

Government interventions in tertiary education in Nigeria: Bad news all the way?

Chinyere Stella Okunna

Abstract

This paper addresses the issue of government interventions in tertiary education in Nigeria. In spite of strong empirical evidence that government interventions in education are indispensable for development, there are clear indications that governments at different levels in Nigeria have continued to pay lip service to desperately-needed interventions at all levels of education, especially at tertiary level. One recurring ugly consequence of inadequate government intervention in tertiary education can be seen in the incessant strikes by the various unions in government-owned tertiary institutions across the nation. Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), Academic Staff Union of Polytechnics (ASUP) and Colleges of Education Academic Staff Union (COEASU), as well as their non-teaching counterparts, have continued to agitate for better government funding in their institutions for improved provision of facilities for their students and better conditions of service for themselves. The dramatic changes in the physical environment and performance of government-owned educational institutions in Anambra State during the Peter Obi Administration are notable examples of the effect which effective government intervention can have on the education sector. The paper concludes that as long as education in Nigeria does not receive the financial attention it deserves from government, development continue to elude the nation. Thus there is urgent need for adequate and proper government funding of tertiary education in Nigeria.

Setting the Scene: Clarifications

‘Intervention’ can be conceptualized in different ways and from different perspectives. However, for this discussion, the most basic meaning of the concept has been adopted, so that ‘to intervene’ means “to become involved in a situation in order to improve or help it” (Hornby, 2015).

Similarly, in spite of the various ways in which government can intervene in education, ‘government intervention’ in this paper has been conceptualized from a fiscal perspective - How effectively is government funding tertiary education in order to improve or help it?

Funding education for development: General perspectives

It is generally accepted that education is the bedrock of development in every sector of the economy and should therefore be one of the most crucial roles of any government that desires development for its people. As has been convincingly demonstrated,

Education is the foundation upon which developed societies are built. Nations that thrive invest in education as a tool for the development of skills which can be used to produce wealth, create and sustain a suitable society (BudgIT, 2018).

Government funding of education is particularly crucial in developing countries where private sector funding of social services is still fledgling or even non-existent. There is evidence to show that in developing countries where this synergy between

education funding and economic development is appreciated, the governments of such countries “are directly responsible for investing or spending on education at both lower and higher level [sic]” (Kabuga & Hussainis, 2015). Advocating the case for increased government funding of education in the context of a developing country like Nigeria, Kabuga and his co-author argue that meaningful government expenditure on education has the capacity to positively influence economic growth. According to them, empirical evidence from their study of the relationship between economic growth and government spending on education in Nigeria clearly shows that “government expenditure on education both capital and recurrent positively influence (sic) economic growth in Nigeria.”

Education has a powerful link with economic development and many model states in the modern world have become eloquent testimonies that there is no better way than education to ensure human endowments. In fact, it is often argued that if any economy is not doing well, the answer to its poor performance could readily be found in what it spends on education. Ola (1998), cited in Omotor (2004), makes this point in his statement that “if you see any economy that is not doing well, find out what is spent on education.” This assertion has been cited as the reason why governments of the ‘Asian Tigers’ (beginning from as long ago as the 1970s) allocated between 25-35% of their annual budgets to their education sectors – because experts have confirmed that increase in national income, as well as per-capita income, is a function of education which conditions human endowments (human capital) which in turn determines the differences among nations, rather than physical capital (Aboribo, 1999).

Overview of education funding in Nigeria: The realities

Sadly, in spite of strong empirical evidence that government interventions in education are indispensable for development, there are clear indications that governments at different levels in Nigeria have continued to pay lip service to desperately-needed interventions at all levels of education, especially at the capital-intensive tertiary level. The consequences for the Education Sector are there for all to see. According BudGIT (2018),

The education decay in Nigeria began in the late 90s when the sector was starved of funding. Gradually, this was followed by infrastructure decay and brain drain. With the flight of these three elements, the education sector went down a slope....

As revealed by BudGIT (a civic organization committed to simplifying Nigerian budget and public data to make them more understandable and accessible to all), Nigeria's Federal Government budgetary allocation to the Education Sector (as percentage of its annual budget) has been falling over the last three years, dropping from 12.28% in 2015 to a pitiable 7.14% in 2018:

| Year | Percentage of Education Budget |
|------|--------------------------------|
| 2015 | 12.28% of budget size |
| 2016 | 9.17% “ |
| 2017 | 7.41% “ |
| 2018 | 7.14% “ |

These abysmally poor allocations are an embarrassing defiance of the UNESCO (United Nations Scientific and Cultural Organization) recommendation that government should commit 15% to 20% of the

nation's budget to Education. Using the 2018 national budget of N8.61 trillion as a case-in-point, and going by the UNESCO recommendation, BudgIT states that the Education budget should be in the region of N2.2 trillion, not the miserable N606 billion that was allocated to the sector in that year.

