

79 Higher Education Is A Scam: A Critical Media Analysis of Value Construction for Higher Education In Nigeria

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

Coupled with its postcolonial and contemporary challenges, the discussion about the role and value of Higher Education (HE) in Nigeria has gained traction among its stakeholders. This research critically explores how the value of HE in Nigeria is being constructed in public discourse. Media analysis, coupled with a discourse approach, was used to reconnoitre the value construction and narrative hegemony of the role of HE. The finding shows three dominant frames for constructing HE in Nigeria: (1) labour market value-driven model of education; (2) vocational-oriented education, (2) and neoliberalisation of education. Also, there was a power imbalance and social inequality in the discourse around HE, where the government and academics have more discursive power and control over this discourse in the media. This study recommends exploring the perspectives of underrepresented voices in the discourse around HE in Nigeria and the impacts of neoliberalisation of education on student experiences and outcomes.

Full paper

The discussion around higher education's challenges and transformational value has gained purchase among its stakeholders (Jaja, 2013; Uduk, 2016; Oni et al., 2010; Ogunode and Musa, 2020; Asiyai, 2013). Some have attributed these challenges and "value naming" to the inability of higher education to cater for the exponential increase in yearly enrolment and the country's population (see Chukwurah, 2011; Kanyip, 2013). Other researchers have identified issues such as policy rigidity and repudiation, inequity in access and participation, western-centric curriculum, poor funding, uncanny lecturer-student ratio, incessant strike actions, gaps in skills, knowledge and value provided and demands of labour markets and workforce, and implicit and explicit exclusion because of individual makers of differences or identities (see Okebukola, 2006; Uduk, 2016; Arowosegbe, 2016; Ogunode, 2020).

While there has been extensive empirical and positional research on the challenges facing higher education in Nigeria (see Okebukola, 2003; Uduk, 2016; Arowosegbe, 2016; Ogunode and Musa, 2020), none of these studies employs a media analysis and critical discourse analysis as a theory and method to examine how the value of higher education and its challenges are being constructed in public discourse; This pilot study fills this gap and hopes to make meaning stride to the prevailing debates on higher education research in Nigeria.

The discourse analysis methodology involved the selection of two (2) Nigerian newspapers (Punch and Daily Trust) published between 2021 to 2022. These two media outlets were chosen because they are ranked top among the rest for wider coverage of audiences and their consistency of publishing education and policy issues; they have excellent editorial standards and are go-to for education officers and policymakers in Nigeria (Adeyemo, 2015). The time horizon (2021-2022) was also considered because of the small-scale nature of this inquiry and to ensure the rigour of the finding of this study. Besides, this period could be regarded as Post-lockdown because of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was when different alternative schooling emerged, and the value of education was massively questioned in Nigeria, where access to the internet for online learning was foreboding.

The study built on prior literature that has illustrated various constructs for students and HE, such as students as consumers rather than learners, neoliberalisation of HE, and students as future workers. The analysis found a similar construct of HE in Nigeria, primarily as a 'factory' for future workers, leading to three framing ideologies: a labour market value-driven model, a shift to vocational-oriented education, and the commodification or marketisation of education.

The findings indicated a prevailing narrative within Nigerian HE institutions about the ideal university model, suggesting that the 'common sense' approach for universities is to prioritise entrepreneurship and labour market readiness for students. The discourse emphasised the role of universities in workforce development and economic growth, signalling a shift from traditional academic-centric approaches to a more market-oriented model. This shift aligns with broader global trends towards the commodification and neoliberalisation of education.

The discourse analysis also revealed that the perspectives of academics and government officials dominate the educational policies and practices discourse, potentially sidelining the valuable input of other stakeholders. The underrepresented voices of students, parents, non-academic professionals, and non-governmental organisations could result in a mismatch between the education provided and the practical needs of students and the job market.

Additionally, the use of images of government officials and academics accompanying their statements in the media can lend authority and credibility to the discourse, potentially endorsing the presented views as 'official' or 'correct.' This finding parallels strategies in political discourse used to legitimise positions and actions, presenting them as beneficial, necessary, or inevitable.

Overall, this research uncovers a significant ideological shift in higher education, as portrayed in Nigerian media. The dominant perspective frames universities as labour market-oriented institutions, emphasising vocational skills, and promoting marketised education. The study emphasises the importance of including multiple perspectives in shaping education policies and practices, which currently overlook the perspectives of essential stakeholders.

Further research is recommended to explore these underrepresented perspectives in the discourse around HE in Nigeria. Also, it would be valuable to investigate the impacts of the marketisation and neoliberalisation of education on student experiences, career aspirations, and transitions into the job market.

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