

## **Managing Higher Education for Sustainable Development in Nigeria: Implications for Policy Challenges**

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### **Abstract**

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, formal higher education has expanded very rapidly all over the world. Investment in human resource development has been considered to be a powerful metaphor for a healthy competition in the new world order for various reasons thus an increasing private demand for higher education. The view that education is a fundamental human right contributed to the rapid expansion. Special economic, social and political power attached to the positions given to graduates of higher education, attracted more and more students. There are economic and political reasons for the expansion of higher education. For all the countries, a university has been a symbol of national or regional prestige and this, too, has been responsible for the increasing number of universities around the world. In Nigeria since independence, various governments have spent substantial portion of their national budgets to develop education. Investments in this magnitude have been justified at all times as a means of producing rapidly the skilled manpower required for national development. This paper is concerned with the quality of universities in Nigeria. The main purpose is to show that the Nigerian university system is at the crossroad.

What is happening in Nigeria today is certainly widespread in Africa, but not necessarily universal. Three strong evaluative words: relevance, usefulness and identity from the thesis of the paper. The paper notes that universities in have not been particularly pertinent, serviceable and contemporary on consonance with the challenges of the new world order.

**Keywords:** development, education, higher education, Nigeria, universities

### **Introduction**

The history of higher education in Nigeria is closely associated with the formal opening of the Yaba Higher College in 1934. The college was set up to produce “assistance to the colonial personnel in varied fields such as Medicine, Engineering, Surveying and Teacher Education. Compared with the length of time required to complete a similar course at the university, the duration of courses at Yaba Higher College was unduely lengthy (some 7 years for medicine and 5 years for engineering). The work done there was of high quality. Proof of this was the performance of graduates of the college in their occupations and the ease with which they obtain higher qualifications if they had the opportunity for further studies.

The Diploma awarded at the college was unfortunately accorded inferior status compared to the university degree. The graduates were not appointed to seniors’ positions on the grounds that their qualifications were not equivalent to those awarded by universities in Britain. Whose still, the graduates were disappointed when denied admission to professional status. The Diploma did not qualify the graduates to sit for the external Degrees of either the university of London or Durham University.

The College was characterized with high-drop-out rate, repetition and inferior status. These made attendance at the College an unpleasant experience.

As the demand for self government was conceded after the second world war, enlightened opinion recognized the urgent need for university institutions to be set up to train the Nigerian personnel. This came into being the University College, Ibadan in 1962 just as Makerere University College in Uganda in 1946, Gordon College in Sudan in 1947 and the University College of the Gold Coast in 1948. The Ibadan

University College was set up by the British Colonial Government based on the recommendations of the Elliot Commission. At its inception in 1948, the University College, Ibadan inherited the staff and students of the Yaba Higher College. Courses offered at the college were in the Arts, Sciences and Medicine. Between 1984 and 1063, the University College prepared its students for degrees of the University of London as was recommended by the Ashby Commission. Until 1960, Ibadan University College remained the Nigeria's only university.

Under the Macpherson Constitution of 1954, the regional governments in Nigeria were granted greater autonomy. Higher education for instance was placed on the concurrent list. In 1955, Dr. Akanu Ibiam proposed a bill to set up a university in Eastern Nigeria. Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe championed the crusade and used his international connection and the Eastern Regional Assembly passed a bill to set up a university. This was not effected until November 1960 when the University of Nigeria Nsukka was formally opened. The university was founded in close association with the University of Michigan.

There was the Ashby Commission in 1960 headed by Sir (later Lord) Eric Ashby. The recommendations of the commission have been a profound influence on the structure of university programmes all over English speaking Africa but especially in Nigeria. Following the commission report, the universities of Lagos, Ife and Ahmadu Bellow were established in 1962, 1961 and 1962 respectively and the Ibadan University College was upgraded in 1963 to a full-fledged and autonomous university. These institutions departed from the previous pattern in several ways –they began from the outset as full-fledged universities awarding their own degrees, and offered courses in a diversity of disciplines relevant to the needs of the emerging independent nation.

