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ACCELERATING INNOVATIVE SKILLS IN THE MANAGEMENT OF UNIVERSITY EDUCATION FOR POVERTY ERADICATION IN RIVERS STATE NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigated accelerating innovative skills in the management of university education for poverty eradication in Rivers State Nigeria. Accelerating innovative skills in the management of university education holds immense promise for poverty eradication in Rivers State, Nigeria. One crucial avenue lies in fostering robust partnerships between universities and industries. Collaborative initiatives such as internship programs and joint research ventures provide students with practical experiences and skills aligned with the demands of the local job market, thereby enhancing their employability and income prospects. The theory that guided this paper was anchored on Rogers' theory of the diffusion of innovations. The theory posits that the process of individuals, organisations, or communities embracing a novel innovation unfolds gradually. The study concluded that by fostering a culture of adaptability, embracing technological advancements, and promoting collaboration between academia and industry, universities can equip students with the skills and knowledge necessary to drive economic growth and social development. Through initiatives such as entrepreneurship education, vocational training programs, and research partnerships, universities can empower individuals to create sustainable livelihoods, foster innovation, and contribute to poverty alleviation efforts in Rivers State. It suggested among others that Stakeholder should foster collaboration between universities, government agencies, NGOS, and industry stakeholders to develop comprehensive strategies for accelerating innovative skills in education management and university administrators should implement capacity building programs for university administrators, faculty, and staff to enhance their competencies in innovative education management practices.

Introduction

Education, in its broadest sense, encompasses the process of acquiring knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes that empower individuals to thrive personally, socially, and economically. Beyond the transmission of information, education is about nurturing critical thinking, creativity, and lifelong learning habits. In the context of accelerating innovative skills in the management of university education, it extends beyond mere academic instruction to encompass holistic development and empowerment. At its core, education is a transformative force that empowers individuals to realize their full potential and contribute meaningfully to society. It equips learners with the tools and capabilities necessary to navigate complex challenges, make informed decisions, and adapt to an ever-changing world. In Rivers State, Nigeria, where socio-economic disparities and developmental challenges persist, education serves as a catalyst for social mobility, economic empowerment, and community development.

The imperative to accelerate innovative skills in the management of university education is particularly pressing given the evolving needs of its diverse student population. A fundamental aspect of accelerating innovative skills in university education is the cultivation of a culture of adaptability and agility. This requires a departure from traditional bureaucratic approaches towards governance and decision-making, towards fostering an environment that encourages experimentation, creativity, and continuous improvement. Such a cultural shift demands visionary leadership that is receptive to change and empowers stakeholders at all levels to contribute to the innovation process (Brown, 2019).

Harnessing the power of technology is another crucial element in accelerating innovation in university management in Rivers State. Digital tools and platforms offer immense potential to streamline administrative processes, enhance communication and collaboration, and deliver personalized learning experiences to students. For instance, universities can leverage Learning Management Systems (LMS) to facilitate online learning, provide access to educational resources, and track student progress (UNESCO, 2017).

Furthermore, partnerships and collaborations helps in driving innovation in university education management in Rivers State. By forging strategic alliances with industry, government agencies, and non-profit organizations, universities can access additional resources, expertise, and opportunities for students. Collaborative initiatives may include joint research projects, internship programs, and community engagement activities designed to address local challenges and foster socio-economic development (Selingo, 2017). Moreover, financial sustainability and resource optimization are critical considerations for universities in Rivers State as they seek to accelerate innovation in education management. Given the limited funding and competing priorities, institutions must explore innovative strategies to diversify revenue streams, contain costs, and maximize the efficient use of resources. This may involve exploring alternative funding sources, such as philanthropic donations, public-private partnerships, and income-generating ventures, while prioritizing investments in core academic and infrastructure needs (Brown, 2019).

