



Higher Education in Nigeria: The Challenges and Contributions of Private Universities

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ABSTRACT

University Education has been with us in Nigeria since the establishment of the University College, Ibadan in 1948; which was later granted full-fledged university status in 1952, and the subsequent establishment of what some commentators refer to as the 'Ashby Universities' as regional universities in the then three regions of Nigeria. Despite the flurry of other Federal and State Universities that followed, it does appear that the thinking that private individuals have the right to provide university education, and the feeling that the public universities have failed in providing the needed access to university education and infrastructure for teaching and learning gave vent to emergence of private universities in Nigeria. This paper therefore is an attempt to examine the challenges of private universities, when viewed along the variables of funding, staffing, admission policy, organizational structure, facilities and mode of examination administration vis-a-vis their contributions, the challenges appear to be dimming the light of the contributions. It is therefore the suggestion of this paper that private universities should ensure that admissions are based on merit; that standard facilities for effective teaching and learning are provided among others, if private universities in Nigeria are to effectively contribute to educational development.

Keywords: Private Universities, Challenge, Contribution

INTRODUCTION

As one of the most important social institutions, the university has rightly been seen as knowledge factory, where the raw material of humanity may be refined, emancipated, trained and honed to become leaders in all facets of human endeavour. Nigerians embraced university education since the first university was established in Nigeria, because they believe that education is the key to all doors. It is the process of acquiring knowledge, developing skills, mores and values that are prerequisite for the development and sustenance of the society via the enhancement of the human capital. Provision of education the world over is seen as a productive investment which the proponents of the human capital theory give a pride of place when compared with physical capital. Higher education at university level plays the vital role of cultural transmission, social integration, selection and allocation, personal development as well as gate-keeping (Brown & Selznick in Nwachukwu & Okoli, 2015).

In Africa, the provision of university education by private institutions is a growing phenomenon when compared to other parts of the world. However, most Africa countries have been slow to expand the private sector in university education (Altbach in Ajadi, 2010). In Nigeria, the emergence of private universities as a business enterprise is a fast growing phenomenon, a number of issues plague its development including legal status, quality assurance and the cost of service. Though, the status of some private universities appears shady; operating without license and commensurate resources or appropriate infrastructures. Nonetheless, a few of the institutions possess better equipment, newer buildings and better facilities than the public universities.

Interestingly, from the 1960s to 2019, the Federal Government of Nigeria has established 43 universities; the various State governments have established 48 universities and the private individuals and organizations own 79 universities. Thus from 1999 when the pioneer three private universities were established, private universities have operated for about twenty (20) years in Nigeria. So it would not be out of context for this paper to examine or assess these private

universities to determine whether the privatisation of university has satisfied the reasons for such adventure, that is providing solution to the challenges or problems associated with public universities, which are decline in performance and general quality of higher education; a direct result of over stretched facilities, shortage of academic staff, lack of teaching and learning equipment, inadequate funding as well as poor infrastructure.

Though, some scholars have argued that the private universities *ab initio* have worse problems of lack of infrastructure, unqualified academics as well as exorbitant tuition fees that are out of the reach of indigent students or parents. Some scholars further argued that there is no corresponding expansion in the industrial sector that could employ graduates from the private universities, which they assert has resulted in unprecedented high rate of graduate unemployment. Despite all these queries, some reviewers are still of the opinion that private universities have contributed to the educational sector and national development.

CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

Private University

The concept of private universities is a recent development in Nigeria compared to the Federal and State government universities. For Belfied and Lerin in Ajadi (2010), private universities are non-public or independent universities who do not receive government funding and are usually administered by denominational or secular boards; others are universities operated for profit. Some refer to private universities as those universities that are solely owned, financed and managed by private individuals with intention to recover cost in short time and make profit (Olaniyan in Ajadi, 2010). Education as we know in Nigeria is regarded as an instrument “par excellence” for effecting national development, which means the kind of university education being given by the private universities must be qualitative rather than quantitative. So how do these private universities cope with the challenges therein?

Challenge

Challenge in this context refers to those variables that test the skill and ability of managers of private universities, especially in a way that impedes the achievement of their set goal.

Having looked at the concepts of private universities and challenge, it is imperative that this paper looks at the evolution and the typology of private universities before delving into their management or organizational structure; staffing, facilities, admission policy, funding, and mode of examination administration; and their contributions

Contribution

Contribution in simple term refers to an addition, an input made to something or a part played by a person or thing in bringing about a result. In this context, contribution means the value added by private universities to the advancement of university education in Nigeria.

