

Private Universities in Nigeria: Emergent Realities and Coping Strategies

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Abstract

This paper analyzed the emergence of private universities in Nigeria since 1999. A close examination of the ownership structure of these universities revealed that not less than 50% are wholly-owned by Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs) with the remainder coming under a variety of interests ranging from business partnerships to private individuals. A comparative analysis of the fees structure of the private universities studied vis-à-vis publicly-funded ones revealed that there exist huge differences between them. With regard to course offering, it was found that unlike the “super market model” prevalent in publicly-funded universities, the “boutique model” predominate their privately-owned counterparts regardless of ownership background. Full-time well-trained and experienced staff (especially in the academic cadre,) are grossly insufficient to meet needs and, the tendency is towards heavy dependence on ill-trained, inexperienced and over-used academics from public universities. Not surprisingly, the research and development (R&D) strength of these universities is virtually non-existent. Taken singly and considered collectively, these problems have been proved to constitute serious challenges to private universities and demonstrably impact negatively upon their activities. This paper critically examined the private universities sub-sector in Nigeria from the angle of the factors mentioned and prescribed various coping strategies for ameliorating identified challenges.

Keywords: higher education, private universities, public universities, faith based organizations, fee payment.

INTRODUCTION

Private higher education has been described as encompassing a broad range of institutions that are self-financing (profit-making enterprise as any other corporate entity), as well as those that receive partial public funding support and public institutions that run profit-making courses (Varghese, 2002). The private sector, according to the outcome of a recent international survey, is the fastest growing segment in higher education in all countries examined in the case studies (UNESCO, 2003). The growth in the number of private institutions has outstripped by far that of public institutions to the extent that the number of private higher education institutions now exceeds those of the public sector in CIS countries where the changing political scenario has been identified as an influential factor (UNESCO, 2003a). Whereas in one hand this growth is attributable to a curb in public funding in Kenya, in Bangladesh on the other hand, the inability of public institutions to satisfy the growing social demand for higher education has been held accountable for this situation. The widely acknowledged fact of explosive sectoral growth is in tandem with the remark of Varghese (2002), that most Asian countries witnessed a similar pattern of growth in their universities sector.

Emerging Realities

In Nigeria, recent developments in the area of private university education have resulted in one of the most astounding sub-sectoral growth rates ever witnessed in the country's education sector (NUC, 2005; Erinsho, 2007). To illustrate this point, whereas it took thirty years for 36 public universities to emerge, it has in contrast, taken less than fifteen years for over 50 private universities to take-off. Indications are that many more will follow suit shortly, most likely specialized ones in the tone of Pan-African University, Lagos. These are direct consequences of the acceptance by government, of the findings of an administrative commission (FGN, 1992). The establishment of private universities was enabled by Decree No.16 of 1985 as amended by Decree No 9 of 1993. In line with their provisions, ‘licenses to operate’ were issued in 1999 to four private universities namely: Babcock, Igbinedion, Madonna and Heritage respectively. The enabling environment for this legislative action was provided by the fact that data from very reliable sources had shown that the rate of unsatisfied demand for university education in Nigeria was increasing geometrically without any concurrent positive development in the areas of physical growth and infrastructural facilities (JAMB, 1997-1999: 2001; 2004. ESA, 2003). Verifiable evidence has been adduced to show

that this 'admission denial rate' has of recent increased to 89.97%.

Of the 50 private universities approved, 27 were founded and are operated by Faith Based

Organisations (FBO's), 19 are owned by private individuals, and 5 others by partnerships and 1 corporate ownership, as shown in Table 1, below.

Table 1: Ownership Pattern of Private Universities in Nigeria and Tuition Fee Range

