ADULT LEARNING AND VOCATIONAL TRAINING IN POST-COVID-19 ERA: ISSUES, CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

BY

[1]**OKUNNA, OGOCHUKWU KENNEDY,** ok.okunna@unizik.edu.ng,

[2]**IWUNDU, SOCHIMA PEACE** sp.iwundu@unizik.edu.ng

&

[3]**Chukwuemerie, Obiageli Chinyelu (PhD)**
oc.chukwuemerie@unizik.edu.ng

[1,2&3]Department of Adult and Continuing Education Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria.

Corresponding author: Okunna Ogochukwu Kennedy (phone: 08109780779)

ABSTRACT

This paper examined the issues, challenges, and prospects of adult learning and vocational training in the post–COVID 19 era. The impact of the pandemic on adult learning and vocational training is discussed in details, based on issues identified from an extensive review of relevant literatures. Some of the issues identified include increased level of isolation, a shift in the way lifelong learning is provided, and a new level of digital literacy required for adult learners to access training opportunities. Furthermore, challenges such as difficulties in providing access to resources and in addressing the loss of jobs, as well as a lack of policy infrastructure to support adult learning and vocational training, are discussed. Strategies to provide equitable access to opportunities are suggested and the prospects of virtual learning and online education are explored. The paper concludes with some thoughts on the potentials of adult learning and vocational training in the post-COVID 19 environment.

Keywords: Adult Learning, Vocational Training, Post-COVID- 19 .

Introduction

Moving young adults into work and enabling them to learn skills required by the contemporary labour market has been considered as one of the most significant prerequisites of adult learning courses. Similarly, Evans (2009) postulated that repositioning adult education within life-long-learning requires a shared philosophy of the purposes and benefits of adult learning, which relates to a capability approach and the expansion of human capabilities rather than merely economic development. Vocational training for the adults incorporates numerous life skills that can be acquired to foster resilience, confidence and problem-solving as well as encourage learners to become more tolerant of diversity.

In combating pandemics, formal, informal and non-formal programmes in adult education have been used constantly. In the current COVID-19 pandemic, adult vocational training draws attention to the urgent need for each learner to be equipped with the basic training and skills to be self-sufficient, self-employed and as well an employer of labour. COVID-19 pandemic highlights the need for skill-based knowledge and information management to ensure that learners have sufficient, clear and reasonable information to adapt to the exponential change brought about by this disease. Based on this backdrop, these researchers discussed the issues, challenges and prospects arising from efforts to adjust to the new normal presented by COVID-19 towards elevating adult learning, restructuring adult education and vocational training practices and policies in more equitable and efficacious way.

Concept of Adult Learning and the Adult Learner

Adult learning is perceived around the globe as a change agent, transforming societies, sustaining the very existence of national heritage as well as transcending the competitive competences of different countries in the struggle of maintaining a balance in the economy. According to Obiozor and Obidiegwu (2013), adult learning refers to the process which individuals go through as they attempt to change and enrich their knowledge, values, skills or strategies so as to maintain a healthy existence in the world of change. Furthermore, they maintain that the concept of adult learning clearly connects with the application of adult development and andragogical constructs to life which has become a global trend in the field of adult education and community development. This definition shows clearly that adult education programmes prepares an adult recipient to be a functional and productive member of his society. Functionality of the learner is achieved when adult learners acquire vocational training through acquisition of different vocational skills within or outside the four walls of school.

The essence of adult learning is to provide the adult learner with learning opportunities. Ugwoegbu (2003) opines that adult education is seen as a system which is to provide learning opportunities. He stresses further that it is expected to help people who are disadvantaged in education so that they will use the opportunity which it offers to remedy individual, social and economic injustices. Undoubtedly, the adult is the client and centre of adult learning. According to Ani (2010) an adult

learner is one who is an adult and engages in any learning activity. The learning activity may be in day-time classes, evening courses, residential courses, weekend schools, job-training courses at training centres, extension work, seminars or workshops and the mass media.

