



Social Ills and Higher Education's Community Service Function: The Strategic Role of Adult and Non-Formal Education Departments in Tertiary Institutions' Community Engagement Practice

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ABSTRACT

The paper places adult and non-formal education departments at the centre of tertiary institutions' role in combatting social ills in the country. Introduction provided a background on social vices and the link with higher education. A discussion of the types, causes and effects of social ills formed the next section while the community service function of higher education was highlighted as a reason for active role in addressing societal problems. Adult and non-formal education departments' pivotal role in tertiary education's intervention was examined followed by the conclusion and recommendation among which is a call for greater synergy among all faculties and schools in engaging with communities to solve society's problems with adult and non-formal education departments being the hub for new and innovative programming.

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INTRODUCTION

The Nigerian society today does not need a searchlight beam on it to find evidence of a fast eroding social order. Social ills, more commonly referred to as social vices have become serious matters of concern. A vice is defined as "an immoral act or wicked habit or characteristic" (Encarta, 2009). For Okwu (2009, p. 193), vices are "forms of evil, wicked and criminal actions or behaviours in the society". The level and complexity of these criminal actions have risen so much that it is difficult to imagine the society had ever enjoyed relative peace and tranquility. It is not surprising explained (Peters, Mbaegbu & Ugochukwu, 2013) that sometimes law abiding citizens are stupefied with horror at the unexpected upsurge of crime and violence in the society. Criminality in the Nigerian society has permeated the whole of society that it is threatening its very existence. A very worrying trend is the involvement of young people in the perpetration of these vices including crimes that have serious implication for the future of the nation in terms of parenting and leadership roles. For many Nigerians, the threat to life and security of properties are realities they live with on a daily basis.

Higher education in Nigeria comprises of universities, polytechnics, monotechnics and colleges of education. Their activities usually conjure up an image of the proverbial 'ivory tower' detached from larger society and its problems. Higher education is used here interchangeably with tertiary

education to refer to post-secondary education. However, with the increasing demand on higher education to make it relevant to the needs of society, active role in addressing social ills from which it is not invulnerable assumes a significance for the sub-sector of education and adult and non-formal education is most strategic to this role.

Types, Causes and Effects of Social Vices

Social vices perhaps do not lend themselves easily to categorization because most commonly, crimes are referred to as either violent or non-violent. The list of social vices is getting longer with the addition of previously unknown acts of misbehaviour or crimes being perpetrated in the society. The manifestations of criminality in Nigerian society are in such forms as kidnapping, armed robbery, cultism, rape, electoral violence and muggings. While engaging in vices is certainly not an exclusive preserve of a particular group since people across social strata and age groups are known to be involved, these vices however tended to be more common among the youths. Nwankwo et al (2010) reported several findings which concluded that anti-social behaviours (i.e behaviours that do not conform to society's expectation) are more common among juveniles and also peculiar to adolescents. And neither educational level nor gender is a determinant of involvement. Anti-social behaviours were found to be prevalent among boys as well as girls (Nwankwo et al, 2010) even as academic



institutions are as much plagued by the same problem as the larger society. Okwu (2006, p193) enumerated some of the vices engaged in by students in Nigerian tertiary education to include “cultism, drug abuse, examination malpractice, obscene dressing and sexual promiscuity/harassment”. The major anti-social behaviours ranked in order of prevalence among adolescents in secondary school found by Nwankwo et al (2010) were cultism, smoking, truancy, alcoholism and drug abuse.

The causes of social vices can be hotly debated. Different people have different opinions about the factors responsible for societal ills including the rise in their occurrences. For example, a People’s Democratic Party (PDP) aspirant in Delta State, Mr. Ede Dafinone was reported to have linked the high rate of social vices in the country to poor education system and high level of youth unemployment (Akogun, 2010). Other causes identified included deplorable value system, poor parenting style, religious/moral decadence, poverty, peer and media influence (Nwankwo, et al, 2010, Okwu, 2006).

