

YOUTH DISILLUSIONMENT WITH EDUCATION IN NIGERIA: UNPACKING THE 'EDUCATION IS A SCAM' SLOGAN AND PROPOSING REMEDIAL MEASURES

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Abstract

Disillusionment refers to a feeling of disappointment or loss of faith in something once believed to be true, promising, or ideal. It occurs when a person becomes aware that the reality of a situation, person, or belief system does not meet their expectations or ideals. This can lead to a sense of betrayal, confusion, or sadness, as the individual realizes that their previously held views or hopes were unrealistic, flawed, or deceptive. The slogan “education is a scam” has gained traction among Nigerian youth, signaling a profound disillusionment with the nation’s formal education system. This article examines the underlying causes of this growing sentiment, including graduate unemployment, curriculum-labor market mismatch, systemic corruption, and the deteriorating quality of education. Anchored in the Expectancy-Value Theory, the paper critically examines how these challenges diminish the perceived value of education among youth. The study proposes remedial measures such as curriculum reform, promotion of vocational and technical education, employment transparency, and values-based learning to restore trust and reposition education as a credible vehicle for personal and national development.

Keywords: Education, Youth, Nigeria, Disillusionment, ‘Education is a Scam’ Slogan

Introduction

Education is globally recognized as a fundamental instrument for personal empowerment and national development. It is a vital pathway through which societies equip citizens with the skills, knowledge, and values necessary to contribute meaningfully to socioeconomic advancement. In Nigeria, successive governments have emphasized education as a cornerstone of national transformation. However, despite policy efforts and increased enrollment rates, many young Nigerians are becoming increasingly disillusioned with the formal education system. This discontent is now commonly captured in the phrase, “education is a scam” a slogan that reflects a broader societal crisis. The origins of this perception can be traced to persistent structural and systemic failures. For many Nigerian youths, the reality of prolonged unemployment after graduation, the poor quality of teaching and learning environments, and the prevalence of nepotism in job recruitment processes contradict the promises traditionally associated with education (Akinyemi & Abiodun, 2021; Obasi, 2020). Instead of serving as a ladder to upward mobility, education is often seen as a prolonged and expensive investment with limited returns. As a result, the younger generation increasingly questions the relevance and worth of schooling, particularly in a society where social connections and political affiliations appear to outweigh academic merit (Eze, 2022).

The rise of this skeptical narrative coincides with broader economic challenges. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2023), Nigeria’s youth unemployment rate remains

alarmingly high, with over 40% of university graduates unable to secure gainful employment within five years of graduation. This harsh reality, compounded by inflation, currency instability, and declining public sector capacity, has significantly eroded the perceived value of education as a tool for securing a stable future (Adebayo & Ibrahim, 2021). Furthermore, the educational content delivered in Nigerian schools often lacks alignment with the realities of the job market. Curricula are frequently outdated, and disconnected from practical skills needed in today's knowledge-driven economy (Eze, 2022). Inadequate exposure to digital tools, entrepreneurship training, and vocational skills limits graduates' adaptability in a competitive labor market, thus reinforcing feelings of disappointment and betrayal.

Beyond economic factors, the quality of education delivery has also contributed to the problem. Public schools are often under-resourced, overcrowded, and lacking qualified personnel, leading to a substandard learning experience (Omorie, 2021). In turn, many youths—especially those from lower socio-economic backgrounds—are unable to access the quality education needed to compete effectively in the labour market. This article, therefore, seeks to unpack the socio-economic and institutional factors underpinning the "education is a scam" slogan. It aims to provide a scholarly interrogation of this growing youth disillusionment, using relevant theoretical lenses and propose practical remedial measures that can restore faith in the Nigerian education system and reorient it towards relevance, equity, and sustainability.

