

Review Article

## Strengthening Basic Education for National Development in Nigeria: Historical Perspectives

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**Abstract:** This paper examined educational growth and its contribution to national development in Nigeria. The paper adopted review of literature to present the sequence of innovations in curriculum development and the evolving policies and programmes targeted at improving education and enhancing the achievement of national goals and national development. The paper identify different educational systems and programmes such as the introduction of Universal Primary Education UPE in 1976 and Universal Basic Education UBE in 2000, highlighting the achievements recorded from each of the programmes and the challenges which hinder its success. The challenges identified include, poor funding, poor implementation, lack of infrastructures, inadequate in-service training for teachers and inadequate qualified teachers among others. The authors also discuss the effectiveness of basic education in national development and thus suggest that Government should ensure complete implementation of the UBE programme by reviewing the policy document that established the programme and ensure full implementation. Government should employ qualified teachers to meet the growing population of the students, ensuring that appropriate student-teacher ratio are maintained at the basic schools.

**Keywords:** Education, National Development, Universal Basic Education, Universal Primary Education.

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## INTRODUCTION

Education provides individuals with the knowledge and skills necessary to advance as individual and as a nation. The same way, education enhances people or a group socially, economically and otherwise. Education is seen and defined by everyone according to either perception or its contribution to the society. Fafunwa (1974) in Adesope (2021) asserted that education means what each generation gives to its younger ones which make them develop attitudes, abilities, skills and other behavioural attributes which are germane to the growth of the society in which they live. According to National Policy on Education (2014) education is an instrument par excellence for effecting national development. Education is the instrument used for the development of human beings' cognitive, affective, psychomotor domains. Education can be seen as the creation of sound mind in a sound body, it is the share of information that makes one wise or aware of the inborn potentials and how it can be used to better the society. Afolabi and Adesope (2010) sees education as the process of human upbringing that involves formal, informal and non-formal acquisition of knowledge,

attitudes and skills for the good and growth of the individual and of the society to which the individual belongs. This is achieved through the process of teaching and learning.

Basic education refers to the foundational stage of formal schooling that provides children and young people with the essential knowledge, skills and attitudes required for lifelong learning, active citizenship and productive participation in society. It commonly encompasses primary education and the first cycle of secondary schooling (often called lower secondary), and is designed to deliver a core curriculum in literacy, numeracy, basic sciences, social studies and life skills so learners can meet every day needs and access further education or vocational pathways (UNESCO, 2015). Beyond academic content, basic education emphasises equitable access, inclusion of marginalized groups, and the development of social and emotional competencies that underpin further learning and personal development (UNESCO, 2015).

In national policy terms, basic education is framed both as a right and as a public good: governments

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are expected to provide free or affordable, compulsory basic schooling that prepares learners for continued education and participation in civic and economic life. For example, national policy in Nigeria locates basic education as the compulsory phase intended to equip children with fundamental skills and to reduce social inequality by ensuring broad-based access to schooling; policy documents stress curriculum relevance, teacher quality, and community involvement as core dimensions of effective basic education provision (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013). In sum, basic education functions as the cornerstone of an education system establishing the minimum learning outcomes, social norms, and institutional supports necessary for individual advancement and national development.

Development as described by Adesope (2021) is all-encompassing change, a process which builds on itself. Development should not be talked about in terms of changes in the physical environment alone, but in terms of intellectual development as well. Intellectual development is an increase in skills and capacity, greater freedom, self-discipline, responsibility and material well-being. Development can also be a multi-dimensional process involving re-organization and re-orientation of the entire economic and social systems. These dimensions include; utilitarian, behavioural, institutional and structural dimensions. At an individual level, development implies increased skill and capacity to earn income, greater freedom of action, creativity, self-discipline, responsibility and general material and psychological wellbeing.

Ugwu (2015) in Adesope (2021) stated that the attributes of National development include; Increased capacity to regulate internal and external relations, Increase in ability to guard national independence, Self-sufficiency in food production, High level of employment, Equalization in the distribution of social services, Self-reliance, Independent control of the economy, Equalization of economic opportunity, Ability to solve internal conflicts, Greater share of international trade, and Quality education.

On the other hand, national development is the ability of a country to improve the social well-being of its citizens through the provision of such social amenities as medical care, infrastructure, quality education and other social services. This article examines education and moral development, education and social development, education and economic development and education and political development of the Nigerian child in relation to national development (Adesope, 2021). The Education is the heart of national development and the source of quality human capital development that will propel Nigeria to be among the top 20 economies in the world” (President Jonathan, 2011.) “The quality of our workforce is a direct reflection of the quality of our schooling system” (President Jonathan 2010). This fact remains that education is the bedrock of every society

development. This can be observed in the Nigeria case from the point of amalgamation through independence and now post-independence era.