S/No	Name of University	Type of Proprietor.	Year Licensed	Tuition Range (₦'000)
1	Babcock University, Ogun State	FBO	1999	500-1,500
2	Igbinedion University, Edo State	Individual	1999	320-493
3	Madonna University, Anambra State	Individual	1999	Not Available
4	Heritage University, Niger State*	Individual	1999	
5	Benson Idahosa University, Edo State	FBO	2002	171-250
6	Bowen University, Osun State	FBO	2001	180-240
7	Covenant University, Ogun State	FBO	2002	373-502
8	Pan African University, Lagos State	Partnership	2002	Not Available
9	Crescent University, Ogun State	FBO	2005	475-480
10	The Bells University, Ogun State	Individual	2005	Not Available
11	ABTI-American University, Adamawa State	Partnership	2003	1,590-2000
12	Caritas University, Enugu State	FBO	2004	Not available
13	Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo State	FBO	2005	500-600
14	Al-Hikmah University, Kwara State	Individual	2005	Not Available
15	Bingham University, Nassarawa State	FBO	2005	270-655
16	CETEP City University, Lagos State**	Individual	2005	
17	Katsina (Islamic) University, Katsina State	FBO	2005	Not Available
18	Redeemers University, Ogun State	FBO	2005	510-550
19	Wukari Jubilee University, Taraba State	FBO	2005	Not Available
20	Crescent University, Ogun State	FBO	2005	475-480
21	Leads City University, Oyo State.	Individual	2005	450-600
22	Crawford University, Ogun State.	FBO	2005	295-450
23	Novena University, Delta State	Individual	2005	Not Available
24	Renaissance University, Enugu State	Individual	2005	Not Available
25	University of Mkar, Benue State	FBO	2005	Not Available
26	Joseph Ayo Babalola University, Osun State	FBO	2006	Not Available
27	Obong University, Cross River State	Individual	2007	130-150
28	Caleb University, Lagos State	Individual	2007	550
29	Fountain University, Osun State	FBO	2007	Not Available
30	Salem University, Kogi State	FBO	2007	524-574
31	Tansian University, Enugu State	Individual	2007	90-150
32	Veritas University, Abuja	FBO	2007	250
33	Wesley University of Science and Technology, Ondo State	FBO	2007	250-300
34	Western Delta University, Delta State	Individual	2007	180
35	Calvary University, Ogun State	FBO	2007	Not Available
36	Achievers University, Ondo State	Partnership	2007	350-550
37	African University of S&T, Abuja	Partnership	2007	1,755
38	Wellspring University, Edo State	Partnership	2009	Not Available
39	Rhema University, Abia State	Individual	2009	160-325
40	Paul University, Anambra State	FBO	2009	300
41	Oduduwa University, Osun State	Individual	2009	164
42	Nigerian Turkish Nile University, Abuja	Corporate	2009	1,500-1,600
43	Godfrey Okoye University, Enugu State	FBO	2009	Not Available
44	Afe Babalola University, Ekiti State	Individual	2009	350-750
45	Adeleke University, Osun State	Individual	2011	350-500
46	Baze University, Abuja	Individual	2011	1,650
47	Landmark University, Kwara State	FBO	2011	300-550
48	Samuel Adegboyega University, Edo State	FBO	2011	400-500
49	Mcperson University, Ogun State	FBO	2012	441-490
50	South Western University, Ogun State	Not Available	2012	350-420
51	Elizade University, Ondo State	Individual	2012	750-1,100
52	Evangel University, Ebonyi	FBO	2012	Not Available

Source: Field Survey

*Yet to be operational as at the time of writing

**License suspended as at time of writing.

***Exchange Rate at time of writing is ₦150 to a \$1

Apprehension has been expressed in certain quarters that the lopsided ownership structure of these universities (in favor of FBOs,) could constitute the

kernel for unintended complications in the religious fabric of the nation (Alani, 2007).

It has however been asserted that whilst it is true that Christian FBO's own over 60% of all private universities in Nigeria, it is nevertheless equally true that the religious background of promoters does not

form a determining criterion for approval (or otherwise,) of applications to own and operate private universities in the country. Relatedly, observations have been made that the skewed pattern of regional (i.e. North versus South) distribution of these universities could be indicative of a bias in favor of the latter and become the basis for future political unrest although this is quite easily debunked by verifiable facts of historical patterns of educational growth and development (Fafunwa, 1974,) as well as the uncontested evidence that regional origin of applicant(s) is not a factor in the eligibility criteria for approval of private universities (NUC, 2007). On the contrary, location appears to be purely market-driven as has been proved to be the case in other places where such developments took place (Suspitin, 2003); (Altbach and Teffera, 2004). The fact that not less than 35% of the private universities are located in the "Lagos-Ogun Megalopolis" clearly illustrates the veracity of this averment.

