

The future of private universities in Nigeria

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Abstract

The story of private universities in Nigeria started with the establishment of Imerienwe University by late Dr. Nnana Ukegbu, an attempt that gave rise to a series of court cases that eventually led to its demise. Since then, the country has swung to the current situation where private universities will soon be more numerous than public universities. There are however enormous problems hindering the fast growth of private universities, particularly the problem of funding which leads to paucity of student enrolment and the absence of high-quality lecturing staff. This article argues that despite these problems the future of private universities in Nigeria is very bright. Among the reasons for this optimism is comparison with other similar climes; inefficiency and absence of vision of successive Nigerian governments which result in the obvious inadequacy of reasonable investment in education; perennial mismanagement fueled by corrupt interest of many segments of the public in the universities leading to continuous lowering of standards. We argue that the scenario in basic and secondary level education in Nigeria where the decay in public schools means that the country's best schools are private schools will certainly replay at the universities level in no distant future.

Keywords: private universities, public universities, corruption, mismanagement, investment in education.

Introduction

The history of private universities in Nigeria goes as far back as the late 1950s when the then Catholic Archbishop of Onitsha, Charles Heerey expressed the intention of starting a university. This idea was not well received, both by the Government of the day and even the members of Heerey's own Catholic Church. For the latter group, establishing a private university in Eastern Nigeria when the famous University of Nigeria was doing very well would mean that Catholics would be deprived of utilizing the opportunity offered by that university. Charles Heerey's idea was shelved and the prospect of private university was never seriously broached till Dr. Basil Nnanna Ukegbu established the first private university in Nigeria: Imo Technical University at Imerienwe in 1981.

The establishment of Imo Technical University led immediately to a series of litigations. The then Attorney General of Imo State sued Dr. Basil Nnanna Ukegbu challenging his right and competence to establish a private university. In 1983, the Supreme Court of Nigeria affirmed the right of individuals to establish private university, as well as the responsibility of the National Assembly to regulate the exercise of that right. The issue of private universities was virtually forgotten for the next sixteen years. In 1999, the then Federal Government of Nigeria under the military approved three private universities: Babcock University, Ilishan-Remo, Igbinedion University, Okada and Madonna University, Okija. Bowen University at Iwo was approved two years later in 2001, and in 2002 additional three private universities were given approval: Pan-Atlantic University, Lekki; Benson Idahosa University, Benin City; and Covenant University in Otta. Abti American University in Yola was approved in 2003.

From the above incidents of approval of private universities, the rise of private universities in Nigeria was speedy. From 1999 to November 2019, there are a total of 79 private universities operating in Nigeria. It means that within this period (1999 – 2019) on the average 4 universities were approved every year. Already by July 2019 (this current year) four universities have been approved to operate in the country including Greenland University, Kaduna; Dominion University, Ibadan; Trinity University, Laloka; and Westland University in Iwo. (cf. Brendan Umoren, “FEC Approves Four New Private Universities,” *Todayng*, Jan, 9, 2019)

While there is significant and speedy rise of private universities for the past twenty years in Nigeria, the regional spread of these universities has been very divergent. In all, up to 70% of private universities in Nigeria are located in the South West geo-political zone, especially in the areas around Lagos State (Ogun State and Oshun State!). The South East has a total of 14 private universities while North East and North West together can boast of only 5 private universities. There are currently 79 private universities; 43 Federal Universities and 48 state universities, in Nigeria making a total of 170 universities (Matt Stephens, *How Many Universities Are in Nigeria?* (2019), March 4, 2019, www.naijahombased.com). There are about 306 prospective private universities the approval of which is being processed by the National Universities Commission.

The rapid spread of private universities as well as the wide disparity in the regions in which they are cited is not too difficult to explain. There is first the huge advantage afforded by university education for socio-economic progress in a developing country like Nigeria. It is notable that all who can make it strive to acquire university education. This is because in many ways it

is like an assurance of progress in one's chosen occupation. Effectively this scenario creates a situation where there are artisans (usually poorly educated and trained only by apprenticeship) and then university educated professionals in the country. There have been some efforts to change this by attempting to create what can be called middle level manpower. This was one of the major reasons behind the establishment of colleges of technology and polytechnics but the policy wholly failed to achieved the desired effects, since successful polytechnic graduates inevitably seek to acquire university degrees, and by so doing realign themselves with the original thinking in which university degrees reign supreme. In more recent times, the efforts championed by the polytechnic teachers' union have been to force the government to legislate a parity between university degrees and certificates of colleges of technology and polytechnics.