Since pre-colonial times Nigeria relied on informal, community-based learning; formal Western-style schooling expanded in the 19th and early 20th centuries when missionary societies and colonial authorities established primary and vocational schools that formed the foundation of the modern system (NOUN Courseware, n.d.; UNESCO, n.d.). After independence the federal government introduced national structures and reforms (for example the post-colonial secondary education expansion and later the Universal Basic Education framework) to broaden access and standardize curricula moves that increased enrolment but also created new pressures for teacher training, infrastructure, and consistent quality across regions (Abdulrahman, Chiadi & Oniye, 2023).

Despite expanded access, Nigeria still faces major equity and learning challenges that constrain development. Large numbers of children remain out of school (UNICEF reports around 10–12 million primary and junior-secondary age children out of school), and regional and gender gaps persist; moreover, improved enrolment has not always translated into learning gains because of shortages of qualified teachers, instructional materials, and safe learning environments (UNICEF, 2022; Nwoke, 2024). These deficits are compounded in areas affected by insecurity and poverty, which disproportionately reduce education’s reach and effectiveness.

Education contributes to national development primarily by building human capital (literacy, technical skills, and tertiary graduates) that supports economic growth, productivity, health outcomes, and civic participation; empirical studies for Nigeria show positive links between education investment and economic growth but stress that outcomes depend on spending quality, governance, and complementary policies (Keji, 2021; Akinwale, 2023). Recognizing this, multilateral partners and the government have recently targeted financing and reforms to improve learning quality and resilience most notably the World Bank’s new financing packages aimed at strengthening education governance, quality and nutrition because better-directed funding and implementation are critical if education is to deliver measurable poverty-reduction and productivity gains (World Bank, 2025).

### **Education and National Development in Nigeria**

The advent of a knowledge society and the higher trend in skill requirements only increase the relevance of education and the improvement in the development based on devise indices (Schleicher, 2018). In Nigeria, Education is an instrument for national, individual and societal development (Federal Government of Nigeria 2013). In Nigeria, where the

earlier education introduced to citizens were informal and semi-formal, there were still some level of development based on the education of the people. Between independence and the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there are indices of development that are associated with each level of educational improvement. Thus, the higher citizens are educated the more society develops intellectually, socially and in infrastructure. It can be argued that when people are pulled out of illiteracy the society development improves. Hence, the federal government must invest in education to improve the human capital development in order to be competitive in jobs and investments in a globalised world (Majgaard & Mingat, 2012 cited in Adesope, 2021). The Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme which provided nine years of free and compulsory education (primary to junior secondary school) (Oyelere 2011; World Bank, 2013). These programs were designed to equip individuals with foundational knowledge, skills and competencies in diverse fields to contribute productively, socially and economically to Nigeria development (Adeyemi, Oribabor & Adeyemi, 2012). Thus, basic education provides the basis for the growth of education and the overall development of any given society.

The introduction of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) increased access to primary education and gross enrolment rates in Nigeria. For example, enrolment in public primary schools rose from 17.9 million in 1999 to 22.9 million in 2006 (28 per cent increase), and a 60 per cent increase in primary school attendance rates (World Bank, 2013). In spite of the increased access it was said that the quality was poor, admittedly, several authors have questioned the validity of increasing access to education when the quality is poor. Attaining to excellence thus needs more meaningful investment in education (Onyukwu, Clark & Ausukuya, 2017). But, it is noteworthy that in 2016, only 8% of the total budget was allocated to the education sector (Nigeria Education Management Information System, 2017). Below United Nations Education and Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) 26% prescribe as the budget for education for developing countries (World Bank, 2013). This challenge of poor or low allocation to education is also negatively affecting education in terms of its effect on development as no nation can grow more than the growth of their education.