In 1970, the Mid-West Institute of Technology at Benin was converted to the University of Benin. This marked the beginning of the “2<sup>nd</sup> general universities”. In the mid 1970s, four new universities at Calabar, Jos, Maiduguri and Sokoto and three university colleges at Ilorin, Kano and Port Harcourt were set up. The Colleges were upgraded to universities in 1977. Between 1980 and 1982, the Government approved the establishment of seven universities of Technology Bauchi, Makurdi and Owerri (1980), Akure and Yola (1981) and Abeokuta and Minna (1982). Abeokuta and Makurdi were in 1987 converted to Universities of Agriculture. And also between 1979

and 1984, the following state universities were established: Rivers State University of Science and Technology, Imo State University, Bendel State University, Ondo State University, Anambra State University, Ogun State University and Lagos State University.

As part of measures to ensure that qualified high level manpower was available at the nation's high school system, the Federal Government in 1982, directed that seven Colleges of Education located at Ondo, Owerri, Abaraka, Kano, Port Harcourt, Uyo and Zaria to run first Degree Programmes in Education. Kaduna Polytechnic was also granted the power to run Degree Programmes in Technical Education with effect from 1987. The Colleges at Uyo and Abaraka have since become universities. And in 1984, agree in principle to establish the University of Abuja. The institution has fully started.

Today, there is no less than 80 Degree awarding institutions including the Nigeria Defense Academy in Nigeria, preparing the new generation for survival in the 21st century.

### **Quantity versus quality**

By 1960, the highest seat of academic learning was the university college; Ibadan established in 1948. Before the end of 1960s, the harsh realities of independence began to manifest them. Political dissent started to emerge and was met with repression. Inter-ethnic rivalry and suspicion escalated to open internal conflict. There was a bloody civil war from 1967-70. Corruption, military coups, election malpractices and disregard for rule of law led to doubts in the minds of many. Regarding the Universities, political leaders soon discovered that they were very expensive institutions and governments began to wonder whether the high cost of maintaining them was justified in terms of returns to the nations. Politicians also turned their attention to the privileges and freedom which the universities were claiming and enjoying, especially as much of the criticism of the political class came from the university.

In the 1970s, the economic maladies, social pathologies and political vagaries escalated to a wider crisis. Many external and internal factors made Nigerian economy crippled. Inevitably as the crisis depends, financial allocations to universities were drastically cut and facilities began to deteriorate. Consequently, the quality of service, instruction, research and identity built up over the years could be sustained. This was the origin of qualitative decadence in Nigeria

universities. The size and complexity of universities today call for rapid and efficient methods of planning, communication and analysis of administrative function. The politicians only went ahead to create universities particularly the regional and state ones. The country at the, that juncture missed another opportunity of national integration at the highest intellectual level. Rather, what were amplified further following the regional universities were polarization, spatial injustice and social inequality. The situation is sad, sordid and sympathetic.

Worse still, universities sprung up at an incredible rate that no one gave thought to the development and evaluation of academic traditions, let alone the maintenance of the already not too high academic standards and integrity. Poorly staffed and poorly equipped, Nigerian universities have become veritable wooden towers, ready to go up in smoke and flames at the least provocation. Universities are created in name only, as institutions that cannot function.

The agony of Nigerian young men and women who yearly performed the ritual of the JAMB examination but are unable to secure a place in one of the many universities can hardly be expressed in words. There is no doubt that if there is proper planning, the five so called first generation universities could serve the university educational needs of the youths sound like a paradox and of course dramatic. But the reality of the situation is that Nigeria has universities that are victims of book famine, shortage of materials supplies, under-funding, under-staffing and worse still with poor structures and little or no facilities for research.

Because of the poor physical and intellectual state of the universities, new and disturbing development have emerged. There is a high attrition rate among staff often referred to as brain. The colleges of Medicine and Applied Sciences are the most affected. In the circumstance that follows, one may want to know the quality of instruction offered in these institutions: how have the universities created awareness in the individual; carry on a dialogue with those who generate the knowledge; enable individuals to create new knowledge. None of these tasks are simple. Even the dissemination function requires careful planning and forethought.