Nigeria's meagre expenditure on Education is equally an embarrassment to the nation, considering its status as 'the giant of Africa', because this expenditure is very small in comparison to those of other African countries to whom Nigeria is playing 'Big Brother'. In 2014, for instance,

Ghana spent 21.7% of its budget expenditure on Education which shows its commitment to improving the sector, compared with Nigeria's 10% in the same year despite the fact that Nigeria has a larger population and even more resources (BudgIT, 2018).

Government interventions in tertiary education in Nigeria: Bad news all the way

There is indeed nothing to cheer about in terms of government fiscal interventions in education in Nigeria. The poor funding of education in the country cuts across all levels of education and is a failure by both national and state governments.

At the national/federal level, government allocations to the tertiary education sector in Nigeria remain worrisome, and this poor funding characterizes all categories of tertiary institutions, including the 43 NUC-accredited Federal Universities, the 23 Federal Polytechnics established for the primary purpose of training technologists and technicians and providing management skills, as well as the 21 Federal Colleges of Education established

for the grooming of future teachers in whose hands the future of our future generations lies (in terms of equipping them with the knowledge and skills to compete favourably in an increasingly competitive world).

At the state level too, inadequate government intervention is also the order of the day in comparison with other sectors, as illustrated with the approved capital expenditure in the 2018 Budget of Anambra State:

| Sector | Allocation |
|--|-------------------|
| Office of the Executive Governor | N15.5bn |
| *Anambra State Polytechnic | N1bn |
| NwaforOrizu College of Education | N1.6bn |
| ChukwuemekaOdumegwuOjukwu University, Igbariam | N1.2bn |
| Ministry of Tertiary & Science Education | N290.5m |
| Ministry of Local Govt, Chieftaincy & Town Union Matters | N7.5bn |

*Formerly a College of Agriculture, this institution was recently upgraded to a Polytechnic with virtually no new government interventions in terms of physical infrastructure/facilities

To make matters worse, the meagre budgetary allocation for tertiary education in Nigeria does very little to actualize the primary mandate of a university system (in terms capital/direct spending on students) by providing physical facilities and teaching aids through construction of lecture rooms, equipping of laboratories etc. Using 2018 Federal Government Budget as a case-in-point, out of the N278.12 billion allocated to Federal universities, 90% (N250.34bn) was for recurrent expenditure, while a paltry 10% (N27.77bn) was for capital expenditure

(BudgIT, 2018). Details of budgetary provisions for all categories of Federal tertiary institutions are as follows:

| Sub-Sector | Total Allocation | Capital Expenditure | Recurrent Expenditure: Personnel + Overhead |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|--|
| Federal Universities | N278.12bn | N27.77bn | N250.34bn (N245.45bn+N4.89bn) |
| Federal Polytechnics | N71.28bn | N3.21bn | N68.07bn (N65.54+N2.53bn) |
| Federal Colleges off Education | N48.28bn | N2.82bn | N45.47 (N43.99+N1.48) |

Consequences of poor government interventions in education in Nigeria: The good, the bad, the ugly

At both national and state levels and at all levels of education, the negative and positive consequences of inadequate government interventions in education are glaring.

The ‘bad’ and the ‘ugly’

Collapsing standards of education at all levels, resulting in secondary school leavers who are practically illiterate and who graduate into tertiary institutions where they make teaching hellish for lecturers. These low standards also result in the production of what is now being described as “unemployable graduates” from all levels of tertiary education in Nigeria.

Poor funding is also resulting in disruption of the academic calendar, causing untold physical and psychological trauma for major stakeholders (such as students and their parents/guardians). This was recently exemplified by the failure of Anambra State Ministry of Basic Education to conduct the 2019 Junior

Secondary School and First School Leaving Certificate Examinations as scheduled in the academic calendar, as a result of alleged lack of funds. This ‘catching them young’ trauma ultimately follows the children into tertiary institutions, with negative consequences for tertiary education.

One recurring ugly consequence of inadequate government intervention in tertiary education can be seen in the incessant strikes by the various unions in government-owned tertiary institutions across the nation. ASUU (Academic Staff Union of Universities), ASUP (Academic Staff Union of Polytechnics) and COEASU (Colleges of Education Academic Staff Union), as well as their non-teaching counterparts, have continued to agitate for better government funding in their institutions for improved provision of facilities for their students and better conditions of service for themselves.

