education programme in Nigeria was in 1955 by the Western Region Government, in the Eastern Region in 1957 and in 1959 in the Northern. While nationally, the UPE programme was introduced in 1976 by the military administration of General Olusegun Obasanjo. As observed by Okafor (1996), the UPE scheme was a universal and free primary education which seemed not to be successful, especially in the Eastern region of Nigeria due to inadequate preparation, mismanagement, misplaced priorities, resource constraints, lack of political will, ethnicity, among others.

The publication of the National Policy on Education in 1977 which provides for functional, universal and qualitative education and government intentions to use a variety of strategies for the provision of Universal Basic Education for all citizens was another evidence of government's interest in providing basic education. According to Jekayinfa (2000), despite all the various efforts of government in the provision of education, the rate of illiteracy in Nigeria was still high. For instance, Babalola (2000), and the Federal Ministry of Education (FRN, 2000) estimated literacy rate in Nigeria to be 52 percent. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (1998) also noted that only 40% of all heads of households in Nigeria had any education at all. Data from the Federal Ministry of Education, Education Statistics (1996) showed that only 14.1 million children of school age were enrolled in primary school out of the 21 million children of school going age.

This could be said to be so because, the efforts and programmes of government in education in the past have been militated against by political changes, funding, hurried plans without accurate data, lack of proper monitoring and evaluation of the projects and programmes. Therefore, in recognition of the need to provide educational opportunities for all citizens as well as in conformity with the world initiatives on education, the Universal Basic Education (UBE) was launched by the then President of Nigeria, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo in Sokoto on the 30th September, 1999 with the aim of bridging the gap between the South and the North, in ensuring that all children of school age acquire basic education in the country.

UBE according to Salawu (2011) is therefore, the Nigeria's version of Education For All (EFA) programme. For effective implementation of the UBE

programme, a Commission known as the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) was established in 2004 by an Act of the National Assembly known as the Compulsory, Free and Universal Basic Education Act, 2004. The commission is saddled with the responsibilities, among others, of setting and monitoring standards for Basic Education throughout the country as well as advising the federal Government on the funding and orderly development of Basic Education across the country.

It is against this background that this paper assesses the issues in the implementation of the Universal Basic Education in Nigeria towards the achievement of mandates of the programme.

The Meaning of Universal Basic Education

The Universal Basic Education (UBE) is a type of education, in quality and content that is given in the first level of education. The concept of UBE according to Jekayinfa (2000) changes from country to country. The UBE programme in Nigeria according to Eya (2000) is intended to be universal, free and compulsory. Basic education according to the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999), is the foundation for sustainable life-long learning. It provides reading, writing and numeracy skills. It comprises a wide variety of formal and non-formal educational activities and programmes designed to enable learners to acquire functional literacy.

Obanya (2000) submits that the UBE is the level, type and form of learning needed to build firm roots for literacy and numeracy, inculcate basic life skills and more importantly, consolidate the skills of learning how to learn. Similarly, Animalu (2000) notes that UBE is concerned not only with the development of skills in the act of reading, writing and arithmetic, but also skills in integrity (morality) and learning environment. The UBE is the foundation for sustainable lifelong learning and consists of a wide variety of formal and non-formal educational activities and programmes to facilitate the acquisition of functional literacy (Adetoro, Oladipo & Adekunle, 2009).

The universal aspect of Basic Education according to the Federal Ministry of Education (2000) has the following implications: Inclusiveness, that is, persons in all manners and conditions of physical, spatial and psychological existence benefit from the programme; Special attention to special groups, implying that the special needs of all sectors of the production will be taken to account; and Encouragement to the provision of facilities for early childhood care and socialization.

From the foregoing, UBE could be said to be a system of education which helps to lay the foundation for transforming the social and economic life of a nation. This is because quality basic education helps in the eradication of illiteracy, promotion of functional education, poverty reduction, and attainment of an enlightened, economically viable and democratic society.

