

UNIVERSITY EDUCATION IN NIGERIA: GAINS, PAINS AND PROSPECTS

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ABSTRACT

Any significant attempt at nation building and development begins with education. Such an education ought to be adapted to the mentality, traditions, occupations, aptitudes and general worldviews of those being educated. University education, especially, is an important form of investment in human capital. That is why this paper focuses on the gains and pains of university education in Nigeria and the prospects that could boost its sustenance. The study adopts the qualitative research design, with data derived basically from library materials. The expository and evaluative tools are employed to analyse the data. However, this study observed that in spite of the importance and gains derived from university education, Nigeria has been bedeviled by many pains in her university education sector, such that anyone who has the good of the country at heart would agree that the sector needs a divine touch. The paper recommends that all relevant stakeholders ought to put hands on deck towards revamping the waning university education in Nigeria. If this is done, the quality of university education in Nigeria would be engendered so as to create a more educated and functional Nigerian populace and thereby better her social and developmental outlook.

Keywords: Education, University Education, Human Capital Investment, Sustainable National Development, Nigeria.

Introduction

All over the world, education occupies a pride of place in the developmental effort of various nations. Professor Blaise buttresses this assertion by stating that “education is the biggest industry that touches on every fabric of our human endeavour” (62). Various nations, including Nigeria, have been making conscientious efforts to harness this important sector for optimal development. Although much has been achieved in this regard, much still needs to be done in order to confront effectively the ever-increasing challenges of our time. University education, which is our focal point in this essay, is an important form of investment in human capital. It can be viewed as a high level or a specialized form of human capital, contribution of which is very significant to economic growth in any society. This is why Schultz rightly refers to it as – “the engine of development in the new world economy” (17). Nevertheless, it is by adequate university education that people get to know their basic rights and seek to get them enforced. This is because part of the reasons for the smooth ride of the unscrupulous ruling elite lies in the fact that they have constantly worked on the emotions of an ignorant population. Lack of adequate education limits the horizons of the masses and therefore restricts the capacity of the oppressed to extract their rights from the state, as well as to engage in other developmental strides in the social system. However, in spite of the pertinence of university education to any nation, Nigeria has been bedeviled by many woes in her

university education sector. This write-up, will therefore have as its kernel, to consider the situation of the Nigerian university education - the history, relevance, successes and failures as well as areas that need to be touched and how this should be done in order to salvage the university education in Nigeria.

University Education in Nigeria: A Brief History

Various accounts have been given of the advent of university education to Nigeria. The popular theory is that which traces the history of university education in Nigeria “to the Elliot Commission of 1943, which culminated in the establishment of University College Ibadan (UCI) in 1948” (Blaike 49), as an affiliate of the University of London. This view is also shared by Ibukun who contends that “the UCI was saddled with a number of problems at inception ranging from rigid constitutional provisions, poor staffing, and low enrolment to high dropout rate” (57). After this, precisely, in April 1959, the Federal Government commissioned the Ashby Commission to advise it on the higher education needs of the country for its first two decades. Before the submission of the report, the Eastern Region government established the University of Nigeria, Nsukka in 1960. The implementation of the Ashby Report led to the establishment of University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife) in 1962 by the Western region, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria in 1962 by the Northern Region and University of Lagos (1962) by the Federal Government (National Teachers Institute (89). Interestingly, the University College, Ibadan became a full-fledged university in 1962. This meant that UCI, Ibadan and University of Lagos became the first two federal universities in Nigeria - the other three remained regional. In 1976, the newly created Midwestern region opted for a university known as University of Benin. The six universities established during this period 1960-1970 are still referred to as first generation universities. Babalola et al remarked that during this period, “universities in Nigeria were under the close surveillance of the government. Appointments of lay members of the council, and that of the Vice-Chancellor, were politically motivated” (38).

