

## **PROLIFERATION OF PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES IN NIGERIA: A CURSE OR A BLESSING?**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Globally, University education is regarded as a very important aspect of a nation's educational system. The paper discussed the significance of University to the development of any nation. Specifically, the paper traced the origin of University education and emergence of Private Universities in Nigeria. It noted that as at September, 2023, Nigeria had a total of two hundred and sixty (260) universities, out of which one hundred and forty-seven (147) were privately-owned. The paper observed that the proliferation of Private Universities has some merits and demerits. It further observed that to a large extent, the Universities have been able to solve the problem of access to University education. However, the low capacity of these Private Universities has been a major challenge. The paper concluded that the National Universities Commission (NUC) should continue to ensure effective control and monitoring of these universities. The Commission should ensure strict compliance with the published Code of Governance for Private Universities.

**Key Words:** Proliferation, Private Universities, Benefits, Limitations.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

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

In the view of Okoro-Orubite, et al (2012), the University is a community of scholars that believe in the superiority of the mind

over matters and insist that everything should be subordinated to the intellect. The University is, therefore, a place where concepts hallowed by age and tradition are subjected to severe scrutiny and knowledge growth through dissent, and not through compromise. Earlier, Varghese (2004a) opined that "Universities play a crucial role in generating new ideas, accumulating and transmitting knowledge, yet they have remained peripheral to developmental concerns. Although, no longer the sole generators of knowledge needed for development, through their research and teaching, they help to produce expertise, manage development, engineer social transformation, and

preserve social values and cultural ethos” (p.30).

Accordingly, modern societies now entrust Universities with more responsibilities than ever before. Universities are charged with preserving the knowledge of the past and transmitting it to the next generation, education of tomorrow’s citizens, professionals and leaders and fostering the discovery of new knowledge that may either strengthen or challenge established ideas and norms—all with the aim of deepening human understanding and bettering human condition. Universities also function as engines of economic development, foster technological and scientific innovation, stimulate creativity in the arts and literature, and address urgent global problems, such as poverty, disease, ethno-political conflict and environmental degradation (Bilkent University, 2005).

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

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

Consequently, University education is seen as a serious aspect of the education system which cannot be ignored at both the government and individual levels. In terms of

sustainable development, Universities are perceived as microcosms of culture and of the society that supports them. According to Ciferri and Lombardi (2009), Universities are bastions of ethical behaviour and provide the training ground for students to determine and practice a personal code of ethics that will guide them for the rest of their lives. Universities should provide examples of ethical consideration as well as provide students with education in ethical values, including the underlying concepts, critical intellectual skills to help in decision making, a broad view of universal ethical codes and a sense of responsibility for others when making choices. Also, Universities play crucial role in developing a new generation of metrics. These new metrics capture social and political issues, as well as picture economic situations, and act as media to communicate the progress recorded by the local communities and other stakeholders. In this regard, the role of the University is crucial in training and providing capacity building.

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

#### **NIGERIA’S CASE:**

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

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1. Universities and Inter University centres, such as Nigerian French Village, Nigerian Arabic Village, National Institute of Nigerian Languages,
  2. Colleges of Education,
  3. Polytechnics,
  4. Colleges of Agriculture,
  5. Colleges/Schools of Health Technology,
  6. National Teachers Institute, etc. (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2014 p.39)
3. Making all students part of a general programme of all round improvement in University Education, to offer general study courses, such as history of ideas, philosophy of knowledge, nationalism and Information Technology (IT); and
  4. Making entrepreneurial skills acquisition a requirement for all Nigerian universities. (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2014, pp. 41-42.)

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

1. Contribute to national development through high level manpower training;
2. Provide accessible and affordable quality learning opportunities in formal and informal education in response to the needs and interests of all Nigerians;
3. Provide high quality career counseling and lifelong learning programmes that prepare students with the knowledge and skills for self-reliance and the world of work;
4. Reduce skill shortages through the production of skilled manpower relevant to the needs of the labour market;
5. Promote and encourage scholarship, entrepreneurship and community service;
6. Forge and cement national unity; and
7. Promote national and international understanding and interaction (pp.39-40).