### Historical Perspectives

The Universal Primary Education (UPE) started in the Western Nigeria by Chief Awaolowo after winning the Western House of Assembly in 1952. Chief Awaolowo introduced a free universal and compulsory primary education, otherwise known as the Universal Primary Education (UPE) in 1955. This led to an upsurge in pupils' enrolment. For instance, pupils' enrolment rose from 457,000 in 1954 to 811,000 in 1955, representing a rise from 35% to 61% of 5-14 year olds (Achuonye, 2014). The growth of UPE in the Western region could

not be ignored by other regions. The Eastern region and Federal Government adopted the programme in 1957 and 1976 respectively. The increase in primary education gave birth to the expansion in teacher training schools and more universities. These expansions are all indices of social, intellectual and human development. There was an increase in the number of Grade Two Teacher-Training Colleges (TC 11 Colleges) and teachers' enrolment. The UPE educational system was not long lasting, as it ran into certain challenges. The challenges include;

1. Political Instability: Not long after the introduction of the system when the military took over power. Change in government policies hampered the success of the UPE system of education.
2. Inconsistency in Policy Formulation: A policy is an overall guide that gives the general limits and direction in which administration action will take place (Okoroma, 2016). Every new government wants to bring out a new policy without implementing the old one. Poor policy implementation leads to policy somersault which describes the state of the Nigerian educational system.
3. Teacher Shortages: The increase in pupils' enrolment superseded the number of teachers.
4. Inadequate Infrastructure: Many schools lacked proper facilities, leading to overcrowded classrooms and poor learning conditions.
5. Regional Disparities: The Universal Primary Education (UPE) struggled to address the existing disparities that existed in the system. The northern and the southern regions of Nigeria were having different policies in pupils' accessing education.

The Universal Basic Education (UBE) system was introduced in Nigeria in 1999 to improve the educational system, focusing on primary education and junior secondary schools. The UBE programme aimed to provide free, universal, and compulsory basic education to every Nigerian child aged 6-15 years. The UBE system was launched on September 30<sup>th</sup>, 1999, in Sokoto, Sokoto State, with the goal of achieving Education for All (EFA) as part of the education-related Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The primary objective of the UBE system is to provide access to basic education for all Nigerian children, thereby increasing enrolment rates and reducing dropout rates. The programme also seeks to improve the quality of education, which is the solid foundation for future academic success and personal growth.

In spite of the challenges associated with the rebranding of universal primary education to universal basic education. The former improves school entrance and teacher training, while the latter provided access for all young people to be schooled. The end point of this schooling is that these young people became well

informed and can vote wisely, contribute to the economy of the society along other benefits. From available data, Nigeria have well trained medical doctors and other professionals leaving the country for a greener pasture. The education system is able to provide workforce to fill all vacancy that exist or may arise. This in contrary to what was obtainable before the introduction of most of the educational programmes in Nigeria. In-fact, Nigeria has long moved out of the condition where Government or organizations could hardly see who fit what in their company. Rather, sufficient workforce awaits engagement and that a good evidence of a developed society.

### Factors Affecting Universal Basic Education (UBE) in Nigeria

The UBE is faced with several challenges, including

1. **Inadequate Funding:** The problem of funding is one major challenge confronting the educational system in Nigeria. Nigeria is one of such countries that is yet to allocate 26 % of her budgetary allocation to education as recommended by the United Nations (UNESCO). Insufficient funding has hindered the effective implementation of the UBE programme, affecting the quality of education and infrastructure.
2. **Teacher Shortages and Infrastructures:** The UBE programme has faced challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified teachers, particularly in rural communities. Many schools lack adequate infrastructure, including classrooms, textbooks and technology. Ojedokun and Aladejana (2012) cited in Adesope (2021) asserted that in some schools students were taught in poor quality learning environments which lacked essential equipment and teaching materials, negatively affecting teaching and learning processes. Besides, the national recommended student/classroom ratio for primary and junior secondary (JS) is 35students to 1teacher, while in senior secondary (SS) is 40 students to 1teacher. Yet, in 2012 and 2013, actual student/classroom ratio for primary and JS was 49:1 and 44:1 respectively. This large number of students in the classroom suggests overcrowded learning environment and inadequate infrastructure.
3. **Insecurity Challenges:** One of the greatest threats to security in Nigerian educational system is insecurity or insurgency. The resultant effects of insecurity are the destruction of lives and properties, including school building, kidnapping of students for financial purposes and disruption of economic and educational activities in various part of the country especially in the north and north-east (Awortu, 2015). Most parents are sceptical in releasing their female children to attend schools away from their homes due to fears of child

kidnapping and sexual assault. Thus, security has become a fundamental issue for the Federal government and has affected activities in the education sector, especially in northern Nigeria (World Bank, 2013).

4. **Implementation Challenges:** The UBE programme's effectiveness has been affected by implementation challenges, including corruption and bureaucratic bottlenecks.