Fee Structure

All the private universities, subject matter of this study, are profit oriented. Nevertheless, sharp differences exist within the genre, in regard to fees payable across the wide spectrum of options. Tuition fees constitute the bulwark of their financial strength as the size of their income is totally dependent upon the number of students enrolled. Profits are maximized by a larger enrolment. Compared with public universities, the fees regime of most private universities in Nigeria as noted by Erinosh (2007), is in the range of N300, 000 to N500,000 per session unlike the less than N100,000 payable in public federal and state universities as reflected in Table 2, below.

Table 2: Fees payable (per session,) in selected universities in Nigeria

S/No	Universities	Tuition Fee Range (₦'000)
1	Ahmadu Bello University, Kaduna State	13
2	University of Calabar, Cross River State	41 - 40
3	Federal university Lafia, Kogi State	45 - 35
4	University of Lagos, Lagos State	60- 90
5	Anambra State University, Anambra State	86-100
6	Bauchi State University, Bauchi State	23-46
7	Benue State University, Benue State	50-55
8	Osun State University, Osun State	105 -115
9	University of Benin, Edo State	39 - 60
10	Cross river State University of Science and Technology , Cross River State	22- 26

Source: <http://toscanacademy.com> accessed 3/10/12

Table 3: Number of students Admitted into Public and Private Universities from 2002 to 2007 sessions

Years	Public	Private	% Admitted to Private Universities
2002/2003	68,613	981	1.42
2003/2004	117,551	817	0.69
2004/2005	121,972	3,701	3.03
2005/2006	77,947	3,427	4.39
2006/2007	81,584	6,722	8.23

Source: Secondary Data from JAMB

Course Structure

It has been proved that whereas public universities in Nigeria provide wide-ranging academic programmes (Erinosh, 2007), private ones on the other hand are principally interested in market-driven courses. Like their counterparts in other parts of the world, Nigerian private universities concentrate on courses that do not necessitate huge investments in equipment and research facilities (Suspitin, 2003; Bernasconi, 2003).

Thus, compared with public universities, most private institutions tend to offer Humanities/Social Science-based courses. Due mostly to lack of facilities, very few of them are seriously into Science and Technology courses. Following a variety of reasons therefore, whereas public universities in Nigeria provide wide ranging academic programmes based on the supermarket model, the private ones on the other hand are basically engrossed in consumer-targeted courses rooted on the boutique model.

Staffing Situation

It is universally acknowledged that there exists a direct correlation between the quality of teachers and the standard of education. The point has been made severally that an unintended fall-out of the explosive growth recorded in the university sector is a relative contraction of requisite human resource (Obanya, 2002; Obasi, 2004; Akpotu, 2005). As noted by Erinosh (2007) and Varghese (2002), many private institutions economize by employing teaching staff on a part-time and or, non-tenured basis. Interestingly, most of the part-time teachers (mostly "moon lighters",) come from co-located or nearby publicly funded universities. The critical shortage of well-trained and adequately experienced staff has led to a severe dilution of the quality of academic staff along with its concomitant effect on the quality of the learning milieu. Staff development requires urgent attention.

Research and Development

Although public universities have a long history of research and development, of recent in Nigeria, this has been affected by the under-funding of the education sector. Nigeria was sometime ago ranked very low in the quality of scientific and engineering endeavor measured in terms of the level of its

research and development activities (Babalola, Sikwibele, Sulaman 2002). It has been averred that most private universities are yet to find their feet in research and development. At a recent National Universities Commission organized Research Fair, very few private universities participated; a situation perhaps reflective of their level of (non-) involvement in research. According to Varghese (2002), private universities are more often teaching institutions where research is almost non-existent.

Challenges

El-Khawas (2001), has stated that flexibility and responsiveness underpin the framework for the assessment of world class universities. Four broad areas viz: access; quality of teaching and learning; financing profile; and governance have been identified as crucial indices of this framework. Featuring prominently among the points most frequently adduced in favor of private universities are the following:

- Reduction in the burden of government expenditure
- Improvement in the efficiency of the operation of schools
- Increase in the diversity and choice of courses and opportunities
- Enhancement of sectoral accountability

The challenges facing private universities in Nigeria strictly speaking are not significantly different from those besetting the publicly funded ones. From the aforesaid, the challenges being faced by private universities in Nigeria could be summed up as funding, staffing and lack of infrastructural development. These are generally classifiable as 'internal' and 'external' in character. Nwadiani, (1998), has opined in this regard that whereas the external problems are inextricably wedded to politics and proprietorial interference, the internal difficulties include cultism, unionism, and shortage of academic staff as well as disruption of academic calendar (Williams, 1992). In addition to the framework analyzed earlier, the difficulties referred to above constitute the challenges which private universities must tackle if they are to make a difference and remain relevant in the higher education sector given Nigeria's peculiar circumstances.