There is also the inadequacy of existing universities to cater for the need and the quest for university education. This becomes clearer when one compares the number of generally better funded and better managed universities in other parts of the world with that of Nigeria. Nigeria with a population of around 180 million people has only just 170 universities, and many of these as we have seen above are private universities with relatively low intake of students. India, a developing nation, with a population of 1.371.6 Billion inhabitants has a total of 789 universities. China with 2017 population of 1.386 Billion has a total of 2914 colleges and universities. The United States of America with 325.7 inhabitants in 2017 has a total of 5300 universities and colleges. It is clear from these numbers that public universities alone are very inadequate to cater for the need and desire for university education in Nigeria.

Added to the above factor is the arrant lack of political will on the part of successive governments in Nigeria to invest in the education of its citizens. Taking the budgetary allocation to education as an example, the Federal Government of Nigeria has hardly given up to 10% of its annual budget to education. This contrasts very sharply with the vaunted UNESCO projection of at least 26% of budgetary allocation to education in developing countries and the fact that such countries as Ghana, and South Africa devote up to 30% of their annual budget to education. The government of President Mohammed Buhari promised to budget at least 15% of its annual expenditure to education, but this promised has remained a fool's paradise and this year it budget barely 7% to education.

Given the absence of political will to robustly finance education, the government's enthusiasm to approve more and more private universities can be interpreted as furtive passing of buck. The policy is apparently aimed at allowing private investors to enter the terrain of university education and by so doing lighten the obvious burden of financing public universities in Nigeria. Government enthusiasm to approve private universities can also be read as a quiet attempt to inject class in the sphere of education. Already it is well known that given the high cost of education in private universities, only the children of rich Nigerians can afford to study in these universities. In some of the good private universities there is more efficient management; more sense of responsibility on the part of the workers, including lecturers and smoother running of the program of study. It goes without saying that in the very near future universities that run on these principles will surely outdo others that are more funded but very badly managed. The implication is that the better managed universities will be attended by the offspring of rich Nigerians,

and the poorly managed one will be flooded by children of the poor. In this manner the foundation of class differentiation in the society is without notice being strongly laid.

Despite all the above, it is important to inquire about current state of private universities in Nigerian. In terms of sheer number, private universities are just a few years short of matching public universities in Nigeria. With 79 private universities and 91 public universities and with over 300 requests for approval of private universities, it is very predictable that within a few years there will be more private universities than public ones. But these numbers and prognostication speak very little of what is on ground in Nigerian private universities. There is no gainsaying the fact that numerous problems bedevil these universities.

The first and the most important of these problems is the issue of funding. Most private universities are just private investments from which the investor hopes to scoop as much returns as possible and as quickly as possible. Incidentally, the only sure and substantial source of returns for investment in private universities is the tuition fees and the payment for other services rendered to the students. That is why many private universities make residence on campus compulsory for the students so that they can reap the returns of hiring of hostel accommodation. It is also the reason why tuition fees are also relatively very high in Nigerian private universities.

A second major problem is the paucity of students. Many of our private universities start off with less than a hundred students after sinking billions of Naira in the infrastructure of the university. The implication of this situation is that the proprietors must inject heavy sums of money to support the university. More students mean more income from fees and from other services that the university can render. But as at 2018, all Nigerian private

universities together admitted only 6% of the Nigerian students' population. (cf. *Premium Time*, 10th July, 2018). The implication is that the expected easing of pressure on public universities is hardly being realized by the multiplication of private universities.

There is then the problem of stiff competition with foreign universities. In addition to many other factors, many parents are ready to pay the high cost of allowing their children to study in foreign universities. Since it is only the rich who can afford this, it means that these foreign universities have the same constituency of fee-paying parents as the private universities in Nigeria. Malaysia has about 13,000 Nigerian students in its universities. The United States of America has 7,318; the United Kingdom has 17,973, prompting the British MP, Iain Steward, to project that there will be about 30,000 Nigerian students in UK universities by 2020, making up about 7% of the student population of the Kingdom. Ghana can boast of around 71,000 Nigerian students in its universities. The import of the tuition collected by Ghanaian universities from them is better expressed by the former Governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria and present Emir of Kano, Lamido Sanusi: "There are about 71,000 Nigerian students in Ghana paying about US\$1 billion annually as tuition fees and upkeep, as against the annual budget of US\$751 million for all Nigerian federal universities." If all these Nigerian students spread in many countries of the world were to study in Nigerian private universities, one can only imagine the enormous change this would constitute in the fortune of private universities in the country.