Specifically, the goals of University Education are:

1. Intensifying and diversifying its programmes for the development of high level manpower within the contexts of the needs of the nation;
2. Making professional course contents

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

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

It is gratifying to note that the same military government, in 1993 legalized the establishment of Private Universities, with the promulgation of Education (National Minimum Standards and Establishment of Institutions Amendment) Decree No.9 of 1993. Arikewuyo (2004) further reported that on 10 May, 1999, the military government formally licensed three Private Universities, namely: Babcock University; Igbinedion Uni-

versity and Madonna University. Since then, the number of Private Universities in the country has continued to increase. Records from the National Universities Commission (NUC) indicate that as at September, 2023, there are one hundred and forty-seven (147) Private Universities in Nigeria, apart from fifty-one (51) and sixty-two (62) Universities owned by Federal and State governments, respectively. Thus, as at September, 2023, Nigeria had a total of two hundred and sixty (260) Universities. ([www.nuc.edu.ng](http://www.nuc.edu.ng)).

Private Universities in Nigeria have been grouped into three. According to Adediran and Gbadamosi (2012), Private Universities in Nigeria are classified into: Sole proprietorship; Religious based and Hybrid types. The Sole proprietorship type is a one-man enterprise established by individuals, operating as an artificial person or as a corporation. This type of university possesses all paraphernalia of a university, such as Governing council, Board of regents, etc. Yet, the university depends on the financier who exercises a complete control over his business. Igbinedion University, Lead City University, Afe Babalola University and Novena University belong to this group.

The second category is the Mission or "Religious Universities". According to Adediran and Gbadamosi (2012), these Universities, which are deemed to belong to the Churches as a whole, had been founded by the Orthodox or religious groups. Allocation of major responsibilities reflects the culture, diversity and spread of the church. Though, the financial support comes from the church (or mosque), the day-to-day administration of the institutions is in the hands of Council and Management in terms of control. These Universities include: Ajayi Crowther University, owned by

the Anglican Communion; Babcock University, owned by the Seventh Day Adventist; Bowen University, owned by the Baptist Convention; Wesley University of Science and Technology, owned by the Methodist Church, the Fountain University, founded by Nasrul-Lahill-Fatih Society (NASFAT) and Summit University, founded by the Ansar-Ud-Deen Society of Nigeria are also in this category.

The hybrid Universities, according to Adediran and Gbadamosi (2012) are those that are mission oriented but are personally driven. In this case, the owners not only found the mission, but also establish the universities. These Universities include: Madonna University, Benson Idahosa University, Covenant University, Redeemers University, amongst others. In addition, Owusu-Dankwa (2009) classified the objectives of Private Universities as spiritual, educational and profit-making.

Earlier, Varghese (2004b) explored Private Universities in Africa into the following classifications:

- a. Operating in collaboration with foreign institutions;
- b. Established through government or public universities with foreign collaboration;
- c. Owned by religious Organisations, and operated as private firms within the country and are owned by nationals.

Private Universities have therefore been increasing almost on a yearly basis in Nigeria. With the proliferation of these universities therefore, it is imperative to examine whether the development has been a blessing or a curse to University Education in Nigeria. The paper therefore examines the extent to which these Private Universities have been able to contribute to the development of University education in Nigeria

**A BLESSING OR A CURSE?**

The question of access to University Education in Nigeria has accounted for the need to establish more universities in Nigeria. This is because the existing Universities owned by Federal and State governments are inadequate to admit all the candidates applying for admission into the Universities (Table 1). There is no year when more than thirty percent of the candidates were admitted. The highest was in 2015, where out of a total of 1,612,247 candidates that applied

for admission into all Nigerian Universities, only 485,338 (representing 30 percent) could be admitted. (NBS & JAMB, 2017). It was only in 2018 and 2019 that more than thirty percent of the candidates were admitted (Table 2). Thus, one of the impacts of private participation in University Education is its ability to reduce the pressure of admission into universities in Nigeria, as the public Universities are inadequate to offer admission to all the eligible candidates.

**Table 1: Pattern of UTME Application And Admission Into Nigerian Universities (2010-2016)**

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

NA - Not Available

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

**Table 2: Pattern Of UTME Application And Admission Into Nigerian Universities (2017-2019)**

Year	Application	Admitted	% Admitted
2017	1,722,269	319,538	18.55%
2018	1,653,127	582,593	35.24%
2019	1,886,488	608,859	32.27%

Source: National Bureau of Statistics (2020).

The benefits of Private Universities in Nigeria have also been highlighted by some researchers. According to Isuku (2014), there are usually effective monitoring and control of resources in private institutions, which in turn help to minimize wastages, which is common in public institutions. This assertion is supported by Aluede et al (2012), who also agreed that wastages of resources, which characterize public institutions in Nigeria, are reduced in private institutions. The private institutions usually utilise minimum resources to achieve high productivity.

