

Principles and Policies Guiding Current Reforms in Nigerian Universities

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to put forward and analyze the principles and politics guiding the reforms currently taking place within the higher education sub-sector in Nigeria. The paper is in three main sections. The first section presents an overview of the Nigeria university system highlighting its problems and challenges. The second examines the policies and reforms that have been introduced to address the challenges and problems facing the Nigerian university system within a global context, including the principles guiding these policies and reforms. The third section is a preliminary attempt to briefly assess the success and sustainability of these reforms. Keeping in mind that it is still early days, and that such far-reaching reforms will take time to achieve their objectives, I argue that the reforms are already showing evidence of the desired results. Thanks to the reform programme, the Nigerian university system is on the road to recovery after many years of neglect.

Résumé

Cet article tente d'analyser les principes ainsi que la politique guidant les réformes en cours au niveau du sous-secteur de l'enseignement supérieur au Nigeria. Il se présente en trois grandes parties. La première est un aperçu du système universitaire nigérian, et met en exergue ses problèmes et ses défis. La seconde examine les politiques et réformes ayant été introduites, dans le but de surmonter les défis et les problèmes auxquels est confronté le système universitaire nigérian dans un contexte mondial ; elle s'intéresse également aux principes guidant ces politiques et ces réformes. La troisième partie est une première tentative d'évaluation succincte des réussites et de la durabilité de ces réformes. Tout en gardant à l'esprit qu'on se situe à un stade très précoce, et que ces réformes profondes mettront du temps à réaliser les objectifs visés, j'avance cependant que ces dernières s'avèrent prometteuses.

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Grâce au programme de réforme, le système universitaire nigérian est sur le chemin de la renaissance après toutes ces années de négligence.

Introduction

I should start by congratulating the organisers of this conference, in particular the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), for finding it expedient to initiate what could be termed a dialogue on reforming higher education in Nigeria. The timing and theme of the conference, including its broad participation (with both on-shore and off-shore scholars), could not come at a more appropriate time, when a national dialogue is taking place which will address issues in a broader scope and impact positively on educational development at all levels. I salute ASUU and CODESRIA for this significant step in making their contribution to the overall development of the nation.

Down through the ages, universities as human institutions have been characterised by change induced by the demands of the societies which they serve. Bologna, Harvard, Oxford, Witwatersrand, Ibadan, Makerere, Legon, Lagos and Nsukka have undergone transformations in structure and processes in response to forces prevalent at different times during the course of their history. In some cases the result of such forces has moved the university in a direction along the flow of its traditional functions. In other cases the university has had to wade against the current and shake some of the shine off the 'ivory' in its tower. The forces can be internal to the university – teachers, students and administrators, either as individuals or groups or committees such as senate and council – or external national or global forces. The national government through its policies and programmes can intervene in the operations of the university. Global forces such as those induced by the market, developments in ICT and the demands of a global knowledge economy also bear on university functions. All these forces can activate reforms in the university.

University education in Nigeria dates back to 1948 with the establishment of the University College Ibadan. Two years after independence the country had five universities, with each of the three regions having its own institution, while the then 'Western' region had three. The increase in oil revenues in the mid-1970s, coupled with the need to forge national unity following the end of the civil war, influenced the creation of a national system of higher education. This was achieved through the reconstitution of the National Universities Commission into an autonomous body with additional responsibilities and powers in 1974. This development laid the framework for the take-over of all the regional universities in 1975. The widespread agitation for an expansion of access to university education and increased high-level national workforce requirements and technological developments contributed greatly to the

establishment of a 'second generation' of universities and other specialised universities (of agriculture and technology) as well as a military university. The placement of higher education under the concurrent list in the 1979 constitution allowed state governments to establish universities. There are currently 23 such state universities in the country and many more in the planning stages.

Private-sector participation in university education commenced during the second republic. However, in the absence of proper guidelines, they all turned out to be universities only in name. All the 24 private universities established between 1980 and 1983 were abolished by the federal government in 1984. Nine years later another law which allowed for the establishment of private universities and spelt out procedures for such was promulgated. To further widen access to university education, the National Open University was re-opened in 2001 to offer tertiary education through open and distance learning (ODL). There are 65 universities in Nigeria today, consisting of 26 federal, 23 state and 16 private universities.

