The Place of Private Universities in Nigeria’s Educational System

By

Prof. Jide Owoeye

Chairman, Governing Council
Lead City University, Ibadan.

Guest Lecturer,
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of
Honourable Chancellor Chief Sir, Gabriel Osawaru Igbinedion LL.D., DLIT., GCK. CON,
The Esama of Benin Kingdom

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The central themes for our discuss this afternoon stands out as education, university and private sector. Education is the process of gaining knowledge abilities, skills, habits, healthy values or attitudes. It empowers people to adequately interact with their environment and makes them adaptable to inevitable changes. Education takes place mostly within the school system but several forms of it also occur outside the school system. Education is as old as humanity itself. Also, a modern society would not survive without education.

Simply put, university refers to learning in institutions that extends a person’s education beyond the high school. A university or college education as the Americans call it, helps men and women to enjoy richer and meaningful life. It prepares people for professional careers as doctors, engineers, lawyers, teachers etc. University education also gives a person a better appreciation of such fields as art, literature, history, human relations, science and nowadays, information communication technology without which one may not fit into the modern world of work and even leisure.

Private-Sector on the other hand, would refer to the non governmental agencies or resources being deployed for developmental purposes without financial or other inputs from government or its affiliates. In the immediate post independence period, the private sector was very miniscule thus prompting government to establish public corporations/parastatals to provide essential services where the extent of capital required was beyond the capacity of the private sector. Today, however, the private sector in Nigeria has grown in size and complexity. Indeed, we have witnessed a progressive expansion of the national economy since the oil boom began unabated from the mid ‘70s. Moreover, this trend is further accentuated with discovery that Gas which is currently underexploited is even threatening to take the lead from oil. This development has impacted favourably on economic activities and the expansion of the private sector of the economy. Indeed, the strengthened reservoir of capital, skill and entrepreneurial ability in the private sector following the change from controlled agrarian to the hydrocarbon propelled market economy, had enhanced private sector capability to compete successfully in areas in which purely public financial capital had solely held sway initially. It is hypothesized here, that all things being equal, the tendency towards deregulation, private-public partnership / concessioning etc that are now changing the face of governance in Nigeria, is bound to enhance the general thought processes, perception and performance of private universities in the Nigeria educational system.

Having set the conceptual tone of our discourse, pertinent questions do arise in terms of what factors guarantee or promote the role of private universities? What factors impede them if any? Who are the identifiable role players in the process? Are the players really in partnership with the state in this enterprise? Any areas of conflict, misperception or mistrusts? How do we make the private-public partnership sustainable in the university context? How can the private-public partnership enhance access to higher education in the Nigerian educational system. It is hoped that our humble attempts to posit answers to these questions, would provide some useful basis
for furthering our understanding of the place of the private university in the development of access to higher education in Nigeria.

**Emergence of the University System in Global Perspectives**

The University system in Nigeria began essentially as a special preserve of government, Federal and State. The incursion of the private sector into higher education came much later. Contrastingly, the earliest universities were founded by individuals and non-governmental organizations or charities. It is on record that the oldest known formal university system began at Al-Azhar in Cairo in about 970AD. Other historic universities include the one in Bologna established in 1088, Oxford (1096), University of Paris (1150), University of Modern Italy (1175) University of Cambridge England (1209), Harvard (1636), Yale (1701), Princeton University (1746), Cambridge University (1754) Rutgers (1766) etc were founded by individuals and not government. Oxford for instance, was established by a group of Masters and students then residing in Oxford in the 16th century. The first classes were held in the church of St. Mary and this practice continued until the 16th Century. Most of these early universities were established by the clergy and lay men who had passion for missionary work and as such desired to produce a learned clergy. Thus the early schools were adjuncts of Mosques and Churches. Similar history of establishment is shared by centres of learning in other parts of the Arab World, Europe and America. Apparently, evangelism was a major objective of the early providers of access to education. The state on the other hand, paid scant attention to higher education initially, and left the field entirely to the private providers until it discerned it could earn some socio-political profits from that sector.

Access to higher education in Nigeria, preceded the establishment of home based universities which were initially all government owned. This derived from two sources. First, was the Fourah Bay College, Sierra Leone, which was established in 1827 by the Church Missionary Society (CMS). Fourah Bay provided access to higher education for students from Nigeria and all British West African colonies. Though established for the training of priests and teachers, students also had the chance to study through the College for different degrees of the University of Durham in U.K. By 1950, as Prof. Babs Fafunwa reveals, more than 50 percent of the population of students in Fourah Bay were Nigerians.

