The
Social Costs
of
Privatization
And
Deregulation
In Nigeria

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PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES AND THE PROBLEMS OF TERTIARY

EDUCATION IN NIGERIA: WHICH WAY FORWARD'

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INTRODUCTION

One of the biggest fallout of the prolonged crisis of Africa's political economics since the 1970s has been the erosion of the fundamental values that guide institutional behaviour and social practices. These consequences resulting from dwindling economic fortunes, collapse of socio-cultural values, political instability associated with prolonged military rule, policy inconsistencies etc have had grave implications for the well-being of all social institutions in the Nigeria society particularly the educational sector.

The result of this obvious social malaise has brought about the erosion of the core objective for the setting up of tertiary education, with the primary purpose of creating human intellectual capacity base to harness the vast natural resources that abound in the Land. In its place, our tertiary institutions rather than be the citadel of sound academic learning, have become breeding ground for political thugs, secret cults activities, infrastructural decay associated with poor funding, dearth of qualified teaching and administrative personnel, value deficiency, incessant closure due to strikes (academic & non academic) and students unrest.

It is against this background that this paper seeks to examine the place of private universities' (secular/religious) involvement in tertiary education and to what extent have they been able to address the myriad of challenges facing tertiary education in Nigeria, given the adoption of the IMF/World Bank economic reform policy of privatization, deregulation and liberalization under the aegis of structural adjustment programme (SAP) since 1986.

To be able to address these concerns the paper is divided into the following parts. Part one deal with the importance of university education in promoting national development and nation building. Part two addresses the mandate of private universities' involvement in tertiary education following government deregulation

of the sector. Part three looks at the systemic structures applied by private universities in the discharge of their assigned tasks of tackling the challenges that characterized higher education in Nigeria. Part four identifies likely challenges that hamper the promotion of effective tertiary education by private universities. Part five provides the conclusions and suggestions on the way forward for the advancement of tertiary education in Nigeria.

The importance of Tertiary Education toward promoting National development

One of the mega-trends in higher education development has been the proliferation of private universities in the African continent over the last two decades. Be that as it may, Universities are seen as essential and sacred elements of modern society for the acquisition and renewal of employable skills needed to help solve socio-economic, political and technological problems. This is particularly so because the level of any nation's development is closely tied to its level of educational pursuit. This is because higher education institution provides the society with the capacity base for knowledge production and utilization toward the promotion of lifelong practices necessary for upgrading knowledge and skills.

It also creates as well as transmits culture by stimulating intellectual inquiry and critical thinking, sparking the development of new ideas (Hurn, 1978). Besides, Higher Education help foster social integration of culturally diverse people into one unified whole, by internalizing in the people the capacity to learn a common culture- language, values, beliefs on fundamental social goals (Benavot et al., 1991). In all, higher education serves as the 'melting pot' for nurturing skills needed for societal development.

With regard to Nigeria, the emergence of higher education dates back to 1932 when the British government established the Yaba high college in Lagos. This was followed by the University of Ibadan formed in 1948 as a college of the University of London and later became a full-fledged university in 1962. Since then, the Nigerian university systems have witnessed tremendous growth. At present, we have 24 federal universities with four inter-varsity centers; 23 state government universities and over 16 privately owned universities (Omoregie, 1995). However, the phenomenal expansion in the Nigerian University system has occurred without a commensurate increase in the levels of funding with government expenditure dropping from 27% to 9.4% in 2001 (National University Commission, 2004), improved infrastructural facilities and quality manpower etc; a situation that has brought some untoward effects for the creation of skills and intellectual capacity development.

Coupled with this is the fact that the hitherto global acceptability, recognition, and respectability that the Nigerian university education used to enjoy in

Western Europe and the United States began to wane as a result of instability in the system characterized by the truncation of academic sessions occasioned by recurring protracted strikes actions between the government and Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), Students demonstrations, secret cults killings etc and unanticipated consequences of the adoption of the policies of structural adjustment such as devaluation, privatisation, liberalization which has curtained government expenditures on social services like health and education . These inequities and iniquities have all conspire to bring about the steady but inexorable decay in higher education in Nigeria. With this plethora of problems came the strong clamour from all quarters for the restructuring and revitalization of the education sector particularly higher education, which brought the emergence of private universities in sub-Saharan Africa in the 1990s.

