



Initiatives on Education Diplomacy/Linkages: The Chequered Experience in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: The study provided clear indications from the studies of comparative education that Nigeria's educational system is not highly rated when compared to many other educational systems around the globe. Research evidences are also rife on the use of education diplomacy and international linkages for bridging the gaps of educational inequalities between developed and developing nations.

Methodology: As a qualitative study, the paper adopted historical research design, relying on documentary analysis to establish the tenets of education diplomacy/ linkages are not only capable of improving Nigeria's educational system, but can equally be used to elevate it to a point of global relevance and reference.

Main Findings: Revealed in the study are the four major purposive initiatives that are corollaries of education diplomacy/ linkages are depicted in the praxes associated with Foreign Aid packages, Technical Aids Corps, Foreign Studentship schemes and Internalization programme in higher education. The treatise critically appraises the exploration and use of these initiatives for educational image-making and cautious integration of the country's educational system with global best practices. Despite the chequered experiences identifiable with the initiatives, the inherent derivatives of these initiatives are extremely gainful to the overall development of education in Nigeria.

Novelty/Originality of this study: Finally, the paper strongly advocated that Nigeria needs to carefully re-engage and follow through the gains in these initiatives, so as to unlock and tap from the intrinsic benefits and humongous opportunities derivable from the thrusts of education diplomacy linkages.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Diplomatic relations are recurring in the history, life and activities of modern nations. Such relations could be usually focal or eclectic, and are mostly determined by clear national interests. Diplomatic relations could thus be directed at the economy, military, politics, culture, education and any or all other sphere of a nation. Interestingly, and in recent times, most countries have incorporated or resorted to the use of certain educational initiatives as part of their strategic pursuit of national interest in the wider web of cultural diplomacy [1].

Unarguably, Nigeria's foreign policy, as it is currently framed, focuses more on political, economic and military interests than it is towards educational interest. This is quite unacceptable, considering the cliché that 'no nation can rise above the level of its educational attainment'. Much as the National Policy on Education provides for "strengthening and harnessing policy and capacity to draw in and effectively utilize resources from international; and local Development Partners such as World Bank, USAID, UNICEF, UNDP..."[2], the nation's foreign policy initiatives do not largely complement such strategy for the development of education. With exception to the Technical Aids Corps (TAC) programme, education is not known as a fundamental determinant of Nigeria's foreign policy. Again, even though the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs (NIIA) is also dedicated to providing information and investigation of international questions via conferences, lectures, book publications, discussions, etc., the Institute is adjudged to be doing all of these not with any patent attachment to the tenets, philosophy and goals of education diplomacy/linkages. This obvious gap in the country's foreign policy structure calls for a critical examination.

It is noteworthy that prior to the exit of a protracted military rule in 1999, and up to 2003 when Nigeria was able to successfully transit from one democratic dispensation to another, the country suffered alienation from the committee of nations owing to various sanctions from the international community. The climax of this pariah status was the suspension of the nation from the Commonwealth from 1995 to 1999. Consequently, with the return of the country to civil rule in 1999, deliberate efforts were made to launder the image of the country so as to once again link it back to the committee of nations. As part of the plans towards achieving this, government designed diplomatic campaigns and projects such as "Heart of Africa" and "Good People, Great Nation", which were all aimed at rebranding as well as promoting Nigeria's socioeconomic potentials and cultural diplomacy. Unfortunately, the use of these projects/campaigns to bolster the country's image in the international realm did not achieve best possible results, partly because the country did not systematically deploy educational tools and initiatives in driving these campaigns [3]. Associating the lackluster results in the use of these campaigns to the lack of painstaking educational initiatives also validates the need for the study of the value of education in tackling challenges in cultural diplomacy.

In addition to the aforementioned gaps in Nigeria's diplomatic practices, there is also the growing need for Nigerian teachers, students, policymakers, diplomats, etc. who are concerned with the difficulties of the dynamics of cross-cultural understanding and uses of education, within an increasingly complex globalized environment, to explore the import of education diplomacy and international linkages in sorting out such difficulties. Besides, in a global society, it is only logical that national and international educational practices mingle. Many countries have devised different ways for this educational mingling to happen within the framework of mutual benefits to the interested countries, and Nigeria has not been an exception in these practices. However, a quantitative appraisal of what Nigeria has done in respect of these practices would be an arduous task because there are little or no clear-cut Nigerian policy documents directly dealing on education diplomacy/linkages with which to empirically to carry out such appraisal.