Evolution of Private Universities in Nigeria

As posited in the abstract of this paper, the twin factors of neo - liberal or new right perspective in education, and ‘public failure theory’ may have collaborated to the invention of private universities in Nigeria. Before 1979 the power to establish university was placed under the Exclusive Legislative list. But Sections 24, 25, and 26 of the 1979 Constitution placed the power to establish university under the Concurrent Legislative list; meaning the Federal and the States government could establish, fund, regulate and operate universities. However, it is pertinent to state that even the 1979 Constitution did not explicitly permit the founding of a university by private individuals or initiative. Perhaps, as stated by Odinkalu (2007) the decision of the Nigeria’s Supreme Court in *Dr. Basil Ukaegbu V. Attorney General of Imo State* (1983) NSCC 160, established the legality of private universities in Nigeria. In this case the then Governor of Imo State instituted proceedings to preclude Dr. Ukaegbu, a private operator, from establishing or operating a private university. The Supreme Court ruled in favour of Dr. Ukaegbu affirming his rights to establish university. However, the Supreme Court emphasised the need to balance his entitlement with the right of every member of the community to what it called freedom from unsavoury and diabolical institutions and teachings. Thus the court created both the basis for private universities and the justification for their regulation. Although the over 26 private universities established by the end of 1983 on the strength of the Supreme Court decision were closed down in 1985. According to Obassi (2007), the lack of serious minded academics among others contributed to the closure of the private universities in 1985. The

issue of private universities since then was not given further attention until 1991 when the then Military President; General Ibrahim Babangida decided to lift the ban on the establishment of private universities and set up the *Lunge Commission* to review higher education in Nigeria. The *Lunge Commission* among its recommendations was the establishment of private universities.

However, it was not until the year 1999 that the National Universities Commission (NUC) granted operating license to three (3) out of the forty (40) applications for private universities. Therefore these three universities could be referred to as the pioneer of private universities in Nigeria. They are: Igbinedion University, Okada – Benin, Edo State; Babcock University, Ilishan Remo, Ogun State; and Madonna University, Okija, Anambra State. Since then, there has been quantum leap in the growth of private universities, which presently, stands at seventy-nine (79) private universities in Nigeria, accredited by the National Universities Commission and whose academic activities have begun. *See table 1*

Table 1: List of Licensed Private Universities in Nigeria and Year of Establishment.

S/N	Private Universities	Est. Year
•	Achievers University, Owo	2007
•	Adeleke University, Ede	2011
•	Afe Babalola University, Ado-Ekiti Ekiti State	2009
•	African University of Science and Technology, Abuja	2007
•	Ajayi Crowther University, Ibadan	2005
•	Al-Hikmah University, Ilorin	2005
•	Al-Qualam University, Katsina	2005
•	American University of Nigeria, Yola	2003
•	Augustine University	2015
•	Babcock University Ilishan-Remo	1999
•	Baze University	2011
•	Bells University of Technology, Otta	2005
•	Benson Idahosa University, Benin City	2002
•	Bingham University, New Karu	2005
•	Bowen University, Iwo	2001
•	Caleb University, Lagos	2007
•	Caritas University, Enugu	2005
•	Chrisland University	2015
•	Covenant University, Otta	2002
•	Crawford University, Igbesa	2005
•	Crescent University	2005
•	Edwin Clerk University, Kaigbodo	2015
•	Elizade University, Llara-Mokin	2012
•	Evangel University, Akaeze	2007
•	Fountain University, Oshogbo	2007
•	Godfrey Okoye University, Ugwuomu-Nike-Enugu State	2009
•	Gregory University, Uturu	2012
•	Hallmark University, Ijebi Itele, Ogun	2015
•	Hezekiah University, Umudi	2015
•	Igbinedion University, Okada	1999
•	Joseph Ayo Babalola University, Ikeji-Arakeji	2006
•	Kings University, Ode Omu	2015
•	Kwararafa University, Wukari	2005
•	Land-Mark University, Omu-Aran	2011
•	Lead City University, Ibadan	2005
•	Madonna University, Okija	1999
•	Mcpherson University, Seriki Sotayo, Ajebo	2012
•	Michael & Cecilia Ibru University	2015
•	Mountain Top University	2015
•	Nile University of Nigeria, Abuja	2009
•	Novena University, Ogume	2005
•	Obong University, Obong Ntak	2007