The Development of Private Universities:

Given the state of the prolonged political and socio-economic crisis in the 1970s in which sub-Saharan Africa countries was hit by a serious problems: declined terms of trade, worsening balance of payment deficits and high level corruption among political elites. The period created an external dimension of relationships with which most African states' economics (including Nigeria) interacted with the activities of multi-lateral institutions of the World Bank/IMF in redressing their economic woes.

It was this relationship that set in motion the adoption of Structural adjustment programme (SAP) by Nigeria resulting in the decline in government expenditure on social services like health, education particularly higher education in compliance with the World Bank's position in the 1980s regarding the role of universities in educational development as evidenced by the World bank's education portfolio support for Africa which dropped from 17% in 1985 to 7% in 1995-1999. One of the arguments put forward by the World body was that the rate of return on higher education to the individual is greater than to the society and therefore multi-lateral financial institutions should focus on encouraging basic and primary education rather than higher education. A flurry of reforms measures were introduced by African governments under this policy guidance starving higher education institutions of funds which compromised their ethical, scientific and educational standards.

The position canvassed by the World body on higher education in Africa has had serious impact in the way most African countries have carried on with the funding of tertiary institutions in engaging the policies of Structural adjustment. The key element here was that the adoption of the process of economic liberalization and deregulation which emphasized cost recovery by government gave impetus for the introduction of private sector participation in the running of higher education in the country.

It was this trend that marked the emergence of Private universities (religious and secular), all having missions and mandates, while stressing the importance of the contributions they were making toward the development objectives of nation building and human power planning in advancing a better society. Most of these universities in Africa (Nigeria inclusive) began in the 1990s in a relatively new educational environment that was undergoing major development reform where the demand for higher education went well beyond what the public institutions could provide.

Within this context, several mission (religious) based private higher institutions have also emerged to provide alternatives to the general public institutions in restoring the fundamental values of institutional and cultural practices that was lost to value deficiency over the last three decades. And in some other circumstances private higher education institutions have emerged to meet the demand for "internationally recognized" qualification in terms of the quality of input (such as students, staff, facilities and curriculum), processes (relating to the teaching–learning interaction, management and use of resources), and outcomes regarding the knowledge base, skills and disposition of the graduates) which have dropped considerably owing to the deterioration (sometimes near collapse) of their public sectors counterpart that were suffering from a severe lack of infrastructure, poor funding and inconsistencies in government policies(Altbach, 1999; UNESCO,1994). However, the establishment of private higher education institutions in Nigeria have provided certain benefits which include providing people increasing access to higher education, increasing competitiveness among public and private higher educational institutions, thereby improving the quality in the provision of curricula and curriculum content; increasing institutional and programmatic diversification; diversifying the financial resource base for higher education systems; amongst other reasons specific to individual countries. (Geiger, 1985:386).

The Mandate of Private Sector Participation in Higher Education

The subject of private sector participation in higher education in sub-Sahara Africa is more crucial given the region's needs that require a plethora of ideas and solutions in addressing several socio-economic, political, health and environmental challenges facing the continent. i.e. wars, famine, diseases and poverty. Thus, private providers of higher education should become part of the solution providers to the problems rather than being a burden if they are to rise up to the challenge of a globalised world and knowledge economy which is ICT driven.

It is essential for everyone involved in dealing with the challenges that confront the sector to keep abreast of developments and required skills and resources that should ensure development of higher education in the sub-continent. This is

paramount because once challenges are known; it becomes incumbent upon institutions, policy makers and other participants in higher education (e.g. business, community leaders, parents and students) to find ways of addressing them.

Following the entry of private universities into the higher education sector a lot has been required of them in terms of meeting the goals and objectives of university education in the area of teaching, research, and community service. This responsibility which is the primary purpose for their existence demands that they create and provide the right academic environment that will make learning conducive and rewarding. To achieve this goal, the private universities' faces the challenge of exchanging traditional curriculum with new and innovative models.

Their existence should be driven by a clear mission statement regarding the specific social needs of society that they intend to meet if they are to provide real program differentiation from the existing ones. In the same vein, private universities needs to develop curricula that should be able to withstand the proof of quality maintenance and assurance while continuing to adapt to local needs and labour market demands. In addition, their curricula should be able to give greater attention to issues of moral regeneration and instillation of values and attitudes amongst their students. For as Schwartzman (2002,101) observes: Higher education is not just about providing students with a profession and skills, but also with values and attitudes that contribute to countries national and cultural identities.

