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THE ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA: A FUNCTIONALIST THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE ANALYSIS.

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Abstract
Education is one of the fundamental tools of sustainable economic development. No nation can achieve sustainable economic development without investment in human capital. Higher quality education with its associate technology and innovations is advancing society more than ever. However, despite this tremendous change, there are many parts of developing world that are unable to adapt to the momentum of change and struggle to increase their GDP and provide for impoverished sectors of their societies. Poor quality education, especially in developing countries has been blamed for the general underdevelopment. This study sought to examines the Role of Higher Education in Sustainable Economic Development in Nigeria. Functionalist theoretical perspective was used as a corner stone in analyzing the study. The study indicates that higher education is a cardinal tool for sustainable economic growth and development that create a quality workforce, instills in individuals the value of achievement, promote life learning, support business and industries, carryout research and promote technologies as well as innovations. Higher education enhances upward socio-economic mobility and is an instrument of escaping poverty and unemployment. It is recommended that Government should strengthen the educational systems in order to ensure that they are equipped with good quality facilities, teaching learning materials, conducive learning environment, well trained personnel, research equipment and adequate research funds. More so, Government at all levels should empower its citizens through education and make education it utmost priority. The study concludes that higher education

should be given greater attention by the Government to become a powerful tool to make the citizens become the catalyst of positive change since a strong education system broadens access to knowledge, opportunities, improves health and eradicate poverty and provides the skills people need to thrive in the new sustainable economy.

Keywords: Role, Higher Education, Sustainable Economic Development, Functionalist Theoretical Perspective, Analysis.

Introduction

Higher education is considered as a vital element in the development of a society. Given its primary role as knowledge provider, higher education serve as a powerful means to help create a more sustainable future (Abanyam & Agbo, 2019; Bain, 2019; Elsayed, 2019; Blessinger, Sengupta & Makhanyam, 2018). One of the core educational initiatives is to address many challenges linked with human development. Educated persons tend to invest more in their own health and the health of their children (Ozturk, 2001). Education of the poor helps to improve their food intake not only by raising their incomes and spending on food but also inducing them to make better, healthier and choices. Higher education's role in creating a sustainable future take on a greater importance as the world continues to become increasingly globalized and interdependent (Blessinger, Sengupta & Makhanyam, 2018). It is evidently clear that higher education is a viable tool for suitable economic development of every nation and it is the life wire of a nation's industries and the foundation of moral regeneration and revival of people (Abanyam & Oga, 2019; Orji & Mackae, 2013). Ozturk (2001) observes that:

> No country has achieved constant economic development without considerable investment in human capital. Previous studies have shown handsome returns to various forms of human capital accumulation: basic education, research, training, learning-by-doing and aptitude building (p.4).

Higher education therefore, is a focal point of knowledge and its application, an institution which makes a great contribution to the economic growth and development through fostering innovation and increasing higher skills (Asia News Network, 2018). Higher education has a unique role to play in helping to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Canals (2017) claims that:

> An economy's production capacity depends on different factors. These include physical capital, technology and the number of workers, as well as their quality. This quality is largely determined by what is called human capital (The stock of knowledge, skills and habits). An increase in workers' educational level improves their human capital, increasing the productivity of these workers and the economy's output (p.1).

Higher education plays a significant role in the economy of countries, its especially helps the society to develop its economy by producing the right kind of workers with the necessary skills, knowledge and training needed to perform roles in increasingly specialized occupations (Abanyam, 2015). According to Di-Gropello (2018), a significant driver of higher

education expansion is the need for skills. In many countries, employers are demanding that higher education institutions focus more on preparing graduates for job market. The production of goods and services depends largely on the training, which a person acquired through education. Higher education supply skilled manpower, which plays an important role to the development of a country's economic sector (Abanyam, 2013). "In agriculture, evidence suggests positive effects of higher education on productivity among farmers using modern technologies, but less impact, as might be expected among those using traditional methods" (Ozturk, 2001 p.4). No wander, there is a saying that "No nation's development rises above the level of its education and development" (Abanyam & Agbo, 2019).

