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The Evolution and Management of Higher Education in Nigeria: A Review of Private Initiatives

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Introduction

Nigeria possesses the largest university system in Sub-Saharan Africa. Although South Africa's tertiary enrollments are higher, Nigeria boasts more institutions. Nigeria has over 75 universities as at 2005 (Adedipe, 2005), about 41 polytechnics and 62 colleges of education as at 1998 (UNESCO, 2000a). In less than 50 years of tertiary education in Nigeria, the enrolment which was 210 in 1948 increased to 392,683 in 1996 (UNESCO, 2000a:87). As at 2005 Nigeria had 23 private universities. As the Federal Universities grew in number and students enrolment, State Universities started emerging in 1979 with the Rivers State University of Science and Technology taking the lead. In the same vein, the emergence of private providers of university education in Nigeria became a reality when the first three Private Universities were licensed to operate in 1999 after an earlier failed attempt. Currently, Nigeria has one hundred and one (101) universities comprising twenty-seven (27) federal universities, thirty-three (33) state universities and forty-one (41) private universities. The staff strength of Nigerian universities is 99, 464 comprising of 27, 394 academic staff and 72, 070 non-teaching staff. The current total students enrolment in Nigerian universities stands at 1, 096,312 (Okojie, 2009).

With this number of university and the students' enrollment, its university system supports numerous graduate programmes and serves as a magnet for students from neighboring countries. The system embraces much of the country's research capacity and produces most of its skilled professionals. Surveying this system and its institutional arrangements well over a decade ago, the World Bank concluded that "more than any other country in Sub-Saharan Africa, the structures exist in Nigeria that could provide for a rational and effective development of university education" (World Bank, 1988:3).

Nigeria sees higher education as "the education given after secondary education in universities, colleges of education, polytechnics, and monotechnics including those institutions offering correspondence courses" (FRN, 2004:36). The National Policy on Education (FRN, 2004:38-43) clearly distinguishes between the traditional university education and other types of higher education. Nigeria expects the university system to contribute optimally to development of high level manpower within the context of the needs of the nation by increasing and diversifying its programmes, making professional course contents to reflect national requirement, inculcating community spirit in student through team projects and action research, and by making all students to offer liberal or general study courses.

Public universities became monopoly in providing higher education in Nigeria until recently. In practice, however, the university system developed less rationally than anticipated. Enrollments in the federal universities grew at the rapid rate of 12% annually during the 1990s and totaled 325,299 students by 2000 (NUC, 2002). Enrollment growth rates were the highest in the South-South Region, followed by the North-East Region. However, efforts to expand enrollments and improve educational quality are severely constrained by growing shortages of qualified academic staff. Between 1997 and 1999, the numbers of academic staff declined by 12% even as enrollments expanded by 13%. Long term brain

drain, combined with insufficient output from national postgraduate programmes in the face of rising enrollments, has left the federal university system with only 48% of its estimated staffing needs filled. Staffing scarcity is most acute in engineering, science and business disciplines. Shortfalls are estimated at 73% in engineering, 62% in medicine, 58% in administration, and 53% in sciences. In contrast, no staffing shortages exist in the disciplinary areas of Arts and Education (NUC, 2002).

The cost of running the federal university system totaled \$210 million in 1999. Financing for that system comes almost entirely from the federal government. As a result of enrollment growth and currency devaluation, recurrent allocations per university student in the federal system fell from \$610 to \$360 between 1990 and 1999 – with obvious implications for educational quality. However, agreements covering university salaries and teaching inputs negotiated with government by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) in 2001 have raised this amount close to a much healthier \$1,000 per student annually (FRN, 2001). Federal university revenues are received mainly from three sources: the federal government (84%); income generation activities (7%); and various student fees (9%) – even though no undergraduate tuition fees are charged. In 1992, student fees had represented just 2% of revenues. Equally attention-grabbing is the fact that, in real terms, capital budgets for federal universities surged by 40% during the 1990s. This is the combined result of special campus refurbishment and rehabilitation grants of substantial size, awards for university capital projects from the now-defunct Petroleum Trust Fund, and similar grants from the recently operational Education Tax Fund. This trend of increasing financial support for the system appears likely to remain during the coming years. In August 2002 the National Universities Commission (NUC) announced that the federal universities would receive an additional 7.2 billion naira (US Dollar 60 million) from government in 2003 and 2004 for the completion of capital projects (Guardian, 2002).