Broadly speaking, private universities should seek to strive for global competitiveness with curricula that take cognisance of universal graduate standard. To achieve this goal of academic excellence, private higher education institutions are challenged to balance the goal of producing graduates with that of being able to address the needs of their immediate communities, which may necessarily be similar to global challenges. In all private higher educational institutions should meet up with the 'rediscovery' of its indispensable role in the restoration and maintenance of national development.

Following the centrality of knowledge as a critical component of modern development and national competitiveness at the global level, private higher institutions should be expected to play an even direct role than before. Partly in consequence, therefore, the quality of teaching, research and the effectiveness of their contribution to policy formulation, production, management and social life, as well as their cost efficiency becomes a matter of public notice and concern. We must move away from an environment of simply being tenacious to an environment capable of realizing the development of our universities for sustainable development.

While higher education plays a crucial role in national economic growth, there can be no doubt that it serves more than economic purposes, to which private institution of higher education must take cognizance of. In addition, they should also acknowledge the other purposes of higher education to include: the improvement of social justice through fair access, the pursuit of knowledge for more than commercial ends, the spread of a broad range of skills and capabilities across the entire population, and the education of a democratically informed critical citizenry. What is vital regarding private sector participation in higher education is on 'reinserting the public good' into higher education transformation. For the private sector to be able to meet their mandate of involvement in higher education in Nigeria, they must avoid the pitfalls associated with the public universities in terms of inadequate facilities (lecture rooms, lecture theatres, laboratories, libraries and information and communication technology).

The Systemic Structure of Private Universities

For private higher educational institutions to be able to meet its statutory responsibility of providing qualitative higher education, these private educational institutions needs to be structured and organized in line with their core vision, mission and foundational objectives. This must be clearly articulated to address issues relevant to the private initiatives regarding higher education in Nigeria. The purpose of private higher education universities should reflect the general tendency of modern societies towards specialization in specific fields like medicine, engineering, information technology etc, transmission of skills, knowledge, and information etc in addressing the current challenges of tertiary education in Nigeria.

In assessing the principle of university structure and organization in private universities, our concern is focused on the need to ascertain to what extent the private sector initiatives in higher education has been able to grapple with the issues of funding, governance and academic standards. This is in tandem with meeting the challenges of relating higher education to the needs of society, since these have been the main challenges that most public universities have had to grapple with over the years. The question that arises therefore is how to build consensus around critical national development, and the proper goals of higher education, and to use it a yardstick for specific policies and actions. In this context, private universities must demonstrate their social relevance not only in their esoteric research, but also through their contributions to meeting the needs of the industry (Oni, 2003).

In terms of financing, the issue that arises is that the private universities need to have the resources to provide quality education. This is obvious because adequate funding of higher education is imperative for the realization of its primary objectives as stated in the national policy of education which include -

production of effective and efficient high level manpower for national development, production of good citizens and the development of the ideas, skills, and attitude necessary and fundamental for the development and advancement of prosperous, free, and peaceful nation. Without adequate funding' it is clear that private higher education will suffer from malnutrition, thereby debasing the quality of education.

With regard to meeting academic standards, it is imperative for private higher institutions to put in place adequate mechanism to ensure continuous improvement of quality in the area of students' admission, academic staff recruitment, and learning programmes. Quality assurance in private universities should be managed in accordance with the mission statement of the institution as well as adhering to nationally and international acceptable quality criteria that will lead to the production of national relevant, entrepreneurial and globally competitive graduates. The framework that should serve as guidelines for institutions is to ensure progress in the establishment of internal quality assurance that will comprise their visions, aims and goals, learning philosophy, academic policies and practices (Vroeijenstein, 2001). This is particularly fundamental since the only way private higher education will grow is if it is based on a system of effective management of quality assurance that nurtures creativity and innovation. As such good quality offering should be the objective of all higher education.

Furthermore, while it has been shown that public universities have a long history of quality assurance mechanisms and academic decision making bodies to ensure checks and balances in the system, the same can not be said of many private higher educational institutions in Nigeria, a situation that has led to various accusation against private universities of allowing business motives to take priority over academic interests. This trend should be reverse if we are to ensure long-term survival of private higher institutions.

Thus a model should be put in place to make provision for the separation of business and academic interests to assure the independence of academic decision-making in private institution. Without a clear allocation of responsibility, quality assurance will not receive the necessary focus and resources, which are essential for ensuring the long-term survival of the private higher institutions. For Sursock (2001) comments that quality assurance has become one of the major issues in higher education in the 1990s, to the extent that it is now identified as the emergence of the "evaluative state" in higher education development in the world.