In view of the deficiencies in Nigeria's cultural diplomacy, particularly as they affect education, coupled with the justification and significance of the utility of education in the fostering of diplomatic relations, this study would engage the following sub-themes for a historical appraisal of Nigeria's experience in the practices of education diplomacy/linkages: Foundations of Education Linkages in Nigeria, and Purposive Education Diplomacy/Linkage Initiatives for Nigeria.

2. CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

Thrusts on Education Diplomacy/Linkages

Over the years, developed and developing nations have shown not only to be engaging in socio-political and military interactions, but they also have come to strongly establish what could be considered as international exchanges or linkages in education as part of the dynamics in global interconnectivity. Although the initiatives and programmes on educational linkages, cultural exchanges, co-operations, cross-fertilizations of activities, etc were traditional and common to developed nations, they were steadily expanded to include the developing countries after World War II. Education diplomacy/linkages is thus a form of co-operation that is initiated and understood as wide a range of activities beyond merely consulting or coordinating at one end of the spectrum to possible full collaboration on the other end. The range of activities in education diplomacy/linkages could be initiated formally or non-formally and overtly or covertly [4].

In contemporary times, international educational initiatives and agenda such as Education for All (EFA), the educational components of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) or allied programmes all provide the platforms for educational linkages. Similarly, global institutions like the World Bank, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations International Children Emergency Funds (UNICEF), United States Agency for International Development (USAID), International Development Association (IDA), and International Monetary Funds (IMF)

etc. have all initiated one form of education linkage programme or the other that impact nations around the world.

Similarly, philanthropic international agencies and organizations, such as Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI), Education International (EI), Global Partnership for Education (GPE), etc. all constitute platforms for education diplomacy/linkages due to their massive cross-national support for the development of education. Indeed, it was the ACEI that reenacted and intensified the development of the concept of educational diplomacy in 2009 [5]. In addition, multilateral educational forum like the E-9, with the collective initiative on how to ensure quality education and lifelong learning opportunities to member-countries, also represents the byword for international linkages in education. Likewise, the European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students (ERASMUS) has been an important linkage initiative involving the influential academic sector across and beyond Europe since 1987 [6]. Besides the aforementioned bodies, the activities arising from world conferences, colloquia, global scholarship exercises, cross-border studentships, etc all serve as veritable platforms for the initiation and promotion of activities that facilitate educational diplomacy/linkages amongst nations.

Furthermore, the concept of educational diplomacy/linkages is also expressed in the balanced and constructive ways that nations present their unique educational ideas, policies, practices and values for global absorption and diffusion. This approach to educational linkages is seemingly and diametrically opposed to the use of global educational programmes and platforms for the promotion and institutionalization of neo-colonial educational ideologies and packages by the developed countries [7]. As a matter of fact, Achuonye [8] asserts that the types of international co-operations or initiatives requisite for the nurturing of modern educational co-operations, particularly as they would impact developing nations, do not essentially need to be imposed or prescriptive. In essence, linkages in education typify the scale of balance on how nations help and learn from each other. Educational linkages are therefore vastly considered as a form of cultural diplomacy, structured to permit students, scholars and educational visitors to communicate and relate with their overseas audiences in a fluid manner that easily dismantles the conventional cultural barriers that are inimical to universalization in education. Consequently, the use of formal and non-formal educational exchange programmes is generally an acceptable practice in the pursuit of this cultural cum public diplomacy [9].

Education diplomacy/linkages is equally a systematic and growing approach aimed at promoting international partnerships between stakeholders in various countries for the ultimate advancement of education. Many international organizations use it to help nations from around the world close ranks in educational disparity. Educational diplomacy/linkages become very strategic for some organs of society that advocate for mutual understanding in education thoughts, practices and innovations. Linkages in this perspective are either patently or latently used for the spread of literacy, knowledge and cultural contacts amongst nations and their educational institutions [10], [11]. It is for this reason that many university professors tend to be international in their consciousness and often in their work. They increasingly collaborate with colleagues in different countries with the view to be intellectually and internationally relevant [12].