The past three decades have witnessed significant changes within the university system in Nigeria. Notable among such changes are the increase in the number of universities and programmes offered in these institutions. By the end of 2002 there were over two thousand programmes across universities in Nigeria, with staff strength of about 25,000 (Okebukola 2003). However by far the greatest change has been in the explosion in student populations and in the number of aspirants seeking university admission. The total student enrolment in all Nigerian Universities grew from just over 2,000 in 1962 to over 500,000 in 2002 (Okebukola 2003). Data from the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) and the universities confirmed that over one million candidates sat for the University Matriculation Examination in 2002. Of this number the entire 52 universities in the country at that time could only take in about 150,000 students, or 15 percent.

The stress put on the universities in terms of demand and the limited expansion in physical facilities and academic staff to cater for this demand has taken a great toll on the quality of programmes in the institutions. Employers and the general public have expressed concern about the quality of graduates from Nigerian universities, and an increasing number of employers are forced to practically retrain newly recruited graduates to give them the skills that should have been acquired in the university.

The problems are worsened by the exodus of academic staff from the universities, popularly referred to as 'brain drain'. This has largely been as a result of the economic crisis of the mid-1980s to early 1990s, made worse by the devaluation of the Naira as a result of structural adjustment programmes (SAP).

Another dimension to the problem in the 1990s was repeated staff strike action, with resultant frequent closures of the universities. The state of university education in Nigeria can therefore be summarised as one of massive explosion in student enrolment, increasing numbers of prospective new entrants in the face of inadequate and obsolete infrastructure and equipment, inadequate academic staff in terms of both numbers and quality, lack of relevance of academic programmes and low quality of graduates, as shown by many studies supported by the World Bank and the Needs Assessment Survey of the NUC in 2004. The world economy is changing, however, as knowledge supplants physical capital as the source of wealth. This trend is driven by technology, especially information technology and biotechnology. As knowledge becomes more important, so does higher education. The quality of higher education and its availability to the wider economy are becoming increasingly critical to national competitiveness. These challenges and problems call for a rethink of the higher education sector in terms of what it should be and how it is expected to play its critical role in society.

Reforms in University Education in Nigeria

There are five main challenges facing Nigerian universities today: funding, quality, access, relevance of programmes and university governance and management. These challenges are thwarting the potential of the Nigerian university system to contribute significantly to the social and economic development of the country through the advancement and application of knowledge. However, after years of static higher education policies, recent initiatives by the current civilian administration have introduced policies that address the identified challenges and aim to re-position the system in line with the global higher education realities of expansion, differentiation and knowledge revolution (World Bank 2000). These reforms can be broadly classified into systemic and institutional reforms, but all are geared towards the five major areas listed above.

Funding

Under-funding has been a major problem of education in many developing countries, including Nigeria. When public funding becomes insufficient to maintain institutional performance, universities seek to supplement their funding with locally generated revenue. This is also true in Nigeria. The principles guiding reforms in the funding of university education in Nigeria therefore take a tripartite approach: increases in government funding, cost sharing among stakeholders and promoting internal efficiency through better allocation and

utilisation of funds. The first and second approaches are systemic, while the third is institutional.

The quantity of funds released to federal universities has increased more significantly within the last five years than ever before. While there has been debate over the real value of the funds released, the average actual recurrent grant released per student has increased from 45,323 Nairas in the 1999/2000 session to N137,457 Nairas in the 2001/2002 session (Sambo 2003). Another major policy initiative on funding was the separation of the costs of academic activities from the regular overhead costs (for goods and services) through the creation of a separate Direct Teaching and Laboratory Cost (DTLC) budget in 2004. This was meant to guarantee the funding of the day-to-day academic activities in federal universities at departmental level. Within the past five years public funding of university education has also involved the participation of other relevant ministries and parastatals, either directly through the release of funds or indirectly through the provision of physical facilities, including buildings and equipment. The ministries of Works and Transport, Housing, Water Resources, Health and Science and Technology have all been involved in the funding of university education through the provision of facilities. Major parastatals and organisations involved in funding university education have included the Education Trust Fund, Petroleum Technology Development Fund, Niger Delta Development Commission, Central Bank of Nigeria, National Deposit Insurance Company, among others. This approach greatly complements the direct funding through the Ministry of Education.