Looking at the structure upon which most private higher educational institutions are build, it is imperative to ascertain the philosophical base that underlie these institutions in general and the specific courses and programmes offered in

particular, and to what extent are the curricula and the pedagogic quality of the programmes and courses geared toward inculcating strategies that will revitalize the learning environment.

This therefore brings to focus the issue of looking at the processes from which the private higher institutions evolve their academic and socio-cultural ethos. Our emphasis here is that private universities should be guided by the realization of providing a holistic curriculum that will prepare students both for the world of work and life in general through the provision of a sound spiritual, academic, and ethically life applicable skills, targeted towards the restoration of the fundamental values that once guided our institutional behaviour and social practices. This ideology should take on a sacred inspirational dimension that lends an air of moral authority to these institutions that is worthy of emulation by all.

Challenges Associated with the Promotion of Effective Private Tertiary Education

From the foregoing discourse, it is clear that private sector involvement in higher education is a welcome development as it plays a supportive role to public sector educational institutions. Be that as it may, their participation in higher education leaves much to be desired considering the contributions they are making toward the overall advancement of this all important educational sector. Just like the public universities, the private higher education institutions are also confronted with similar challenges though of a different degree and magnitudes.

Of particular mention at this junction is the tendency by private institutions to specialize in less capital intensive fields of study in order to maximize profit, while investment in the fields of physical sciences, engineering, medicine, law and information technology remain largely peripheral, however fundamental they are to national development. Also related to this is the fact that there is no single specialized private sector involvement mainly in post graduate research-oriented based universities simply because of the high intensive capital nature of engaging in such ventures, for which they are not ready to plough their investment. In the midst of these challenges, some private institutions are grappling with the overbearing influence and undue interference by the proprietors of these institutions in their day to day activities which has become very worrisome, to the extent that it is very difficult to differentiate their role in administrative matters from the issues that pertain to the pursuance and maintenance of academic standards.

Furthermore, private higher educational institutions are faced with the problem of over-enrolment of students, which often stress their infrastructural facilities to its limit; also most of the teaching staffs of some of these universities are overburdened with too much teaching workload that they hardly have the time to

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engage in cutting edge research which is vital to their overall academic advancement and efficiency in impacting knowledge and skills to the students in particular and positively influencing the society in general. For example, a situation where a lecturer is saddled with three or four courses in a semester will not bring out the best in him in terms of delivering maximally on his assigned responsibilities.

Besides, the conditions of service for academics in these private higher institutions to say the least is not competitive enough such that the future wellbeing of this academic personnel are not adequately addressed both in terms of remuneration and overall welfare, thus resulting in their search for greener pastures abroad where their future can be guaranteed. This has also made it impossible for these universities to attract top-flight scholars from Europe and North America to teach in these private higher institutions as was the case in the 1960s and 1970s. Similarly, some of the private universities that are inn existence are a sorry site to behold as most of them lack the proper infrastructural facilities such as adequate classroom, teaching aids like overhead projectors, multimedia, communication gadgets, laboratories etc, state of the art equipped library facilities that can compete favourably with the world best universities like Harvard, Yale, Stanford and others.

Finally, the role of the nation's universities regulatory body, the National Universities Commission (NUC) is also suspect, as it has not lived up to its responsibility of ensuring that universities meet up with the statutory required standards for operation. The rate at which the regulatory authority is granting new licenses for private universities without defining the strategic roles they should serve as engines of economic development and social renewal for promoting sustainable development is worrisome. This has led to the criticism by scholars who argue that we are only interested in increasing the quantity of universities in Nigeria without according due regard for their quality assurance. This is clearly evident in the 2004 global ranking for the world's best 200 universities in which no Nigerian university made the list.

Summary and Conclusion

In all this discourse it is evident that private higher educational institutions are also faced with the task of proffering viable solutions to the prevailing problems of inadequate facilities, resource persons, conditions of service for staffs and other bottlenecks associated with the teaching- learning process. Thus, these problems raised above needs to be systematically addressed by private universities operators as they try to cope with the demands and challenges of higher education in the 21st century.

Therefore, the way forward out of these problems rest on the need for the government and its regulatory agencies to place a high premium on higher education as an integral strategic imperative that must be guided by effective and workable policy framework consciously followed through in the interest of the public good. It is this process that will allow for the restoration of the broad social goals of higher education with regard to research, scholarship, and community development service delivery through harnessing the nation's resources of scientific and technological knowledge for development.

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