Statement of the Problem

Education, long regarded as a passport to a better future, is increasingly being viewed with skepticism by Nigerian youth. This shift in perception is dramatically captured in the slogan "education is a scam," which has become a popular refrain across social media platforms and among graduates facing economic and professional stagnation. The widespread adoption of this slogan signals a deeper societal malaise: the erosion of confidence in the education system as a vehicle for socioeconomic mobility and personal development (Obasi, 2020). The disillusionment stems from a glaring contradiction between the promise of education and the lived experiences of young Nigerians. While formal education is promoted as a means to employment, innovation, and societal contribution, a growing number of graduates find themselves jobless, underemployed, or forced into informal sectors unrelated to their academic qualifications (Akinyemi & Abiodun, 2021). The National Bureau of Statistics (2023) reports that over 40% of Nigerian youth—many of whom hold university degrees—are unemployed or underemployed, creating widespread frustration and discontent.

In addition, the curriculum offered in many Nigerian institutions remains largely theoretical and disconnected from the realities of the modern labor market (Eze, 2022). This mismatch contributes to the production of graduates who are ill-prepared to meet contemporary industry demands or to engage in entrepreneurial ventures. At the same time, the deteriorating quality of teaching, inadequate infrastructure, and declining funding for public education further reduce the value and appeal of schooling, especially for students from marginalized backgrounds (Omorie, 2021). Moreover, systemic corruption and nepotism in job recruitment further fuel the perception that academic achievement is no longer a reliable pathway to success. The belief that social connections, political affiliations, or even illicit activities offer more lucrative opportunities than education undermines the motivation to pursue academic excellence (Adebayo & Ibrahim, 2021). Despite numerous education reform policies and government interventions, the gap between academic credentials and economic empowerment continues to widen. If left unaddressed, this disillusionment may not only lead to reduced school enrollment and increased dropout rates but also intensify youth frustration, social unrest, and brain drain. Hence, there is an urgent need to

interrogate the socio-economic and institutional factors contributing to this disillusionment and propose evidence-based solutions to revitalize education as a viable path to individual and national development.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Expectancy-Value Theory (EVT), developed by Eccles and Wigfield (2002), and the theory posits that individuals' motivation to engage in a task is determined by two key components: their expectation of success and the value they place on the task. This theory helps explain why students choose to persist or disengage from academic pursuits. According to EVT, if students perceive that their academic efforts are unlikely to yield success or are not valuable for achieving their long-term goals, their motivation diminishes. In Nigerian setting, the relevance of EVT becomes especially apparent when analyzing the growing disillusionment among youth toward education. Many students and graduates no longer perceive education as a reliable route to socio-economic advancement. The expectation of success—defined in terms of gaining meaningful employment, achieving financial independence, or social status—is consistently unmet for many Nigerian youths, even after obtaining university degrees (Akinyemi & Abiodun, 2021). Consequently, their perceived value of education deteriorates, making slogans like “education is a scam” a collective expression of declining educational motivation and perceived utility. Furthermore, EVT emphasizes the role of cost—a sub-component of task value—which includes factors such as effort required, emotional toll, and opportunity cost. In Nigeria, the high financial and emotional burden associated with acquiring education, coupled with the uncertainty of outcomes, makes the cost of schooling increasingly unjustifiable to many youths (Obasi, 2020). When students begin to question the return on educational investment in light of prevailing unemployment and underemployment, their likelihood of disengagement increases.

The theory also highlights social and cultural influences, such as parental expectations, peer opinions, and societal norms, which shape an individual's value assignment to education. In a society where, alternative routes to success—such as social media fame, fraud, or political patronage—are often glorified, formal education begins to lose its appeal. This shift in societal values further reinforces the perception that education is no longer essential for success. By applying EVT, this study provides a psychological and motivational lens to understand youth disillusionment with education in Nigeria. It moves beyond structural and economic explanations to consider how perceptions, beliefs, and social environments influence the value youth attach to formal education. Understanding these motivational dynamics is crucial for designing interventions that can re-establish positive educational expectations and values among Nigerian youth.

Factors Fueling the “Education is a Scam” Narrative

The pervasive sentiment among Nigerian youth that “education is a scam” is not merely a reactionary slogan, but a reflection of deeper systemic and socio-economic challenges. Several factors contribute to this growing disillusionment with the educational system, leading many to question its relevance and efficacy in addressing their personal and professional aspirations.