The foregoing indicates that the concept of education diplomacy/linkages is driven with purposive initiatives. That is to say that the concept is cognate to the many and varied initiatives which effectively and consequently culminate in the popular functions of education; though such initiatives may not specifically be structured, planned or designed with clear targets on formal diplomacy. In other words, there are several educational initiatives at the national or international levels that are tantamount to education diplomacy. These initiatives are historically, institutionally and government orchestrated. Incidentally, the improvement or shortfall in any educational system is usually as a product of the implementation or non-implementation of a range of policy initiatives. It is therefore those initiatives over the years that are associated with Nigeria's experiences in education diplomacy/linkages that would be further discussed.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

A qualitative study with an adoption of historical research design. The study relied entirely on documentary analysis. In the analysis, contents were analyzed, as data itself cannot speak, the researchers therefore adopted content analysis to give interpretations to the findings.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Foundations of Education Linkages in Nigeria

Nigeria, like most other former colonial territories, became linked with external educational systems via colonialism when western education interfaced and gradually displaced indigenous learning processes. In particular, the historical interface between Nigeria and many other imperial nations has generated a conversation that places demands on the need for these imperial nations to carry out some sort of socio-economic reparations on Nigeria and other black nations; reparations that should include helping these colonial dependencies with

massive educational investment and support that would facilitate the narrowing, if not a complete closure of the educational and technological gap between the imperial nations and their dependencies like Nigeria [13].

Post-colonial Nigeria has struggled with attempts to grow her education, but six decades after political independence, the nation is yet to catch up with the high level of educational advancement in many parts of the globe. As the colonial administrators left in droves on the eve of Nigeria's independence, the educational policies of their educational administrators were however left as the possible compass to the future of Nigeria's education. Much of these policy expectations were, for example, vastly responsible for the setting up of the Eric Ashby Commission. Remarkably, the recommendations of the Commission rightly signaled the pace of the development for higher education in Nigeria. Few years after independence in 1961, it was part of the Ashby recommendations that prompted the United Kingdom Government to give in-service training and special course to about 1,300 student-teachers of Nigerian extraction during summer vacations. Unfortunately, this arrangement was not successfully sustained partly because the post-independent Nigeria government could not engage skilled diplomatic tools for the sustenance of the in-service training [14]. And so, it goes without saying that Nigeria was possibly not attuned with how to leverage on strong diplomatic ties with her colonial master to strengthen the initial pace of its educational development. Nevertheless, Nigeria still marginally benefits from the goodwill of Britain, as the later, amid other packages, uses the Commonwealth scholarship initiative as a tool to promote mutual diplomacy for Commonwealth member-nations [11].

4.2. Purposive Education Diplomacy/Linkage Initiatives for Nigeria

4.2.1. Foreign Aid Initiatives

Foreign aid has remained a pragmatic tool of diplomacy, and Nigeria is in the incurable habit of relying on foreign aid for the development of her educational institutions [15]. However, Tilak [16] notes that foreign aid in education has generated controversies for developing countries, that is; aid is generally beneficial to education development, aid is only rewarding to donor country, and that aid has the potential of helping a recipient country despite the negative experiences associated. The Nigerian experience with foreign aid perfectly fits into this tripartite labyrinth. There are clear indications that Nigeria is a large beneficiary of foreign aid and donations for education, and that the country does not only call for the aid but relies heavily on their donors for the sustenance and running of educational services. On the one hand, foreign aid doubtlessly contributes to some degree of educational development in Nigeria, but it has equally made the Nigerian government very indifferent and lackadaisical in the funding of education. The heavy reliance on foreign donations unfortunately opened the doorway to the mismanagement of most of those donations. Aid has also dampened the drive and opportunity for local sourcing of funds and commitment to the development of the country's education. Perhaps, the most disturbing of all these chequered impacts of foreign aid is in the inherent imposition of neo-colonial educational templates, laced with conditionalities of capitalism and intellectual expansionism, which ultimately downplays the needed emphasis on the cultural identity of Nigeria's education system [7], [17].

The generally implication of the foregoing is that the massive educational revolution that Nigeria needs cannot be undertaken without some form of external aid and donations, but that such donations must not largely come with the prevailing structure of donor-receiver relationship, in order to avoid over dependence and prescriptions from the donor.