A most common effect of rise in the rate of crime in the country is the instilling of fear and insecurity in the minds of the people. Not only do some of these vices lead to outbreak of violence and the attendant destruction of lives and property but when they occur frequently, they generate feelings of fear and social insecurity (Okwu, 2006) that is detrimental to people’s psychological wellbeing. People are then put on edge and a slight feeling of being in danger can lead to people taking unthoughtful actions. Imagine what happened at the overhead bridge in Kaduna recently where a shout of ‘kidnappers’ led to a mob lynching of innocent citizens according to the police. Other behaviours like alcoholism, smoking, drug abuse, prostitution and rape expose people to diseases and disorders like cardiovascular collapse, cirrhosis of the liver, insomnia, and loss of appetite, syphilis, gonorrhoea, candidiasis and even death. It can also damage the body parts like tearing and bruises or lead to sterility, infertility and psychiatric cases (Nwankwo et al, 2010).

Higher Education Institutions, Community Service and the Challenges of Society

There are different theories on higher education and its purpose. These varying narratives have been summed up into four main branches

(<https://www.epigeum.com>). The liberal theory sees universities as communities dedicated to the learning and personal development of their members especially students. Another view, the professional formation theory regards higher education as sources of expertise and vocational identity while the ‘research engine’ theory with an important corollary-the business and industry services theory considers universities as creators, testers and sites for the evaluation and application of new knowledge. The civic and community engagement theory, the fourth views higher institutions as important contributors to society and nations. Whatever the perspective from which higher education institutions have functioned, their role is being reassessed and their contribution to socio-economic well-being of their environment is increasingly being demanded. Indeed, it is instructive that a call made more than 30 years ago to universities to among others “assume a public service function, i.e make contributions to the solution of major problems faced by the local community and by the society at large and participate directly in the process of social change” (OECD-CERI cited in Jongbbed, Sanders & Salemo, 2008) is still being re-echoed.

According to Adekolu (2015), higher education programmes in Nigeria are designed to achieve seven broad goals with almost all related to the acquisition of knowledge useful for improving the lives of the people and their communities. Goal 5 more specifically refers to promoting and encouraging scholarship and community service. Watson (cited in Laing, 2016) observed that in the global south “the mission of an individual higher education institution is generally stated in terms of its teaching, research and community service obligations. But, community service has been the least developed area of activities by tertiary institutions in this country although this was a general trend around the world until recently. Boyer (Cited in Hudson, 2013) had seen higher education generally falling short of this function. Gill, (2009) explained that even when higher education engage with communities, it is not structured and systematized, takes place on ad hoc basis and is largely conducted through individual lecturers or the industrial arm of universities. And often too, it is a benevolent activity, a charitable outreach to communities to provide them with social amenities. Rarely is it an attempt to fundamentally change lives.



But, higher education around the world like other social institutions is also being impacted by the demand for improved accountability and in more recent times has come under pressure to make itself relevant to society. Weerts (cited in Hudson, 2013) opined that if Higher education were to tie its engagement to broader community goals, it will have less need to struggle to demonstrate its relevance which will enable it to frame its work more competitively and be well positioned to receive public funds. Gill (2009) pointed out that “there is a greater demand from society at large to be able to see the returns of the expenditure invested in higher education, to see how higher education helps the community to gain both economically and socially” and he concluded that in that case, “there is a strong need to work towards ensuring that higher education is relevant to the larger society out there...”.

The above implies bringing down the ‘town’ and ‘gown’ separation wall and making societal problems from which higher education itself is not immune, a business of the institutions. After all “academic institutions have been implicated as breeding grounds for most anti-social behaviours or social vices” (Nwankwo et al, 2010). It has been reported that social vices including drug abuse, thuggery, cultism, inordinate ambition, sexual abuse, examination malpractice are common among youths, majority of whom are students of various institutions of learning (<http://allafrica.com/stories/200507250440.html>, 2005).

Increasingly therefore, higher education is required to understand that the agenda has moved on from a desire to simply increase the general education of the population and the output of scientific research... (to a) greater concern to harness university education and research to specific economic and social objectives (Wallies cited by Gill, 2009).