Nevertheless, the level of nation's economic height intern also determines the quality of its educational system since a society with developed economy provides the fund needed for schools infrastructures, good facilities, quality learning materials, good salaries and research allowances (Abanyam, 2013). Romer (1990) suggests that societies with a large number highly skilled workers generate more ideas and consequently grow more. Similarly, Aghion et al. (2009) contend that there is more advanced economics benefit from workers with a university education since higher education promotes technological innovation, augmenting the productivity of both physical, capital and the workforce as whole. However, Canals (2017) argues that most developing economies on the other hand, also benefit from workers with a primary and secondary education as this helps them imitate the technologies developed in richer countries, thereby also increasing the productivity of their physical capital and workforce.

Given the significant diverse role that higher education plays in the society apart from supporting business and industries, carrying out research and promoting technologies and innovations but also fosters democracy. Canals (2017) reveals that citizens with a higher educational level tend to associate more and take a more active part in civil society in terms of collective decision making. Thus, a high education level tends to encourage the defence and reinforcement of democratic systems (Glaeser, Ponzeto & Shleifer, 2007). Be that as it may, individual and the government (Education policy makers) tend to decide the level or quality of education training they wish to attain based on the returns they expect to receive (Canals, 2017). A significant return would therefore justify policies to encourage greater investment in education. However, Nigeria and most other developing world educational system is in serious crisis due to low quality education characterized by inappropriate teaching methods, lack of research funds, examination malpractice, lack of competent personnel, lack of access to education, lack of facilities and conducive learning environment, etc (Abanyam & Agbo, 2019; Edet & Beyin, 2018; Westmore, 2017; Gallagher, 2017; Kumaravelu, 2017; Bangay, 2016, Muheison, 2015; Epstein & Yuthas, 2012). As a result of numerous challenges associated with higher education in developing countries, especially in Nigeria it is difficult to generate and apply the knowledge needed to meet the rapidly changing requirements or scientific and technological innovation to accelerate development (Abanyam, 2019). It is against this backdrop that this study sought to investigate the role of higher education in sustainable economic development in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework of Reference

This study is premised on structural functionalist theoretical perspective. Functionalism reasoned that society is best understood as a complex system with various interdependent parts that work together to increase stability (Ritzer, 2011). This theory has its origins in the work of Emile Durkheim, who was especially interested in how social order is possible or how society remains relatively stable (Crossman, 2020). Functionalist theory suggests that the different parts of society are primarily composed of social institutions such as education, family, government, media, economy and religion, each designed to fill different needs (Crossman, 2020; Giddens, 2010). According to functionalism, an institution only exists because it plays a vital role in the functioning of society. If it no longer serves a role, an institution will die away (Crossman, 2020). Functionalism addresses society as a whole in terms of the function of its constituent elements (namely norms, customs, traditions, and institutions) much like the interacting organs within the human body (Giddens, 2010). Prominent functionalist theories include Auguste Comte, Harbert Spencer, Talcott Parsons, Kingsley Davis and Wilbert E. Moore, Robert Merton, and Gabriel Almond and Bingham Powell.

In analyzing this study using functionalist theory, functionalist theory would view higher education as one of the most relevant social institutions in the society. Education provides one of the major methods used by people for upward social mobility. Education teachers certain skills to individual necessary for their future jobs and occupations (Abanyam, 2015). Work in industrial societies depends on the skills inculcated by higher education which enable a person to be a functional member of his or her society. In the traditional society status ascribed or assigned to a person by the society event at birth without regard for the person's unique talents or skills accorded through education (Abanyam, 2015; Giddens, 2010; Mboto, 2002). However, in modern society achieved status comes to us largely through our own efforts. One has to make efforts, obtaining a higher university degree or acquiring some level of education can result to upward social mobility. Higher education therefore serves as universalistic standards for all students regardless of ascribed demographic characteristics.