Second, private sponsorships, scholarships and bursaries provided by well to do parents, social clubs, and ethnic/ community groups, etc, also contributed in no small measure to the development of access to higher educational. Our historians had it that while the Yoruba’s of the coastal area sent their wards to Great Britain and Ireland, the Ibiobio and Ibo in that order, also sponsored their young men and women mostly to the American universities. It is indeed on record, that Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, Ozunna Mbadiwe and Nwafor Orizu single-handedly sponsored and or encouraged groups of students to study in the United States in the 1930s and 40s. According to Fafunwa, “This was the era of the golden fleece which witnessed intensive competition for higher education by diverse groups especially in Southern Nigeria.”
It is not on record anywhere that government had any hand in these impressive efforts at sourcing higher education overseas in the absence of none at home. If anything the sector was perceived by the then colonial government as a profitless and counter productive venture and as such distanced itself from it. After all, the best government needed to generate locally was the lower and middle-level cadre required to service the colonial bureaucracy and that purpose was already been met by the different forms of departmental higher training schemes started since 1908 to meet the technical staff needs in the civil service.

Apparently, the colonial government perceived rightly that if it did not start a university of its own flavor at that stage, the nationalists, who were mostly missionary school graduates, might source private missionary resources, augmented by contributions from different communities to start a university of their own brand on Nigerian soil. A home grown university that would furnish and empower the local elite to take over leadership and assume the privileges of the white colonial elites must have been perceived as dangerous. However, pressures from nationalists led to the initiative for the establishment of the first Higher educational institution in the country – the Yaba Higher College in 1932.

However, the outbreak of World War II provided that government the excuse to again renege on what should have been the fundamental duty of the state. The Campus of Yaba was taking over by British Army Medical Corps, while its student body was dispersed. After the war, the College was eventually absorbed by the newly established University College, Ibadan. Located in wooden sheds that served initially as British Military Hospital in Eleyele area of Ibadan, the UCI was established in 1948 as an offshore campus of the University of London.

Even then the intakes at UCI were tutored to be British Nigerians. It took some student activism and movements such as Wole Soyinka’s Pirate Confraternity to rebel against the trend. To that extend we would argue, that the real home grown universities were the ones that took off two years after independence in Ife, Nsukka and Zaria. Following that, the second, third and fourth generations of federal and state government own universities were established in various part of the country.

**Advent of Private Universities**

For several centuries, as discussed earlier, universities were founded by individuals and non-governmental groups while the state provided the Chatter or license that legalizes their existence. Contrastingly, the legal order in Nigeria stood against this progressive development until the struggle for local entrepreneurial involvement in higher education began. We must not forget the role of those like the irrepressible Esama of Benin Kingdom – Chief Sir, Dr. Gabriel Osawaru Igbinedion- a man who had vowed to provide from his home town the highest level education possible in the modern world. Eventually, the government succumbed and the first licensed private university in Nigeria emerged as the Igbinedion University, Okada.
However, following the establishment of the initial ones, the door was once again closed on the establishment of new private universities by subsequent political leaders. Invariably, new factors emerged to promote a rethink of government policy towards establishment of private universities. First, with poor funding for infrastructures and emoluments generating incessant strikes; overstretched facilities promoting cultism; decaying infrastructures lowering the quality of outputs; etc government universities began to loose credibility. Even the government itself, began to doubt the ability of its own institutions to deliver stable academic calendar and qualitative higher education. Second, alternative access to higher education via the polytechnics became less attractive as even the Federal and State Government owners of such institutions, discriminated against their products in favour of university graduates at the level of employment and/or advancement in service.

A third factor was the advent of the Obasanjo administration which refocused away from state centric to private sector driven economy. Accordingly it deliberately invited private participation into the provision of higher education and in fact issued out far more licenses than any of his predecessors or successors. Prior to that, only three Private universities were up and running but by the time he was leaving office, Obasanjo had brought the number up to 34.

**Sustainable private university system – the defining characteristics**

Now that the private universities are very much on ground the question of their sustainability becomes very imperative. Obviously, there are some conditions that must be present to facilitate sustainable private university system in Nigeria. The partnership with government which grants the charter to operate, must take place within the ecology of a developmental ideology that both parties subscribe to and a supportive and institutional framework to promote sustainability of the partnership. There must be a guarantee or legal cover to ensure reliability, predictability and mutual compliance with the terms of partnership.