It therefore, needs to be stated that the UBE programme has an expanded scope which covers the Early Childhood Care, Development and Education (ECCE), primary education and junior secondary education.

Mandates of the UBE Programme in Nigeria

The UBE programme has the vision that at the end of nine years of education, every child should acquire appropriate and relevant skills, values and be employable, so as to contribute meaningfully to national development. Similarly, the mission statement of the scheme is to serve as a prime energizer of national movement for the actualization of the nation's Universal Basic Education by motivating the nation's creative energies and ensuring that education for all becomes the responsibility of all.

The Act establishing the UBE programme provides that all children of primary and junior secondary school age in Nigeria should have access to compulsory, free and universal education. It also stipulates penalties for parents who fail to adhere to this provision. The legal justification for the promulgation of this Act was derived from section 18(1) and (3) of the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, which provides that:

1. Government shall direct its policy towards ensuring that there are equal and adequate educational opportunities at all levels; and that
2. Government shall strive to eradicate illiteracy; and to this end, government shall as and when practicable provide:
 - (a) free, compulsory and universal primary education;
 - (b) free secondary education;
 - (c) free university education; and
 - (d) free adult literacy programme.

The major objectives of the UBE programme as conceived in 1999 according to the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2000) are:

1. the development in the entire citizenry a strong consciousness for education and a strong commitment to its vigorous promotion;
2. the provision of free, universal basic education for every Nigerian child of school age;
3. reducing drastically the incidence of drop-out from formal school system through improved relevance, quality and efficiency;
4. catering for the learning needs of young persons, who for one reason or another have had to interrupt their schooling, through appropriate forms of complementary approaches to the promotion of basic education; and
5. ensuring the acquisition of the appropriate level of literacy, numeracy, communicative and life skills as well as ethical, moral and civic values needed for laying a solid foundation for life- long learning.

Emerging Issues in Mandate Achievement of the UBE

There is no gain saying the fact that the introduction of the UBE programme in Nigeria is basically to wipe out illiteracy as well as enhancing equal educational opportunities among the entire citizenry. From the foregoing discussion, it is evident that the Nigerian Government has put different machineries in place for the successful implementation of the programme. However, certain emerging issues in the achievement of the mandates of the UBE programme have been identified. Some of these include:

Funding

There is no doubt that the achievement of the mandates of the UBE programme requires adequate financial allocation. In realization of this, the Nigerian government provides funds for educational institutions through yearly budgetary allocation to education. As observed by Adaralegbe (as cited in Bello and Adekunle, 2011), with the huge amount of money annually invested in education, albeit grossly inadequate, education has become big business, making it second only to defense in the country's revenue allocation. According to Salawu (2011), inadequate funding is a challenge facing the UBE programme. The problem is not only the budgetary allocation, but even where it is required of state governments to provide counterpart funds, some states fail and thereby cannot access the fund from the funding agencies. Similarly, the little money released is usually eaten up by corruption, nepotism and abuse of the instrumentality of office. For instance, it was reported that the Federal House of Representatives in 2016 lamented that 10 states were yet to access N30bn UBE funds. In the same vein, Dikko (2016) also lamented that over 40 per cent of the Federal Government's matching grant allocated to state governments for implementation of Universal Basic Education programme had not been accessed, and however, noted that most of the state governments were unable to access their allocations due to the inability of the Governors to pay the requisite counterpart fund. According to him, over N39 billion of the grants had not been accessed by some of the state governments leading to the observed dilapidated infrastructure and lack of effective teaching and learning facilities in schools of many of the affected states.