An adult learner may also be regarded as one who has returned to education to acquire more things in form of knowledge, skills or affection (Ani, 2010). He maintains further that an adult learner is one who is physically mature, socially and economically responsible and participates actively in any educational activity. In the view of Obiozor and Obidiegwu (2013), an adult learner is someone who has some felt needs which requires attention and because of this need, he or she enrolled in different adult learning programmes for training; to get knowledge and acquire skills to fulfill such needs or meet his/her life goals.

In defining adult learning and the adult learner, there are relatively few assertions that can be made without generating controversies and queries due to the polymorphous nature of the two words that make up the concept. However, these researchers believe that it can be asserted without argument, that adult learning is within a bigger concept of education, being the education for the matured minds and therefore obeying the major characteristics that differentiates education from other ordinary social activities; and that it is a concept that recognizes that adults and children learn differently in their learning situation. Adults are motivated to learn when they perceive they can apply the knowledge

and it can be of use to them. Adult learning is life-long because the adult is constantly faced with different challenges throughout lifespan.

Aspin, Chapman, Evans and Bagnall (2012) stated that different cultures have their own discourses on learning throughout their life, informed by their own traditions. The relationship between education, life and learning has been defined by the knowledge-driven economy where the relationship between education and 'real-life' is that the more we learn, the more we earn (Evans, 2009).

According to Evans, in the educational debates of the past 30 years, and specifically during the most recent decade, the concept of adult and life-long-learning has been redefined both strategically and functionally. It is associated with a new way of defining tasks of education in modern societies specifically related to both moving to a knowledge-based economy and shifting to a more complex social world where individuals are expected to take control of their lives and acquire skills that would enable them to navigate different social spaces in the contemporary world. Skill acquisition is a form of vocational education acquired through both formal and non-formal education.

Concept of Vocational Education

The diverse and evolving nature of technological advancement in today's world necessitates the introduction of various new skills. This however, requires constant training and retraining of personnel to service so as not to be overwhelmed by the intricacies associated with these new innovations. Osinem (2007) asserts that training is the process

of impacting specific skill which enables an individual or group of people to perform and maintain specific jobs effectively, efficiently and diligently. Therefore, training involves a painstaking process whereby one patiently learns the skills needed to be competent in a vocation.

Wapmuk (2011) perceives vocational training as an acquisition of skills and competencies that can help individuals to function productively in industrial and commercial occupations. To buttress further on this definition, the Federal Government of Nigeria (2004), Policy on Education views vocational training as an education given in institution as providing both scientific knowledge and practical skills required for a specific trade, employment or profession as craftsman, technicians/technologists and scientists.

According to Obidiegwu and Obiozor (2014) human development recognizes that people are the real wealth and builder of every nation. It puts people at the centre of development and emphasizes that for sustainable development to be achieved, potentials of people must be developed without constraints and lives of people fulfilled without any barrier or limitation. This submission shows that vocational training and development of people will invariably enable them to acquire the needed knowledge and skills for sustaining their livelihood.

Vocational trainings can be organized in the form of workshops, seminars, extension programmes and short duration courses in schools and out-of-school (training centres) to impact requisite skills to participants (Osinem, 2007).

Vocational training is that education that prepares people to work as a technician or to take up employment in a skilled craft or trade as a tradesperson or artisan. Vocational education is sometimes referred to as career and technical education.

Vocational education usually consists of a mix of theory and practical or hands-on-experience. Typically, instructors use competency-based grading, over a standard grading scale, to check if students have mastered a skill. Modern vocational education allows students to develop transferable creative and personal development skills specific to a chosen job. Vocational training helps to prepare students for a specific career. This type of education can take place in a trade schools, technical schools or on-the-job training programs. These trades or crafts include, but not limited to plumbing, nursing architecture among many others.

Corona Virus and Covid-19 Pandemic

It is a generally accepted fact that at some stages of human development, the world has witnessed outbreaks of pandemics. They often occur in form of cholera epidemic, typhus outbreak, flu etc. The Spanish flu in 1918 in two years ended the lives of an estimated 40 million people around the globe while Ebola disease claimed millions of lives in Africa. No matter the origin and nature, the responses of society irrespective of geographical differences, whether developed or developing have not been mutually exclusive. Over the past few years, the world witnessed the outbreak of the coronavirus strain tagged (COVID-19). It was said to have originated from China but the spread rose to the scale of a global pandemic hence, it necessitated a global response. Subsequent and