Accelerating innovative skills in the management of university education holds immense promise for poverty eradication in Rivers State, Nigeria. One crucial avenue lies in fostering robust partnerships between universities and industries. Collaborative initiatives such as internship programs and joint research ventures provide students with practical experiences and

skills aligned with the demands of the local job market, thereby enhancing their employability and income prospects (Oluwatoyin et al., 2020). These partnerships also facilitate knowledge transfer and the adoption of innovative practices, contributing to economic growth and poverty reduction in the region.

Furthermore, integrating entrepreneurship education within university curricula empowers students to become job creators rather than job seekers. By equipping students with the necessary entrepreneurial skills and mindset, such programs enable them to identify and capitalize on business opportunities in sectors crucial to Rivers State's economic development, such as agriculture, renewable energy, and technology (Okeke & Onyeneke, 2019). Through practical training, mentorship, and access to funding, aspiring entrepreneurs can establish sustainable enterprises that generate employment and contribute to poverty alleviation in their communities.

Again, leveraging technology in education management can enhance access to quality education and skill development opportunities, particularly for marginalized populations. Online learning platforms, digital libraries, and virtual classrooms can reach remote areas with limited educational resources, enabling individuals to acquire relevant skills and knowledge from anywhere, anytime (Onyeneke et al., 2018). By democratizing access to education and fostering lifelong learning, technology-driven initiatives play a pivotal role in empowering individuals with the tools they need to break free from the cycle of poverty and pursue socio-economic advancement in Rivers State.

Osuji & Uriri (2022) investigated Managing Innovative Education to End Poverty for Attainment of Sustainable Development Goals in Rivers State. The findings of the study revealed that proper management and value of innovative education helps in achieving human development, achievement of innovative education helps in the context of the management development goals and that improvement of innovative education helps in the context of sustainable development. The researchers recommended that government should place more emphasis on the proper management and value of innovative education hence it helps in achieving human development and end poverty, government should promote innovative education by investing more since it helps in the achievement of management development goals and government should create more awareness to the school management on the importance and need of innovative education hence it helps in the context of sustainable development.

However, several gaps remain that warrant further investigation. One notable gap is the limited understanding of the effectiveness of specific innovation initiatives and interventions in different educational contexts. Additionally, there is a need for research that explores the role of organizational culture and leadership in driving innovation within universities. While innovative practices are often championed at the individual level, the institutional environment and leadership structures can either facilitate or hinder innovation efforts.

Furthermore, there is a lack of research focusing on the intersectionality of innovation and equity in higher education. While innovation has the potential to enhance access, quality, and relevance of education, there is a risk that it may exacerbate existing inequalities if not implemented thoughtfully. Research is needed to examine how innovation initiatives can be designed and implemented in ways that promote inclusivity, address systemic barriers, and ensure equitable outcomes for all students, particularly those from marginalized or underrepresented backgrounds.

Specifically, the study emphasizes the lack of comprehensive understanding regarding the effectiveness of innovation interventions, the influence of organizational factors on innovation adoption, and the potential implications of innovation for equity and inclusivity in higher education. By addressing these research gaps, stakeholders can develop more targeted and impactful strategies for promoting innovation and driving positive change within academic institutions which necessitated this research on accelerating innovative skills in the management of University Education for poverty Eradication in Rivers State Nigeria

Theoretical Framework

Diffusion of Innovation Theory

Rogers' theory of the diffusion of innovations was postulated, as referenced in the work of Nwuke (2021). The theory posits that the process of individuals, organisations, or communities embracing a novel innovation unfolds gradually. The theory provides a comprehensive explanation of the mechanisms through which novel concepts or ideas are communicated and adopted within a specific population. The process consists of five fundamental phases, specifically knowledge acquisition, persuasion, decision-making, implementation, and confirmation.

Knowledge: The individual acquires knowledge of the innovation through focused and concise practise. During this first stage, individuals are exposed to the innovation for the first time, gaining awareness of its presence and cultivating a basic understanding of its purpose and potential benefits that will accrue from the innovation

Persuasion: The individual develops an inclination towards the innovation and actively pursues additional information. During this stage, individuals develop a favourable attitude towards the innovation. The individuals evaluate the advantages of the subject being assessed and compare it with existing alternatives, considering multiple factors such as cost, suitability for their needs, and potential risks.