The increasing costs of delivery in university education brought about by a combination of enrolment pressures, resistance of institutions to adapt more efficient and productive financial management styles and inability of government to keep pace with cost pressures in the face of other, competing social demands, have forced a rethink of the exclusive funding of university by the government. As a result various cost-sharing measures have been introduced, including user charges, which were previously non-existent. The second rationale for cost sharing in university education is the issue of equity. The private rate of return of university education has been shown to be high, and this is made more compelling by the fact that a very disproportionate number of the beneficiaries of higher education are from middle to upper income families. Consequently, if individual students gain from university education, it is fair that some form of cost sharing be put in place.

There are two basic components to unit costs in university education – tuition fees and student support costs. Tuition has remained free in all federal universities as a government policy, but students are basically responsible for

their upkeep and academic support costs. This is subsidised through the institution of scholarship schemes by various levels of government. Such student support costs are in such areas as hostel accommodation, health, transportation and feeding. A study conducted by NUC has shown that student support costs consist of about 45 percent of total teaching cost per student across disciplines and universities.

Institutional entrepreneurship and philanthropic donations are other forms of cost sharing that are being actively promoted by government as a matter of policy. They will further increase the quantity of funds that go into the institutions and further subsidise academic costs. The private sector has also been invited to get involved in the provision of hostel accommodation through participation in the University Hostel Development and Management Initiative introduced in 2001. This policy was informed by the success recorded in this regard by the private sector in some state universities that were entirely non-residential at the outset. The objectives of the policy (Okebukola 2003) are to:

- encourage the intensity of private sector participation in hostel provision as a contributory factor to having a conducive environment for learning
- encourage ploughing back of private profits into critical social areas
- channel more university resources towards teaching, learning and research
- ease the problem of acute shortage of hostel accommodation in the university system.

Under this policy, each university provides land on a lease basis and enters into a contractual agreement with the provider on a “build, operate and transfer” (BOT) basis.

With regard to the promotion of the internal efficiency of universities, a number of policies and guidelines have been introduced by the NUC to promote and support efficiency in fund allocation and utilisation within each federal university. Such guidelines include the following:

- 60:40 recurrent grant allocation between personnel and overhead costs
- at least sixty percent of total recurrent grants to be allocated to direct teaching units
- library to account for at least ten percent of total recurrent expenditure
- research grants to account for at least five percent of total recurrent expenditure
- central pension fund to account for at least one percent of total recurrent expenditure.

These policies were put in place to ensure adequate allocation of funds to academic and research activities in each university rather than to routine administrative functions.

Quality Assurance

The quality of programmes in Nigerian universities and their products are being increasingly called into question. Many factors contribute to the perceived decline in quality. Chief among these are underfunding, inadequate academic staff numbers and quality, inadequate physical facilities and equipment, overcrowding resulting from increasing demand and other contributory factors. To promote quality in university education the NUC law was amended to give it powers to lay down minimum academic standards and accredit the academic awards of all universities in Nigeria. This is intended to ensure the implementation of basic minimum curricula by each university irrespective of its ownership and to give a guarantee to the public as to the quality of university education in Nigeria. Since promulgation of the law and the production of the Minimum Academic Standard (MAS) documents, seven cycles of accreditation have been conducted by the NUC. The MAS documents have recently been reviewed to take into consideration new developments in the needs of the market. The quality assurance law gives the NUC the power to suspend admission into programmes with denied accreditation status, and it has recently done this in twenty-one programmes in eight universities.

Overcrowding has been a major feature in many if not most universities in the country. The negative impact this has on quality has been well documented. This led the NUC to conduct a study on the carrying capacity of each programme across all Nigerian universities. Directives have been issued to institutions deemed to have over-enrolled beyond their carrying capacity not to grow until enough resources (human and material) are put in place to cater for the student load. Over-enrolments are a clear indication of non-compliance with admission quotas and growth rates allocated by the NUC to each university or group of universities respectively.

Over-enrolment is not the only issue bearing on quality of programmes. After decades of neglect infrastructure and facilities in the universities have run down considerably. A policy on the rehabilitation of such facilities was instituted in 2002. In the application of this policy in 2004 the sum of 12 billion Naira was provided as capital grants for universities to address their numerous uncompleted academic buildings as well as to rehabilitate existing ones. The Virtual (Digital) Library Project is a response to the dearth of (physical) library facilities and resources in most universities. The objectives of the project are to:

- improve the quality of teaching and research in institutions of higher learning in Nigeria through the provision of current books, journals and other library resources
- enhance access of academic libraries serving the education community in Nigeria to global library and information resources
- enhance scholarship, research and lifelong learning through the establishment of permanent access to a shared digital archival collection
- provide guidance for academic libraries on applying appropriate technologies in the production of digital library resources
- advance the use (and usability) of globally distributed networks of library resources.

