

Deregulation of University Education in Nigeria: Problems and Prospects

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*Florida Journal of Educational
Administration & Policy*

Winter 2009
Volume 3, Issue 1

This paper focuses on the deregulation of university education in Nigeria, its problems and prospects. The paper commences with the recognition given to education all over the world, especially higher education. Nigeria as a country gives much credence to higher education as the means for social and economic mobility, social transformation, and as a major platform for higher level workforce development – managerial and technological. To achieve these laudable objectives, therefore, government has given approval to private individuals and organizations to own and manage private higher institutions of learning. This paper examines some of the problems that accompany privatization policy of higher education such as high costs, the widening of gap between the upper class and indigent students, and the circumvention of standards in the name of profits, among others. The prospect for this noble idea was also examined.

Keywords: Deregulation, Privatization, Private Universities, Public Universities

Introduction

The Government states that the teaching and research functions of higher educational institutions play crucial roles in national development, particularly in high level workforce development. Thus, if education, especially at the university level, is regarded as the vehicle for social and economic transformation, then its provision, administration, and financing should be given greater significance, since the success of any system of education is founded on proper planning and efficient administration.

Also, access to higher education is essentially a social process deeply involved with the society's cultural pattern and system of values (Thresher, 1970). The conditions governing admission into universities must therefore be determined by the existing social,

economic, and political realities within the society. In Nigeria, with a population of over 140 million scattered over 36 States and Federal Capital Territory situated at Abuja, finding an equitable formula for admitting all eligible applicants is a challenge.

University Education in Nigeria

Universities all over the world are accepted as the citadel of learning and development of human resources. According to Subair (2008), the entire intellectual and professional life of a country depends on sound higher education, especially university education that provides quality products (graduates) of international standard. The Nigerian university system sprang out of the need for the development of a high level workforce to take the challenge of nation building after independence (Fadipe, 2000).

The history of Nigerian universities dates back to the establishment of the University College, Ibadan in 1948. Since then, inexorable expansion has been one of the most remarkable features of higher education in Nigeria. Forty-five years ago, Nigeria had five universities. Two of these, University College, Ibadan and University of Lagos were federal universities, while the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University) and University of Nigeria, Nsukka were owned respectively by Northern, Western, and Eastern Regional governments.

According to Aminu (1988) while the Federal Government tried to correct the distortion in geographical distribution of universities by establishing what have come to be regarded as the “second generation” universities in 1975, some states of the federation restored the uneven distribution by establishing state-owned universities. Though it can be argued that while it was not economically viable for some states to establish their own universities at the time they did, the problem of geographical areas served by an institution (catchment areas) and quota system made it imperative for state universities to emerge.

Government acceded to higher demands for more universities in newly-created states; between 1975 – 2002, the number of public owned universities has increased from six to forty-seven (National Universities Commission (NUC), 2002). As of February 2007, the total universities in Nigeria are 85, out of which 32 are owned by private individuals or organizations. Currently the number of universities has increased to 96. 27 of them are owned by the federal government with 35 and 34 of them belonging to the state governments and private owners respectively (NUC Bulletin 12th October 2009).

The Concept of Deregulation

The term deregulation primarily is an economic term that developed from the free market economy of Adam Smith (Encarta Encyclopedia, 2003 cited in Edobor 2004). Government rules and regulations governing the operation of the system are relaxed or held constant in order for the system to decide its optimum level through competition. The concept means government non-involvement in the establishment, funding, and management of schools. As a deregulated sector, education will become a private enterprise undertaken by private individuals or corporate bodies that hope to maximize profit from their investments in education (Kaplan 2003; Encarta Encyclopedia, 2003).

Deregulation of the university has been linked with privatization where the university will have to be self-regulated and controlled; that is, freedom from government imposed decisions. Initiatives for deregulation of education have been taken by developed and developing countries of the world (Tsai, 2001). In the United States, the main focus of education deregulation is in the area of parental freedom to control their children's schooling. In Britain, too, deregulation has brought about autonomous schools, with greater responsibility placed on the schools to determine their own destinies. In Nigerian education system, deregulation policies primarily emphasize privatization bordering on funding (Denise, 2002 & Alabi 2005).

Emergence of Private Universities in Nigeria

The 1979 Constitution of Nigeria paved the way for the first incursion of private universities into the Nigerian education system. It was Dr. Basil Nnnana Nkaegbu of Imo State who established Tandem University at Owerri in 1980. But this bold venture was challenged by then incumbent Imo State Government, which declared the institution illegal, unapproved, and hence unrecognized. Under threat of being closed down, proprietor of the private university, Dr. Ukaegbu went to court to seek protection of his fundamental rights. The Supreme Court eventually ruled in his favor after he had lost the case of the State High Court and the Federal Court of Appeal (Akpochofo 1997).

As soon as Dr. Ukaegbu won his case to establish, own, and operate a private university, many individuals, religious organizations and groups, notably in the Southern part of Nigeria, opened their own private universities. In order to ensure that all the universities were being properly developed and controlled, Decree No. 16 of 1985 empowered the Federal Ministry of Education through the National Universities Commission to inspect, assess, and accredit academic programs in the institutions. The Decree is known and called the Minimum Standards and Establishment of Institutions Decree (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1985)

In 1999, when the Military returned the country to democratic rule, the second coming of private universities commenced. The outgoing military regime announced the approval of some private universities. The approval of these private universities is predicated on the fact that Nigeria as a nation has a youthful population that is yearning for education at the tertiary level.