Decision Making: The process of decision making involves the careful evaluation of the strength and weaknesses associated with the adoption of the innovation, leading to a conclusive determination to adopt it. Individuals partake in a purposeful procedure to ascertain the feasibility of embracing or dismissing the innovation. The decision-making process is susceptible to various internal and external factors, encompassing personal perceptions, societal norms, and the perspectives of influential individuals.

Implementation: The individual starts using the novel concept (Innovation). Once individuals have made the decision to accept, they proceed with the implementation of the innovation in their respective daily lives or work environments. This may involve the acquisition of knowledge related to the product, the adjustment of established routines, or the alteration of processes to accommodate the innovation..

Confirmation: Confirmation is the stage in which the individual assesses the outcomes of adopting the innovation and makes a determination regarding its ongoing utilisation. The concept involves the continuous adoption and application of the innovation by individuals, leading to either the validation or dismissal of their initial choice. If the innovation successfully meets the users' expectations and effectively delivers the desired benefits, there is a strong likelihood that it will be embraced and spread through informal channels of communication

Rogers in Nwuke (2021) posited that the rate of adoption of an innovation is influenced by five key factors, namely relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability. Various factors have the potential to influence an individual's inclination towards either embracing or dismissing an innovation. The application of the Diffusion of Innovation theory holds significant relevance to the study of accelerating innovative skills in the management of university education. This theory provides a framework for understanding how new ideas, practices, or technologies spread within a social system over time. Diffusion of Innovation Theory underscores the significance of opinion leaders and change agents in driving the adoption of innovation within social systems. In the context of university education, influential faculty members, administrators, and student leaders who embrace innovation and champion change can play a pivotal role in encouraging their peers to adopt new practices and overcome resistance to change. By identifying and empowering these opinion leaders, university leaders can accelerate the diffusion of innovative skills and practices throughout the institution.

Conceptual Review

Entrepreneurship Education as an Innovative Skills towards Poverty Eradication

Entrepreneurship education is increasingly recognized as a potent tool in the global fight against poverty. As nations strive to alleviate poverty and promote sustainable development, fostering entrepreneurial skills has emerged as a pivotal strategy. Entrepreneurship education equips individuals with the knowledge, skills, and mindset necessary to identify opportunities, mobilize resources, and create value in the economy. By cultivating an entrepreneurial mindset, individuals are empowered to take control of their economic destinies, thereby breaking the cycle of poverty. Guerrero et al. (2020), entrepreneurship education not only enhances individuals' capacity to start and manage businesses but also fosters creativity, resilience, and adaptability—all essential attributes for navigating the challenges of poverty.

Entrepreneurship education nurtures a culture of innovation and enterprise within communities. By instilling entrepreneurial values such as initiative, risk-taking, and problem-solving, it empowers individuals to explore alternative pathways out of poverty beyond traditional employment. As highlighted by Fayolle and Gailly (2015), entrepreneurship education fosters a spirit of self-reliance and resourcefulness, enabling individuals to harness their talents and local resources to create sustainable livelihoods. Importantly, entrepreneurship education goes beyond theoretical knowledge to emphasize experiential learning and practical skills development. Through interactive pedagogical approaches such as business simulations, case studies, and mentorship programs, individuals are exposed to real-world challenges and opportunities. This hands-on approach not only enhances their entrepreneurial competencies but also builds confidence and self-efficacy, crucial for overcoming the barriers to entrepreneurship faced by the poor (Ratten, 2016).

Furthermore, entrepreneurship education contributes to the creation of an enabling ecosystem for entrepreneurship by fostering collaboration between academia, government, and industry. By engaging stakeholders from diverse sectors, it facilitates knowledge exchange, access to resources, and policy support for aspiring entrepreneurs. This collaborative approach is exemplified by initiatives such as entrepreneurship incubators, business development centers,

and public-private partnerships aimed at providing holistic support to budding entrepreneurs (Acs & Szerb, 2020).

Evidence from empirical studies underscores the positive impact of entrepreneurship education on poverty alleviation. For instance, a study conducted by Kibler et al. (2019) found that individuals who received entrepreneurship education were more likely to start businesses and generate higher incomes compared to their counterparts. Similarly, research by van Praag and Versloot (2007) suggests that entrepreneurship education not only enhances individuals' entrepreneurial intentions but also improves their likelihood of business success, thereby contributing to poverty reduction.

Industry-Academia Collaboration as an innovative skills towards poverty eradication

Industry-academia collaboration bridges the gap between theory and practice, harnessing the complementary strengths of academia's research expertise and industry's practical insights and resources. By fostering a symbiotic relationship between these two sectors, it creates opportunities for knowledge exchange, technology transfer, and skills development, thereby driving innovation and competitiveness in the economy (Agrawal et al., 2014).

One of the key benefits of industry-academia collaboration is its role in enhancing the relevance and applicability of academic research to real-world challenges faced by industries and communities. By engaging industry stakeholders in the research process, academic institutions can ensure that their research agendas align with the needs of the market and society, leading to the development of innovative solutions with tangible impact (Bercovitz & Feldman, 2006). Moreover, industry-academia collaboration facilitates the co-creation of knowledge and the co-development of solutions to complex problems. Through collaborative research projects, joint ventures, and technology transfer agreements, academia and industry partners can leverage their respective expertise to address pressing societal challenges such as poverty, healthcare, and environmental sustainability (Feller et al., 2018).

Importantly, industry-academia collaboration contributes to skills development and capacity building, particularly in emerging sectors with high growth potential. By providing students and researchers with exposure to industry practices, hands-on experience, and mentorship opportunities, it equips them with the practical skills, entrepreneurial mindset, and professional networks needed to succeed in the dynamic and competitive job market (Etzkowitz et al., 2000).

Furthermore, industry-academia collaboration catalyzes economic development and job creation by fostering innovation ecosystems and entrepreneurial ecosystems. By nurturing a culture of entrepreneurship and innovation within academic institutions and surrounding communities, it stimulates the formation of startups, spin-offs, and small and medium enterprises (SMEs), which are vital engines of economic growth and job creation, particularly in developing countries (Chesbrough, 2003).

Skill-Based Training Programs as an innovative skill towards poverty eradication

Skill-based training programs hold significant promise as innovative tools for poverty eradication in Rivers State, Nigeria. With its diverse population and rich natural resources, Rivers State presents both opportunities and challenges for socioeconomic development. Skill-

based training programs aim to equip individuals with the technical, vocational, and entrepreneurial skills needed to secure employment, start businesses, and contribute to economic growth. In the context of Rivers State, where unemployment and underemployment rates are significant challenges, such programs can play a crucial role in empowering individuals and communities to overcome poverty (Adisa et al., 2018).

One of the key benefits of skill-based training programs is their ability to address the skills gap in the labor market by providing training in high-demand sectors such as agriculture, construction, hospitality, and information technology. By aligning training programs with the needs of local industries and employers, stakeholders can ensure that participants acquire relevant skills that enhance their employability and income-earning potential (Aremu & Adeyemi, 2011). Skill-based training programs contribute to the diversification of the economy by promoting entrepreneurship and self-employment opportunities. In Rivers State, where the oil and gas sector dominates the economy, fostering entrepreneurship in non-oil sectors is essential for creating alternative pathways to prosperity, reducing dependency on volatile commodity prices, and promoting inclusive growth (Nkang & Bassey, 2016).

Importantly, skill-based training programs have the potential to empower marginalized groups, including women, youth, and persons with disabilities, who are disproportionately affected by poverty and unemployment. By providing targeted training and support services, these programs can enhance the economic participation and social inclusion of marginalized populations, thereby reducing inequality and promoting sustainable development (Ogbonna & Ahaiwe, 2020).

Furthermore, skill-based training programs contribute to human capital development by improving participants' productivity, creativity, and problem-solving abilities. In Rivers State, where access to quality education and training opportunities is limited in many rural and underserved communities, investing in skills development is essential for unlocking human potential and fostering sustainable development (Okafor & Okafor, 2019). Skill-based training programs represent a promising avenue for poverty eradication in Rivers State, Nigeria. By equipping individuals with the skills, knowledge, and resources needed to succeed in the labor market and entrepreneurial ventures, these programs can empower communities, promote economic diversification, and foster inclusive growth. However, realizing the full potential of skill-based training programs requires coordinated efforts from government, civil society, and the private sector to ensure access to quality training, support services, and opportunities for all residents of Rivers State.

Research and Innovation Hubs as an innovative skills towards poverty eradication

Research and innovation hubs have emerged as dynamic platforms for fostering skills development, entrepreneurship, and economic growth, with the potential to significantly contribute to poverty eradication. In reviewing the literature on research and innovation hubs, several key themes and insights emerge.

Firstly, research and innovation hubs serve as focal points for collaboration between academia, industry, government, and civil society. By bringing together diverse stakeholders with complementary expertise, resources, and perspectives, these hubs create synergies that drive innovation and address complex societal challenges (Carayannis & Campbell, 2009). Such collaborative ecosystems are essential for bridging the gap between research and practice,

ensuring that innovative solutions are not only developed but also effectively implemented to benefit communities.

Secondly, research and innovation hubs play a crucial role in skills development and capacity building. Through training programs, workshops, and mentorship initiatives, these hubs provide individuals with the knowledge, tools, and networks needed to succeed in the innovation economy (Etzkowitz et al., 2000). By equipping people with relevant skills in areas such as technology, entrepreneurship, and problem-solving, research and innovation hubs empower them to create sustainable livelihoods and break the cycle of poverty.

Furthermore, research and innovation hubs contribute to economic development by fostering the commercialization of research outputs and the growth of innovative startups and SMEs. By providing access to funding, infrastructure, and expertise, these hubs enable researchers and entrepreneurs to translate their ideas into market-ready products and services (Chesbrough, 2003). In doing so, they stimulate job creation, attract investment, and promote inclusive growth, particularly in regions where poverty is prevalent.

Research and innovation hubs represent a promising approach to poverty eradication, leveraging the power of collaboration, skills development, and entrepreneurship to create inclusive and sustainable growth. By fostering vibrant ecosystems where ideas thrive and talents flourish, these hubs empower individuals and communities to realize their full potential and build a brighter future for themselves and future generations.

Conclusion

Accelerating innovative skills in the management of university education presents a promising pathway towards poverty eradication in Rivers State, Nigeria. By fostering a culture of adaptability, embracing technological advancements, and promoting collaboration between academia and industry, universities can equip students with the skills and knowledge necessary to drive economic growth and social development. Through initiatives such as entrepreneurship education, vocational training programs, and research partnerships, universities can empower individuals to create sustainable livelihoods, foster innovation, and contribute to poverty alleviation efforts in Rivers State. As universities continue to prioritize innovation in education management, they play a pivotal role in shaping a brighter future for communities across Rivers State, paving the way for inclusive prosperity and sustainable development.

Suggestions

1. Stakeholder should foster collaboration between universities, government agencies, NGOs, and industry stakeholders to develop comprehensive strategies for accelerating innovative skills in education management.
2. University administrators should implement capacity building programs for university administrators, faculty, and staff to enhance their competencies in innovative education management practices.
3. University administrators should establish innovation hubs or incubators within universities to provide students with opportunities for hands-on experience in developing innovative solutions to real-world challenges.

4. University administrators should advocate for policy reforms at the regional and national levels to create an enabling environment for innovation in education management. This may involve advocating for incentives, regulatory frameworks, and institutional support systems that incentivize and facilitate innovation adoption within universities.

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