
The Proliferation of Private Universities in Nigeria: A Curse or A Blessing?

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Abstract.

The paper discussed the significance of universities for any nation's development. Specifically, the paper traced the origin of university education and the emergence of private universities in Nigeria. It was noted that as of October 2020, Nigeria had a total of one hundred and seventy-one (171) universities, out of which seventy-nine (79) were privately owned. The paper further observed that the proliferation of private universities has some merits and demerits. It was also observed that, to a large extent, the universities have been able to solve the problem of access to university education. However, the low capacity of these private universities has been a major challenge. As a result, the paper recommended that the National Universities Commission (NUC) continue to ensure proper control and monitoring of these universities. The Commission should ensure strict compliance with the recently published Code of Governance for Private Universities.

Key Words: proliferation, private universities, curse, blessing.

Introduction

All over the world, university education is regarded as a very important aspect of the educational system, to the extent that countries often rely on the sector to provide the needed manpower for development. Apart from this, quality research, which invariably contributes to the socio-economic development of any country, is usually undertaken by universities and other higher educational institutions.

In the view of Okoro-Orubite, Paulley, and Abraham (2012), the university is a community of scholars that believe in the superiority of the mind over matters and insist that everything should be subordinated to the intellect. The university is therefore a place where concepts hallowed by age and tradition are subjected to severe scrutiny, and knowledge grows through dissent and not through compromise. Earlier, Varghese (2004) opined that:

universities play a crucial role in generating new ideas and accumulating and transmitting knowledge, yet they have remained peripheral to development concerns. Although they are no longer the sole generators of knowledge needed for development, their research and teaching help to produce expertise, manage development, engineer social transformation, and preserve social values and cultural ethos (p. 30).

Accordingly, modern societies now entrust universities with more responsibilities than ever before. Universities are charged with preserving the knowledge of the past and transmitting it to the next generation, educating tomorrow's citizens, professionals, and leaders, and fostering the discovery of new knowledge that may either strengthen or challenge established ideas and norms, all with the aim of deepening

human understanding and improving the human condition. Universities also function as engines of economic development, foster technological and scientific innovation, stimulate creativity in the arts and literature, and address urgent global problems such as poverty, disease, ethno-political conflict, and environmental degradation (Bilkent University, 2005).

Relating this to the African situation, Kofi Annan, a former Secretary General of the United Nations, argues that:

The university must become a primary tool for Africa's development in the new century. Universities can help develop African expertise; they can enhance the analysis of African problems; strengthen domestic institutions; serve as a model environment for the practice of good governance, conflict resolution, and respect for human rights; and enable African academics to play an active part in the global community of scholars (United Nations Information Service, 2000, p. 5).

Consequently, university education is seen as a serious aspect of the education system that cannot be ignored at both the government and individual levels. In terms of sustainable development, universities are perceived as microcosms of culture and of the society that supports them. According to Ciferri and Lombardi (2009), universities are bastions of ethical behaviour and provide the training ground for students to determine and practice a personal code of ethics that will guide them for the rest of their lives. Universities should provide examples of ethical consideration as well as provide students with education in ethical values, including the underlying concepts, critical intellectual skills to help in decision-making, a broad view of universal ethical codes, and a sense of responsibility for others when making choices. In addition, universities play a crucial role in developing a new

generation of metrics. These new metrics capture social and political issues, as well as economic situations, and act as a medium to communicate the progress recorded by the local communities and other stakeholders. In this regard, the university's role in training and capacity-building is critical.

Similarly, Arikewuyo and Ilusanya (2012) observed that the presence of a university is a factor that can make an area more attractive. It can be a factor in the decision of skilled workers to migrate to an area, as they generally move to regions with a high concentration of human capital, and in the decisions of businessmen to establish firms in an area, as they can be influenced by the fact that it has a pool of highly skilled labour and research institutions. A university's presence can encourage private research development and attract other research laboratories.

Tertiary education in Nigeria is defined as the education given after post-basic education in the following institutions:

- i. Universities and inter-university centres, such as the Nigerian French Village, the Nigerian Arabic Village, the National Institute of Nigerian Languages,
- ii. Colleges of Education,
- iii. Polytechnics,
- iv. Colleges of Agriculture,
- v. Colleges and Schools of Health Technology,
- vi. National Teachers Institute, e.t.c. (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2014, p. 39)

Accordingly, the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2014) identified the goals of tertiary education, which include university education, to:

- i. Contribute to national development through high-level manpower training;
- ii. Provide accessible and affordable quality learning opportunities in formal and informal education in response to the needs and interests of all Nigerians;
- iii. Provide high-quality career counselling and lifelong learning programmes that prepare students with the knowledge and skills for self-reliance and the world of work;
- iv. Reduce skill shortages by producing skilled workers who meet the needs of the labour market;
- v. Promote and encourage scholarship, entrepreneurship, and community service;
- vi. Forge and cement national unity, and
- vii. Promote national and international understanding and interaction (pp. 39–40).