To ensure a wide application of the Virtual (Digital) Library, the Federal Executive Council in June 2004 approved the procurement of various IT equipment for the hub facility at the NUC and eleven pilot universities. In the meantime the project is also being extended to universities other than the pilot centres who have already acquired the VSAT facilities needed for hooking up to the hub. At present hundreds of locally published and foreign journals and books are available online on the site. The library currently runs on www.nigerianvirtuallibrary.com.

One of the resolutions of the March 2002 National Summit on Higher Education was that special pedagogical centres should be established at three locations to train academic staff in the universities, polytechnics and colleges of education in teaching techniques. However, due to funding constraints, the centres could not take off as scheduled. The National Universities Commission therefore came up with a cost-effective method of delivering the training and enhancing the pedagogical skills of our academic staff via the internet. Thus came the birth of the Virtual Institute for Higher Education Pedagogy (VIHEP) whose objectives are to:

- provide academic staff in tertiary institutions in Nigeria with internet-based training on modern methods of teaching and learning in higher education
- enhance the knowledge and skills of academic staff on such issues as teaching of large classes, effective utilisation of (meagre) resources, modern methods of assessment and evaluation of students' performance, basic guidance and counseling techniques, basic skills of curriculum development and techniques for writing successful grant proposals
- share experiences among academic staff in Nigerian universities on best practices in university teaching and how to deal with academic vices such as examination malpractice, cultism and plagiarism.

With a complete web-based and online training programme VIHEP was launched in September 2003 and has trained many academic staff within the higher-education community generally, but mainly university teachers.

Following the tremendous success of VIHEP the Harare Cluster Office of UNESCO invited the NUC to make a presentation on how to extend the training programme of the Virtual Institute for Higher Education Pedagogy to other parts of Africa. The successful presentation of the NUC proposal led to the establishment of what is now known as the UNESCO/NUC Virtual Institute for Higher Education in Africa (VIHEAF). Launched by the Director-General of UNESCO in March 2004, the Institute has trained over 30,000 participants from across Africa on such things as HIV/AIDS education, how to teach large classes and modern methods of teaching. VIHEAF's objectives are to:

- build the capacity of teachers and other personnel in educational institutions in Africa in critical areas of national and regional needs as identified through the machineries of the AU, MINEDAF and NEPAD
- provide internet-based training on HIV/AIDS education for teachers at the primary, secondary and higher education levels in Africa
- provide internet-based training on the development of materials for open and distance learning
- enhance the knowledge and skills of academic staff in institutions of higher learning on such issues as teaching large classes, effective utilisation of (meagre) resources, modern methods of assessment and evaluation of students' performance, basic guidance and counseling techniques, basic skills of curriculum development and techniques for writing grant winning proposals
- share experiences among staff in institutions of higher learning and within the context of the World Conference on Higher Education (WCHE) and the African Network for Innovations in Higher Education (ANIHE) on best practices in higher-education teaching.

A number of other initiatives have also been launched. The Nigerian Experts and Academics in Diaspora Scheme (NEADS) gives Nigerian experts and academics abroad the opportunity of contributing their quota to the development of the Nigerian university system and, by extension, the nation through short-term appointments. After a period of careful planning NEADS was launched on 25 November 2004 with the invitation of Professor Gabriel Oyibo, a world-renowned mathematical physicist. Other experts and academics have been lined up to participate in NEADS. The Nigerian Universities Research and Development Fair (NURESDEF) addresses the disjoint between Nigerian universities and industries, a situation that has contributed to Nigeria's slow industrial

development, by showcasing the numerous research and development outputs from the universities and bringing them within the purview of industry in order to promote a symbiotic relationship between the two sides. The first fair took place in Abuja on 22–25 November 2004 at the International Conference Centre. Forty-three universities participated, and over 3,000 visitors from diverse backgrounds visited the stands. The fair made a good beginning in forging the expected link between the universities and the end users of their research outputs. It was also an opportunity for universities to develop networks and collaborate on similar research projects being undertaken by their staff. Other quality promotion and enhancing policies include the prescription of a pyramidal structure for academic staff, the Nigeria Expatriate Supplementation Scheme (NESS) to promote the attraction and retention of foreign expert academics in harsh areas of the Nigerian university system and the best practices in university teaching performance programme to promote the dissemination of effective teaching techniques by identified experts in particular fields across the university system.