• Oduduwa University, Ipetumodu, Osun State	2009
• Pan-Atlantic University, Lagos	2002
• Paul University, Awka- Anambra State	2009
• Redeemer's University, Ede	2005
• Renaissance University, Enugu	2005
• Rhema University, Obeama-Asa, Rivers State	2009
• Ritman University, Ikot Ekpene, Akwa Ibom	2015
• Salem University, Lokoja	2007
• Samuel Adegboyega University, Ugwa	2011
• Southwestern University, Oku Owa	2012
• Summit University	2015
• Tansian University, Umunya	2007
• University of Mkar, Mkar	2005
• Veritas University, Abuja	2007
• Wellspring University Evbuobanosa- Edo State	2009
• Wesley University of Science & Technology, Ondo	2007
• Western Delta University, Oghara Delta State	2007
• Christopher University, Mowe	2015
• Kola Daisi University, Ibadan, Oyo State	2016
• Anchor University, Ayobo, Lagos State	2016
• Dominican University, Ibadan, Oyo State	2016
• Legacy University, Okija Anambra	2016
• Arthur Jarvis University, Akpoyubo Cross River State	2016
• Crown Hill University, Eiyenkorin, Kwara State	2016
• Coal City University, Enugu State	2016
• Clifford University	2016
• Admiralty University, Ubusa Delta State	2017
• Spirtan University Nneochi, Abia State	2017
• Precious Cornerstone University, Oyo	2017
• Pamo University of Medical Sciences, Port Harcourt	2017
• Atiba University, Oyo	2017
• Eko University of Medical and Health Sciences, Ijanikin, Lagos	2017
• Skyline University, Kano	2018
• Greenfield University, Kaduna	2019
• Dominion University, Ibadan, Oyo State	2019
• Trinity University, Ogun State	2019
• Westland University, Iwo Osun State	2019

Source: Retrieved from <http://nuc.edu.ng/nigerian-universities/private-universities>, March 29, 2019

Sadly though, according to Adekeye in Nwachukwu and Okoli (2015), some fake private universities are germinating alongside the ones approved by the NUC like the biblical parable of tare and wheat growing together until the time of harvest. And of course the NUC has been vigorously closing down these 'degree mills'.

Typology and Organizational Structure of Private Universities

Adediran and Gbadamosi (2012) attempted classifying ownership of private universities in Nigeria into three categories; namely sole proprietorship, religious, and hybrid. The sole proprietorship as the name implies is a one man enterprise established by individuals, operating as a person or as a corporation. This type of university, they continued, possesses all the paraphernalia of a university such as Governing Council, Board of Regents etc; yet the university depends on the financier who exercises a complete control over his business. The likes of Igbinedion University, Afe Babalola University, Lead University, among others belong to this category.

The duo of Adeiran and Gbadamosi (2012) further stated that the mission or 'Religions Universities' are another category of private universities ownership. According to them, these universities deemed to belong to the churches as a whole had been founded by the orthodox religious groups. The allocation or donation of major responsibilities reflects the culture, diversity and spread of the church.

In this type of ownership, they posited that although the financial support for these comes from the church, the day to day running of the institutions is in the hands of council and management in terms of control. The likes of Babcock University – owned by the Seventh Day Adventist; Wesley University of Science and Technology – owned by the Methodist Church; Bowen University – owned by the Baptist Convention; and Ajayi Crowther University – owned by the Anglican Communion are some of the private universities in Nigeria that belong to this category.

The next category of private universities identified in the categorization is ‘Hybrid Universities’. These are mission oriented universities but are personally driven. Here the owners not only found the mission but also established the universities.

In other words, the universities are the extension of the churches. Although these universities also have Boards of Regents, the founder of the church is the ‘supreme’ in terms of control. The example cited in this category include, Madonna University, Benson Idahosa University, Covenant University, and Redeemer University, among others.

The Structure of Management or Governance

The governance structure of these private universities appears not to be fundamentally different, apart from slight structural differences found among the ones that are religious-based institutions and single proprietorships. According to Osagie cited in Nwachukwu and Okoli (2015), the major constitutive bodies in these universities include Board of Regents, the Governing Council, the Senate, and the Principal Officers. The Board of Trustees (BOT) in many of these universities for example, is established by the various laws establishing them with final responsibility for ownership, operation and welfare of the universities. Osagie further gave an example with Igbinedion University, where the president of the Board of Regent is also the proprietor.

Adeniran and Gbadamosi (2012) took their argument further to say that in a situation where the president of the BOT is also the proprietor, the latter may even render all organs: such as the council, senate, congregation and even the management redundant and ineffective. Where this happens particularly in a university where the proprietor has no university experience or has never passed through a university himself, the damage to the education system is unimaginable. The overbearing influence of the proprietor would limit the autonomy of the university. Irrespective of this argument, the Governing Councils of the private universities are responsible for overall policy determination, development and governance of these universities, subject to any general directives by the BOTs.