The specific goals of university education are:

- i. Intensifying and diversifying its programmes for the development of high-level manpower within the context of the needs of the nation;
- ii. Creating professional course content that reflects our national requirements.
- iii. Making all students part of a general programme of all-round improvement in university education to offer general study courses such as history of ideas, philosophy of knowledge, nationalism, and information technology (IT); and

- iv. Making entrepreneurial skills acquisition a requirement for all Nigerian universities. (FRN, pp. 41–42.)

Historically, university education in Nigeria began in 1948, with the Colonial government establishing the University College, Ibadan, as an affiliate of the University of London. Since independence in 1960, various governments, both democratic and the military, have established more universities in order to cater to the manpower needs of the country.

During the Second Republic (1979–1983), attempts were made by private individuals to establish private universities. Arikewuyo (2004) reported that even though such universities were initially declared illegal by the then government, private universities were given legal backing by the Supreme Court judgement of March 30, 1983, in favour of Imo Technical University, founded by Dr. Basil Ukaegbu. When the military came to power in December 1983, all private universities were prohibited.

It is gratifying to note that the same military government legalised the establishment of private universities in 1993, with the promulgation of Education (National Minimum Standards and Establishment of Institutions Amendment) Decree No. 9 of 1993. Arikewuyo (2004) further reported that on May 10, 1999, the military government formally licensed three private universities, namely Babcock University, Igbinedion University, and Madonna University. Since then, the number of private universities in the country has continued to increase. Records from the National Universities Commission (NUC) indicate that, as of October 2020, there are seventy-nine (79) private universities in Nigeria. This is separate from forty-four (44) and forty-eight (48) universities owned by the federal and state governments, respectively. Thus, as of October 2020, Nigeria had a total of one hundred and seventy-one (171) universities (www.nuc.edu.ng).

Private universities in Nigeria have been grouped into three. According

to Adediran and Gbadamosi (2012), private universities in Nigeria are classified into three types: sole proprietorship, religious-based, and hybrid. The sole proprietorship type is a one-man enterprise established by individuals, operating as an artificial person or as a corporation. This type of university has a governing council, a board of regents, etc. However, the university relies on the financier, who has complete control over his business. This group includes Igbinedion University, Lead City University, Afe Babalola University, and Novena University. The second category is missions, or "religious universities." According to Adediran and Gbadamosi (2012), these universities, which are deemed to belong to the churches as a whole, were founded by the Orthodox or religious groups. The allocation of major responsibilities reflects the culture, diversity, and spread of the church. Though the church provides financial support, the day-to-day running of the institutions is controlled by the council and management. These universities include: Ajayi Crowther University, owned by the Anglican Communion; Babcock University, owned by the Seven Day Adventists; Bowen University, owned by the Baptist Convention; and Wesley University of Science and Technology, owned by the Methodist Church, as examples. The hybrid universities, according to Adediran and Gbadamosi (2012), are those that are mission-oriented but personally driven. In this case, the owners founded the mission and universities. These universities include Madonna University, Benson Idahosa University, Covenant University, and Redeemers University, among others. In addition, Owusu-Dankwa (2009) classified the objectives of private universities as spiritual, educational, and profit-making.

Earlier, Varghese (2004) explored private universities in Africa in the following classifications:

1. Working in partnership with foreign institutions;
2. Established through government or public universities with foreign collaboration;

3. The companies are owned by religious organisations, operate as private firms within the country, and are owned by nationals.

As a result, the number of the number of private universities in Nigeria has grown almost every year. With the proliferation of these universities, therefore, it is imperative to examine whether the development has been a blessing or a curse to university education in Nigeria. As a result, the paper investigates the extent to which these private universities have been able to contribute to the development of university education in Nigeria.

A blessing or a curse?

The question of access to university education in Nigeria has highlighted the need to establish more universities. This is because the existing universities owned by the federal and state governments are unable to admit all the candidates who usually apply for admission into the universities. Table I, for example, showed a picture of all Nigerian universities' applications and admissions. The truth is, there is no year where more than thirty percent of the candidates were admitted. The highest was in 2015, where out of a total of 1,612,247 candidates that applied for admission into all Nigerian universities, only 485,338 (representing 30 percent) could be admitted (NBS & JAMB, 2017). It was only in 2017 and 2018 that more than thirty percent of the candidates were admitted (Table II). Thus, one of the impacts of private participation in university education is its ability to reduce the pressure of admission into universities in Nigeria, as public universities are unable to offer admission to all the eligible candidates.