To be realistic about what actually happens in university settings in Nigeria today, what is being promoted is. At most, they are able to teach students to recognize concepts that typify common fields of endeavor and the terms that describe those concepts. Often the process

is boring and depends on memorization, routine, testing and review. The process can be “puffed up” and made to look prestigious because the university remains something of mastery to many in the public at large. But the function actually performed is routine treatment of common knowledge. For many university faculties, the only pedagogical technique and practice is memorization, rote learning, grammatization, ornamental meritocracy and little attention to the stimulation of students to be critical and creative for themselves and the society. The normal pattern is for the teachers to condense textual materials into notes that they either dictate or hand out and for the students to further abridge and crame them as thoroughly as possible in order to reproduce at exam pass.

There is dysfunctionalism in Nigerian universities. The universities lack relevance and identity. Undergraduates and post-graduate students demonstrate not only ignorance but also little or no inclination for basic research. They neither write good prose (literacy), discuss intelligently (articulacy), illustrate effectively (graphicacy) nor provide concrete proof of their analyses in figures and other numerical values (numeracy). So long as the graduates lack these skills, they are only but “educated illiterates and “urban villagers”. Considering the demands of the new world order in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, one wonders if there is any future for an illiterate society –certainly not in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, one wonders if there is any future for an illiterate society-certainly not in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Without any fear of contradiction, it is clear to note that quality has been sacrificed in the process of quantitative growth. The proliferation of universities is certainly functional and pseudo. Some of the universities fell into the trap of rapid expansion but without adequate planning. The abandoned project sage is yet an evidence of this assertion. As a result, rapid growth in enrollments led to much over crowding, recruitment of less-qualified teachers, and insufficient equipment and laboratory facilities for adequate operations. Furthermore, universities absorb most admitted students not into their choice of specialization.

This results in graduation of large number of students in field in which they are not interested. This is yet another dimension of the unfinished agenda.

### **Policy implications**

Education entails a recognition of the interdependence of people, the acquisition and cultivation of such virtues as caring for our fellow men, honesty, integrity, faithfulness, sympathy, thoughtfulness, trust and a healthy attitude towards work to mention only but a few. In its second National Development Plan, 1970-1974, Nigeria articulated a set of five national objectives. These means to build up:

- (a) A free and democratic society
- (b) A just and egalitarian society
- (c) A united, strong and self-reliant nation
- (d) A great and dynamic economy; and
- (e) A land of bright and full opportunity for all citizens

In order to realize these objectives, universities were made to aim at:

- (a) The acquisition, development and inculcation of paper value – orientation for the survival of the individual and society;
- (b) The development of the intellectual capacities of individuals to understand and appreciate their environments;
- (c) The acquisition of both physical and intellectual skills which will enable individuals to develop into useful members of the community;
- (d) The acquisition of an objective view of the local and external environments.

Universities are the apex of academic learning. The teaching and research functions should have important roles to play in national development. That apart, universities had been known in the Western world to be one of the best means for developing national consciousness. Clearly, the Nigerian universities have not lived up to either the traditional objectives or the aims as set out in the National Policy on Education. They have not been particularly effective in directing the nation to the path of truth and equity. If this were different then indiscipline, corruption, disorder, and unpatriotism should no longer be the bane of the Nigerian society particularly among leaders. Perhaps what universities in Nigeria seem to have succeeded in doing is the development of intellectual capacities of the individual but unfortunately not to understand and appreciate the environments rather, to exploit, cheat, and manipulate the environment for selfish purpose. The system has failed not only as a mechanism for westernization but also as an instrument for the identification, modification and codification of Nigerian cultural values. Consequently, universities have

been a disastrous clash of cultures. The products are neither Western nor Nigerian. Perhaps the western values have really been understood and appreciated while the local values are misunderstood, denigrated and sometimes discarded.

The 1962 UNESCO Tananarive Conference on the Development of Higher Education in Africa remarked the issues of reliance and identity as important factor in ensuring sustainable development through universities. The preamble of the Association of African Universities which followed the conference reads as follows.

*Conscious of the role of African Universities to maintain an adherence and loyalty to world academic standards, and to evolve over the years a pattern of higher education in service of Africa and its people, yet promoting a bond of kinship to the large human society”.*

The significant points in the preamble include:

- (i) The acceptance of the existence of a world standard; and
- (ii) The necessity to evolve a pattern suited to the need of Africa without disregarding the assumed world standards.