Given this need, tertiary education institutions in the country must therefore broaden their conception of their community service function if they are to fulfill their core mission. Universities around the world are re-examining their activities in the light of new realities and coming up with new and innovative programmes to meet the latest challenge. For example, the Universiti Kebangsaan, Malaysia created three service oriented offices that include the industrial liaison office, office of

University-Community Partnerships and the Chancellor’s Foundation with a view to producing graduates who are innovative and economically productive while being socially responsible (Gill, 2009). The American federal Promise neighborhood is a comprehensive community initiative in which higher education contributed exceptionally to community change processes.

Laing reported that Watson in his book ‘The Engaged University’ published in 2012 had stated that the missions of Universities of the Global South “are increasingly concerned primarily with compelling and immediate social issues: alleviating widespread poverty, improving public health, achieving universal primary and secondary education and enabling locally controlled economic development” (2016). Laing summed it up by stating that “Community engagement is what universities should be for”. Boyer (Cited in Hudson, 2013) in his work ‘Scholarship of engagement’ which started a movement called for “higher education to become a vigorous partner contributing to solutions for the most pressing social, civic, economic and moral problems” (p.110). Higher education in Nigeria therefore must not only be seen to be concerned about society’s problems but must take active role in helping society find solutions to the issues by engaging with communities to determine their needs and wants. Higher institutions must remember that they are not islands but located in communities with existing knowledge and ideas that can make contributions to human development.

The Role of Adult and Non-Formal Education Departments in Higher Institutions’ Efforts to Address Social Ills

The most effective ways to address a problem is to tackle its identified causes. Although opinions differ, there seems to be a general consensus however on the significance of high unemployment, poverty, high illiteracy and erosion of social values as factors driving social vices in the country. If any attempt to curb the problem is to be successful therefore, it must begin from here. But, proffering solutions from the outside as tertiary institutions are known to do from researches are not likely to succeed. Solutions must be organically found by the active involvement of the people in the search for answers in a relationship of mutual respect, reciprocity, and partnership with ‘experts’ from outside.



Gill stated that “it is only the engagement forms of teaching and research that faculties connect their academic expertise to public purposes as a way of fulfilling the core mission of the academic institution” (2009). No wonder the American Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching allows higher education institutions to assess their involvement with communities using its Community Engagement elective classification. This classification has become an influential driver of engagement practices. More than 300 institutions hold the classification, reported (Hudson, 2013).

Unfortunately, most academic programmes in Nigeria’s higher education are not oriented to engaging with communities nor do they result from such practice. Even universities that attempt to undertake these activities leave it to a special unit to carry them out. But, higher education institutions must understand that their community service function is not a philanthropic gesture to surrounding communities nor is it charitable activities among the population but an active partnership with communities to meet their needs and address their challenges. Hudson for example reflected a general feeling that “institutions of higher education are embedded in their communities and thus have responsibilities to engage their neighbours as productive institutional citizens” (2013 p.110). She saw higher education institutions in the ideal partnership as embedded community partners that function as part of a system of solutions to deeply rooted community challenges.

Many people see unemployment as a major factor in increased social vices. To some, it is also a result of a mismatch between what schools teach and the required skills and knowledge for work after schooling while some also hold the view however arguable, that imposition of a foreign oriented education system rooted in Western culture has left people confused about their value system with disruptive effect on their cultural ideals and attitudes. So to address the issue of social vices, these and other identified causes must be tackled. Thus, illiteracy needs to be tackled for example by ensuring easier access to quality education and training, unemployment with skilling the unskilled and re-skilling the skilled to meet the demand of an increasingly fast changing global economy. New attitudes will also need to be developed among the people and a pride in who they are as a people needs to be restored.

Nigerian higher education institutions therefore must contribute to the solution of these major problems of local communities as this role of the institutions is becoming an acceptable fact globally. Hudson found that higher education institutions in the American grant aided federal Promise Neighbourhood programme, committed to building the neighbourhoods’ capacity by strengthening early childhood education training through professional development for pre-school teachers, improving schools through evidence-based classroom instruction, developing neighbourhood leadership and organizational capacity, supporting local culture, improving post-secondary access , emphasizing sustainability, improving educational opportunities for adults and building workforce capacity (2013). The aim of the programme was to transform distressed communities through improving education and developmental outcomes for children.