The ‘good’ in effective government intervention: An Illustration

The dramatic changes in the physical environment and performance of government-owned educational institutions in Anambra State at a point in its history are notable examples of the effect which effective government intervention can have on the education sector, as exemplified by the Peter Obi Administration. At a point in 2013, this Administration spent N5 billion in one fell swoop on the face-lift of the state-owned Anambra State University to dramatically transform it from ‘a glorified secondary school’ to a tertiary institution deserving of bearing the name of Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu - a name change which Peter Obi also effected during his tenure as Governor of Anambra State, to loud ovation and appreciation by the people of the State.

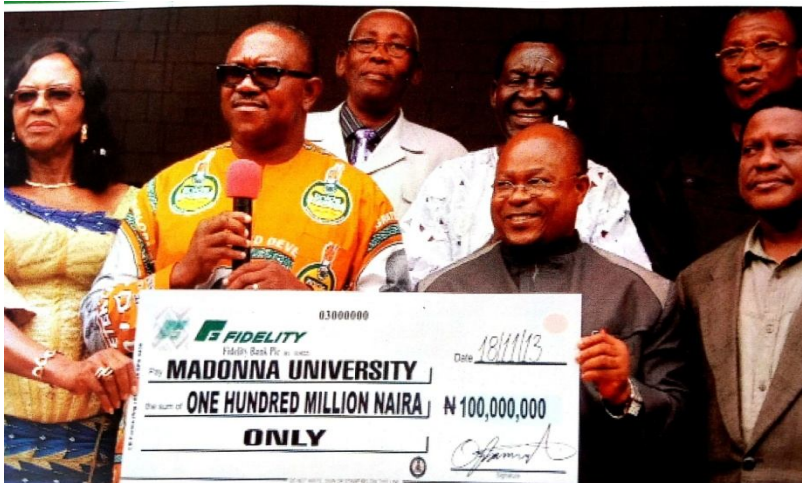


Gov. Obi presenting a cheque of N5 billion for continued provision of infrastructure to Chukwuemeka Odumegwu-Ojukwu University.

Similarly, extensive government expenditure on the State College of Education in Nsugbe and the College of Agriculture in Mgbakwu resulted in the provision of more than 40 new buildings for the three tertiary institutions put together.

Amazingly, other tertiary institutions in Anambra State were also financially supported by Mr Peter Obi – whether they were Federal Government-owned, Mission-owned, or privately-owned – in line with his argument that it was mainly the people of Anambra State who were benefitting from being educated in such institutions which therefore deserved to be supported by the State government. Thus, each university received one hundred million naira (N100 million) as well as logistics support of at least one bus and one security vehicle. These universities included NnamdiAzikiwe University (owned by the federal government), Madonna University (owned by the Catholic Church), Paul

University (owned by the Anglican Church) and Tansian University (a private university).





Peter Obi presenting a cheque of N100,000,000 to Paul University, Awka.



Even at the secondary level of education in Anambra State, this same type of intervention by the same Peter Obi Administration catapulted Anambra State from the 27th position in external examinations (WAEC and NECO) to Number One in the entire

country when government interventions included massive funding and provision of morale-boosting facilities such as: laboratory facilities, libraries, computers, Internet facilities, construction of new classrooms and renovation of dilapidated ones, school buses, electricity generating sets, water supply, etc in addition to the much-celebrated return of secondary schools to their original Church owners – a ground-breaking initiative which was followed up by payment of teachers’ salaries by the government, as well as continued government funding of the schools so returned.

The multiplier effect of such robust fiscal intervention by government at the secondary level would usually be seen in the quality and performance at the tertiary level by secondary school students when they ‘graduate’ into universities.

Parting shot: Conclusion and recommending the Obvious

As stated in the introductory segment of this paper, government interventions in tertiary education, or any other level of education for that matter, boils down to government funding, no matter how ‘intervention’ is conceptualized. Consequently, the recommendations on how to get Nigeria’s tertiary education sector working again are obvious:

- There needs to be, as a matter of urgency, adequate and proper funding – ‘adequate’ in terms of massive funding in comparison to what obtains now, and ‘proper’ in terms of giving urgent attention to capital expenditure in budgetary allocations in comparison with recurrent expenditure.
- Re-orientation of the private sector to take an interest in the funding of tertiary education, although the government in Nigeria, particularly at the federal level, is believed to possess the capacity to solely fund education – that is, if people in

governance can have the discipline to cut down the huge cost of governance and control their greed.

Of course, it is also stating the obvious to say that as long as Education in Nigeria does not receive the financial attention it deserves from government, so long will development continue to elude this nation that is so richly endowed with the right resources that it has the capacity to be counted among developed countries in our part of the world and far far beyond.

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Chinyere Stella Okunna is a professor in Department of Mass Communication, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria.