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Repositioning Vocational and Technical Education in Nigeria: Work-Based Versus Work-Place Learning and Skill Acquisition Order

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ABSTRACT

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Vocational and technical education (VTE) is a stratum of education system that deals directly with acquisition of skills for work. Nigeria's National Policy on Education (NPE) in Section 7 Numbers 40 to 57 expansively stresses the need for VTE with a view to producing formidable workforce with relevant vocational and technical competences necessary for sustainable national development. On this premise, this paper underscores repositioning VTE in Nigeria. This article conceptually explores the similarities as well as the differences between work-based learning and work-place learning. How these two concepts result into vocational and technical skill acquisition with their attendant demands forms a major section of this paper. The paper views that if the opportunities for job skills acquisition offered by work-based and work-place learning could be purposively harnessed into the nation's educational programme, the ever-rising unemployment rate in the country would drastically be alleviated.

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Introduction

The advancement in modern information and communication technology (ICT) has created unlimited job areas where vocational/technical skills are required more than it used to be in the preceding centuries. The advancement in technologies in virtually all aspects of human endeavors has opened up many more job opportunities. Aside liberal academic qualifications, relevant vocational/technical/technological skills are required to meet up with the emerging job demands in the labor market. Continuous production of university and college graduates without the required relevant job skills needed for job opportunities in the labor markets has been widely debated in literature.

Majority of tertiary institutions admission seekers seek admission into universities much more than vocational and technical colleges. Some admission seekers only seek and accept admission into polytechnics and/or technical/vocational colleges only after their attempts at entry into university have failed. This scenario is not farfetched from the low glamour and esteem given to vocational/technical education certificate holders. It becomes more pathetic to know that the so called technical/vocational education in the country, due to many years of neglect and inadequate attention merely exists in name. The VTE being offered in the current dispensation in the country is nothing less than theories and rote learning. Due to the unfortunate neglect, most VTE colleges in the country lack relevant facilities and equipment necessary for impartation of various trade skills for which the learners are admitted.

Gone are the years in the country when polytechnic graduates were the best mechanical, electrical and civil engineers, and graduates from Vocational/Technical (VT) colleges were the best of the artisans. Nowadays graduates from Nigerian polytechnics no less than VT colleges are merely Ordinary National Diploma (OND), Higher National Diploma (HND), and National Board for Technical Examination (NBTE) certificates holders without commensurate and relevant job skills to show for the certificates obtained. Thus, there seems to be a wide disconnection between the tertiary institutions and labor/industrial markets (Ortiz et al., 2020) where the products of the higher education will be needed. Many graduates who are the products of higher institutions are destitute of relevant jobs skills required by labor/industrial markets. This, consequently, continues to breed and exacerbate unemployment among the teeming university, polytechnic and technical college graduates nationwide.

Poor funding of education generally in Nigeria is a major contributory factor to the disconnection between the higher education institutions (HEIs) and the community (Nwachukwu, 2014 and Adeyemi, 2019). The polytechnics and the technical colleges in the country today lack necessary facilities needed to impart practical and technical skills into their students. So, the

learners are in the schools only to learn in theories and not in practical. It is regrettable that virtually none of the graduates of HEIs in Nigeria can be self-employed in line of their courses of studies after graduating. Majority search for paid employment from public or private sectors and once they could not get job they become and remain jobless and idle because they lack the required work skills to be self-employed!

It is no wisdom for HEIs to continue to produce graduates who will become unemployable and jobless after schooling due to being half-baked or outright lack of required vocational/technical skills they need to become job creators and self-reliant. Many graduates of vocational and technical colleges are regrettably unskilled. A skilled worker is one who is adept in the vocation or a person who has attained a satisfactory level of expertise in a particular trade or vocation. A skill is the ability to do something well, usually acquired through training or experience. Skill acquisition, therefore, involves painstaking effort, discipline, practice and drill as well as experience. In other words, it involves the development of a new skill, practice or a way of doing things, usually gained through training or experience. Thus, at this juncture, it becomes imperative that vocational/technical education in the country is repositioned to meet the emerging challenges and demands of the modern world of advanced information and communication technologies. This repositioning must prioritize bridging the school-community dichotomy. If this is done, the school will be more relevant to the community.

Method

This study used descriptive qualitative method. Data obtained through in-depth interviews and analyzed. Focus Group Discussion is used to explore the problems that occur at VTE by involving experts from vocational education and industry.

Result and Discussion

Vocational and Technical Education: Conceptual Exploration

There exists a catalogue of definitions of vocational and technical education in literature. The question then arises: Why still defining VTE in spite of many definitions that are already existing in literature? This current study requires refreshing our minds on the workable definitions of VTE with a view to gaining a proper understanding of the path of dissension. Vocational and technical education can be viewed as learning that combines theories and work practical. In other words, it is a form of education that combines teaching and training with a view to making the beneficiaries do physical/technical work as a result of specific job skills acquired through the teaching and training. Thus, it is an aberration to have vocational/technical institutions without facilities for practical works.

Abdulrahman (2013) explained VTE as a planned programmes of courses and learning

experiences which have career options, following acquisition of necessary basic academic and life skills required in the world of works. Without specific job skills imparted into learners, we cannot say there is VTE. This is because VTE gives opportunities to learners to acquire relevant job skills in various aspects of commerce and trades and the economy. VTE should lead to the production of artisans and professionals such as: electricians, mechanics, carpenters, bricklayers, plumbers, iron benders, tailors/fashion designers, embroiders, panel beaters, painters, sculptors, and aluminum and iron fabricators among other works, skills and artisanship.

Contrary is what we have nowadays. How many completers of VTE colleges or polytechnics can boast of being qualified electricians, mechanics, carpenters, bricklayers, among others, with adequate practical skills? This is highly regrettable and called for rejuvenation. The Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN) in her National Policy on Education (2014) defined vocational and technical education as: A comprehensive term referring to those aspects of the educational process involving, in addition to general education, the study of technologies and related sciences and the acquisition of practical skills, attitudes, understanding and knowledge relating to occupations in various sectors of economic and social life.

FRN (2014) listed specific courses and work areas in which vocational and technical skills can be acquired by prospective learners admitted into VTE colleges/institutions. It is, however, saddening that the contents of the NPE as regards VTE are not being properly implemented. Adebisi (2012) lamented the lip-service paid to the contents and the various recommendations made in the NPE. According to Mutie (2007) cited in Adebisi (2013), vocational training can be defined as educational services aimed at equipping a person with skills to make him/her increasingly self-sufficient and also to help such persons to enter and remain in the job market. Based on the various workable definitions of VTE given above, and the noticeable gap between the theory and the practice of VTE, there is need for repositioning of this branch of education. Below are the possible approaches through which VTE could be repositioned in Nigeria.

Through Work-based Learning Approach

All forms of education or training received in life directly or indirectly have to do with some form of work, either to produce goods or to render services. However, VTE is physically and practically work-specific in terms of focus and emphasis. Thus, all efforts must be made not to allow theories to override practical orientations in VTE. The best way to do this is to promote work-based learning (WBL) in Nigeria's higher institutions of learning especially polytechnics, vocational and technical institutions. Moise et al. (2013) said that young university graduates are faced with low employability due to insufficient skills for the place of work. This informs the necessity to consciously make the education and trainings received in HEIs match the skills demands in the

labour markets. Necessary skills for gainful employment opportunities can be in form of soft skills or hard skills.

According to Veal et al. (2018), ⁶ Work-based learning refers to all forms of learning, both initial and continuous, that take place in a real-work environment. It provides ⁹ individuals with the skills they need to successfully find and keep jobs, and to advance their career. Work-based learning presupposes learners are adequately equipped with relevant and necessary work skills right from the higher/vocational education institutions they attended. Learners should be able to say categorically what work they could professionally, skillfully or vocationally do after completion of their education or training. According to Ismail et al. (2015) WBL combines institutional learning with industrial learning and creates an integrated experience for the learners. Combination of both the institutional learning and industrial training will provide learners an integrated experience required for their after school engagements in work place.