Another benefit for private sector involvement in University Education is the accountability nature of private institutions. According to Albach (2008), most government institutions are hardly accountable to the public due to some political interest and corrupt tendency. Thus, Isuku (2014)

agreed that in most private institutions, effective accountability is sine-qua-non to the organisation success since profit attainment is an important motivating factor. This attribute, he believed is uncommon in most government institutions where there is usually a low level of accountability.

It has however been observed that the capacity of the Private Universities is very low. Citing data from the National Universities Commission (NUC), Arikewuyo & Ogunsanwo (2020) reported that out of a total enrolment of 1,962,364 in all Nigerian Universities in 2017, the Private Universities had an enrolment of 104,454 (representing only 5.32 percent). Similarly, out of a total student enrolment of 2,159,461 in all Nigerian Universities in 2019, the Private Universities constituted only 109,162 (representing 5.05 percent) (Table 3).

**Table 3: Total Enrolment In Nigerian Universities, 2019**

University	Male	Female	Grand Total
Federal	840,633	608,226	1,448,859 (67.09%)
State	330,975	270,465	601,440 (27.85%)
Private	56,330	52,832	109,162(5.05%)
Grand Total	1,227,938	931,523	2,159,461

SOURCE: Nigerian University System Statistical Digest, 2019 (retrieved from [www.nuc.edu.ng](http://www.nuc.edu.ng) on November 4, 2023).

The low capacity of Private Universities in Nigeria has been attributed to the challenges facing the institutions. According to Okebukonla (2015), the major challenges facing these Universities and eventually their capacity are: low funding; NUC over-regulation; naivety of Proprietors; recruiting

and retaining qualified staff with Ph.D.; inadequate staff; disrespect for university tradition; lack of freedom to mount courses without BMAS; unreliable public utility (especially water and electricity); as well as use and abuse of drugs by students. The challenge of funding, according to

Arikewuyo and Alaba (2013), made the Vice Chancellors and Registrars of Private Universities in Nigeria to appeal to the Federal Government to assist in the funding of Private Universities. The Committee argued that since all citizens pay taxes to the government, private universities should also benefit from the Education Tax Fund.

The type of courses and programmes offered by Private Universities also need to be examined. From the record of approved courses of Nigerian universities, it is evident that most Private Universities in the country offer courses in the Management Sciences, Social Sciences, Arts and Natural Sciences. Only very few of them mount courses in Engineering, Medicine, Technology and Agricultural Sciences. This observation further confirms the findings of Varghese (2004a) that private Universities in Africa generally offer courses that require less investment in terms of infrastructure and equipment.

Also related to this is the issue of postgraduate programmes. It has been observed that not all Private Universities in the country offer postgraduate programmes. Evidences from the National Universities Commission indicate that as at 2019, only thirty-three (33) out of seventy-nine (79) Private Universities in Nigeria (representing 41.7 per cent) offer postgraduate programmes ([www.nuc.edu.ng](http://www.nuc.edu.ng)). In the opinion of Arikewuyo and Ichado (2013), this may be due to the fact that many of the Private Universities rely on part-time teachers. This assertion was supported by Varghese (2004b), who discovered that one of the features of Private Universities in Africa, irrespective of location and orientation is the fact that most of them rely on part-time teachers. Therefore, it is difficult for them

to offer postgraduate programmes, which require high level teaching staff

## CONCLUSION

The growth and proliferation of Private Universities in Nigeria has no doubt widened access to university education in the country. With a total of one hundred and forty-seven Private Universities in year 2023, many candidates now have opportunity to benefit from university education. However, the Universities need to expand their carrying capacity and manpower in order to be able to offer Science and Technology Courses, as well as Postgraduate Programmes.

From the foregoing, it is evident that the proliferation of Private Universities in Nigeria is a blessing to the country. However, there is need for proper monitoring and control by the government through the National Universities Commission (NUC). The Commission has published a Code of Conduct for the governance of Private Universities in Nigeria. This was brought about by the forensic audit conducted by the Commission on Private Universities (NUC, 2021).

Among other things, it was observed that Private Universities have the following challenges:

1. Poor implementation of the NUC approved governance structure;
2. Poor implementation of the University Committee system;
3. Over-bearing influence of the Proprietors/Promoters in the administration of the Universities;
4. Poor or lack of delineation of the roles and responsibilities between the governance structure (such as Board of Trustees, Governing Council, Senate, Committees, etc.);
5. Excessive profit-orientation of many

- Proprietors to the detriment of the social contract aspect of the Universities;
6. Interference by family members of the Proprietors in the governance of some Private Universities;
  7. Frequent replacement of the administrative staff, especially the Vice Chancellors in some Private Universities.

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

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