Today, Hinchliffe (2002) estimates that education expenditure is equal to only 2.4% of GDP and 14.3% of government expenditure. The share of these funds going to primary education has dropped to 35% and secondary education's portion has remained relatively unchanged at 29%, but tertiary education's share has nearly doubled to 35%. The Education Tax Fund is financed by a 2% levy on pre-tax earnings of firms with more than 100 employees; half of these funds are earmarked for higher education.

Nigeria's recent allocation shares for education diverge sharply from regional and international norms. This divergence begs justification. For example, UNESCO's

World Education Report (2000b)

indicates that for 19 other countries of Sub-Saharan Africa, education expenditures averaged 5.1% of GDP and 19.6% of total government expenditures. On average, these countries allocated 21% of their education budgets to tertiary education. In comparison with other African nations, Nigeria's funding effort on behalf of education is less than half as vigorous and its budgetary priority for the education sector is lower, but tertiary education receives a much higher share of these comparatively smaller amounts of national resources.

During the phase of nation building, many of the countries, especially developing countries, relied heavily on foreign capital and foreign personnel in many of the crucial areas of national development. Recognizing the importance of qualified and trained manpower, especially to manage the economy and to plan and organize their educational systems, most of the countries emphasized the development of higher education. The developed countries emphasized the expansion of their higher education sector,

while the developing countries followed a dual strategy of establishing universities of their own and sending people abroad for studies to meet the immediate requirements. All of these strategies were funded by the state. In fact, in many countries there was a 'state monopoly on tertiary education' (World Bank, 2002) during this period. State-funded public universities became the dominant feature of the development of higher education during this phase.

The higher education system in the developed world responded to the declining state support by the withdrawal of subsidies on higher education. Developing countries too began responding to these changes rather late. They introduced various reforms that reduced reliance on the state for the progress of higher education. Education reforms adopted by most of the countries indicated cost-reduction measures, cost-sharing strategies and income-generating activities (Varghese, 2001). Consequently, more recent trends indicate that the higher education is expanding in developing countries.

The national competitiveness in a knowledge economy depended on the availability of higher educated persons. Furthermore, the expansion of secondary education put pressure on higher education to expand, and more importantly, the rates of return analysis, which formed the theoretical basis for diversion of public resources from higher to primary levels of education, indicate higher returns to higher education rather than to the primary sector in certain developed countries (Carnoy, 1999). Privatization of public universities was a major change in the developed world, encouragement and promotion of private sector in higher education became a major change in higher education in the developing world.

Emergence of Private Universities in Nigeria

Private higher education is one of the most dynamic and fastest growing segments of post-secondary education at the turn of the 21st century (Altbach, 1999). There are numerous reasons for their emergence on a large scale. First, the inability of the public sector to satisfy the growing social demand for higher education has necessitated the entry of the private sector in order to expand access conditions. Second, the changing political view of large-scale public subsidies to social sectors will reduce investment possibilities in the 'productive sector' and hence the overall growth potentials of the economy. Third, in many countries, the demand for courses and subjects of study had changed and public universities in Nigeria were thus unable to respond to this phenomenon. Fourth, in countries where the public sector is criticized for inefficiency, the private sector is increasingly promoted for its efficiency in operation. Fifth, in many centrally planned economies, the transition from state planning to market forces was also associated with the expansion of the private sector in higher education (Varghese, 2004).

The private sector involvement in education can be in different forms. There are some state-supported private institutions, which receive funding support from the government. This type does not exist in Nigeria. There are also not-for-profit private institutions, they are usually owned and operated by trusts that rely heavily on endowments and fees collected from the students. Most of them are self-financing institutions. While there are for profit private institutions, these are private institutions that operate and produce profit. They are designed and established to produce profit. The element of these last two types could be observed in Nigerian private universities.

The private participation in higher education in Nigeria started with promulgation of Decree No.9 of 1993. This Decree outlined the requirements and modus operandi for the establishment and operation of private universities in the country. However, it was not until May 10, 1999 that a certificate of Registration was handed to each of the first three private Universities in Nigeria. They were: Babcock University, Ilesha; Igbinedion University, Okada-Benin; and Madonna University, Okija. Presently, there are thirty-Four (34) private universities in Nigeria which are already accredited and whose academic activities have begun.