One of the reasons frequently given for the paucity of students in Nigerian private universities is the high tuition fees. Many of these universities operate compulsory university residence for all their students. This practice is of course aimed at

making the most from income from students who hire hostels within the universities. However, the vaunted high cost of studying in private universities in Nigeria remains debatable on further considerations. The highest tuition fees among private universities are paid at Abti American University, Yola with tuition fee of 1,590,000 to 3,000,000 Naira per session; and Afe Babalola University, with annual fee of 1.5 to 1.75 million Naira per session. The lowest paying include Obong University with annual fee of 190,000 Naira and Oduduwa University with 165,000 Naira. When one considers the highest fees at private university, one realizes that these are lower than what is paid annually in quite a good number of private secondary schools in Nigeria. British international school in Lagos is rated as the most expensive secondary school in Nigeria with an annual fee of 4.8 million Naira. (Opeyemi Odu, "10 Most Expensive Secondary Schools in Nigeria," Nigerian Monitor, www.nigerianmonitor.com)

It is important to ask why many Nigerian parents are ready to invest more money for the secondary education of their children than they do for their tertiary education. One reason may be that despite the fast multiplication of private universities in Nigeria, public universities generally remain the best universities in the country and have rather low tuition fees. Some federal universities do not charge up to 30,000 Naira as tuition fee annually. The implication is that these public universities are still the best and are the cheapest, and thus will attract the quest of many parents. Contrary to what is prevalent at secondary education, most public secondary schools are very badly managed, badly financed and the students are badly taught. The avoidance of these schools by economically well to do parents is thus not difficult to understand.

Again, even though the fees of private universities may not be comparatively as high as many assume them to be, they are sometimes high enough to approximate to what is payable in some better foreign universities. We have commented on high the number of Nigerian students in some foreign universities. Even with comparatively higher fees in foreign universities, many Nigerians associate studying in foreign countries with some other advantages, and so will be ready to even pay high fees to foreign universities than pay the same or something similar in Nigerian private universities.

It is remarkable however that most private universities in Nigeria do not pay what we can call reasonable salaries to their teachers. This explains why most of those teachers see their work in private universities as temporary as they search to migrate to Federal or State universities to offer their services. Very often the private universities departments are stacked with teachers who are full time in public universities, and then seek private universities jobs as part-time and adjunct staff to improve their income.

The above problems notwithstanding, Nigerian private universities have recorded significant achievement within the twenty years of their existence. It is remarkable that within twenty years many of our private universities have overtaken some public universities in world-wide ranking. Covenant University, Otta, established in 2002 ranked 2nd for many years among Nigerian universities in Webometrics. But it is not just one private university that has been recording commendable progress in university ranking. For instance, as of January 2019, the Webometric Ranking of world universities in all ranked 252 universities and higher institutions in Nigeria. Eight private universities came within the first 50 universities among these.

Webometric ranking: January, 2019

1. Covenant University	4 th
2. American University	28 th
3. Landmark University	40 th
4. African University	41 st
5. Babcock University	42 nd
6. Technical University	43 rd
7. Redeemer's University	47 th
8. J. Ayo Babalola University	49 th

It is certainly true that these eight universities constitute just 16% of the first 50 universities in Webometric ranking of Nigerian universities. But to better judge how remarkable the progress of private universities has been, other variables such as time must be taken into serious consideration. Starting from the University of Ibadan, public universities have been in operation for more than 70 years, while private universities have existed for 20 years or less. If within twenty years and less, private universities can take 16% of the first fifty ranked universities in Nigeria, one can only imagine what will happen in the next fifty years.

The reasons for what we would call the modest achievement of private universities in Nigeria are not far-fetched. In a general sense there is more discipline among students of private universities than those of public universities. This is in part because of the relatively very high fees charged by these universities. Some of our public universities pay close to nothing in terms of fees. This may have the tendency in some students not to care too much about failures in courses, prolonging their programs, and sometimes abandoning them altogether. While it is not safe to make blanket generalization in this regard, the success

rate of students in private universities in completing their programs is much higher than in public universities.

There is also greater dedication on the part of both teaching and non-teaching staff of private universities. Absenteeism among lecturers is a rare occurrence in private universities, while it is sometimes endemic in public universities. Part of the reason is that the managers and proprietors of private universities pay more attention to the performance of their staff. They will not usually continue paying a staff who is known for dereliction of duty. In addition, the staff of private universities are not members of university trade unions. This means that they do not embark on strike actions which very often disrupt the smooth running of university programs in Nigeria.