ongoing research by adults, revealed a general agreement that people were particularly exposed to infections through close family or work contact, as transmission seems to occur through contaminated droplets expelled by an infected person who is less than two meters away (Middleton, Martin-Moreno & Barres, 2020). More than 213 countries globally have been infected according to the National Center for Disease Control (NCDC, 2020) report in Nigeria. As more and more countries continued to be affected, a range of measures have been implemented by these countries to contain the spread of the virus and Nigeria is not an exception. These measures include; home confinement, lockdown of different degrees, isolation of the infected, travel ban and mobility restrictions, closure of work centres and restaurants, the imposing of social distancing, the use of face masks as well as hand sanitizer is currently the practice in the absence of an effective drug or vaccine for the treatment and control of the disease. The mediating factor with COVID-19 appears to be the physical distance as those who are affected pose less risk to others if they are at least two meters from them (Yee, Unger, Zadrovcz, Cariello, Seibert & Johnson, 2020). The effects of the pandemic are rapid as well as all embracing and can be witnessed in almost all areas of the society.

From a global perspective, the heart arching effects of the COVID-19 crises, stemming from both the virus itself and the restriction measures put in place, are overwhelming. They are affecting countries, societies and communities at national, international and global levels. These measures can be strongly reinforced by the use of masks.

The COVID-19 crisis has created challenges for working environments, learning environments and the day to day life of individuals. It has also hiked the rapid shift of jobs and work tasks to online environment. It has also affected both the health care system, the economy, labour market, education and training systems, social security systems, political and governance system and generally the environment and climate. Many countries are seeing a sharp rise in unemployment, for both young people and adults and a sudden shift to teleworking and connected economy through the use of digital technologies which many people especially the adults are not familiar with. The current pandemic has given rise to a number of behavioural patterns that are common to large-scale health threats (Jones 2020). Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the need for knowledge and information management to ensure that citizens have sufficient clear and reasonable information to guarantee that they have a change in their behavior in order to prevent the spread of infection (Legido-Quigley, Asgari, Teo, Leung, Oshitani & Fukuda, 2020). The education sector has not been exempted from its effects. The COVID-19 crisis has literally forced a digitalization of education and rapidly pushed education and training systems to explore new ways of teaching and learning.

Societal Issues and Challenges of Vocational Training

Vocational training is the product of an extended evolutionary process. Economic, educational and societal issues have repeatedly exerted influence on the definition and application of vocational training as well as on how, when, where, and to whom it will be provided. Vocational

training is defined as a practically illustrated and attempted job or career skill instruction. As such, a variety of components fall under the vocational education umbrella: agricultural education, business education, family and consumer sciences, marketing education, technical education, technology education and trade and industrial education, health occupation education.

Vocational preparation must always be viewed against the backdrop of the needs of society and of the individuals. While meeting the demands of the economy, the abilities of individuals must be utilized to the fullest. Meeting the internalized job needs of individuals is a crucial objective of vocational training.

Historically, almost all vocational training took place in the classroom or on the job site, with students learning trade skills and trade theory from accredited instructors or established professionals. However, in recent years, online vocational education has grown in popularity, making learning various skills and soft skills easier than ever for learners even those who may live far away from a traditional vocational school.

The World Bank's 2019 World Development Report on the future of work suggests that flexibility between general and vocational education particularly in higher education is imperative to enable workers to compete in changing labour markets where technology plays an increasingly important role. Trends have emerged in the implementation of vocational training and skills development worldwide. Vocational and skills development were viewed as an important component in promoting economic growth in general and addressing youth

unemployment in particular. In recognition of this, United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (4) advocates the expansion of equitable access to vocational training needs in order to sustainably increase the number of youths with relevant skills for decent work.

Formal education system had not been effective in developing the skills that many young people and adults needed to secure employment in industry. The late 1980s and early 1990s saw the introduction and expansion of new vocational curricula and courses, often developed in collaboration with industry, and an increase in the variety of work-based learning routes on offer to young people. A lot of changes have been made over the years to promote vocational education among the nations of the world. Nevertheless, the problem of unskilled and unemployable graduates persists even till date in Nigeria and in many developing nations due to challenges being faced by stakeholders in the advancement of vocational education.