It is believed by some scholars (Ade-Ajayi, 2001; Altbach, 1999; Varghese, 2004) that the major aim of private initiatives in tertiary education is to help the ugly situations in this level of education. But the question is how far private universities have on ground rescued or proffered solutions to the problems of our university education. Some eminent Nigerians including the former Head of State of Nigeria, General Abdul-salami Abubarka reported the devastating condition of our universities. During his induction into the eminence circle of Babcock University in March 15, 2007, he observed inter alia that:

- When some of our first generation universities began, they had almost everything; they were like heaven on earth, a beauty to behold.
- The hostels were home away from home, students lived one in room; if there were two in a room, it was considered a crowd;
- The class size were small and the teacher knew every student by name;
- The environment was neat and dignified, the lawns were well manicured with blossoming and crispy trimmed flowers;
- The laboratories were never short of required equipment, chemicals, and reagents;
- In those days, anyone with first class or second class upper division got straight admission for postgraduate programme in any foreign university.

That was the situation in those days, while the situation today is expressed below:

- Universities have no stable academic calendar; now in 2008, some are still in the 2005/2006 session due to strike actions.
- Various cult groups have taken over most of academic communities and often clash to determine superiority.
- In many universities, laboratories are dusty, rusty, and empty.
- Lecturers are ill-equipped, ill-trained, and ill-motivated and at times their take-home may not take them beyond the university gates.
- The libraries are stocked with outdated texts and ragtag shelves with the library environment visited by old age.
- Classes are filled out of proportion and some hang on windows or sit on the floor to receive lectures.

- Lecturers feast on helpless students selling recycled materials as handouts.
- There is total breakdown of moral values.
- Incessant strikes by students and workers who take turns in closing the campuses.

The three long decades 1970 to 1990 represent the sad phase in the country's educational development, during which the institutions of higher learning "lost integrity, credibility and professionalism" (Ade-Ajayi, 2001). We are witnessing policy overload and conflicting directives in our educational industry. Even not up to 40% of those who sat for Joint Admission Matriculation Board (JAMB) examination succeed in securing admissions into our universities because of poor performance and examination malpractices. It is also contemplated now whether all our graduates or a randomly sampled number will serve in the National Youth Service Corps scheme.

Programmes of study/courses offered by Private Universities

The public universities are large organizations offering courses in a variety of subject areas. The academic interest and advances in frontiers of knowledge decide programmes of study and courses offered in public universities in general. The purpose of establishment and orientation of the operation of private universities is different from that of public universities. Since many of them are self-financing and profit generating, they have to offer courses that have a premium both in the education market and on the labour market. The demand for particular courses and their prices, that is, fees levied in the education market and labour market give signals to the private institutions, and their success depends upon their ability to respond quickly to such responses.

The courses offered in private universities in Nigeria reflect either a commercial consideration or a religious orientation. It seems the primary objectives of establishing a university are reflected in the curriculum offered by the private institutions. The 'for-profit' private universities cater to the private business enterprises. This type of institution and those that are not affiliated to religious bodies offer courses that are market-friendly. Courses in Business Administration, Computer Sciences, Accounting, Marketing, Economics, Communication, etc., are very common in for-profit private universities. While at public universities level, government places emphasis on Science and Technology by making provision in the National Policy to devote a greater share of its expenditure on university education to this sector, while not less than 60% of places should be allocated to science and science-oriented courses in the conventional universities and not less than 80% in the universities of technology.

It should be noted from the above that the courses offered vary depending on the basic orientation of the universities. Those which are self-financing and profit-generating institutions offer courses closely aligned to the private sector employment, especially in the manufacturing and service sectors. Courses on information technology, management, and accounting are very common among courses offered by these institutions, for the purpose of enticing candidates and in turn generate profits. Moreover, these are courses that are not offered in some traditional universities, and when offered, the numbers of seats available are very limited. The religion-oriented universities try to offer courses of a general variety, but make a serious effort to link them with theology (Varghese, 2004).