Job opportunities today and careers have become dependent on the degrees and educational higher qualification. Institutions not only broaden people's mind or perspective but prepare new generations for participation in economic life (Mboto, 2002). Specialized forms of technical vocational and professional training often supplement student's 'liberal' education and facilitate the transmission from schools to work (Giddens, 2010).

The status of higher education is achieved on merit since higher institutions which teaches skills operates on meritocracy. Schools emphasize on a fair level playing ground for all. Higher education therefore is a means of role allocation. Schools test and evaluate students, match their talents, skills and capacities to perform jobs for which they are best suited. A functional society is one in which its educational system teaches the relevant skills needed to provide for its basic needs (Abanyam, 2015; Giddens, 2010; Mboto, 2002). From the functionalist theoretical perspective, higher education play key important roles such as creating social solidarity, teaching skills necessary for work, teaching core values (work ethics, etc) and role allocation and meritocracy. Higher education has the opportunity to build capacity and knowledge, it exposes the masses to information and help prevent the

misinterpretation of information (Saijjad, 2019). Higher education improves labour productivity in rural areas, increasing the wealth of a country. Education develops leadership, with education, individuals gain confidence, knowledge, skills and experience – all factors that increases an individual's ability to effectively and efficiently lead a group of people toward success.

Higher education raises self-esteem and furthers opportunities for employment and earnings. For a country, it helps strengthen institutions within societies, drive long term economic growth, reduces poverty, and spurs innovation. Good quality higher education facilitates the acquisition of knowledge, skills and attitudes that have intrinsic values and also helps address important goals. Sifuna & Sawamura (2018) hinted that:

> Quality education is also perceived to have an impact on a country's economic growth. The relationship between measured labour force quality and economic growth is said to exert an even stronger influence than the impact of human capital and school quality on industrial productivity and incomes. Economic growth determines how much improvement can occur in the overall standard of living of a society. More specifically, a more educated society may translate into higher rates of innovation, higher overall productivity through firm's ability to introduce new and better production methods, and foster introduction of new technologies (p.12).

Good quality higher education therefore is an essential instrument for achieving a more sustainable world. According to UNESCO (2017), sustainable education empowers people to change the way they think and work towards a sustainable future. Sustainable development is most often described as the need to maintain a permanent income for human kind, generated from non-declining capital stocks (Spangenberge, 2005; UNDP, 2005). Thus, from functionalist theoretical perspective, higher education exists because its serves certain function for the society.

The Role of Higher Education in Sustainable Development in Nigeria

Higher education institutions have critical role to play in implementing and driving sustainable development initiatives through their institutional policies and practices (Blessinger, Sengupta, & Makhanya, 2018). This implies equipping students with the requisite knowledge, skills, attitudes and values to create a sustainable future. As a knowledge producer, the core mission of higher education cuts across all learning domains since it is through good quality education that people are equipped with the requisite knowledge and skills needed to tackle sustainable future (Akari, 2019; Kioupi & Voulvoulis, 2019; Edet & Beyin, 2018; UNESCO, 2017; Alba, 2013). Adhikari (2018) pointed out that:

> The goals of economic and social development must be defined in terms of sustainability in all countries – developed or developing, market – oriented or centrally planned. Interpretations will vary, but must share certain general features and must flow from a consensus on the basic concept of sustainable development and on a broad strategic framework for achieving it (p.4).

Higher education play so many roles in sustainable development. The basic roles of higher education in sustainable economic development include:

1. **Creating a Quality Workforce:** Higher education gives someone opportunities to succeed in today's global economy (Abanyam & Agbo, 2019; Asia News Network, 2018). Modern higher educational institutions provide their students with various programmes aimed at preparing them for different economic sectors, helping them to stay and progress in the labour market for long, programmes that make a difference for labour market outcomes and keep pace with changes in the global economy and changes in the innovation process (Asia News Network, 2018). Olakunle (2010) hinted that:

   > Education systems train the most qualified individuals for the most socially important positions. Education teaches people not only the skills and thinking skills to maximize their potentials, but also teaches them to be good citizens and get along with others (p.31).