4.2.2. Technical Aids Corps Initiatives

The Technical Aid Corps (TAC) programme is perhaps the only structured diplomatic scheme with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs uses to promote educational diplomacy. The scheme is no doubt a vital tool of Nigerian Foreign Policy, aimed at fostering south-south cooperation by way of providing human resource and capacity building in specific areas of interest on request from African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) Countries. Inherent in the goals of TAC is a mobile platform for knowledge exchange in furtherance of effort to bridge the education gaps in ACP countries. Teachers, lecturers and academics of Nigeria extraction have been massively and consistently involved in the scheme since it started in 1987. Although the scheme boosted Nigeria's image as it ploughed invaluable human and material resources to combat illiteracy in ACP countries, it has also incidentally provided the basis for inwards appraisal of the country's genuine commitment to the educational development of her citizens, going by a number of the shortcomings in the country's educational landscape; part of which is that Nigeria currently has the highest number of out-of-school children in the entire globe [18].

Again, TAC is considered to be one of the numerous Nigerian Afrocentric policies that are bereft of diplomatic reciprocity, taking into account that in the past fifteen years many schools have been shut down in the North Eastern part of Nigeria, and yet neither the African Union (AU) nor the ACP countries have demonstrated any discernible diplomatic interest in assisting Nigeria tackle the plight of the children who are out of school because of insecurity. This experience, therefore, shows that Nigeria could just be in the danger of wasting a great proportion of her resources on technical assistance on ACP countries until it comes up with a better policy strategy on how to commit these ACP countries into reciprocating the investment on TAC by at least responding to some of the educational needs and emergencies in Nigeria.

4.2.3. Foreign Studentship Initiatives

In recent times, it is widely acclaimed that Nigeria is one of the countries with highest number of foreign students across the globe. Nigerians account for a large portion of the population of international students in the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Ireland, Norway, and many other countries in Europe, America and Asia. Incidentally, the federal and state governments, as well as the political class, are known to be deeply promoting foreign studies. The federal and state governments initiate foreign scholarship schemes for a number of reasons. These include: the desire for better educational opportunities, the need for exposure to international and local job experiences, and the need to sustain diplomatic/cultural ties.

Remarkably, lots of these foreign students have made good names and strides, with exceptional performances in their various fields, creating a firm foothold for themselves, and by extension establishing strong academic images for their motherland. No doubt, the exposure acquired by foreign students is fundamental in today's globalized world, particularly as the contemporary requirement for job placement places value on individuals with vast global perspectives and cross-cultural awareness. Expectedly too, foreign students usually establish international networks, develop foreign language proficiency, and enhance multi-cultural communication skills through the opportunities inherent in foreign education [3].

Furthermore, the use of foreign studentship programme by various Nigerian universities has for long been applied for advancement of specialty studies. Over the years, Nigerian students studying French, in company of some their lecturers spend either one year or a minimum of one semester for more studies in French-Speaking West African universities. The motivation for establishing such linkage is to encourage staff and/or students in Nigeria with a view to building capacity, promoting research collaboration, and also developing quality foreign language studies [19]. Accordingly, Erinsho [20] acknowledges that those who co-ordinate such linkage programmes in most Nigerian universities have come to acknowledge the beneficial roles that students and scholars who participate in the programmes play towards the enhancement of quality assurance in their home institutions.

Suffice it to say that the rising phenomenon of oversea education has been partly a bane to the development of education in Nigeria, bearing in mind that part of the untoward effects of foreign education to the country is the "brain drain" syndrome [21]. For sure, international mobility in education contributes to the brain drain syndrome, but it is inevitable and tends to be the part of the smart levers to the attainment of global academic excellence for the individual [12]. The syndrome also turns out to be of value as it positions and projects Nigerian foreign students as cultural ambassadors. The import of this for Nigeria is that the teeming numbers of foreign students are veritable tools for educational diplomacy since studying abroad provides an opportunity for the students not only to benefit from inter-educational dialogue and cross-fertilization of educational ideas, but actually make them extended promoters of such ideas. Succinctly put:

With the recent development of a plethora of study-abroad opportunities, soft power (soft power as "the ability to get what you want by attracting and persuading others to adopt your goals") can be re-configured by students and educators who cross national borders. Consequently, they are the potential agents of a paradigm shift regarding cultural diplomacy and international education: they are today's new unofficial cultural diplomats [22].

In essence, hundreds of Nigerians who are sent to study abroad by government agencies and parastatals have the limitless opportunities to display and disperse their worthwhile national image from Nigeria to the rest of the world. The overseas students are equally in better position to communicate to the members of their host countries a more accurate and unbiased version of the learning culture and potentials in Nigeria. Of course, on completion of their studies, and having garnered enough experiences in international best practices in education, foreign students of Nigerian origin are better equipped as the global citizens that their home country yawns for in the area of global best practices. The shock however is that a chunk of the government-sponsored students hardly return home to inject their wealth of international experiences into the home front. This resulted in the discomfiting remarks of Executive Secretary of The Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund), Sonny Echono that:

The government has invested heavily in the education of these scholars, and it is disheartening to see many of them choose to stay abroad after their studies. Our goal is to foster collaboration with British universities to create a mechanism that encourages the return of our scholars to Nigeria [23].