Funding in Private Universities

Several writers and stakeholders have identified funding as one of the challenges impeding private universities in Nigeria. Private universities rely heavily on tuition fees and other internally generated revenue (IGR) to meet their expenditure. This paper is in sync with Owolabi and Okwu (2012) who averred that there is a mixture of revenue sources available to private universities for funding development. Such sources according include market sources such as investment income, contract research and sales of services in addition to tuition fees which they regard as the major source. Onuoha (2012) added minor sources of funding as proprietors subvention, fund raising, industries as well as capital campaign. Nevertheless he said that for most capital funding, his university – Babcock – has depended in “long term facilities from developers and Banks”. There is no gain saying the fact that running a private University is a capital intensive venture that the return on investment (ROI) takes years. It is also note worthy that to run a university is not a tea cup affair and unfortunately many private universities owners in Nigeria appear not to have the financial muscle to bear the financial burdens of these institutions.

Facilities in Private Universities

Another challenge to private universities is inadequate facilities. Many private universities seem to be groaning under the yoke of inadequate or low standard facilities which is closely related to inadequate funding. High cost facilities such as building for classrooms, offices, hostels, furniture items for students and staff, laboratory equipment, well resourced libraries in term of relevant books and journals constitute a very serious impediment to total quality management. This view was equally canvassed by Amponsah and Onuoha in Olawore and Ajayi (2016). The facilities for staff development and research opportunities are limited, thereby reducing the quality of education in private universities in Nigeria

Staffing in Private Universities

Varghese (2004), in his study discovered that reliance on part time academic staff is a common feature of private universities irrespective of their location and orientation. This is yet another impediment to private universities, because as Olawore and Ajayi opined, many Nigerian private universities are in dire need of adequate human capital, without which one cannot run and manage an ideal university that is globally competitive and locally relevant. Similarly, Abidum – Oyeibanji (2011) averred that some of the needed or required manpower are not available to many of the private universities and majority of their staff, especially academic staff are bottom heavy in terms of mix. Many equally rely on lecturers from public universities for a part time job or those on sabbatical to meet the accreditation requirement. Those on regular appointment on private universities are mostly young graduates who are not Ph.D holders as prescribed by NUC to be the minimum requirement. Of course unqualified or inexperienced lecturers cannot be said to be contributing much to quality university education. Robinson and Nwaham (2007) also viewed it in this direction, that many of the lecturers lack both technical and personal competences required in teaching because they are not professionally qualified. According to Obarenren and Ibabor (2012) no educational system rises above the quality of her teachers anywhere in the world.

Staff Development

Closely related to staffing is staff development. According to Osokoya in Olawere and Ajayi (2016) facilities for staff development and research opportunities for staff are limited in the private universities compared with the public universities. Information materials in the libraries are very few and majority of them rely on open access materials on line for their clients. Most faculty members have little or no time for research because these institutions failed to employ enough staff.

Admission Policy in Private Universities

Given the profit making mind set of some owners of private universities who have invested in education; and therefore, expect returns in their investment. The cost recovery plan in such institutions affects their admission policy, as their main sources of income are tuition fees and other student levies. Presently, admissions into private universities are not highly competitive. According to Ajadi (2010), most of the students that seek admission into private universities are those who do not meet the public universities admission standard. In other words, the criteria for admission into most private universities in Nigeria are lower than that of the public universities to attract more students, which mean more tuitions fees and more profit. Most private universities offer admission to candidates once their parents show the capacity and willingness to pay the tuition fee without proper scrutiny of the intellectual competence of the candidate to cope with the concomitant academic rigours; thereby affecting the quality of such private universities.

Mode of Examination Administration in Private Universities

Private Universities mode of examination are not completely at variance with the public ones, but still hinging on the commercial mindset of most private universities. Most of these universities admit more than their facilities can cater for; as some commentators averred, when private universities took-off, they started with less than one thousand students, e.g. Babcock, Madonna etc, but now there is explosion in students' enrolment which has brought in several vices into the system including examination malpractices, such as copying, bringing – in scripts into the examination hall etc. In some private universities, the admission policy or method has no definite time table, thereby resulting into staggered examination for students. Though often times they cleverly evade the supervisory eyes of the NUC. Nevertheless the nature or mode of examination of most of these private universities is semester based and the various examination ills and jiggery-pokery prevalent in the public universities are very much alive at the private universities.