Similarly, Okafor (2008) stated that statistics released showed that UBE needed more than 40,000 qualified teachers, 336,467 additional classrooms, 336,144 additional chairs and tables and 950,480 units of toilets to meet the requirements as at then. These without doubt, required huge financial commitment. Funding education has been a very big question that the answer has remained elusive in Nigeria. In fact from the pre-colonial era till date, funding the education sector has been a big challenge to each government that comes on board in Nigeria. Funding the education sector has been a cog in the wheel of education development and progress in Nigeria. Nigeria is rated among the poorest funded education sector even in Africa where she claims to be the giant. According to Maduewesi (2001), public education is a capital-intensive, non-profit making social service. Technically, it is never "free" at any level. It must be paid for, somehow, by somebody. From the view of King (as cited in Anibueze & Okwo, 2013) "education is after defense, the biggest single item of national expenditure" in most countries of the world, but in Nigeria, this is certainly not the situation today. There has been a staggering budgetary allocation to education in the last 10years. In fact, the United Nations International Children Emergency Fund (UNICEF) (2005) rated Nigeria as the 10th worst and deviant country in funding education, and yet, hoped to use education as the instrument of economic, social and political development.

Although, this rating was done about 14 years ago, the funding situation now seems not to have improved.

Teachers' Quality and Quantity

The success of any educational system is to a large extent dependent on the teacher, "since no educational system can rise above the quality of its teachers" (FRN, 2004). The achievement of the mandates of the UBE programme has a direct relationship with the quality and quantity of teachers, since they are directly responsible for the implementation of the programme.

The National Policy on Education (FRN, 2004) stipulates that for effective teaching and learning, the teacher-pupil ratio in primary schools shall be 1:35, while the Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE) shall be the minimum qualification for entry into teaching profession. However, Jekayinfa (2006) found that in most states sampled, teachers were inadequate in quantity with an average of about 1:65 teacher- pupil ratio in most states. Similarly, for the quality of teachers, bearing in mind the minimum teaching qualification, it was found that in some states of the federation there were still Grade II and ACE teachers still teaching in primary schools.

Therefore, the issue of the adequacy of professional and competent teachers for the UBE programme has continued to call for serious attention.

The Gap Between Policy Formulation and Policy Implementation

The Act of the UBE programme provides for the establishment of the State Universal Basic Education which is responsible among others for the personnel functions for teaching and non-teaching staff under the Basic Education (primary and junior secondary school). It has however, been observed that in most states of the federation, the personnel functions for teachers in junior secondary schools are still carried out by the Teaching Service Commission or the Education District (as is the case in Lagos State). This policy inconsistency, has continuously brought about administrative problems/clashes between the State Universal Basic Education Board (SUBEB) and the Teaching Service Commission (TESCOM) in most states.

Non-Implementation of Sanctions on Erring Parents

The 2004 Compulsory, Free, Universal Basic Education Act, which is the legal framework establishing the UBE scheme in Nigeria imposes a duty on the parents or guardians to ensure that children not only attend, but also complete the compulsory period of schooling (Basic education level), failure of which is regarded as a criminal offence punishable with fines or imprisonment or both. There is still a large number of basic education age children who are still not in schools across the country. In some cases, such children are found roaming the streets hawking one thing or the other. Okafor (2008) observed that about eight million children of between ages 6 and 11 were not in school. The fact that parents of such children are left unpunished as provided for in the Act is a pointer to the non-commitment of the government to implement the compulsory component of the UBE programme.

Inadequate Textbooks

The importance of textbooks in effective teaching and learning cannot be under-estimated. Salawu (2011) observed that the teacher shared the problem of paucity of good books with his pupils. Knowledge is stored in book (even with the advent of the ICT books are still important as storehouse of knowledge). Books are regarded as the gateway to knowledge. If the teacher is the one who imparts knowledge, therefore, he too is the gateway to knowledge. Reflecting on the situation on the book industry, Ogunsanya (2000) observed that a total of 372,610,973 textbooks and teachers' guides would be required at the primary school level during the first six years of the scheme. These books according to him would be needed by the 32,300,617 pupils; 806,513 teachers and 5,371 inspectors that would be in the primary school system.

Though, there are efforts by government to make books available to schools, especially in core subjects, such books are not sufficiently provided, as in some cases the books may not get to schools.