Coping Strategies

The problem of funding has led to the imposition of very high fees-relative to the public sector-, in addition to a course regime that is tilted more towards pecuniary considerations than the ideal of human resources development and socio-political transformation. This has however resulted in an apparently unplanned state of affairs whereby private universities provide educational opportunities to only children from affluent homes; thus constituting more of a status symbol than a learning and socialization

media. Private universities have in addition to the above, sought to tackle funding challenges by mounting courses as well as academic programmes in gross disregard of the developmental needs of the country. Such fund-seeking activities have unfortunately emphasized profit yielding programmes in preference to others more suited to the pursuit of the overall development of the nation. Endowments, investments, alumni relations and other allied fund raising mechanisms are generally absent.

Shortage of appropriate staff is being addressed through a variety of measures ranging from 'Visiting' positions through contract (temporary appointments) and in-service training positions to the outright deployment of ill-trained and inexperienced staff. Universities located in the densely populated or, areas with a long history of tertiary education, generally share staff albeit informally. Outright poaching is rare as none (except one) of these universities offers any special incentive package to justify permanent relocation by staff. Expatriate staffs are very rare and can be found only in the lone university with unique and enhanced conditions of service.

The observed dearth of activities in research and development has caught the attention of both internal supervisory organs as well as external regulatory agencies with the effect that efforts are being intensified to redress the situation. Difficulties encountered in this connection are numerous and vary from inadequate finance, poorly trained and ill-motivated staff to gross shortage of appropriate structures and facilities.

Nigerian universities are bedeviled by the twin cankerworms of incessant strikes (industrial action by various categories of staff) and the nightmare of cults which often necessitate shut-downs lasting sometimes for as long as six months with consequent frequent dislocation of academic calendar. Remarkably, all private universities in the country have been able thus far, to avoid these problems by the expedience of disallowing labor union activities among staff as well as seriously screening and closely scrutinizing the behavior of students prior to admission and for the duration of their studentship.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is a well known fact that higher education promotes income growth and that the quality of any country's higher education sector is a fundamental determinant of that country's relative position in the world economy. To this extent therefore, access to education (especially higher education,) is a very important policy focus of any development-conscious country. The opening up of space for private participation in this sector is intended among other things, to widen as well as deepen the opportunities for access while broadening choices.

Private universities in Nigeria can be said to be working towards the attainment of this objective. The dilemma however is how to ensure that plural systems do not in the process, unwittingly arise whereby the country ends up with one type of education for the rich and another for the poor. The solution lies in a policy framework which ensures equitable access while respecting the business decisions of the universities.

At all levels of the educational enterprise, the quality of the products is inextricably linked to the qualities of both the moderating media (i.e. Teachers) and the learning environment in terms of structures, facilities and equipment. Even though Nigerian private universities may be said to have acquitted themselves relatively well with regard to the latter, they are unfortunately, grossly lacking in the former. An unavoidable fall-out of this situation is the largely arid terrain of research and development, an area requiring urgent and concerted intervention.

The ability of the universities to remain open and carry out all their activities and programmes suggests that it is not all the time that labor union actions are in the best interests of all concerned and, that strikes do not necessarily constitute the surest means of settling labor disputes. Having accepted the relevance of private initiatives to the pursuit of the goals of education, it is apposite to recall the four broad concerns of access, quality of teaching and learning, financing profile and governance, which, taken collectively or individually as the case may be, have over-arching influence on the effectiveness of the universities. It is recommended therefore, that in all the critical functions profiled under 'the emerging realities' section above, private universities should seek to ensure that they attain a reduction in the burden of government expenditure while looking for improvements in the efficiency of the operation of school in the midst of an increase in the diversity and choice of courses and opportunities and, in this manner, enhancing sectoral accountability.

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