Also, as asserted by Khor (2003), due to some reasons which include: the need to create opportunities for university education for the teeming number of qualified youths; the need to shed the financial burden of educating them; and the pressure of following the global trend dictated by the Bretton Woods Institutions, the World Bank and the International Monetary Funds (IMF), the Federal Government of Nigeria quietly took university education off the exclusive legislation list into the concurrent list by allowing private individuals, church, and corporate organizations to establish universities. As a result, the number of private universities increased by leaps and bounds, a reminder of the growth of public universities between the 1970s and the early 1990s.

Reasons for Deregulation of University Education in Nigeria

Education in both developed and developing economies of the world is capital intensive in terms of human, financial, and material resources (Nwadiani, 2001). In light of this fact, Nigeria, which is one of the poorest countries in the world in terms of per capita income, needs assistance from the private sector, particularly in the provision and management of university education, since the three tiers of government alone cannot cope with educational costs.

Also, most public universities in Nigeria operate in adverse conditions: overcrowding and deteriorating physical facilities, lack of recent library books; education materials, laboratory consumables and maintenance. The foregoing adverse conditions in which public universities operate are among the reasons for participation of private sectors in the provision of university education. Another reason for private sector participation in the provision of university education is to create keen competition between public and private educational institutions in all facets of human endeavor. In other words, competition brings improved quality of educational inputs and outputs.

Furthermore, private involvement in the funding and management of education would offer alternatives to the citizens. This is in the area of creating more space for university applicants who are denied yearly due to inadequacy of spaces for them in public universities. Also, it will enable applicants opportunity to choose varied type of new courses or career being introduced by private universities. In addition, citizens would be able to enjoy better academic environment equipped with modern facilities, and curriculum and expatriates lecturers mostly employed by those private institutions. Some of the public institutions, most especially universities, are conservative and find it difficult to change or adapt their curriculum to meet global challenges at the international level. Whereas, the privately-owned universities must have studied the emerging events and develop their curriculum in line with the current global needs.

Problems

One of the major problems facing the deregulation of universities in Nigeria is the exorbitant fees charged by some private schools. This situation is creating and further worsening the problem of elitism in the Nigerian education system (Alani, 2005). The problem of excessive fees imposed on students at private institutions would be difficult to control by government leaders. This is because private universities are profit-oriented organizations. To provide qualitative education therefore, modern and costly resources (human and non-human) are employed for their services. It is therefore a matter of choice or affordability for any individual to apply to them.

Similarly, deregulation of university system seems to be a veritable tool to create inequalities among Nigerian students. While it is obvious that most public universities in Nigeria operate in adverse conditions – overcrowding and deteriorating physical facilities, private universities enjoy the splendor of small class size and adequate modern facilities (Utulu, 2001). This situation in turn could provide half-baked graduates at the public universities and a well-trained graduates at the private universities. The inequalities created

by deregulation against the dictates of the National Policy on Education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004), which stipulates “the provision of equal access to educational opportunities for all citizens of the country at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels.” Also, where funding of universities depends on the sales of services, then the resources available will depend on the entrepreneurial success of institutions rather than on an equitable distribution of public resources.

This problem of inequalities is in consonance with some of the reasons why Jacques (1996) asserted that deregulation of education must be rejected because:

- Children’s rights are our collective responsibility and public education sits at the heart of democratic public policy;
- public education contributes to the reduction of inequality, supports social cohesion and national progress; and
- a neo-liberal economic policy that dictates privatization or semi-privatization of education and reduces the state’s financing of or investment in public education marginalizes those children and adults living in poverty and reduces the quality of public education. Individuals are not equal in background and it is for this reason that educational equity at the university level should be given a central role in the philosophy of egalitarianism.

Prospects of Deregulated Universities System

The possibility of increasing numbers of private investors or corporations establishing and managing their own universities is growing. The adaptation of university education to the emerging demands of the global market can only be achieved by the private involvement in university education in Nigeria (Utulu, 2001). In Nigeria, the private university system represents a unique experiment that will enhance human capital development in society. Furthermore, the purpose of public-private partnership in education is aimed at providing opportunity or access to many individuals, while simultaneously maintaining educational quality. Public-private sector initiatives are preferable to cost-bloating in the provision of university education and lowering the government’s sole burden of funding education. In the area of maintaining standard, there is no doubt that private universities will adhere strictly to the Minimum Academic Standard (MAS) stipulated by the National University Commission . The deregulation of the higher education sector would not in any way lead to a situation where educational standard will be compromised. The role of the National Universities Commission (NUC) is to ensure academic standards (Okorosaye-Orubite, 2003). In the area of academics, the NUC’s regular visits to private universities will be made to ensure that established standards are maintained and not quite long, precisely in October 2009, the NUC have discovered some 41 illegally run universities. Some of them include Olympic University, Nsukka, Enugu State; Open International University, Akure, Ondo State, and Leadway University, Ugeli, Delta State, among others. Six of these illegal universities already shut down (NUC Bulletin, 2009).

Conclusion

Nigeria is currently witnessing a period during which education and professional development at the university level are in increasing demand and the cost of providing this education has continued to rise astronomically, costs that the government cannot bear alone (Oyebade, 2005). Coupled with the global trend of deregulation practices in other countries, the deregulation of university education in Nigeria seems inevitable. However, while more private individuals or organizations are encouraged to establish, finance, and manage private universities, educational planners and administrators, as well as state and federal governments, should, through appropriate channels, ensure that educational standards are not compromised and that citizens are not exploited.

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