There is need for transfer of learning from institution to work place. ¹² Work-based learning approach uses the work place as a medium for learning transfer and skills utilization. WBL therefore, requires collaboration of all parties: learners, educational institutions, industries as well as employers of labour. Becker (2007) defined WBL as involving learners going through a learning process in a school to acquire a work experience and utilize the work place or industry for demonstration and actualization.

Since VTE majorly deals with training prospective learners in the fields that have to specifically do with rendering vocational/technical services to people, there is need to intensively expose the learners to real practical aspects of the work that their areas of studies deal with. According to ¹⁰ Ismail, et al. (2015), WBL is a form of learning that relates to all fields of work. So, the work aspects of the respective fields of study should be given due emphasis in the higher/vocational education institutions. Ismail, et al. (2015) believed that for WBL to succeed, there must be cooperation from the learners, the educational institutions and the industrial employers (workplace).

To ensure that WBL is incorporated into the VTE curriculum, the FRN (2014) in her NPE recommended SIWES/IT. The challenge is that just as VTE in technical and vocational education colleges has become liberal and theoretical education so also has the SIWES/IT become impractical! Many students do not go for attachments in work places where they could learn and acquire work-skills but many look for and prefer where they would be paid stipends (wages) during their SIWES/IT not minding work skills acquisition. This is improper and highly regrettable.

Through Workplace Learning Approach

Learning, no doubt, is lifelong. Workplace is one of the places that learning takes place continuously. According to Rossin et al. (2003), the workplace is a crucially important site for learning and for

access to learning. Workplace training is the process through which knowledge, skills and efficiency in one's job are developed. At workplace, there are continuous informal and social interactions among workers which give room for unquantifiable level of skills acquisition. Thus, according to Billett (1995 & 1998), the construction of vocational knowledge is shaped by social practice in which that knowledge is deployed, and accessed by learners/trainers.

Reasons to consider the workplace a setting for acquiring vocational skill/knowledge:

1. Unavailability of the option of skill development in formal educational setting for many industries and enterprises. Billett (1995) believed that public vocational education institutions lack the expertise and infrastructure to secure the development of vocational skills across a range of industries and enterprises.
2. Inability of the public vocational institutions to cope with the increase in specialisation and complexity of vocational activity. Thus, the workplace has the potential to cope with the emergence of specific and complex nature of vocational tasks.
3. The need for cost-effective options for the development of vocational skills.
4. Workplace is seen as an authentic setting for the acquisition and development of vocational skills/knowledge.

Reiterating the importance of workplace to the acquisition of job skills, Veal et al. (2018) noted that one way to produce skilled workers is by training them in the workplace where they get practical knowledge and skills. They emphasized that vocational training programmes will be more effective if work-based learning and structured off-the-job learning in a classroom setting are combined. There is no doubt that combining workplace training with classroom-based learning will reduce skills mismatch by providing students with practical skills and experiences.

According to Nathaniel et al. (2019), workplace training and learning is the training or learning undertaken in the workplace, usually on the job, under normal day-to-day operational conditions. Training is a planned effort to improve employee performance on the job or somewhere related to job (Vukotic et al., 2019). Training represents new practical knowledge and skills acquisition necessary for work, leadership, management and organized behaviour according to adopted rules, regulations and standards (Vukotic et al., 2019).

Conclusion

In conclusion, repositioning VTE in Nigeria requires collaboration between vocational/technical institutions and industries or workplaces/trades centres collaborations. While the VTE institutions will provide a platform for learning in theories and concepts, the workplace will provide a platform for learning in experimental, practical, and experiential modes with a view to imparting the real work skills into the learners. Therefore, efforts should be made to engage both the formal and

informal vocational work settings in the education and training of VTE learners.

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