CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS OF TERTIARY EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The general dissatisfaction with the educational process especially Higher education in Nigeria has given rise to several efforts to find more effective approaches to the education of the young. The influenced expansion in our university system may be an answer to the insatiable demand for university education, but we seem to have taken an action which may in fact compound the problem that we are supposed to solve. This paper therefore recommends among others that Nigeria tertiary institutions would have to acquire the major tools of internalization—ICT, which must become a management learning and research tool. With appropriate develop ICT capacity, Nigerian tertiary institutions would be reducing the time and space that have separated her for too long from the world epicenters of internalization.

Tertiary education is the past secondary education. NPE (2004) emphasized that Tertiary education covers the post-secondary section of the national education system which is given in universities, polytechnics and colleges of Technology including such courses as are given by the Colleges of Education, the Advanced Teacher Training Colleges, correspondence colleges and such institutions as may be allied to them. The aims of this level of education according to NPE (2004) are:

a. the acquisition, development and inculcate of proper value-orientation of the survival of the individual and society.

b. the development of the intellectual capacities of individuals to understand and appreciate their environment;

c. the acquisition of both physical and intellectual skills which will enable individuals to develop into useful member of the community;

d. the acquisition of an objective view of the local and external environment.
The management of tertiary education is the burden of the federal and state governments, not until recently when permission was granted to private individuals to own, organize and manage university education in the country. (Alimba, 2007). The purpose of this paper is to trace the challenges and prospects of tertiary education in Nigeria.

Tertiary education is in its modern form came to Nigeria from Britain, mainly as a fallback of colonial education system. Thus, Great Britain installed a replica of its tertiary education in the country with the establishment of the University College, Ibadan in 1948 as a college of the University of London (Anyebe, 2008). For purposes of this paper, unless otherwise specified in the tertiary education.

It can be recalled that Nigeria adopted a federal constitution in 1954 and tertiary education was placed on the concurrent legislative list. In order to avoid an unbalanced development and wasteful duplication that might arise from the federal and regional governments’ quest for establishment of universities and other tertiary institutions, the federal government set up the Ashby Commission in 1959. The commission which was mandated to review the manpower needs of the whole country and make recommendations for a structure of education for the 1970s submitted its report in October 1960. The detail recommendations contained in the report touched on every facet of education in Nigeria-primary, secondary and sixth form education, teacher training, technical education, commercial, agricultural and veterinary education and university education.

**Demand for Tertiary Education**

Within the last four decades or so, Nigeria has witnessed an insatiable demand for tertiary education especially university education. This is to be expected of a developing country that places a high premium on education as a panacea for socio-economic development. It is seen by the less privileged as the only way to break the social barrier to get to the top and thus the passionate desire of the common men and women to give their children a better opportunity in life. This gave the demand for education its explosive quality. No democratic government could resist this demand for long. It is therefore not surprising that Ashby Commission recommended the establishment of the first generation universities in the following sequence:

1. The University of Nigeria Nsukka was established in 1960 by then Eastern Regional Government as the first Nigerian initiated university;
2. The University of Ile-Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University) though not recommended by Ashby Commission, was founded in 1961 by the government of Western Region; and
3. The Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria was founded in 1962 by the then Northern Regional Government.
These Universities were established in addition to existing two federal universities then; the University of Ibadan, Ibadan (was a university College from 1948 until the bill making it an autonomous institution was passed in December 1962) and the University of Lagos, Lagos established in 1962. In 1963 when the defunct Mid-Western region was carved out of the then Western Region, she demanded for university of her own. However, the region had to wait till the end of the national crisis in 1970 before getting a university. The University of Benin was finally founded in 1972 as an offshoot of the then Mid-West Institute of Technology.

Another relevant recommendation contained in the Ashby Commission Report was that 7,500 students should be enrolled in Nigeria universities by 1970. Actually, the total enrolment in the universities in 1970/71 session was 15,272 distributed as follows: Ahmadu Bello University, 2,689; University of Nigeria 2,929; University of Ife 2,423; University of Ibadan 3,655; and University of Lagos 2,536 (Ayo, 1988:183). This is far more than the Ashby Commission target. Since then there has been the proliferation of tertiary institutions especially universities in the country leading to a tremendous increase in student enrolment. However, between 1971 and 1975, all the regional universities were taken over the federal government or were voluntarily handed over to it by their respective states purely for reasons of financial incapacity. The Third National Development Plan 1975-80, made provision for the establishment of seven more universities to be located in states where there were none at the time. This gave birth to second-generation universities in 1975.