Furthermore, this partnership must take place within the context of free bargaining rather than in an atmosphere of coercion. This is essential because in the latter case, managing the partnership might prove rather difficult with a high probability of sabotage and failure. It cannot be over-emphasised that any arrangement arrived at through free bargaining brings about the best. Specifically, there must be, as Professor Okebukola puts it, “favourable governance features that increase strategic vision, innovation and flexibility that enable institutions to make decisions and to manage resources without been encumbered by bureaucracy and sustained with good oversight mechanism with an appropriate mix of accountability and autonomy.

**Profit or Altruism**

There is a spurious but pervasive perception that private universities are after money, we often forget that even public universities charge fees to meet their overheads. It is just that the proportion paid in tuition by their students have been heavily subsidized by government in order to relieve their parents and sponsors. It is not as if they enjoy free education because somebody is
paying for it. Apart from the subventions from government, public universities still collect gifts, endowments and engage in all kind of paid consultancies and business ventures to make ends meet.

A profitless adventure of any kind cannot be sustainable because the enterprise will fail to survive not to talk of regenerate itself. Therefore, a university project be it public of private must be profitable but not in the raw pecuniary notion. A public or private university must choose between perpetual subvention from its proprietor or work towards self sustenance to perpetuate itself through careful planning and execution that leaves a margin for self protection, maintenance and expansion. The historic universities mentioned earlier on survived over the centuries because they were profitably run. Accordingly to envision a Harvard or Yale status our private universities must chart a viable course for profitability.

Nigeria has a big market for university education. The self regulatory character of the market itself compels the private universities to strive for best practices if they must be the destination of choice for aspirants into the universities system. Accordingly, the urge for quality assurance is bound to be higher still in the private far more than in the public university system. Indeed, the recent ranking of universities in the country indicate that private universities are making a good show alongside their public counterparts. Even though a government owned university ranked first, a private university made 14th position while a another government owned university caped the rear with 74th position.

It could also be argued, that access to university education, if and when granted by government, would always be controlled to garner economic or political profit. This has been the experience both in the colonial and post colonial period. For instance, we are informed that the admission policy in then Yaba Higher College was made so stringent to ensure that only a “reasonable” access to higher education was provided for Nigerians.

In very much the same way, governments in post independent Nigeria also politicized entry into the university. The Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB) was designed to control access to higher education and promote ethnic balancing - an undemocratic objective which did not take into consideration the peculiar desires of Nigerians across board but simply placed emphasis on an imaginary sectional need “to catch up”. Without the intervention of the private universities where access was not subjected to primordial sentiments, the hopes of many aspirants for university education would have been dashed.

The argument here is that when critics generally input profit motive (financial or evangelism) as the main interest of private providers of higher education, they should remember that government, be it colonial or post colonial, did not start universities for just altruistic purposes. There was always the political profit motive too. A motive that went beyond seeking knowledge for its sake or creating opportunities to empower everyone including ones political adversaries or contenders for regional or ethnic superiority. On the other hand, the private entrepreneurs in
education challenged illiteracy by opening avenues in a non-partisan political manner to all those willing and able to seek knowledge.

**Contributions of Private Universities to Nigeria’s Higher Educational System**

The enormous gains that have accrued to the public university system with the advent of more private universities are often underplayed. Those seeking entry into the university are estimated at about 1.5 million annually by JAMB and less than 25% are able to secure a place in the Nigerian universities. Accordingly, there has been a significant growth in the demand for international education by Nigerian students. The chairman committee of Governing Councils of Nigerian Federal Universities, Mr. Wale Babalakin SAN revealed recently that Nigeria placed 3rd on the list of countries with the highest number of students studying overseas. Every year, the British Embassy records a whooping 36,000 student visa application. This number is expected to increase with the on-going review of the visa policy. “Meanwhile there are 71,000 Nigerian students in Ghana paying $15,000 dollars per year. That is N155 billion while the budget for the entire Federal University System is currently N121 billion Naira. We can see how we now fund the Ghanaian economy” while the private universities in Nigeria battling, with a highly on favourable operational environment are now steeped in competition with foreign promoters of higher education in the region and globally.

Accordingly, we begin to export heard earned foreign exchange into foreign countries who in fact engage our own nationals to teach our own students in their countries. Just as “rejects” of Yaba Higher College, easily gained admissions into foreign universities in those days, the so-called JAMB “rejects” are also easily absorbed ironically into older and more renowned universities overseas. The British Council does nothing else in Nigeria now apart from marketing British universities. These universities come around and give on the spot admissions to the so-called JAMB “rejects” especially via foundation programmes in British universities which are actually better ranked globally than the Nigerian ones that rejected them.