Challenges of Adult Learning and Vocational Training in Post-COVID-19 Era in Nigeria

Nigerian vocational training has been facing myriads of challenges even before COVID-19 pandemic. Most of these challenges are also that of general education. Some challenges existed but were further complicated by COVID-19 pandemic. Egwu (2009) highlighted the existing challenges and bottlenecks being faced by Nigerian educational system, especially adult learning and vocational education, even before the outbreak of COVID-19 to include inadequate and obsolete infrastructure and equipment such as poorly equipped laboratories for online

vocational training workshops, libraries and classrooms; inadequate collaboration between tertiary institutions and industries; unstable academic calendar; unattractive conditions of services for teachers; staff shortage across board due to isolation measures; weak support structure for students industrial work experience scheme (SIWES); brain drain or human capital plight; high incidence of cultism, examination malpractices and other social/academic vices; inadequate capacity in the institution for internal/peer quality assessment.

Udoka (2010) also identified funding as the major challenge of vocational training. Yusuf and Soyani (2012) corroborated this by reporting that financing is one of the problems of the implementation of vocational training curriculum. Nwogu and Nweanomi (2011) stated that the challenges of vocational training are numerous and they include lack of skilled manpower, acute shortage of adult learning and vocational training instructors, poor funding. In addition, Olaitan as cited in Odu (2011) stated that the challenges confronting the implementation and achievement of vocational training included insufficient materials resources for training and dearth of qualified vocational training educators. Odu (2011) outlined some human capital development related challenges faced in vocational education and they include inadequate funding; poor workshop organization; gross inadequacy in facilities; harsh and intimidating class work; poor quality preparation of lesson by vocational education instructor; resource inadequacy; unhealthy classroom; shortage of equipment and social vices.

Another issue is the lack of efficient educational monitoring and evaluation procedures. Facilitators of adult learning and vocational training in Nigeria are underestimated and there is a great lack of incentives provided for them. Another challenge is the rapid technological growth that is hard to keep up with, which results in irrelevance of the curricula taught in adult learning and vocational training programmes. In fact, adult learning and vocational training in Nigeria is still facing a lot of challenges ranging from stakeholders and general public view of the programme, poor infrastructure, finance and resources, inadequate resources especially human and capital resources, inability to meet up with the daily emerging advancements of technology etc. outbreak of COVID- 19 Pandemic with its restrictions made matters worse. The COVID-19 pandemic outbreak was heralded by many unprecedented issues and challenges that disrupted effective adult learning and vocational training. According to Ile and Edokpor (2021) many of these challenges and obstacles includes unpreparedness of adult learners for the unexpected transition to online learning, lack of necessary skills and infrastructure to accommodate online teaching and learning approaches. The authors further reiterated some of the challenges that are peculiar to the Nigerian situation to include inadequate electricity supply, low internet connectivity, low data transfer capacity, lack of network to cope with the increased data usage. Chukwuemerie and Ugwude (2021) identified poverty, unstable power supply, poor internet connectivity, lack of digital skills by facilitators, adult learners and caretakers, and exclusion of learners in the rural communities who did not have access to internet. The technophobia and

conservative behavior traits to new and evolving technologies constrain facilitators and adult learners' acceptance to e-learning. According to Hussain (2020), as cited in Chukwuemerie and Ugwude (2021), COVID-19 widened the problem of digital divide among learners and facilitators and made the gap very glaring. However, an e-learning approach has come to stay even in COVID-19 times despite these challenges. Bolarinwa (2015) stated that emerging challenges now are more than ever before, hence; Nigerian economy requires competent workforce with relevant psychomotor, cognitive and affective domain appropriately. There is need for upgrade in adult learning and vocational training to meet the skills need for survival in the 21st century.