1. *High Unemployment and Underemployment Rates:* One of the most significant factors contributing to the "education is a scam" narrative is the glaring disconnect between academic qualifications and job opportunities. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2023), Nigeria's unemployment rate stands at an alarming 40%, with youth

unemployment being even more pronounced. Many university graduates are unable to secure jobs in their field of study, which contributes to the belief that education offers little return on investment. Graduates often find themselves either unemployed or working in low-paying jobs unrelated to their qualifications (Akinyemi & Abiodun, 2021). This mismatch fuels the perception that education is no longer a guarantee of success, rendering it a "scam" in the eyes of many young Nigerians.

2. *Inadequate Job Creation and Economic Opportunities:* Despite the large number of educated youths, Nigeria's economy has been unable to absorb this expanding labor force. This is largely due to insufficient economic diversification, reliance on oil exports, and inadequate infrastructure to support industries capable of providing jobs for graduates (Obasi, 2020). As a result, many graduates find themselves in a competitive job market where job openings are limited, and those available often do not require a university degree. The lack of job creation coupled with a sluggish economy exacerbates the belief that formal education no longer holds the power to propel individuals toward financial independence or career fulfillment.
3. *Theoretical vs. Practical Knowledge:* Another major driver of the "education is a scam" sentiment is the gap between the theoretical nature of Nigerian education and the practical skills required by the labour market. The education system in Nigeria remains largely traditional, with a heavy emphasis on rote learning and theoretical knowledge, often disconnected from the demands of modern industries (Eze, 2022). Many students graduate without the necessary technical, entrepreneurial, or soft skills to thrive in the workplace. This inadequacy leads to frustration among graduates, who are ill-prepared for real-world challenges and unable to meet the evolving needs of employers. When education fails to equip them with relevant skills, students may view the entire system as ineffective and deceptive.
4. *Corruption and Nepotism in the Job Market:* The widespread corruption and nepotism in Nigeria's public and private sectors further fuel the "education is a scam" narrative. In many cases, graduates find that their academic credentials alone are insufficient to secure jobs. Instead, opportunities are often awarded based on political connections, familial ties, or bribery, rather than merit and competence (Adebayo & Ibrahim, 2021). This corrupt system undermines the fundamental value of education as a means to achieve upward social mobility. For many youths, the perception that success depends more on connections than academic performance diminishes their motivation to pursue education, contributing to the growing sentiment that education offers little real value.
5. *The Influence of Social Media and Alternative Success Models:* Social media platforms have played a crucial role in shaping the mindset of Nigerian youth. Influencers, celebrities, and online entrepreneurs often project images of wealth and success achieved through means other than formal education. These figures, sometimes associated with unorthodox methods of success, such as internet fraud or social media fame, present an alternative narrative to the traditional value of education (Okafor & Igbokwe, 2021). For many young people, the rapid success stories of online personalities provide a more attractive and seemingly more achievable path to wealth and recognition than traditional education. This shift in focus from academic achievement to instant success reinforces the idea that education is irrelevant or even misleading in today's world.
6. *Infrastructural Deficiencies and Poor Quality of Education:* The deteriorating state of Nigeria's educational infrastructure also contributes significantly to the disillusionment among youth. Many public schools and universities suffer from inadequate facilities,

poorly equipped classrooms, outdated learning materials, and understaffing (Omoregie, 2021). These infrastructural challenges result in substandard educational experiences, leaving students feeling ill-prepared for the challenges of the job market. Poor-quality education, combined with rising tuition fees in private institutions, fuels the perception that the system is broken, and that the time, money, and energy invested in education do not lead to tangible benefits.

7. *Political Instability and Governance Failures*: The broader political and governance challenges in Nigeria also exacerbate the "education is a scam" narrative. Political instability, frequent changes in government, and inconsistent education policies have hindered the growth and development of the education sector (Ajayi, 2019). Prolonged strikes by university lecturers, the mismanagement of funds allocated to education, and a lack of coherent policy direction have eroded trust in the government's ability to provide quality education. The sense of neglect and abandonment by the state leads many young people to question the value of investing in an education system that appears to be in disarray.