Also, the audatious attempt by the Obasanjo administration to rekindle a kind of Awolowo era mass education via the UBE scheme, also meant that more university places would be needed to cope with the expected turn outs from that level. As Professor Okebukola reveals, this year 2010, is significant because now “the Obasanjo administration’s UBE children” of September 1999 would begin to exit secondary education and a minimum of 10% will knock on the doors of the existing universities for admission. The estimated total absorptive capacity for fresh admissions of the 104 universities is about 500,000. Simply put, if 6.3 million eligible candidates come knocking, the existing universities can hearken to the knock of only 8.5%. We can best imagine what the situation would have looked like without some help from the private sector. Public universities would have been forced to practically double admission rates with its attending consequences. Quality would have been thoroughly eroded in overcrowded campuses providing veritable breeding ground for cultists and all forms of social misfits. Thus the private
universities haverelieved their public counterparts who are now beginning to attain improved service quality.

Currently, there are 104 universities in the country with the federal government controlling 27, state governments running 36 and 41 being run by private organizations. This growth in the numbers of private universities side by side with Federal and State government owned universities, should help to bring about healthy competition that will generate growth in the entire university system.

Finally, the advent of the private universities have helped to democratized the system by providing further choices for those willing to avail themselves of access to university education but who otherwise, would not have been able to achieve their dream. Besides parent who cannot afford high fees paid in foreign universities also have local alternatives and hopefully with more private universities coming onboard it will reduce to the barest minimum, the incidence of capital flight via the higher education sector whereby rich Nigerians expend hard earned foreign currency to finance the overseas admission and education of their children and wards.

**Future Prospects**

We have traced the emergence of the Nigeria university system to 1932 – several centuries after the first universities emerged in the Arab and Western World. The youthfulness of the system itself becomes glaring when one compares for instance the 914 year old Oxford university with our 62 year old premier University of Ibadan. More glaring still, is the age of the oldest private university in Nigeria here in Okada land which is just 11 years old. The point being made here is that the higher education system in this country is still in its infancy. Therefore, the federal, state, private universities and the regulatory agency – National University Commission (NUC) – are all in a learning process.

Moreover it is likely that most universities would eventually be private both in ownership and operational character since already 41 out of 104 units in the system are private and many of the processes of the private sector operations are been speedily and positively imbibed in the management of even the public universities. This development calls for a paradigm shift in the outlook of the regulatory body.

It is also worth noting that public-private partnership in the context of the delivery of private university education would benefit from widening of participation in the policy process by all stakeholders including the promoters of the private universities and the users of the services they provide. Up till now, there exist no forum for exchange of ideas if only to tap the views of the promoters of private universities within the context of policy formulation for higher education that would effect the necessary paradigm shift in congruence with the fast expanding population of privately funded institution within the Nigeria university system. It is imperative that as a matter of urgency, promoters of private universities must have representation on the Board of the National Universities Commission (NUC).
The NUC itself must display a new empathy towards the private providers in the effort to uplift the system. The laws enacted and approved by government for orderly management of the universities promoted by both the private and public sector must be sacrosanct. So that the powers of the university Senate and Governing Councils can truly “be exercised, as in the law and statutes of each university and to that extent, establishment circulars that are inconsistent with the laws and statutes of the university shall not apply to the universities” as provided for in the autonomy act.

On the part of the promoters of private universities, it is high time they woke up from their slumber to recognise the essential need for lobby system in a democracy. Accordingly these visioners, investors and prime stake-holders in Nigeria’s Private university system should hearken to the need to come together in a forum to promote the sustainability of their vision and for continued relevance as major stakeholders in the educational sector. It is not a trade union that is being suggested but a meeting of free minds with divergent approaches to the same issue. A forum with a common interest in the survival and pursuit of excellence in the private universities that we have helped to build in patriotic response to the national call for public-private sector partnership to widen access to qualitative education for our compatriots.

Admittedly, the growth of the private sector has only marginally been felt in the education sector, possibly because unlike the extractive, manufacturing and communication industries, the educational sector which does not promise quick realization of investment has been less attractive. Nonetheless, the products of the private university system have made their mark in the market place. The point has also been made that if given the enabling environment, the private sector is in a position to do so much better now than ever before. There is indeed, enormous investible resources at the disposal of Nigerians especially with what we saw at the height of the stock investment craze, therefore vigorous advocacy is expedient to attract more funds and expertise to the higher education sector with the ultimate aim of promoting and sustaining mega private universities as it is the case in many progressive countries of the world.
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