### The Implications for National Development

The UPE programme laid the groundwork for future educational development, including the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme in 1999, which built upon the foundations established by UPE. The UBE system has made moderate progress since its introduction in 1999. However, addressing the challenges facing the UBE is crucial for national development aimed at providing quality education. The following are the implications for National Development:

1. **Increase Literacy Rate:** Both the UPE and UBE have contributed to increase literacy rates, enabling more Nigerians to participate in workforce and contribute to national development.
2. **Reduction of Poverty:** Education is a key factor in breaking the cycle of poverty. UPE and UBE programmes have helped to equip individuals with the skills and knowledge needed to secure better-paying jobs and improve their socio-economic status.
3. **Increased Civic Engagement:** UPE and UBE programme have led to the education of individuals. Educated citizens are more likely to participate in civic activities, such as voting and community development, thus, contributing to a more engaged and active citizenry.
4. **Economic Growth:** Through the UPE and UBE, a well-educated population can drive economic growth and development, contributing to Nigeria's emergence as a major economic power in Africa. Education plays a pivotal role in fostering economic growth by stimulating productivity, promoting innovation, and reducing poverty (Azzahra *et al.*, 2024). In Nigeria, an educated populace is therefore vital for achieving sustainable economic development. Education enhances the employability of individuals, reduces unemployment rates, and fosters entrepreneurship, thereby fuelling economic growth.
5. **Human Capital Development:** Human capital, comprising the knowledge, skills, and health of a population, is central to a nation's development (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2023). Education serves as the primary means to enhance human capital. In Nigeria, investing in education is imperative for nurturing a skilled



workforce capable of driving innovation, entrepreneurship, and productivity across various sectors. Quality education equips individuals with the competencies needed to adapt to evolving economic demands, thereby fostering human capital development. Moreover, education contributes to improved health outcomes through awareness programs and access to information, further augmenting human capital.

6. **Improved Human Capital:** By providing access to basic education, UPE and UBE have helped to develop a more skilled and knowledgeable workforce, driving economic growth and development.
7. **Social Cohesion:** Education serves as a cornerstone for fostering social cohesion and national unity (Komatsu, 2024). By promoting inclusivity, tolerance, and mutual understanding, education can mitigate social divisions and promote a sense of belonging among diverse ethnic, religious, and cultural groups. Moreover, education equips individuals with critical thinking skills and civic knowledge necessary for active participation in democratic processes and civil society organizations. By fostering a shared sense of identity and citizenship, education can contribute to social stability and cohesion, thereby laying the foundation for peaceful coexistence and societal progress. Continuing inter-tribal animosities in Nigeria is therefore significantly owing to inadequacies in the area of education and the attendant policies.
8. **Democratic Governance:** Education is indispensable for nurturing informed and active citizens who can effectively participate in democratic governance processes (Chando, 2021). In Nigeria therefore, a robust education system is essential for promoting democratic values, political awareness, and civic engagement. Education empowers citizens to critically evaluate government policies, hold elected officials accountable, and advocate for social justice and equality (Eden *et al.*, 2024). Furthermore, an educated electorate is less susceptible to manipulation and misinformation, thereby strengthening the resilience of democratic institutions. By promoting a culture of transparency, accountability, and civic responsibility, education can play a crucial role in consolidating democratic governance in Nigeria. Between education and democratic governance in Nigeria there is currently a large degree of disarticulations as voter apathy remains the order of the day in Nigerian elections.
9. **Promoting National Unity:** UPE and UBE have promoted national unity by providing a

standardized educational system, fostering a sense of shared identity and citizenship among Nigerians.

### Suggestions

Based on the discussions above, the following suggestions are made:

1. Government should ensure complete implementation of the UBE by reviewing the policy document that established the programme and ensure full implementation.
2. Government should employ qualified teachers to meet the growing population of the students, ensuring that appropriate student-teacher ratio are maintained at the basic schools.
3. Because of security concerns in Nigeria schools, Government should provide adequate security for all schools across the country, alongside training on security tips for self-defence.
5. Better strategy should be adopted to enhance state capacity to provide counterpart funding and to ensure improved basic education for all Nigeria pupils.

## CONCLUSION

One of the significant conclusions about the history of education in Nigeria is that there is conscientious movement in educational development, though each of the programmes comes with its flaws. These challenges are impeding on the actualisation of the objectives of each of the programme eg UPE, 6334, UBE, and 934 education system in Nigeria. This paper has therefore, emphasised the importance of quality education and effective mobilisation, financing, and implementation of ammonized systems to drive national development. Also, the significance of government policy and actions in promoting educational achievement and productive society was discuss. The authors' argument was that effective education provides insight to the attainment of educational goals and national development. The government has to initiate strategies to tackle the challenges identified in this paper as way of addressing educational challenges and embolden its contribution to national development.

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