Again, some private universities are better equipped in some disciplines than the public ones even though the former have only existed in Nigeria for 20 years. What we mean by equipment include such vital instruments of research and teaching as libraries, laboratories, learning equipment and physical structures. Still it is obvious that these achievements are modest. They become more remarkable if the variable of time is factored into the performance of these private universities. It is with reference to that consideration that it becomes important to ask whose is the future? Which type of universities, private or public, will be the leading universities in the country with the passage of time? If we talk of the future, we can speak of proximate and distant future. It goes without saying that in the proximate future the best universities in Nigeria will remain as we have mentioned the public universities for the reasons we have highlighted above.

However, when we extend the future under consideration to distant future, there is no iota of doubt that this future belongs to private universities. The reasons are so obvious that we only need

to outline them without much explanation. The first is the unwillingness of successive Nigerian governments to adequately finance education. We have stated that the Federal Government of Nigeria allocated only 7% of its annual budget to education in 2019; and this is a government which promised to devote at least 15% of its budget to education when it was coming into power. There is then the mismanagement of the funds allocated to the universities through bloated contract sums and so many other avenues through which university funds are frittered away by Nigerian university administrators. Thus, corruption in its varied forms is very much at home in Nigerian public universities and will continue to slow the progress of development of these universities.

Much more insidious than corruption or embezzlement of available funds is the recruitment of incompetent and unsuitable staff into the universities. This is more so when academic staff are recruited based on factors that have nothing to do with their future performance. It is difficult today to point to a public university in Nigeria where academic staff are sought for on account of their competence. As far back as 1983, late Chinua Achebe stated that advanced societies are “where they are because they will never hire a man to perform an important task unless he is the best they can find.” He went on to add “Nigeria on the other hand, is a country where it would be difficult to point at one important job held by the most competent person we have. I stand to be corrected!” If this statement was made about the wider Nigerian society in 1983, it has become almost a truism in almost all Nigerian public universities. Less competent staff members are too frequently employed based on tribal, nepotistic, and long-leg considerations. In some cases, teaching positions in universities are in simple terms bought with money. Such serious

aberrations are hardly obtainable in private universities. That is why despite the difficulties under which they operate, it can still be said with some measure of confidence that the future belongs to private universities in Nigeria.

The confidence with which this assertion is made is further bolstered by the fact that Nigeria as a nation can hardly point at one aspect of public life where it has done well. It is obvious that almost all our public undertakings always end in shambles. There are innumerable examples to cite. Nigeria ran a national airline and failed woefully, but today private airlines are flying and certainly making gains. Different states in Nigeria floated long distant bus services. They have all collapsed, but private bus services continue to cater for the need of the people. There is hardly any Nigerian city that is effectively supplying pipe borne water to its population. But small and private outfits are selling drinking water to the people. For many decades, Nigerians have groaned of epileptic power supply throughout the nation; no improvement has been recorded in this all-important sphere with all the money sunk into it. We do not need to speak again of our public primary and secondly schools that have all become second and third grade, where private schools have become the best in the country. The point is that a nation that has abjectly failed in all aspect of life will not likely learn to be efficient *only* in the management of university education.

As stated in the above paragraph the state of public primary and secondary schools in Nigeria today is only an indication of what will most likely befall public universities. Taking secondary schools as an example the West African Examination Council's annual ranking of schools for 2018 shows that there is no single public secondary school in Nigeria that came into the rank of the

best ten secondary schools. WAEC ranking has the following schools as the best ten secondary schools:

1. Loyola Jesuit College, Abuja
2. Marist Brothers' Juniorate, Uturu
3. Presentation National High School, Benin-city
4. Lumen Christi International High School, Arue-Uromi
5. Igbinedion Secondary School, Benin-City
6. Grundtvig International Secondary School, OBA
7. Mea Mater Elizabeth High School, Agbani
8. Britach Secondary School, Umuahia
9. Christ the King College, Gwagwalada
10. The Lagoon Secondary School, Lekki

Finally, we may also learn some lessons from other climes. The United States of America has the best universities of the world. But most of these highly ranked universities are private universities. The United Kingdom has also some of the best universities of the world, some of these like Oxford and Cambridge are legally public universities, but they are allowed to run like private universities, receiving grants which they are free to reject, but without interference of the government in the management of their affairs. The first high ranking universities in Webometric Ranking of World Universities in January 2019 are Harvard University, Stanford University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Oxford University. Of these only Oxford which is public owned but private run is a public university, the rest, the first three are private universities. There is every likelihood that the same scenario will be replicated in Nigeria. It goes without saying that one cannot predict when public universities will become second class and private universities first class in Nigeria. Much depends on the growth of the economy

and the ability of parents to pay the required “high fees” in private universities. Our conclusion is that it is a matter of indeterminate time before private universities become in general the best universities in Nigeria. Of course, some of the private universities will not do so well. Some will certainly collapse, but those that survive will progressively become the best universities in Nigeria.

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