Teaching Staff in Private Universities

Since these private universities are new, they operate with a limited number of staff members. One of the unique features of private universities is that they have very few regular staff. This is to say that they usually have large number of part-time lecturers and a limited number of full-time lecturers. Reliance on part-time lecturers is a common phenomenon among private universities in Nigeria irrespective of their location and orientation. Many private universities make savings by employing teaching staff on a part-time basis or relying on church affiliated staff members. As they rely on part-time lecturers, some of them are headed by retired senior professors from public universities. These part-time lecturers are drawn from public universities, and professors in public universities are well qualified. Although there is the scarcity of experienced teachers as brain drain is real. For example, Nigeria does not have up to four professors of Nursing or up to 8 professors of Accounting, even some of the few ones we have in Accounting do not possess Ph.D in the course or at all. Therefore, there is strong competition for available experienced teachers. The reliance on the academics from public universities is equally a good mechanism to ensure quality in teaching and savings in expenditure. However, the question are, what impact does this practice has on public universities? What are the negative effects of the practice on the academic standards of these private universities?

Student Profile and Admission

In Nigeria, the competition for admission to public universities is very high. Ideally, those who do not secure admission in public universities seek admission in private universities. Some universities that give their religious orientation attract students from the same community or denomination. This is common with the students in the Department of Theology. In most cases, the students in this department are already a part of the church hierarchy.

Obasi (2007) revealed that enrolment in the private universities is modest but there is significant potential for growth based on statistics from older private universities. He cited that Madonna University graduated 390 students during its convocation ceremony in 2004 (Ukeh 2004) and as at 2005, it had 7000 undergraduate students, of whom 5000 were full time and 2000 part time (Madonna University 2005). The Covenant University started with a first batch of 1500 undergraduate students and matriculated 1681 students in its third matriculation ceremony for the 2004/2005 session (Covenant University, 2005). The Benson Idahosa University registered 989 full time undergraduate students and 131 part time students (Benson Idahosa University, 2005). Also the Igbinedion University had 1027 students in the 2001-2002, while Bowen University had 650 in the same session (Okebukola 2002).

It should be noted that both private and public universities get their students from the same source. They come from the same social, economic, and moral environment. The disciplinary and moral problems of students faced by the state and federal universities are also faced by the private universities.

Morality and Student Discipline

Another area where the private universities have made appreciable impact is in matters of morality and student discipline. The word discipline originates from Latin word *disciplina* which originally had to do with teaching and learning. In its proper context, it means to make a disciple. Over the years, school discipline has become forgone issues in our universities. No doubt that many of our students have imperfect minds that need nurturing, therefore educational researchers must come up with ways of maintaining discipline in our schools. Examination malpractices have

become the order of the day among the students at levels. During the 2007 JAMB examination, out of the 911,679 candidates that registered, 15,763 were involved in examination malpractices.

No nation can develop in the real sense of it when its academic giants are moral dwarfs. Morality is caught and taught. The seeds of secret cults, student armed robbers, adolescent assassins, AIDS distributors, and the like were sown when religious studies, and moral instructions were compulsorily removed from the curriculum. What followed this policy was breeding of national international fraudsters, whose operations continually envelope the nation in shame.

Quality of Education in Private Universities

One can not generalise the quality of private universities education. It varies widely; it depends on the agency responsible for establishing the university (the National Universities Commission, NUC), the legislative requirements for infrastructure, and other facilities, etc. The quality of education provided by institutions is a factor of many parameters such as the quality of programmes offered, qualification levels of teachers, the level of infrastructural facilities, academic performance of students in the university, and their performance on the labour market. No doubt that some of the private universities in Nigeria are operating with very limited facilities but at least they are adequate for the number of students admitted. This is because with increased inflation, the provision and maintenance of adequate infrastructure and conducive learning environment is a drain on the budget.

In most cases, some of these private universities offer courses that require limited investment in infrastructure. The courses in humanities, theology, and social sciences demand less facilities than sciences, engineering, and medical sciences. Yet, it is pertinent to state that some private universities are better equipped than public universities in Nigeria. Also, in the area of library facilities, and technology used in teaching/learning process, they are incomparable or better than those in public universities. Some of the students in private universities have their personal laptops because of their better socio-economic background, and they are allowed free access to Internet including their counterparts without laptops with the use of universities' computers. The accreditation exercise usually done by the NUC and some other professional bodies like Institute of Chartered Accountants of Nigeria (ICAN) and the rest indeed establish quality assurance and quality improvement. The academic qualification of teachers is another important area that determines the quality of education offered. As stated above some of these universities depend much on part-time lecturers drawn mainly from the public universities together with their few full-time or regular lecturers. However, the private universities have limited facilities for staff development and research opportunities for their staff.