Access to University Education

Expansion and diversification in higher education, driven by the demand of an upwardly mobile population and the needs of a globalised economy, are important factors underlying the rising demand for university education in Nigeria. The major contributory factors in this expansion include high population growth, expansion of basic and secondary education and the number and rate of growth of students that want university education. The entire university system in Nigeria can only accommodate about fifteen percent of those seeking admission. The situation will worsen when graduates of the Universal Basic Education Scheme (UBES) come knocking on the doors of the universities. Nevertheless some of the most significant policy initiatives that have increased access to university education are the licensing of sixteen private universities since 1999 and the re-opening of the National Open University. The establishment of more universities by state governments is further complementing the efforts of the federal government in this regard.

Relevance to National and Global Needs

Thanks to globalisation and the ICT revolution it is now recognised that university programmes have to be relevant not only to national needs but to the global labour market. To achieve this there has to be competition by other providers internally and through the emergence of cross-border education, and programmes need to give more consideration to students' needs and choices in terms of course design and delivery. Realising the drive to re-orientate the

relevance of university education, the NUC has reviewed the MAS documents, taking into consideration the emerging needs of students and the market. Courses have been updated, and new programmes in such areas as entrepreneurship and peace studies have been introduced. The guidelines on teacher-student ratios and physical facility requirements are being reviewed to reflect the role of ICT in education delivery. These reviews have been intended to also accommodate the rapid acceleration in the creation and dissemination of knowledge, which makes the life span of technologies and products shorter. This trend is also part of the rationale for having a 60:40 admission ratio policy in favour of science-based programmes.

Governance and Management

Responsive university systems have been moving towards more business-like forms of management and governance, with accountability, quality assurance and performance as the watchwords. The crises faced by the Nigerian university system over the years can largely be attributed to ineffective governance, and without effective management the reforms now underway will have little impact. Realising this the present administration introduced the concept of granting a greater degree of autonomy to federal universities. An autonomy bill was forwarded to the National Assembly after wide consultation with all stakeholders in university education. The bill sought to grant universities academic, administrative and financial autonomy and make them more accountable to their students, and to the community at large. At institutional level the NUC has been promoting more efficient management by institutionalising strategic planning, holding regular workshops for top university managers and giving annual awards to vice-chancellors and councils that implement jointly agreed parameters.

Impact of the Reform Measures

The impact of the reform measures will take some time to be evident. However, if the preliminary results of the just-concluded accreditation of newly-mature programmes are used as a yardstick, the system will in the not-too-distant future re-claim its past glory. A study to empirically assess the impact of the reforms over the initial five-year period (1999–2004) is currently being planned by the NUC. To further support the initiatives highlighted earlier, NUC and UNESCO have been organising conferences and roundtable discussions with universities and other stakeholders on the future directions of higher education and the reform measures being introduced by government. The universities have also been sensitised to examine their roles in other key programmes and initiatives like NEEDS and NEPAD. Parameters to rank universities on

various aspects of the reforms have been worked out, and the ranking exercise will be conducted routinely. The active participation and positive acceptance of this exercise by all institution has further demonstrated its objectivity and relevance.

Conclusion

In this paper we reviewed the current policies on university education in Nigeria and provided some insight into the assumptions and principles undergirding the reforms. It is worth noting that higher education, like all other social sectors, has been undergoing reforms globally. While most of these reforms are driven by globalisation and the revolution in information and communication technologies, the Nigerians reforms are guided specifically by the following goals:

- increasing the total quantity of funding that goes into the system through substantial injection of public funds and the promotion of cost sharing with other stakeholders while retaining a free tuition policy and principles of equity
- promoting quality in teaching, learning and research and putting mechanisms in place to assure that quality is achieved in practice
- broadening access to university education in response to the increasing demand for university education
- promoting the relevance of academic programmes to national and global needs
- enhancing internal efficiency through effective management and governance.

The ultimate goal of these reforms is to make Nigerian universities responsive to social needs and the production of competent, globally competitive, entrepreneurial and self-reliant graduates. The NUC has been and will continue to be repositioned to enable it, in collaboration with the universities, to address the challenges facing university education in Nigeria.

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