The federal government came to establish seven universities instead of the four proposed in the Third National Development Plan (1975-1980). They also took over the four regional universities in 1975. The new Universities were: Calabar, Ilorin, Jos, Sokoto, Maiduguri, Port Harcourt and Ado Bayero University, Kano all known as second generation universities. The third generation universities were established between 1980 and early 1990. They are: the Federal Universities of Technology/Agriculture in Owerri, Makurdi, Yola, Akure and Bauchi. While state universities were found in Imo, Ondo, Lagos, Akwa- Ibom, Oyo and Cross-River states. The fourth generation universities are those established between 1991 and the present date. They include more state universities, Nigerian open universities and many private universities.

Gains of the Nigerian University Education System

The gains derivable from a good and functional university education system can never be overemphasized. The entire developmental apparatus of the socio-economic structure revolves around a good university education. The contribution of university education to development comes in varied forms. Firstly, it helps in the rapid industrialization of the economy. This it does by providing manpower with adequate professional, technical and managerial skills. In another vein, a good university system helps to boost the transformation of societies into knowledge societies. This it does by providing not just educated workers, but

knowledge workers who will contribute immensely to the growth of the economy (Castells 81).

Furthermore, a worthwhile university education helps to instill good attitudes and engenders attitudinal changes that are necessary for the Socialization of the individuals, thereby, leading to the modernization and overall transformation of the Society. It is also clear that a functional university system helps, through teaching and concise research, the Creation, absorption, dissemination and application of knowledge. Finally, healthy university education helps in the formation of a strong nation state and at the same time aids globalization. "It allows people to enjoy an enhanced life of mind, offering the wider society both cultural and political benefits" (Ike 162).

Even though the university system in Nigeria has not had a very smooth sail from inception, it has witnessed many successes. The gains that Nigeria has derived from the university education become glaring when one considers the five national goals through which Nigeria's philosophy of education draws its strength, namely, to create a democratic and free society, a just and egalitarian society, a united, strong and self-reliant nation, a great and dynamic economy and a land full of bright opportunities for all citizens. University education is more than the next level in the learning process; it is a critical component of human development worldwide. It provides not only the high-level skills necessary for every labor market but also the training essential for teachers, doctors, nurses, civil servants, engineers, humanists, entrepreneurs, scientists, social scientists, and a myriad of other personnel. It is "these trained individuals who develop the capacity and analytical skills that drive local economies, support civil society, teach children, lead effective governments, and make important decisions which affect entire societies" (Taskforce on Higher Education in Nigeria 77). This function of education can be seen vividly in action in Nigeria.

Furthermore, the university education in Nigeria has led to the development of many Nigerians into sound and effective citizens. Here, university education more than any other, has led to higher self-awareness and self-realization of individuals at various tasks, enhanced better human relationships, national consciousness and effective citizenship. One cannot doubt the fact that the university education system has enhanced social, cultural, economic, political, scientific and technological progress in Nigeria. The country is more blessed now with specialists at various fields of endeavour: medicine, law, engineering, philosophy, education, and so on. And due to this development, the nation is becoming more and more dynamic and self-reliant as the days go by. This has been made possible because of the university education. In addition, university education has been on the vanguard of creating opportunities for the teeming Nigerian population. To build a united and egalitarian country entails that every Nigerian should contribute to the development or upliftment of the country. The opportunity to do this in Nigeria has been largely provided by the university education. Apart from serving their fatherland, the university education has continually churned out scholars who have contributed meaningfully to the world's reservoir of knowledge. There is thus growing evidence that university education, through its role in empowering domestic constituencies, favorable regulatory frameworks and governance structures, is vital to a country's efforts to increase social capital and to promote social cohesion, which is proving to be an important determinant of economic growth and building institutions, and nurturing development.