It was projected in the 1981-85 plans that about 108,720 students would be enrolled in the university system by 1985. It was, therefore, stipulated in the plan document that:

In order to meet the increased level of demand for university places the existing universities will be expanded, seven new universities of technology and one unconventional university with emphasis on post graduate students will be established to cater for the needs of those who are unable to go to conventional universities (1981-85 Plan Document: 160.)

All the above universities were expected to be established to cater for the projected enrolment of about 108,720 students. National Policy on education also in consonance with the projection in the plan wanted the new universities established to ensure even geographical distribution as a means of ensuring national unity.

One thing that was economically unwise about the establishment of the universities is that, no sooner was the 1981-85 plan launched than the world oil market weakened (oil was and still the main foreign exchange earner of Nigeria). The federal government religiously went ahead to establish the seven universities of technology and the National Open University. As if this lack of economic wisdom on the part of the federal government was not enough, eight state governments took
advantage of the fact that the 1979 Constitution put university education on the concurrent legislative list to establish their own universities without adequate appraisal. Thus, we had eight state universities, many of them with satellite campuses.

During this period, a strange phenomenon also began to appear and that was the private sector investing in the establishment of universities. The most famous of these was Imo Technical University founded by one Dr. Ukaegbu. When the legality of starting a private university was perfectly legal for individuals or private concerns to establish private universities or at least that there was nothing in the Constitution and the laws of the country preventing the establishment of private universities. Within six months of this ruling of the Supreme Court, 26 private universities were either established or proposed in the country.

Faced with what would best be described as an avalanche of universities, the Federal Military Government in June 1984 abolished all private universities and prohibited the establishment of new ones in the foreseeable future by Decree No. 19 of 1984. The government also merged four of the seven federal universities of technology with some conventional universities while the National Open University was stopped in order to restore some sanity to the system.

Most of the universities during the plan period were politically inspired. This must have led the Military Government in 1984 to issue a policy statement that there was proliferation of universities without regard to the resource capability of the country (Anyebe, 2006). Today, according to NUC sources, there are 104 universities (24 federal, 36 state, and 41 private) in Nigeria lead to what Professor Tekena Tamuno, a one time Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ibadan, describes as “amor habendi habendo crescit” – the love of having grows by having (Aliu, 2005).

Similarly, there has been a phenomenal expansion in technical institutions. From one technical college in 1948, the country now has about 46 polytechnics with various programmes for both the pre-National Diploma and Diploma students. In addition, there are 89 monotechnics, for training teachers for post-primary technical and vocational educational programmes (NBTE, 2000). Enrolment has also witnessed a significant growth from 17,485 in 1986/87 to 104,686 in 1990/91 and 192,979 in 1997/98 and 237,775 in 1999/2000 (JAMB, 2000). There has been a significant expansion of Nigeria’s college of education system with the country having 94 approved NCE awarding institutions (Daily Trust, August 26:2009).

Challenges
What do Nigeria, for example do, with 104 universities in Nigeria? This question is not purporting that universities are too many for the country, for instance, about one million candidates sat for the University Matriculation Examinations (UME) in 2002 but according to JAMB sources the University system admitted only about 12% of the applicants into the Universities that year, leaving the remaining
individuals (about 88%) stranded without access. The question is seeking to draw attention to the need for us to have a very clear understanding and appreciation about the purpose which universities are meant to serve and direct our attention at achieving them. The unplanned expansion in our university system may be an answer to the insatiable demand for university education but we seem to have taken action which may, infact, compound the problem that we are supposed to solve.

Nigeria education does not appear to be integrated with the economic system of the country, rather the educational system has developed on its own producing more of the same from the number of universities (including polytechnics and colleges of education) that there are. We do not seem to have the knowledge or the strategy to harness the knowledge acquired by the products of the system to promote societal needs. This is not too surprising. The needs of the society were not taken into account when fashioning the curriculum content of our educational programmes at the university level.

Nigeria education system is today contending with very many problematic issues which take too much of the little time available at the expense of promoting excellence in the academic programmes of the institutions. These include explosion in enrolment; very poor academic preparation of the entrant to the university; dearth of senior academics in the system; ethnicity; the effect of unionism on the stability of the system; examination malpractice; sex abuse; decline in staff training programmes; religious bigotry; politicization of academic leadership in departments and faculties; issues related to the appointment of vice chancellors, rectors or provosts; financial squeeze; cultism and secret societies, unconducive learning environment etc. Unfortunately, the resolution of these issues is nowhere in sight and they have remained permanent features in the calendar of activities of universities (Baikie, 2002).