Collaboration with communities to tackle the menace of social ills therefore becomes an imperative for higher education institutions in the country. A goal of University of Portharcourt’s course in community service which students must pass to earn the university’s degree is to involve staff and students in finding solutions to the problems of urban and rural communities especially the University host community. That is certainly one way to go but it leaves the questions as to what extent are the right tools and practices used. This is because unless community engagement is aimed at and results in transforming people’s lives in a sustainable way and eliminating the factors that make them dysfunctional as tended to define our current developmental processes and practice, it cannot be said to be meaningful especially with the high level of social challenges being faced in the country. Adekolu (2015) listed some of the tools available to the community development practitioner to include participation, empowerment, self-help, mobilization and communication.

Additionally, to solve social issues, interventions cannot be left to a single unit but must be viewed as an institution wide responsibility with everyone getting involved. Everyone has something to contribute including the Sciences such that everyone feels responsible for the growth and development of the society and cannot sit on the fence. A major area of concern is that the rigidity that defines many departments, schools/faculties may not be able to support such endeavor without



some fundamental changes to practices. Moreover, Nigerian tertiary institutions do not often provide a role model of inter-departmental/schools/faculty cooperation and partnership. Here is the need for the 'big brother' role for adult and non-formal education departments because they can help to equip others with the tools and the strategies for engagement with communities. One of the core practices of adult and non-formal education is participant engagement which ensures actions and interventions meet the needs of participant. Benefits can also come from adoption/adaption of the principles of adult and non-formal education such as 'conscientisation' to raise critical awareness and promote critical thinking, empowerment to enable people take control and become autonomous individuals, reciprocity and partnership to encourage active participation and mutual respect, while helping people to solve problems.

So, by the inherent nature of adult and non-formal education practices, the departments can work collaboratively with others to become the hub for new directions in programming and innovative and creative solutions to community challenges. Higher education institutions in the country will thus join their other colleagues around the world in making themselves relevant to the local community and the society at large.

CONCLUSION

Too often, higher education itself and the society it is supposed to serve see its major functions as that of teaching/learning and research with some community participation added mainly in the form of a seat on the institutions' board/council for a member of the host community in the person of elite from the local area. A broader concept of 'community service' is taking shape in various ways from voluntary service in the community to corporate social responsibility activities to ensuring curricula serves the need of the immediate environment. As the country faces a wave of social challenges, higher education institutions in Nigeria must play an active role working together with communities to find culturally relevant solutions to the issues in order to demonstrate their relevance and justify their existence. Community engagement must therefore become an important part of higher institution's work so as to respond to people's identified needs and be able to embed solutions in the people's cultural milieu.

Although relatively a young academic discipline, adult and NFE is very strategic to the role of higher education in the quest for solutions to the challenges of society. The inherently flexible nature of adult and NFE gives it greater scope to lead the intervention required and be the hub of activities with both the communities being affected and the perpetrators of social vices who are not by any means homogenous groups. Finding solutions will require elasticity to experiment and innovate with say new teaching techniques and even the media of instruction. Other faculties and departments often do not have inbuilt mechanisms for the needed flexibility for such work. Leveraging on these skills and knowledge from adult and NFE theory and practice will aid higher institutions to adequately fulfill their community service function and help to stem the tide of social ills in society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To further ensure that higher education institutions play their community service engagement roles effectively and curb social ills with adult and non-formal education departments being the hubs of programming and activities, the following suggestions are made:

1. There should be strong collaboration between faculties/schools and adult and NFE departments in the development and implementation of programmes for community engagement towards social change.
2. Adult and NFE departments in higher education institutions should lead the way in increasing research activities in social issues using community engagement tools and strategies, disseminating findings, recommendations and playing active role in implementation
3. Government at all levels should raise the profile of adult and NFE by increasing funding to the sector and giving its role in the universalization of education recognition.
4. The ideals of democracy must also be institutionalized to allow for greater flexibility in teaching methodology out in the field.



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