Pains of the Nigerian University Education

In spite of such monumental benefits accruable from a good university education, the Nigerian university system has been subjected to and constrained by what one could describe as several maladies. It is these that we shall consider below. History has it that in the 1960's, 70's and up to the mid 80's the five premier universities, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria; University of Ibadan, University of Ife, University of Lagos, and University of Nsukka were centers of academic excellence. There were few universities and many students to be admitted and competition was very fierce but healthy. Even then, many students with grade II found it difficult to gain admission because there were so many excellent students to pick from. History would recall that the Udoji award was the greatest economic instrument that unraveled Nigeria. During the Gowon era, prices skyrocketed, and then crude oil became the only way that Nigeria generated her revenue. Many otherwise capable farmers, and market men and women abandoned their lands, bought themselves suits, briefcases and headed for Lagos in search of easy money. Earlier in the seventies, government created new states that also demanded for and got their own universities.

One major challenge then was from the Nigerian government. Nigerian government influenced the admission standards by establishing the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board, JAMB, introducing Federal character, catchment areas, etc but without prospective university students that needed admission, but simply got letters from the Head of State, a Governor, or a Minister in order to gain admission. There is nothing wrong with helping another human being in need but when such help is provided, those who stretch their neck out to help must also make sure that such help does not go to waste. In and by itself, "getting to the university at all cost should not be the only reason for the destruction of a viable educational system but the fact that these students did not work hard to justify the chance of a life time" (Ajayi 109).

Today, self-seeking visionless leaders have continued to create new universities without adequate funding and viable strategies for graduates. Unfortunately, the universities were asked to turn out more graduates without adequate plan to absorb the graduates in a viable employment. It was also during this same period that many none graduates that could not execute contracts were awarded contracts, leading to marginalization. These contractors were able to make millions without performing the projects or at best without completing the contracts and nobody queried them. Graduates, students and lecturers found that some of their eastern, northern, and western friends, their parents and fellow lecturers that had access to government became rich overnight. Hard work and excellence was no longer the yardstick by which success was measured but political connection. 'Connected' students were richer than their lecturers and their unemployed graduates. Hence, prospective university students sought admission to university just to attach B.Sc. or M.Sc. to their names. "Many also thought that they needed the degrees to legitimize the wealth they obtained from easy money making with or without a credible degree" (Taskforce on Higher Education and Society 62). Hence, some bought degrees from unscrupulous fake degree peddlers. Our take on this, however, is that history is judging the prudence of government, students, lecturers and parents for complicity in the fallen and falling standards of university education in Nigeria. Let us peer into the level of complicity of the various groups.

Down the line, it is obvious that initially, military government had no use for the universities except to the extent that their educational policies agitated the students. Naturally, the students had reasons to go against policies that were suicidal to their learning. Such student oppositions came during the popular "Ali must go" fiasco. Since the academic staff had once invited government to intervene in their internal affairs during Gowon's government, it was not too surprising that the military government then ordered students to be mowed down as in the case of Odi situation to teach a lesson. Agents were planted among lecturers to spy on students and university staff. Some of the errand-boys were made political Vice Chancellors and their professorial positions were politically influenced. International Monetary Fund (IMF) gave out loans that the leaders further used to destroy the outstanding educational systems in Nigeria. This gave rise to a mass exodus of many brilliant lecturers that could not compete on political campus arenas from the university campus. Some left to join the rat race in the business world and others left Nigeria. The political professors often silenced the lone voices of active and academic professors. Without bedeviling any of the military governments, the blame for the state of university education falls squarely on the academic staff and those that betrayed the institutions and the establishment (Nwangwu 214).

The lecturers had their own toll on the running down of the university education as well. Many lecturers became rich by selling out to any government in power, selling notes to students that wish to pass a course or selling out examination papers or marks. In fact, many that aligned themselves with government of the day displayed wealth on campus and the scramble for political academic power began in earnest. What did some of the heads of States gain from this exercise? Some of them that could not even spell their names were given honorary degrees to add to the repertoire of their many ill-earned titles. On a more serious note, Nigerian government encouraged, and members of the elite class participated to make Nigeria a dumping ground for almost all substandard imported products by the new breed of businessmen that made easy money. Unemployed graduates and university students were noting that it did not take a genius to get contract and they learnt their lessons well. Nigerian government preferred to give simple projects to foreign firms in return for 10% kickback at the expense of the country (students, workers), and Universities that needed opportunities to gain from and transfer technology to the nation (Michael, Matthew, Eugene Aliegba and Adewole Alagbe 172).