Gender Parity

The Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) as reported by Obanya (2004) aptly illustrates that the gender gap that begins in the primary school becomes a gender gulf at the tertiary level, in the recent statistical reports:

1. For the latest year for which figures are available (2000/2001 academic year), 42.5% of applicants into Nigerian universities (198,819 out of 467,490) were women.
2. However, of the 50,277 admitted, only 19,006 (37.8%) were women
3. Women applications were very low for engineering courses (12%); applications for both sexes were relatively high for courses in Administration (49.6%).
4. A relatively high proportion of women secured admission into the faculties of Arts (57.7%) and education (55%).
5. For the other faculties, the percentage of women applicants securing admissions were: agriculture (42%), engineering (16%) Law, (39%), medical sciences (39%), the pure sciences (39%) and the social sciences (35%).

That fewer women apply for entry to universities is a result of there being fewer girls completing secondary education. Furthermore, that a smaller proportion of women applicants (as compared with male applicants) succeed in gaining admissions is a reflection of girls’ relatively lower success rates in the senior secondary certificate examination.

On primary school enrolment, the myriad of problems facing the country’s education system suggests that enrolling all children in primary school and achieving a full course of primary school by 2015 may not be feasible. Even the complete elimination of gender disparities at all levels of education by 2015 may remain a dream. However, the rest of education system is built on primary education. It is the key to the success or failure of the whole education system including tertiary education.

Rebranding Tertiary Education

Any attempt to rebrand our tertiary education must include systematic and planned development of the sector. This is the core area of attention and would involve a number of specific activities, most important of which would be an effective evaluation of the current state of tertiary education, including an assessment of the country’s capacity to bear its current tertiary education burden.

The situation can be seen from several dimensions:

1. Nigeria cannot meet the demand by secondary school leavers for higher education.
2. Some programmes (mainly in the Humanities) are over-subscribed, while several others (particularly the natural sciences and technology) are under-subscribed.
3. The universities are bursting at the seams, while non-university tertiary institutions are not attracting a sufficiently large number of students. Can JAMB’s new approach solve the problem?
4. Within the non-university tertiary institutions, programmes in the ‘soft areas’ (home economics, secretarial studies, management, etc) tend to be over-subscribed, while the ‘hard disciplines’ (engineering, information technology, laboratory technology, etc) are in dire need of students.

A third issue is whether or not to retain the existing three-tier system of tertiary education. South Africa has already taken a hard decision of aligning the technikons and the colleges of education with the universities. This development deserves very close monitoring, as the view that non-university tertiary institutions
are needed for the ‘production of middle-level manpower’ no longer seems to have the currency it had in the 1960s. The new experiment in South Africa has however not got to the level at which anyone can confidently say ‘go ye and do likewise’.

Nigerian tertiary institutions need to be more development-oriented and the following areas are in need of actions.

Conclusion

The country has to make a concerted effort to overcome the social and institutional factors that impede its development aspirations. In this age of globalization, education is a key tool for strengthening a nation’s capacity to become a full member of the emerging global society. Nigeria therefore, has to work hard to change its global fortunes for the better by systematically planning its education system (primary to tertiary) with emphasis on quality and excellence. Above all, our tertiary education should be development-oriented with emphasis on training creative minds needed for the continuous regeneration of society as opposed to certificate-oriented education.

Recommendations

1. Curriculum reforms that promote the inculcation of the generic skills (commission, inter-personal skills, adaptability, IT-fluency, creativity and lifelong learning skills so valued in today’s knowledge economy), while de-emphasizing narrow and premature specialization. This means that we should refuse to be narrow specialists but have the ability to see life as a connected whole and not as a set of disconnected realities. We should also be life-long learners, people with a perpetual thirst for knowledge, a spirit of inquiry, a perpetual search for self-improvement, making the best of every opportunity to renew and enrich our understanding of life and its demands.

2. Tailoring teaching, research and service functions to the needs of the immediate society – being practically involved in thematic and problem-oriented societal/human activities and generating/disseminating knowledge form these to enrich the world pool of knowledge.

Fifth, Nigeria tertiary institutions would have to acquire the major tools of internalization – ICT, which must become a ‘management, learning, and research tool’. With appropriately developed ICT capacity, Nigerian tertiary institutions would be reducing the time and space that have separated her for too long from the world epicenters of internalization. Nigeria’s role here would also including placing its own academic activities in the epicenter of knowledge and ideas (Anyebe, 2008).

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Federal Government of Nigeria: Merger of Universities of Technology in 1984 *Bulleting of NUC*.