   Higher education plays a central role by instilling in students the value of individual achievement. This achievement is necessary to meet the demand of industries (Abanyam, 2013). Higher institutions such as universities promote lifelong learning: they offer opportunities to engage and attract professionals into training and professional development (Asia News Network, 2018).

2. **Supporting Business and Industry:** Higher education has changed business activities over the last decade (Asia News Network, 2018). This social change has yielded many positive changes as many jobs are created today that failed to exist several decades ago. Education and its affiliate technology is changing the nature of work. The requirements on employees' skills have also changed (Mboto, 2002). Higher education institutions assure the relevance of their knowledge, identify skills gaps, create special programmes and build the right skills that can help societies improve economic prosperity and social cohesion, adapt workforce development to the economy and changing demand for the new skills, develop relevant skills and activate skill supply, and thus support improvement in productivity and growth (Asia News Network, 2018).

3. **Carrying out Research and Promoting Technologies and Innovations:** Higher education is a corner stone for technology and innovation driver. One of the cardinal tenets of the higher modern educational institutions is to find solutions to serious challenges by conducting research and contributing to social outcomes to health, economic and social engagement issues (Abanyam & Agbo, 2019; Asia News Network, 2018). Often it is aimed at designing technologies that result in new products and supplying advanced technology for use. Again, the Asia News Network (2018) alluded that:

   > Knowledge is the true basis of higher education: its production via research, its transmission via technology, its acquisition and use by students. Hence, excellence must remain the prime objective of any institution of higher education, including universities in any country (p.2).

Higher education therefore, is bedrock upon which nations build a new road to growth and development. Countries are putting knowledge at the services of theirs to create a better world (News Network, 2018; Mboto, 2002). This is made possible through the training of first – class minds, through major advances in science and technology and by encouraging an interest in learning (Asia News Network, 2018). Most institutions are already becoming learning labs for sustainable economic development, where researchers (students) are being prepared to adapt to and help mitigate the consequences of climate change which affect agriculture, health, environment and sustainable economic development generally.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

It is well established that higher education is the most important institution of society and an indispensable tool for sustainable economic development. Higher education enables upward socio-economic mobility and is a key to escaping poverty and unemployment. It is therefore, impossible to attain sustainable development without higher education. A functional education promotes not only sustainable economic development and productivity but also generates individual income per capital. This impact is noticeable both at the micro level (individual and family) and macro level (society as a whole). Thus, higher education should be given greater attention and strengthen by the government to become the powerful tool to make the citizens become the catalyst of change since a strong education system broadens access to knowledge, opportunities, improves health and eradicate poverty and provides the skills people need to thrive in the new sustainable economy. Based on the foregoing, the following policy recommendations were made:

1. Government should as a matter of urgent strengthen the educational system in order to ensure that they are equipped with good quality facilities, teaching and learning materials, conducive environment, well trained and motivated personnel, research equipment and adequate research funds.
2. Government at all levels should empower its citizens through higher education and make education utmost priority.
3. Developing countries like Nigeria should build higher education systems that can match those of developed nations if they want to develop no matter how daunting the prospect.
4. Government should improve the quality of education at all levels: from primary, secondary and tertiary level so as to enable students acquire relevant skills to participate successfully in today's knowledge–based society and enhance or shape the sustainable economic development of the country.
5. Government should assist teachers at all levels to become more effective in facilitating learning, improving technology for learning, strengthening of management of schools and system by ensuring that learners of all ages from pre-schools to adulthood are equipped for success. Availability of textbooks and learning materials contribute greatly to child's education qualities.
6. Education policy makers and school management should organize seminars, conferences and workshops periodically to update academic staff with new skills and methods of teaching and carrying out research.

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