It is therefore a mixed bag of experience with what goes on with government sponsored initiatives on foreign studentship. This ambivalence clearly encumbers the optimal exploration and exploitation of the numerous opportunities inherent in oversea studies.

4.2.4. Internalization Initiatives

Nigerian initiative in education diplomacy has also been demonstrated by attempts at the re-invention and transformation of the nation's educational system into a destination for international students. Before the current ebb in the rating and ranking of higher education in Nigeria, there were times when the first generation

universities were world class institutions, having large substantial number of foreign lecturers and students. Recalls that it was quite usual in the 1960s to see Indians, Ghanaians and nationals of other countries in Nigerian universities [24]. This configuration provided Nigerian students the opportunity of getting to know about other countries, broadened their perspectives and positively impacted their philosophies on globalization. As matter of diplomatic policy, the Muritala/Obasanjo regime allowed many universities and advanced learning centres in Nigeria to provide admission for students from Southern Africa during the decolonization and liberation struggles in Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa [25].

Equally interesting is that there were projections after the first decade of independence that the Nigerian university system had the capacity to proportionately grow faster than those of many other major systems in the world [26]. It then follows that where Nigeria reinvents the wheels of these good times and projections for her education, the attraction of foreign students and lecturers becomes an effective initiative that could burgeon the chances of internationalizing the country's education. An Attempt at actualizing these projections was recently intensified by the Joint Admissions Matriculation Board (JAMB) in establishing a "Committee on Internalization of Admission into Tertiary Institution in Nigeria" at the end the 2019 Conference of Rectors, Vice Chancellors and Presidents of African Universities in Egypt. Internalization of admission is the process of integrating an international, intercultural and global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of tertiary education in Nigeria [27].

Unfortunately, the Nigerian university system has had its setback with this renewed idea of internalization. The setback dates back to time when the military junta expelled well-over a million foreigners who were allegedly unregistered in Nigeria [28]. Parts of this number of expelled foreigners were families of foreign students and lecturers who had to leave Nigerian universities in droves. The military assault on foreign university teachers working in Nigeria was typified with the infamous deportation of Professor Patrick Wilmot, a Jamaican-born lecturer at the Ahmadu Bello University Zaria. Prof Wilmot was extradited from Nigeria by Ibrahim Babangida's government for criticizing government's foreign policy in Southern Africa, amid his other radical criticisms against the junta. Ridiculously, the Babangida's government admitted that it deported the Professor on the ground that he taught what he was not paid to teach. Besides, the protracted years of military rule facilitated a massive break in the ties and links between Nigerian universities and other notable universities in the world due to the many sanctions placed on the country within the period.

Since the return to civil rule, selected efforts have been geared towards the re-wakening of dead educational linkages and the attraction foreign students and teachers in the university system, but such efforts have not yielded the optimal desirable results [29], [19]. Regrettably too, the recent rampant kidnap of students of all tiers of education and the wider insecurity problem across the country had only made the idea of internalization, via having more foreign students and lecturers in the system, a dream that could hardly come through in the nearest possible time.

5. CONCLUSION

Diplomacy from an educational perspective is an indispensable feature of modern international relations. In Nigeria, four educational initiatives are identified to be cognate to the dynamics of education diplomacy and linkages. There are express concerns on the possible and inherent challenges associated with some of the initiatives, such as the preponderant demands and dependence on foreign aids, and thus emphasis that the country must carefully scrutinize such aids in order to avoid the attendant negative impacts on the nation's educational system. Reciprocity is not an integral part of the TAC programmes when in actuality the programmes can be designed for a mutually balanced and reciprocal education. The benefits of foreign studentship are far-reaching, but not fully exploited, just as the drive for the actualization of the internationalization agenda in Nigerian tertiary education has the potential for repositioning higher education for global relevance. Therefore, education diplomacy should be fully harnessed to improve Nigeria's image and development, with closer attention from diplomacy agencies, policymakers, and stakeholders to optimize these opportunities and implement policies that ensure education diplomacy/linkages are truly beneficial.

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