The parents did not help matters either. Parents used to be the backbone of the nation. They taught their children right from wrong, and they also taught them the value of hard work. The cultural and societal implication of not receiving good education was drilled into them. Parents used to deny themselves to provide good university education for their children. One may ask how parents contributed to the decline in education in all tertiary institutions in Nigeria. While parents were sure that their children did not meet admission requirements, they encouraged purchase of admission but did not follow up their children's performance to ensure a good return on their investment. Today, however, some children are richer than their parents because they engage in less than honorable acts. Most parents became businesspersons in oil business and other concerns, chasing after contracts and acquiring more cars and houses while neglecting the moral, social, and academic needs of their children. Money was thrown at every problem. The result was, and still is, graduating students that pass through schools but that do not excel and yet are graduated.

Prospects for Nigerian Universities

Having provided a bird-eye view of the systemic genesis of the current state of university education in Nigeria, it is apt to consider the prospects of the university system in Nigeria so that we can together retrace our footsteps and begin to resolve the problem. From the expose, we all share the blame for the lackluster state of the nation's university education system. Government must be blamed for not creating an enabling academic environment through prioritization of funds and the creation of necessary employment to justify the establishment of so many universities. The lecturers must take responsibility for deciding to play financial politics instead of proudly teaching the students. It must be acknowledged that some may have been driven to the brink by circumstances beyond their control but this does not excuse them. Students share part of the responsibilities because they work so hard to purchase degrees/certificates in cash or in kind without mastering what it takes to be worthy of the degree/certificates. Finally, our capable and able parents failed to monitor the progress of their children against morally, socially, academically acceptable standards.

If the Nigerian government is very serious towards revamping the educational system, it is time to appropriately fund the university system in Nigeria. This would not only improve the quality of education for the teeming population, but will also attract some of the country's professionals in the Diaspora. They have fortunately acquired all of the know-how and technologies that the country needs and should be brought back to salvage Nigeria. The truth is that if Nigeria did not knowingly or conspiratorially destroy the educational system, it would be easy to attract capable Nigerians from the Diaspora to help rebuild the nation that they aptly criticize from the Diaspora. The government and concerned relevant agencies should therefore rise up to the challenge of revamping the Nigerian university education system so as to benefit lavishly from the benefits that are accruable from this sector.

Conclusion

There is no gain reiterating that an educated populace is vital in today's world. This fact becomes more indubitable considering the convergent impacts of globalization, the increasing importance of knowledge as a main driver of growth, and the information and communication revolution. Knowledge accumulation and application have become major factors in economic development and are increasingly at the core of a country's competitive advantage in the global economy. However, the state of higher educational system in Nigeria has been very discouraging and sad. It is very sad because it reflects the frustration university lecturers, students, and parents have been feeling. However, instead of feeling sorry, Nigerians should renew their interest and resolve to revive the quality of the educational system for the next generation. No Nigerian can exonerate himself from the culpability of the deplorable state of the nation's educational system.

A pertinent question here is, does the government have the capacity to change the direction of the nation or is it just paying lip service to all problems? Let no one make the mistake, Nigerians will survive in any situation they find themselves but we want them to survive in an academically, socially and morally acceptable environment just like their counterparts in other parts of the world. The deplorable conditions of higher education and the rate of unemployment in Nigeria are clear and present dangers to any old and new political party. Nigerians need a benevolent and patriotic government consisting of people that are ready to wipe falling tears of the citizens and help them dream again. An old Chinese proverb says

that; "We have not inherited the earth from our ancestors, we have only borrowed it from our children." Posterity will judge us by whatever we do today, whether we paid our dues or we shortchanged our children.

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