It is obvious that the challenges of infrastructural facilities, quality of programmes as assessed by the National University Commission (NUC), the admission policy, the funding, the qualification of the academic staff, and student's academic performance in the school and their graduates performance in the labour market have taken the shine off private universities. Of course there are requirement set by NUC to control the quality of programmes offered in Nigerian universities, the universities and programmes that meet requirements are accredited by NUC. However, according to Ajadi (2010) most of the courses offered in the private universities do not meet the set accreditation criteria; as some of the courses are recognized but not accredited and since there is no penalty for any university for offering courses not accredited, this makes private universities in Nigeria to float courses at will.

Also the facilities for development and research opportunities are limited in private universities; all these impede the contributions of private universities in Nigeria.

Contributions of Private Universities in Nigeria

Given the myriads of challenges facing private universities one may want to ask if private universities have justified their establishment. Some scholars have argued that private universities have positively impacted the education and socio-economic development of Nigeria. Isibor in Olawore and Ajayi (2012) posited that before now there were incidences of strike actions in the public universities, no regular academic calendar and a programme that should last for four years could end up causing a student six to seven years. In fact, students then could only know the year of admission but could not predict their year of convocation. In the views of Morenike (2003) frequent strike actions in the public universities have plunged the education system into a pungent soil and have made university degree become a mere certificate, armed with which a job might be obtained at a later date. And if this paper may add, just a meal ticket.

Interestingly the entrance of private universities has brought stability into the system. It is also correct to state that private universities have reduced admission pressure in public universities, though access to university education is still low, private universities have afforded Nigerians the opportunities to seek admission alternatives. For Osokoya (2007) establishment of private universities has also brought about employment opportunities to Nigerians. To buttress this Robinson and Nwaham (2007) opined that Covenant University, a privately owned university at inception in 2002 offered employment to 46 academic staff (including 6 professors and 2 senior Lecturers), 12 administrative staff, labourers, security men, messengers, clerical officers etc. which has helped in no small measure in tackling the unemployment menace. This is a common scenario in most privately owned universities in Nigeria. Also, the infrastructure in some of the private universities can be described as breath-taking and world class, as exemplified by Afe Babalola University. Again, the establishment of private universities has assisted government in the funding of education which has always been a problem facing university education in Nigeria because of the increase in the demand for it (Ajadi, 2010). This paper begs to disagree with Ajadi's position on this point, because this paper cannot see or has not seen how private adventure in education has ameliorated the university funding headache of government.

CONCLUSION

From the above discussions and reviews this paper agrees with the general opinion that universities are the centers of knowledge, the incubators of international best practices, be it public or private. Universities are citadels for production of critical minded individuals; the furnace that forges or shapes individuals to societal expectation; a place where ideas contest for supremacy and the best idea prevails. Agreed that private universities in Nigeria have small size of students' enrolment and offered courses that are market-friendly and limited disciplines. But this paper would like to posit against the backdrop of the challenges private universities face, that many seem not to have good admission policies and procedures for attracting quality students; many seem not to have good recruitment policies and procedures for the recruitment of senior faculty members; many may not have quality supply system that enable them purchase quality equipment; many may not have quality strategic management plan on good class management and lecture delivery; many may not have professors and other senior faculty members who conduct quality research; many may not have buoyant exchange programmes and international linkages; many seem not to have quality infrastructural facilities; and may equally not have the enabling environment for research. Nevertheless, private universities have contributed their quota, though negligible in the face of daunting challenges.

SUGGESTIONS

In consideration of the above discussions and conclusion, the following suggestions may suffice:

- Private universities in Nigeria should ensure that admission policies and procedures for attracting quality students are based on merit and not on the financial biceps of the parents.
- Private universities in Nigeria should ensure that they prove their mien and make a difference by avoiding replicating the conventional programmes or courses offered in the public universities, so as to move towards specialization in certain disciplines to establish themselves as centre of excellence.

- Private universities should put in place processes, standards and support infrastructure that will enhance the training and retraining of their staff so as to enable them compete propitiously with their contemporaries in public universities.
- Private universities should provide incentives for their faculty members to encourage them show commitment to their work, and spur them to engage in continues professional development and publishing in high impact and reputable journals.
- Private universities owners should also engage the government with a view to getting help in terms of opportunity to access the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund) grant and providing necessary technical and logistic support.
- Private universities have come to stay in Nigeria, so the government should give appropriate supportive policy environment aimed at creating a robust competitive milieu between the private and public universities so as to engender growth and development for the overall benefit of the entire country.

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