

Co-Operative Occupational Education: A Tool for Preparing the Nigerian Youth for Employment in Agriculture

M.G. Olujide

Department of Agricultural Extension and Rural Development,
University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria

Abstract: This study looks at the concept of cooperative occupational education and its needs in Nigeria. It also examined the justifications for cooperative occupation experience programme, need for cooperation between the school and the employers and how best to plan, execute and evaluate cooperative occupation education programmes in Nigeria. It highlighted the need and significance of partnership between industry and education for the purpose of generating an essential skilled work force for Nigeria. It revealed that, vocationally oriented classrooms instruction coupled with a well planned cooperative occupational experience programme will go a long way in preparing the Nigerian youth for entry and advancement in agricultural and related occupations thereby reducing the drop-out, unemployment rates and also making the Nigerian youth marketable in the world of work.

Key words: Co-operative, education, youth, employment, agricultural occupations

INTRODUCTION

The concept of co-operative occupational education has not received enough emphasis in the Nigerian educational system. Agriculture teaching in Nigerian schools and colleges is primarily limited to classroom instructions with little or no emphasis on 'hands-on' experience in agricultural establishments (Olujide, 1991). There is no provision for an independent combination of vocational instruction and regular part-time employment in work-related to that instruction and to the students' career objective. In other words, agriculture students are not realistically prepared for employment in agriculture and other occupations. Doubtless enough, the so-called work experience programmes in which the students are seldomly involved, have not been successful in preparing the students properly for entry and advancement into occupations of their choice. In the first place, only a handful of employers are interested in employing students, unless such students are their relations. Otherwise these employers prefer employing experienced low-income workers as a means of maximizing their profits.

Apart from the fact that only a few privileged students benefit from the work experience programmes in Nigeria, the programmes have no training value to the students in that they are hired as producing workers and not as learning workers. Most of the time, they are employed in those occupations, which have no relationship with their classroom activities. The students

are only interested in earning money during the long vacation in order to purchase textbooks and other school equipment.

Co-operative occupational experience could be seen as a pretty good method of instruction, because apart from the fact that it uses the laboratory experience of a real-life setting to make the instruction relevant, it encourages the student to remain in school and increase his vocational competency.

Cooperative Occupational Education is an instructional programme, which combines learning experiences, gained through regularly supervised employment in the community and related occupation in-school instruction. The employing community serves as a laboratory where students have an opportunity to learn the principles and practices of an occupation in an actual situation. Cooperative occupational education is a general term used to describe various types of cooperative programmes specifically designed to prepare youth for occupations in proportion to the distribution of employment and career opportunities.

It is important to note that there have been some gradual changes in the world of work. These changes no doubt have affected the agricultural industries as well as other industries. Scientific and technological advances and increased knowledge have resulted to increasing demand for broad based work experience programmes in all areas of vocational agricultural education. The agricultural industries In Nigeria have been expanding

and taking new dimensions for a couple of years now. As a result of this, vocational agriculture has the responsibility of preparing people especially the youth for gainful employment in the total agriculture industry. The off-farm agricultural occupations recently have become an important means of livelihood for many people. The preparation of students in these occupations calls for appropriate occupational experience programmes. This means that a type of employer-employee relationship in providing the essential occupational experience part of the instructional programme is essential. To this end, there should be a new kind of working relationship between the school, the off-farm agricultural businesses, industries, the students and their parents which must be developed for the instructional programmes to be successful.

The problem of this paper therefore, is to address the issue of new cooperative occupational education could be effectively developed, integrated and utilized for promoting job opportunities among the Nigerian youths.

NEED FOR COOPERATIVE OCCUPATIONAL EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

Learning can be defined as a change of behaviour as a result of experience. In Nigerian labour market today, much emphasis is placed on experience. Because high school and university graduates have no opportunity to gain experience while they are in school, they spend many years on the job before gaining experience. Experience gained by potential workers while out of training, cannot be compared with the experience gained by workers while in training. In the first place little learning takes place when what is learned is not put into practice. We tend to retain those activities, which we put into practice and tend to forget those things not put into practice. There is, therefore, a need for cooperative occupational experience programme in the total educational system of Nigeria-a programme that integrates theory with practice that is, classroom instruction and on the job activity. The Cooperative Occupational Education focuses on learning by doing, which is achieved through supervised employment. It is through employment that students experience the results of learning and see the transfer of knowledge and skill. It is evident that as long as the teaching of agriculture in Nigeria is not interdependently integrated with regular supervised part-time employment in work related to in-school instruction, the Nigerian schools will continue to produce students who are not adequately prepared for employment in occupations that are in harmony with their career objectives. We need this method of instruction in order to prepare our youth realistically for employment.

One of the problems facing Nigeria today is the problem of unemployment. Each year thousands of youth graduate from high schools and university and migrate into the cities in search of non-existent white-collar jobs. The development of 'off-farm' agricultural education in response to changing demands of rural employment community is fostering the acceptance of cooperative vocational education. Adapting cooperative programme to the needs of the agricultural education student and to the employment community in which he will carve out a career, presents a big challenge to the vocational agriculture teacher. The teacher should help the student plan experiences in business, on the farm, at home, in agricultural agencies, at school, or in combination of situations that is best for each student. This will help prepare the student for the world of work.

The cost of living is rapidly rising in Nigeria and people find it extremely difficult to live on their subminimal incomes. The cooperative occupational experience programme, apart from increasing a student's vocational competency while he is in school, will provide the student with the opportunity to earn money as a learning worker in a training station.

There are series of occupations in the world of work, which are best learned through cooperative vocational education. Such occupations if learned without experiences on the job leaves the student inadequately prepared for employment in the occupation of his choice. The best way to expand the curriculum in the Nigerian schools, colleges and universities is to use the cooperative occupational experience method. There is no way to provide in-depth instruction in the classroom without on the job training.

However, the success of cooperative occupational experience programme depends on the type of relationship existing between the school and the training stations. The term cooperative implies an integration of vocationally classroom instruction with progressive on-the-job learning experiences, which are consistent with the students' career objectives. This call for a healthy working relationship between school and business in preparing students for employment. Students enrolled in the cooperative occupational experience programme spend part of their school day in gaining career experience with local agricultural firms when they are not involved in regular school classes. The vocational agriculture teacher is the coordinator of the programme. Some of the training plans, which could be developed by the Nigerian schools, may include nursery employee, assistant swine herdsman, assistant beef herdsman, irrigation equipment employee, etc. The employer, the student and the teacher coordinator jointly select the competences to be included in the students' training programme-which competences

to be developed in the classroom and which can be developed on the job. The care with which the training plan is developed will largely determine the educational significance of the cooperative occupational experience programme.

One problem that could be envisaged in setting up cooperative occupational experience programme in Nigeria is that there are so few training stations in Nigeria that they can not absorb all the students enrolled in Vocational Agriculture. Only a few students will benefit from the programme if it were to operate. Again an employer may view the student essentially as a part-time worker and expects productivity and effective work performance, thereby neglecting the educational value of the programme. The Nigerian business employers, as profit minded as they are, may tend to disagree with the students' parents who might expect the programme to have educational significance and the student to receive specific training, academic credit, varied and interesting assignments, helpful supervision and experience that would lead to further training. There is therefore, a need to educate the employers on the educative significance of the cooperative occupational experience programme. Foreign assistance from the United States, World Bank and other donor agencies may be necessary to help Nigerian educators and employers plan, implement and evaluate the programme at least for a couple of years before the running of the programme could be left in the hands of Nigerians. There is no doubt that Nigeria will be able to manage this programme if the school, the training stations and the parents recognize the respective role they should play in the programme.

PLANNING AND EVALUATION OF COOPERATIVE OCCUPATIONAL EXPERIENCE PROGRAMME PLANNING

Since the Nigerian youth want relevant education, the Nigerian government should make cooperative education a priority in vocational agricultural education. This type of programme may work if the following plan is implemented:

- The employers, the students and the programme coordinators should enter into a training agreement, which is jointly developed by them.
- The training sponsors who are really experienced on the job should supervise the programme. Supervision is very important in the cooperative education. Eicken (1973) identified two main kinds of supervision which exist in agricultural experience programme.

“Paper supervision, a pseudo supervisory educational process and the more desirable one which is planned visits involving the educator with the individual at a particular agricultural business, at a land laboratory or a farm or at a home of an urban student”.

For this programme to be successful the latter should apply in the Nigerian situation.

- The programme should be integrated with guidance services to resist students in making realistic occupational choices, which are in harmony with their interests and abilities. This is done through providing the students with information about the world of work and giving the students diagnostic tests.
- Based on their occupational choices, the students should have realistic career objective, which would be met in the programme.
- Students' selection for the Cooperative Occupational Education programme is not an easy task. Teacher coordinators recognizing this fact should try as much as possible to select students on the basis of needs, interests and ability for them to benefit from the programme.
- Competent vocational agricultural teachers should be trained to teach the in-school phase of the Cooperative Occupational Education programme.
- Advisory committees should be set at Federal, State and local levels, to advise educators on vocational agricultural programmes.
- The Young Farmers Club and other related clubs should be recognized as an educative component of the programme.
- The training stations should give maximum cooperation in the programme by complying with the educational laws.
- The students should receive adequate salary as a learning worker and academic credit for the job done during their training.
- Improvement projects should supplement occupational experience programme.

EVALUATION

Evaluation is an important component of Cooperative Occupational Education (COE) Programme. It needs to be done in order to improve the programme based on specified objectives. Professional organizations responsible for the evaluation should establish the criteria for both product and process evaluation. Such criteria

should be based on the programme characteristics and student outcomes as a yardstick in measuring the programme objectives. Evaluation also provides a good door opener for supervisory visitations by the instructor.

CONCLUSION

Nigeria should incorporate the cooperative occupational experience method in the teaching of agriculture. The importance of experience programme in the teaching of agriculture cannot be over-emphasized. Without occupational experience programme, vocational agriculture, no doubt will likely evolve to a bookish mere classroom-only experience with abstract application. Occupational experience programme are the key for making vocational agriculture in the real sense of the word.

Success in the programme calls for mutual understanding and cooperation among the school agriculture instructors, parents of students, the school staff, employers and programme sponsors, each recognizing his/ her role in the programme. The key to good educational programme is the instructor and the key to good supervised agricultural experience programme is also the instructor. For him to be effective, he must understand and cooperate with the school system and the community. The Nigerian teacher should be educated to recognize the value of cooperative occupational experience programme, so that he will accept his basic

responsibility to develop sound teaching-learning situations which take into account the needs and abilities of the students with regard to their vocational aspirations. He should emphasize the importance of theory and practice in the learning process and the desirability of having them experienced together so that they can contribute to each other in bringing about the desired learning.

Vocationally-oriented classroom instruction coupled with a well planned cooperative occupational experience programme will go a long way in preparing the Nigerian youth for entry and advancement in agricultural and related occupations thereby reducing the drop-out and unemployment rates. It will also make Nigerian youth marketable in the world of work.

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