Post-COVID-19 Prospects for the Adult Learners

A range of changes in economic and social development as a result of COVID-19 crisis, the impact of globalization and the expansion of modern technologies have all contributed to the changes in the perception of adult learning and have facilitated the changing nature of the ways adults learn and the extent to which learning acquired outside formal educational settings is being recognized and accredited. The origins of research on COVID-19 pandemic and the significance of its devastating impact on the adult learners brought attention to the specific requirements of adult learners and the need to find appropriate learning approaches for uncovering their potential even as the spread continues. Both formal, non-formal and informal programmes in adult education have been used increasingly to overcome social exclusion in the face of pandemics and to facilitate the engagement of young adults during such

periods. Specifically, in relation to facilitating inclusion and engagement the following types of programmes have been identified by Saar, Ure and Wolford (2013) to include but not limited to basic skills and remedy programmes, second chance education, retraining, vocational programmes and informal and non-formal learning.

Within the context of adult learning, developments during the crisis show that adult learning systems in it's entirely are changing rapidly in the transition to distant learning. Teaching and learning have moved primarily online, and the use of remote video conferencing has become common place, since the scourge of the pandemic. However, many adults want to take advantage of online learning environments, primarily due to their busy schedules and the online format's convenience (Tweedell, 2000). He further noted that they are using technology with different sets of expectations that are based on their histories.

There is an increase in freely available learning opportunities for the adult learners via digital forms of learning, which can be useful in further stimulating and facilitating their overall learning. This can as well contribute to reducing inequalities.

However, this situation yields risks as well as opportunities. We live in a society with a pernicious digital divide, and while technology might be a way to facilitate adult learning in some circumstances, not everyone has the reliable access to an internet connection or the digital literacy skills to engage in self-directed learning in a virtual environment. Many adult learners may not feel well-prepared for digital education and institutions and workplaces might have to engage with online modes of working and

telecommunicating more than they are accustomed to. With many adults at risk of losing their jobs and as many services have closed and social distancing practice continues; the need to up-skill and re-skill across the lifespan is becoming painfully obvious. Among many concerns, the social and economic vulnerability of many adult learners has been dramatically fore-grounded, highlighting the social inequality that continues to characterize adult learning. The question is, has the 2019 global pandemic presented opportunities for elevating adult learning and restructuring adult education practices and policies in more equitable and efficacious way? Yes, it has in the opinion of the researchers. It is fascinating to see how far learning and work has shifted toward online courses. This has increased the proportion of digital literacy skills as part of the learning programmes. In the aftermath of COVID-19 pandemic, we must remain vigilant that the profession of the adult educator is not in jeopardy.

It is these researchers hope that during this trying time, adult educations should be a force for connecting people, who, after months of social isolation and physical distancing may recognize more than ever the value of supportive networks and solidarity among members of the society.

CONCLUSION

Vocational training is a crucial platform for acquisition of skills and knowledge for employment and sustainable livelihood in these unpredictable times caused by COVID-19 pandemic. It provides the needed employable knowledge, skills and attitude needed by adult learners to perform effectively in the workplace.

Vocational training and Adult education incorporate numerous life skills that the adult learners can leverage on as a survival mechanism to escape the hardship caused by the corona-virus. Vocational skills such as tailoring, bead-making, weaving, wood carving, farming, shoe making and so much more can be acquired by the learners to be self-fulfilled survive and live a healthy life. These vocational skills can effectively change the adult learners in the society and efficiently reduce the hardship that the pandemic has inflicted on them.

Recommendations

In order to achieve the basic aims and objectives of vocational training for the adult learners in this unprecedented time as well as the prospects, challenges and achievements of its programmes; the researchers hereby make the following suggestions:

1. Vocational training for the adult learners should be encouraged through a more consistent, adequate and higher funding to reflect online spending.
2. Vocational training for the adult learners needs to be monitored more keenly by stakeholders and providers who would ensure

compliance to implementation as stated in guiding policies always.

3. Government, stakeholders and educators needs to acknowledge the obvious shifts in learning to online environment and encourage adult learners to acquire online literacy skill to be able to navigate credibly in the online learning environment.
4. Stakeholders and different providers of vocational programmes should promote and encourage the facilitators of these programmes by providing adequate incentives to bring about job satisfaction.
5. With many adults at the risk to losing their jobs, the need to up-skill and re-skill across their life span is necessary; therefore; vocational training facilitators should be well trained, consistently updated and properly networked to enhance better performance.
6. Facilitators should constantly engage in in-depth research, seminars and symposiums in order to discover improve and expand already established as well as new approaches to online learning environment.

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