These are the challenges of universities in Nigeria as well. While it is, however, debatable whether there is indeed “universalistic ness” in the world standard of universities, we may wish to take refuge in Sir Eric Ashby’s remark that the African university should refurbish in the house of Western tradition and adapt their degree programme to fit the needs of the African society. But it must be noted that African universities cannot be engines of national development if their frame of reference is confined to local political predilections and ideologies as in the case of Tanzania particularly at the University of Dar-es-Salaam.

Nigeria universities should enhance sustainable development by intensifying and diversifying their programmes within the context of the needs of culture, society and economy without prejudice to intellectual training in basic sciences and liberal arts. There needs to be effective machinery for the identification of the manpower needs. The universities will enhance national development when the quality of their graduates is improved through consultations between them, the employers of labour and the government. This must be followed with proper funding and links with the industrial sector to facilitate research.

During the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is increasingly evident that the societies which will survive are those that recognize that knowledge and ideas are critical to development. Indeed, the keys to the future are embodied in ideas, in research, in knowledge which can be modified

and reorganized to improve the quality of life of the citizens as demonstrated in higher incomes, higher standards of education, better health and adequate nutrition. This is a challenge to universities.

In addition, as the enabling environment and the rules of the game for industrialization is dramatically changing, the pivot of development are but information technology, aerospace, electronics, materials science, chemical and pharmaceuticals and the biological develop through biotechnology. The science bases for sustainable development will be provide by biotechnology, communication technology and computers. The players in this emerging industrial world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be those countries that have invested in the necessary skills through research at the frontiers of Physics, Chemistry, and Biology and of Engineering through the instrumentality of qualitative education particularly post-graduate studies. In view of this, Nigeria should chose between encouraging the mad rush for university paper qualifications otherwise known as degrees and the proliferation of the institutions to award such degrees or make emphasis on the heart of the matter: “relevance, usefulness and identity to be part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century crusade for sustainable development in consonance with the new world order of globalization, differentiation and interdependence which is propelling the east Asian Miracle.

### **Summary and conclusion**

This paper is concerned with the quality of universities in Nigeria. The main purpose is to show that the Nigerian university system is at the crossroad. What is happening in Nigeria today is certainly widespread in Africa, but not necessarily universal. Three strong evaluative words: relevance, usefulness and identity from the thesis of the paper. The paper notes that universities in have not been particularly pertinent, serviceable and contemporary on consonance with the challenges of the new world order. The universities are in the throes of a major crisis, which has been brought on by economic recession, unchecked demand, and political *naiveté* about higher education functions. The paper resonates that the consequence is that the universities are bewildered with ornamental meritocracy, memorization and devoid of complete scholarship and intellectualism. The paper makes it clear that the proliferation of universities has done

no good to Nigeria. That the Nigerian universities are bleeding to death is not an exaggeration. In view of this, the author recommends some policy decisions that can help alleviate the plight of universities.

The problems and issues facing universities in Nigeria cover a wide number of areas: quality of instruction, admission policies, practices, and shortage of qualified faculty particularly due to attrition, and limited research facilities. If universities adjust to the new realities, they will be able to prosper but if not they will continue to decline as the product becomes more and more similar to high school leavers. In view of sustainable development, the universities should adjust by:

- Negotiating with their governments to name social functions;
- Forging a trusting relationship with governments and employers of labour;
- Managing themselves in a fashion similar to modern business;
- With other institution having similar research comparative advantage.

In the 1960 and 1970s, it was not uncommon to justify university education in Nigeria in parochial terms, and to consider a university as an academic finishing school for local elites. At the same time, universities have been portrayed as having an economic function in that it can help bring Nigeria out of its predicament of depression. This paper is of the view that one cannot have it both ways. A finishing school cannot be expected to pull its economic weight competitively. To do that one needs to be more purposeful. To achieve serious national goals, one needs to make serious choices.

Indeed, the level of national development in any nation is directly related to the relevance, usefulness and identity of the educational system. If Nigeria should enhance national development through the universities, they must emphasize, extol and exemplify the basic positive human attributes and virtues of life such as intellectual meritocracy, academic discipline, creativity, industry, patriotism, academic excellence, self reliance and high sense of responsibility. For as the school, so is the state of national development (economy and society) and the quality of the graduate- the product of both the school and the culture. Whatever Nigeria want in the society, the country must put it in the educational system.

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