The benefits of private universities in Nigeria have also been highlighted by some researchers. According to Isuku (2014), there is usually effective monitoring and control of resources in private institutions, which, in turn, helps to minimise waste, which is common in public institutions. This assertion is supported by Aluede, Idogho, and Imonikhe (2012), who also agreed that wastages of resources, which

characterise public institutions in Nigeria, are reduced in private institutions. Private institutions usually utilise the minimum resources to achieve high productivity.

Another benefit of private sector involvement in university education is that private institutions are held accountable. According to Altbach (2008), most government institutions are hardly accountable to the public due to political interests and corrupt tendencies. Thus, Isuku (2014) agreed that in most private institutions, effective accountability is *sine qua non* to the organisation's success since profit attainment is an important motivating factor. This attribute, he believed, is uncommon in most government institutions, where there is usually a low level of accountability.

However, it has been observed that the capacity of private universities is very low. Arikewuyo & Ogunsanwo (2020), citing data from the National Universities Commission (NUC), reported that out of a total enrolment of 1,962,364 in all Nigerian universities in 2017, the private universities had 104,454 (representing only 5.32 percent) (TABLE III).

The low capacity of private universities in Nigeria has been attributed to the challenges facing the institutions. According to Okebukonla (2015), the major challenges facing these universities and eventually their capacity are: low funding; NUC overregulation; naivety of proprietors; recruiting and retaining Ph.D.-qualified staff; inadequate staff; disrespect for university tradition; lack of freedom to mount courses without BMAS; unreliable public utilities (especially water and electricity); as well as the use and abuse of drugs by students. The challenge of funding, according to Arikewuyo and Alaba (2013), made the vice chancellors and registrars of private universities in Nigeria appeal to the federal government to assist in the funding of private universities. The Committee argued that since all citizens pay taxes to the government, private universities should also benefit from the Education Tax Fund.

The types of courses and programmes offered by private universities

also come into play. According to the record of approved courses at Nigerian universities, it is clear that most private universities in Nigeria offer courses in management sciences, social sciences, arts, and natural sciences. Only a very few of them mount courses in engineering, medicine, technology, and agricultural sciences. This observation further confirms the findings of Varghese (2004) that private universities in Africa generally offer courses that require less investment in terms of infrastructure and equipment.

Also related to the above is the issue of postgraduate programmes. It has been observed that not all private universities in the country offer postgraduate programmes. Evidence from the National Universities Commission indicates that as of 2020, only thirty-three (33) out of seventy-nine (79) private universities in Nigeria (representing 41.7 percent) offer postgraduate programs (www.nuc.edu.ng). This may be due to the fact that many private universities rely on part-time teachers, according to Arikewuyo and Ichado (2013). This assertion was supported by Varghese (2004b), who discovered that one of the features of private universities in Africa, irrespective of location and orientation, is the fact that most of them rely on part-time teachers. As a result, they find it difficult to offer postgraduate programmes that require high-level teaching staff.

Conclusion

The growth and proliferation of private universities in Nigeria have no doubt widened access to university education in Nigeria. With a total of seventy-nine private universities as of 2020, many candidates now have the opportunity to benefit from university education, though the issue of tuition fees remains a challenge. However, universities need to expand their carrying capacity and manpower in order to be able to offer science and technology courses and postgraduate programmes.

TABLE I
Pattern of UTME Application and Admission to Nigerian Universities (2010–2016)

Year	Application	Admitted	% Admitted
2010	1,513,940	423,531	28%
2011	1,636,356	417,341	26%
2012	1,632,835	447,176	27%
2013	1,924,393	463,395	24%
2014	1,785,608	437,704	25%
2015	1,612,247	485,338	30%
2016	1,598,330	NA	NA

NA: Not available.

Source: National Bureau of Statistics and Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (2017).

Table II
Pattern for utme application and admission to Nigerian universities (2017-2018)

Year	Application	Admitted	% Admitted
2017	1,722,269	566,719	32.9%
2018	1,653,127	549,719	33.2%

Source: National Bureau of Statistics/Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (2019).

Table III

Total enrolment (undergraduate and postgraduate) at private universities in Nigeria in 2017.