Relatedly, it has been discovered that most of the UBE schools lack functional libraries and Information Resource Centres, despite their role as the storehouse of knowledge. Specifically, Abdulkareem and Umar (as cited in Adeyanju, 2012) noted that about 80.4% of schools in Kwara state were without libraries. Though, with the introduction of the UBE programme, one would have expected that the situation would improve, but the situation almost remains the same.

Politics of Enrolment Figures and Unreliable Data

The need for accurate and reliable data cannot be underestimated in any planning endeavour. The politics of enrolment figures with its attendant problem of unreliable data for effective planning and the overall management of the enterprise at this level of the nation's educational system has been observed. In some cases, it has been observed that states provide over bloated enrolment figures characterized with inadequate data, since the provision of funds to states is determined by the enrolment. The Universal Basic Education Commission (2002) observed that the politicization of enrolment figures is a major issue in the implementation of the UBE programme in Nigeria. This is a situation where schools, local governments and states deliberately inflate enrolment figures released to the UBE national coordinating body apparently to attract more federal funds. School enrolment figures in most states are not proportionate to the total population figures of the states. This irregularity makes planning and programme implementation difficult, as the projections would be wrong because the data on which they would be based could be wrong, thus, having untoward implications on the realization of the mandates of the UBE.

Teachers' Reward System

It is incontrovertible that reward is central to the hiring and retention of employees in any organization. Reward system helps to keep employees coming to work and motivates them to continuously strive towards goal attainment. It is

no more news that in most states of the federation, the salaries of teachers, especially at the primary level have been threatened due to the dwindling economic fortunes and its attendant problems of the purported zero allocation to Local Governments. The unpleasant welfare conditions of teachers, has been of serious concern, because most of them seem to be unhappy with the reward system and conditions of service as well as the perceived uncomplimentary public image. Consequently, as Fagbamiye (2000) observed, unhappy employees are likely to be unproductive workforce. Therefore, this has negative effects on the morale of primary school teachers, and this without doubt has consequences on mandate attainment of the UBE programme.

Inadequate Quality Assurance Measures

The importance of supervision in the attainment of mandates of the UBE cannot be underestimated as it is a quality control measure. Loto (2010) has observed that supervision of schools in Nigeria was being carried out haphazardly, such that inadequacy of school supervisors/ quality assurance officers, inadequate funds and transport facilities among others have continued to militate against effective supervision of schools. Adeyanju (2012) reported that although there had been monitoring and inspection of UBE schools, such inspections were not consistent with the modern trends in quality assurance practices as they have been found to be a means of ‘witch hunting’ the perceived political opponents of the ruling party, thereby, defeating the aim of school supervision. Another challenge of the UBE schools’ quality assurance was the little or lack of coordination among the different quality assurance agencies in most states (LGEAs, SUBEB and the Ministry of Education), which brings about the absence of clear-cut lines of responsibility among the various agencies.

Similarly, the Inspectorate services, especially at the Local Government Education Authority has been found to be carried out by persons (in some cases political appointees) who do not possess requisite professional training and competence in the performance of school supervisory duties. This could also account for the haphazard ways in which supervision is carried out especially, in primary schools in some states.

Poor State of Infrastructure in Schools

In some UBE schools, there has been observed decay in infrastructure as evident in the inadequacy of classroom accommodation, disrepair state of school plants, inadequate equipment, etc. for effective teaching and learning. This, thereby makes the school environments to be unfriendly to the pupils, teachers and school administrators. There are lamentations by stakeholders on the declining quality of facilities provided for teaching and learning in UBE schools. Although there are various intervention programmes on renovation and construction of buildings and other facilities in UBE schools, much is still desired in this regard in solving the problem of infrastructural decays in these schools.

Professional Development for UBE Teachers

This has to do with the capacity building for teachers. In fact, the issue of teachers' professional development as evident in in-service training has not been given the seriousness it deserves by the Nigerian Government. Gbadamosi (2016) observed that in Nigeria, one's competence at the point of entry into the teaching profession is deemed sufficient to carry him/her through the career, even if one were to spend three and half decades in the profession. Although there is provision for in-service training, this is hardly willingly granted and never initiated by the system itself, and that, teachers who engage in further studies without permission risk being dismissed. To ask for permission is to risk a refusal with consequent suspicion of disloyalty. Even where paid or unpaid leave is granted, it is stipulated that the acquisition of additional qualifications does not guarantee any advancement in the profession. There is therefore, no better way to inform a progressive teacher that he/she is in a wrong profession. This poor preparation of teachers due to inadequate in-service training programme results in poor implementation of UBE at the primary school level.

Recommendations

Based on the issues analysed above, and in order to facilitate the attainment of the mandates of the UBE programme in Nigeria, the following measures are suggested:

The UBE scheme should be adequately funded. Funds meant for the scheme should be promptly allocated to schools, so as to enable them to meet the needs of the schools, rather than returning unspent money at the end of the year to the Government, when so many schools suffer the inadequacy of funds. Similarly, state governments should also pay their counterpart funds, so as to enable them attract the UBE funds for their states so as to enhance the execution of projects in schools.

Provision of adequate number of qualified teachers for schools. Therefore, there is the need to ensure that the system of teacher preparation is re-organised to make teacher-training to responsively learn from theory, research and practice as in the modern trend, to ensure that theories are made relevant in practice, and that teachers can use relevant research results conducted by others and by themselves in classes. These teachers should also be motivated through in-service training, employment of more qualified teachers with good welfare packages, remunerations, and incentives, among others.

There is the need to bridge the gap between policy formulation and implementation. Therefore, successive governments should ensure the continuity of policies. There should be encouragement of production of textbooks for schools. The efforts at making textbooks in core subject areas available to pupils should be strengthened, and that such books should get to the nooks and crannies of every school across the federation.

There is the need to ensure that adequate data is made available for the purpose of planning. This is very important in order to guard against the mismatch in pupils' enrolment and provision of facilities. The situation whereby

state governments inflate statistics of pupils and students in UBE schools with the intention of attracting higher grants from the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC), which is the Federal Government regulatory agency for basic education in Nigeria, should be discontinued, this is because of its implications on effective planning.

Implementation of the spirit and letter of the Act of the UBE especially as it relates to penalties for parents who refuse their children to attend school, this will without doubt serve as deterrent to other parents, thus reducing on the number of school age children not in schools.

There should be prompt payment of teachers' salaries at the basic education level, and states should ensure prompt release of allocations to Local Governments, as the issue of zero allocations should be looked into.

Government should recruit qualified personnel as supervisors and ensure that they are properly motivated for the job. Equally, enough vehicles should be provided for quality assurance officers to facilitate their visits to schools. Professionalism in school supervision should be promoted, therefore, qualification and competence should be considered in appointment of Quality Assurance Officers.

There is the need to strengthen the various intervention programmes for the UBE programme. Therefore, massive investment in instructional and infrastructure for schools will help in this direction.

Creation of conducive and child-friendly school environment. There is the need for the strengthening of the town and gown relationships. Therefore, teachers and parents should be encouraged to attend Parents Forum meetings for the purpose of cross fertilization of ideas and for necessary and timely intervention and assistance. Parents are to be encouraged to monitor the out-of-school activities of their wards.

Adequate public enlightenment about the programme is needed, so as to keep the general public abreast of the gains of the scheme as well as projecting various government interventions on the scheme.

Conclusion

The UBE programme is without doubt an educational initiative in Nigeria, aimed at providing equal educational opportunities for all. For the success of the scheme, necessary legal backing has been provided which forms the bedrock for the implementation of the policy. Therefore, the achievement of the mandates of the UBE programme will be dependent on effective management and adequate funding as well as maintaining a consistent-policy by government. Equally, parents, teachers, pupils and other stakeholders should collaborate in ensuring that the objectives of the UBE scheme are achieved, after all, "education for all is the responsibility of all".

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