Some of the universities for example have state-of-the-art facilities that are the envy of students in public universities where there are dilapidated infrastructural facilities. The NUC accreditation report of 2006 made elaborate positive comments on the state of infrastructural facilities in many of the older private universities (Oyekanmi, 2006). In all the private universities evaluated, the report expressed satisfaction over the standard of laboratories and quantum of equipment acquired as well as the availability and well furnished classrooms, workshops, studios and ICT facilities. The report revealed that three quarter of the programmes taught at the Covenant University for example, were provided with well-equipped computer laboratories. It however expressed dissatisfaction over few other facilities in some universities. For instance, (a) it noted that staff offices were inadequate in Igbinedion University; and (b) quality of the buildings and fittings at the two campuses of Madonna University, needs to be upgraded.

It is not a gainsaying that the dropout rates are low and the graduation rates are high in almost all private universities. This may not be unconnected with the exorbitant fees paid which shows that only those who are really ready to pursue a study seek admission in private universities. Also, the students of private universities are closely monitored and highly motivated in general than their counterparts in the public universities.

Maintenance of Stable Academic Calendar

This is one of the greatest achievements of private universities. In the past two decades, public universities ran an unstable academic calendar usually as a result of incessant strike actions of the lecturers, which led to a prolonged stay of students. In many universities for instance, students spent six to eight years in programmes meant to be completed in four or five years. The presence of private universities has brought a big challenge to public universities. They are now under serious pressure by the government to restore their academic calendar from October to June.

Funding of Private Universities

As public universities are funded through grant from the government the private universities are solely funded through tuition fees paid by students. Their total incomes are determined by the number of students and the rate of tuition fees levied. Therefore, they must meet their expenditure with what they collect from their students. This is the reason private universities attract larger number of students in order to maximize profit. The Executive Secretary of the NUC also confirmed that the fees charged by private universities as at 2005, was not too exorbitant if judged against the unit cost of university education in the country (Dambatta, 2005). In exceptional cases, some private universities in Nigeria, e.g. Babcock University, Ilishan, establish business venture that add to their source of income. If the federal and state universities that receive appropriations from various governments can not balance their budgets, one can imagine what the situation would be with the private universities, whose major funding is internally generated.

Conclusion

The establishment of a public university was seen as a sign of national pride and symbol of self-reliance in some developing countries. However, the monopoly of the public sector institutions in higher education came to an end towards the last decade of the 20th century when private sector institutions emerged as a viable alternative. There is no doubt that the inability of public universities to provide adequate spaces that will match the admission demands in various courses created a conducive environment for the emergence and expansion of private higher education in Nigeria.

It is observed that private universities should be operationally efficient than the public universities. Their operational efficiency is primarily ensured by increasing the gap between the fees collected and the operational cost of the institution. Staff cost being the major item of expenditure; they try to minimize their expenditure on this count. There is also a social and economic obligation for the private universities to perform better since their existence depends on their capacity to attract more students.

It is interesting to note that there are areas of study, which are important for the country but not friendly to the market, and these courses may not be offered by the private universities. The multi-faculty public

universities service the society in many of these areas better than private universities. The private universities are changing the conception of a university with multiple faculties, departments and subject areas of study.

The private universities take teaching as their main function but in limited disciplines. Research is rarely emphasized by the private universities because some of them rely on part-time lecturers and do not have regular staff to carry out research. But public universities are engaged both in teaching and research organizations. This indeed has great implications for national development. Looking at the higher fees levied by the private universities; they will be attracted by students of a better socio-economic background. This creates a cleavage between those who can afford higher education and those that cannot. More so, since the employment market will be rewarding those who have degrees/diplomas from these universities, inequalities in opportunities for admissions to these private universities will have a negative effect on equity, especially from the long-term point of view.

Since one of the important reasons for establishing private universities is to absorb the excess social demand for higher education which cannot be satisfied by the public universities, they are not contributing to weaken public universities. This is because the enrolment in public universities indicates that they continue to grow despite the existence of private universities. The public universities make a significant contribution to broader objectives of national development, and this cannot be substituted by private universities. Not every common man can afford the exorbitant tuition fees charged by the private universities. Therefore, a peaceful co-existence of the two sectors should be a viable and realistic alternative. Also, the private universities' role may be seen in many instances as complementary to the contributions made by public universities. For this reason, there is need for a better partnership between the private and public sectors in higher education rather than leaving the sector entirely to the public sector or to the market force.

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