S/n	Year estb	Universities	Total	% Female
1	2007	Achievers University, Owo	367	35.97
2	2011	Adeleke University, Ede	2454	52.00
3	2009	Afe Babalola University, Ado-Ekiti	7167	51.53
4	2007	African University of Science & Technology, Abuja	169	26.63
5	2005	Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo	2323	41.50
6	2005	Al-Hikmah University, Ilorin	2868	43.31
7	2005	Al-Qalam University, Katsina	4740	52.45
8	2003	American University of Nigeria, Yola	1120	40.27
9	2016	Anchor University, Ayobo, Lagos state	225	54.67
10	2016	Arthur Jarvis University, Akpabuyo, Cross River State	49	51.02
11	2015	Augustine University	139	50.36
12	1999	Babcock University, Ilishan-Remo	9988	54.02
13	2011	Baze University	1274	44.51
14	2005	Bells University of Technology, Ota	2138	44.86
15	2002	Benson Idahosa University, Benin-City.	2864	55.34

16	2005	Bingham University	2878	55.46
17	2001	Bowen University, Iwo	4175	58.42
18	2007	Caleb University, Lagos	2739	39.47
19	2005	Caritas University, Enugu	1607	34.97
20	2015	Chrisland University	113	51.33
21	2015	Christopher University, Mowe	66	43.94
22	2016	Clifford University, Owerinta, Abia State	206	28.64
23	2016	Coal City University, Enugu	82	51.22
24	2002	Covenant University, Ota	7878	43.04
25	2005	Crawford University, Igbesa	1480	41.55
26	2005	Crescent University	1961	41.00
27	2016	Crown Hill University, Eiyenkorin, Kwara state	37	45.95
28	2016	Dominican University, Ibadan	44	2.27
29	2015	Edwin Clark University, Kiagbodo	387	51.86
30	2017	Eko University of Medical and Health Sciences		

31	2012	Elizade University, Ilara-Mokin	1017	32.94
32	2012	Evangel University, Akaeze	415	48.19
33	2007	Fountain University, Osogbo	1273	64.89
34	2009	Godfrey Okoye University, Uguommu -Nike, Enugu State.	540	52.59
35	2012	Gregory University, Uturu	647	41.89
36	2015	Hallmark University	53	54.72
37	2015	Hezekiah University, Umudi	72	36.11
38	1999	Igbinedion University, Okada	3866	54.01
39	2006	Joseph Ayo Babalola University, Ikeji -Arakeji	2649	45.41
40	2015	Kings University	54	40.76
41	2016	Kola-Daisi University, Ibadan	29	34.48
42	2005	Kwarafa University, Wukari	947	47.20
43	2011	Landmark University, Omu-Aran	2572	36.12
44	2005	Lead City University, Ibadan	2719	53.66
45	2016	Legacy University, Okija, Anambra State	48	64.58

46	1999	Madonna University, Okija	12444	61.93
47	2012	Mcperson University, Seriki Sotayo, Ajebo	417	50.12
48	2015	Micheal Ibru & Cecilia University	277	40.43
49	2015	Mountain Top University	602	48.17
50	2009	Nile University, Abuja	931	57.14
51	2005	Novenna University	506	37.75
52	2009	Oduduwa University, Ipetumodu, Osun State	1279	59.89
53	2017	PAMO University of Medical Sciences, Port Harcourt	NA	NA
54	2002	Pan-Atlantic University, Lagos	977	47.08
55	2009	Paul University, Awka, Anambra State	352	43.18
56	2005	Redeemer's University, Ede	1695	51.62
57	2005	Renaissance University, Enugu	322	55.28
58	2009	Rhema University, Obeama-Asa, Rivers State	395	52.15
59	2015	Ritman University	240	40.83
60	2007	Salem University, Lokoja	1319	35.63
61	2011	Samuel Adegboyega University, Ogwa	413	49.88
62	2015	Summit University	103	50.49
63	2007	Tansian University, Umunya	495	35.56

Source: www.nuc.edu.ng

Recommendations

As a result, it is clear that the proliferation of private universities in Nigeria could be beneficial to the country. However, there is a need for proper monitoring and control by the government through the National Universities Commission (NUC). Recently, the Commission released a code of conduct for the governance of private universities in Nigeria. This was brought about by the forensic audit conducted by the Commission on Private Universities since 2012.

Among other things, it was observed that private universities have the following challenges:

1. Poor implementation of the NUC-approved governance structure;
2. Poor implementation of the University Committee system;
3. Overbearing influence of the proprietors and promoters in the administration of the universities;
4. Poor or lack of delineation of the roles and responsibilities within the governance structure (such as the Board of Trustees, Governing Council, Senate, Committees, etc.);
5. Excessive profit-orientation of many proprietors to the detriment of the social contract aspect of the universities;
6. Interference by family members of the proprietors in the governance of some private universities;
7. Frequent replacement of the administrative staff, especially the vice chancellors, in some private universities (p. VI).

It is therefore recommended that the National Universities Commission (NUC), as the controlling agency for all universities (both public and private), strictly monitor compliance with the Code of Governance by the private universities in order to ensure that the benefits of the proliferation of these universities are efficiently annexed. With this, it is hoped that the proliferation of private universities in Nigeria will be a blessing rather than a curse.

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