Consequences of Youth Disillusionment with Education in Nigeria

The growing disillusionment among Nigerian youth toward education has far-reaching implications for individuals, communities, and the broader socio-economic fabric of the nation. When a significant portion of the youth population perceives education as ineffective or irrelevant, it undermines not only the value of learning but also the nation's developmental trajectory.

1. *Rising Unemployment and Underemployment*: One of the immediate consequences of youth disillusionment is the withdrawal from formal education and the job market. Many young people either drop out of school or graduate with little motivation to pursue jobs within their fields of study, especially when such jobs are scarce or poorly remunerated. This disinterest exacerbates already high unemployment and underemployment rates, as educated but disillusioned youth either remain idle or take on low-skilled jobs unrelated to their qualifications.
2. *Proliferation of Social Vices*: When education loses its appeal as a pathway to success, alternative—often unethical—routes become more attractive. Youths who feel betrayed by the education system may resort to crime, internet fraud (commonly referred to as "Yahoo Yahoo"), drug abuse, cultism, and other forms of deviant behavior. These activities offer quick but unsustainable rewards, further diminishing the incentive for honest, education-driven livelihoods.
3. *Brain Drain and Mass Migration*: Many Nigerian graduates, frustrated by the lack of local opportunities, seek better prospects abroad, contributing to the ongoing "Japa" syndrome—a term used locally to describe mass migration. This brain drain results in the loss of skilled human capital, which could have contributed to national development if retained within the country. This exodus also reflects a loss of faith in the nation's socio-economic system and educational return on investment. However, addressing this issue requires a comprehensive strategy focused on improving the working conditions, remuneration, and opportunities for professional development in Nigeria's higher education sector.
4. *Decline in Educational Standards and Enrolment*: Persistent disillusionment can lead to a cyclical decline in educational quality and interest. As youth disengage from formal schooling, enrolment rates may drop, especially in tertiary institutions. Additionally, motivated students and teachers may become disheartened, leading to reduced academic

performance and deteriorating institutional standards. A weakened education system in turn produces graduates with limited skills, further validating the negative perceptions.

5. *Erosion of National Values and Civic Responsibility*: Education is central to nation-building and the transmission of civic values such as discipline, honesty, responsibility, and patriotism. Disillusionment weakens these moral foundations. When youth perceive education as irrelevant or corrupt, they are less likely to respect national institutions or engage positively in civic life. This contributes to increased political apathy, voter apathy, and mistrust in democratic processes.

Proposed Remedial Measures to Address Youth Disillusionment with Education in Nigeria

To combat the rising disillusionment among Nigerian youth with the education system and counter the growing sentiment that "education is a scam," comprehensive and strategic interventions are needed. These measures should aim to align educational outcomes with the socio-economic realities of the country, restore faith in the value of education, and equip youth with the skills necessary to succeed in a rapidly changing world.

1. *Curriculum Reform to Focus on Skill Acquisition*: One of the key reforms needed is a revamp of the Nigerian curriculum, moving from the traditional focus on theoretical knowledge to a more practical, skills-based education. This includes integrating vocational training, entrepreneurship education, and technical skills into both secondary and tertiary education programs. According to Eze (2022), bridging the gap between what is taught in schools and the demands of the labor market is crucial for improving graduate employability. By emphasizing hands-on experience, critical thinking, and problem-solving, education can become more relevant and practical, offering students the tools to create their own opportunities, rather than relying solely on traditional employment.
2. *Public-Private Sector Collaboration*: A robust partnership between the government and private sector can help bridge the gap between education and employment. Private companies, particularly those in tech, finance, and manufacturing sectors, should be encouraged to collaborate with educational institutions to design programs that are aligned with industry needs. Internships, apprenticeships, and mentorship programs should become a standard feature of the educational process, allowing students to gain real-world experience and insights into the demands of the workforce. These collaborations can also ensure that students are prepared for current market trends, which are often overlooked in the classroom.
3. *Improving Educational Infrastructure and Quality*: The state of Nigeria's educational infrastructure must be improved to provide a conducive learning environment. Adequate funding should be directed towards the rehabilitation of dilapidated facilities, upgrading educational technology, and enhancing the training of teachers. This includes providing internet access, e-learning platforms, and interactive learning materials to modernize the classroom experience (Omorie, 2021). Additionally, policies aimed at addressing the high dropout rates in secondary and tertiary education, especially in public schools, must be prioritized. These improvements can restore students' faith in the education system and ensure they receive the best possible preparation for the workforce.
4. *Promoting Vocational and Technical Education*: To reduce the over-dependence on university degrees and encourage alternative career paths, vocational and technical education should be promoted. Vocational institutions should be equipped with modern tools and technologies to provide students with marketable skills in trades such as construction, plumbing, electrical engineering, and software development. Encouraging the

youth to pursue these pathways can provide practical avenues for gainful employment and reduce the pressure on universities to absorb all graduates seeking employment (Ajayi, 2019). Incentives such as financial support, grants, or guaranteed employment in the public or private sector should be offered to students pursuing technical courses.

5. *Addressing Corruption and Inequity in the Job Market:* For the education system to regain its value, the Nigerian job market must become more meritocratic. The government must take decisive steps to combat corruption, favoritism, and nepotism in recruitment processes. This involves the implementation of transparent and accountable hiring practices, with clear criteria for job selection that prioritize skills and qualifications over political or familial connections. Establishing independent bodies to oversee recruitment in public institutions and enforcing strict penalties for corruption would foster trust in the system and encourage youth to view education as a viable means of upward social mobility.
6. *Youth Empowerment and Financial Support Programs:* Creating and expanding youth empowerment programs that provide financial support for small businesses, startups, and self-employment initiatives is essential for revitalizing the education system. Government-backed loan programs and grants can provide financial resources for graduates who wish to pursue entrepreneurial ventures, reducing their reliance on formal employment. Additionally, mentorship and training on business management, financial literacy, and innovation should be integrated into education to equip young people with the tools to succeed independently (Obasi, 2020). Supporting entrepreneurial education can foster a culture of self-reliance and resourcefulness among the youth.
7. *Encouraging Lifelong Learning and Continuous Development:* The notion that education ends with a degree must be challenged. The changing dynamics of the global economy require continuous learning and development. Therefore, initiatives aimed at promoting lifelong learning should be emphasized, with a focus on online courses, certifications, and professional development opportunities. This will allow young people to remain competitive in a fast-paced, ever-evolving job market. Encouraging youth to take ownership of their learning beyond formal schooling will also help combat the perception that education is a one-time event with limited returns.
8. *Public Awareness Campaigns and Education Advocacy:* To change the prevailing narrative around education, comprehensive public awareness campaigns should be launched to highlight the long-term benefits of education, especially in an increasingly globalized world. These campaigns should address the misconceptions surrounding the worth of education by showcasing successful role models who have benefited from education despite initial challenges. By promoting positive stories and exposing the realities of non-educated pathways, the public perception of education can be shifted toward a more favorable view.

Conclusion

The pervasive belief among Nigerian youth that “education is a scam” reflects deeper systemic issues within the country’s educational and economic structures. High unemployment rates, a mismatch between education and job market demands, and pervasive corruption all contribute to the growing disillusionment with formal education. However, addressing these challenges is not insurmountable. By undertaking targeted reforms, such as updating curricula to emphasize practical skills, improving educational infrastructure, promoting vocational training, and fostering public-private sector collaboration, the Nigerian education system can better align with the realities of the modern job market. Additionally, combatting nepotism and corruption in

employment practices, while encouraging entrepreneurship and lifelong learning, can help restore trust in education as a valuable tool for personal and societal advancement.

Youth disillusionment should not be viewed as a defeatist stance, but rather as a call to action for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders to critically assess and transform the education system. By creating more opportunities for youth to acquire relevant skills and secure meaningful employment, education can once again become a gateway to success and a source of empowerment. For Nigerian youth to truly benefit from education, a concerted effort is required to create an environment where education is seen not only as a path to employment but as a means of personal and national growth.

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