

# **Cacophony of Bleats: Insider's Response to Sustainability of Private Universities in Nigeria**

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**ABSTRACT:** An unprecedented number of new private universities were chartered in 2021 (20) and 2022 (12), bringing the total number to 111 which have been issued operating licenses since 1999 when the first four were registered. This act of proliferation (massification) has brought to the fore the raging issue about the sustainability of private universities in Nigeria. This growing concern formed a larger part of the theme of the summit on the sustainability of private universities in Africa organized a little over a decade ago (2012) by the Association of African Universities (AAU) in collaboration with the African Union (AU) in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Using an insider perspective, this paper tries to explore how government excessive consideration of the need to create access to higher education for young applicants and subtle regional balancing created a cacophony of bleats as the universities grapple with insufficiency of critical infrastructure (finances, equipment and human resources) with which to deliver on quality assurance. This paper discusses how the universities adopt survivalist strategies and the impact on late entrants to the circle vis-à-vis knowledge production, societal relevance, and innovation. It recommends a moratorium on further charter of more private universities and a consolidation of the existing ones.

**KEYWORDS:** Private universities, Quality assurance, Access, Proliferation, Massification, Sustainability

## **Introduction**

The issue of sustainability of private higher education institutions, especially universities, has been subject of concern to proprietors and other categories of stakeholders including regulatory agencies, national policy makers, Association of African Universities (AAU) and the regional governments' body, the African Union (AU). A policy meeting on the sustainability of private universities was organized by the AAU and the AU in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in 2012. This has been followed by the various editions of the African Centers of Excellence projects funded by the World Bank to transform higher education into a sustainable enterprise and a critical unit of societal development.

In Nigeria, in particular, sustainability has been a main issue as previous efforts to allow private initiative in higher education were unsuccessful until 1999 when the federal government, through the Federal Ministry of Education approved the charter of the first four private universities. Out of these four only three (Babcock University, Igbinedion University and Madonna University) formally took off. The fourth one, Heritage University did not take off. Each of these three was located in the three geopolitical zones of the south (south-west, south-south and south-east respectively). Nigeria has six geopolitical zones, meaning that the three other zones in the North (north-west, north-central, and north-east had none at take-off. Heritage University, the only one that was approved for take-off in the North-west geopolitical zone did not take-off).

About twenty years after the first three private universities took off (1999-2019), a substantial number of 79 private universities had been chartered. The main issue around the establishment of these private universities is the question of lack of access by numerous applicants who are desirous of higher education opportunities in the universities owned by the federal and state governments, but could not gain access due to low enrollment capacity. Of course, there are other pertinent issues as time goes by with the increase in the numbers of registered private universities. A few of these important issues include:

The critical issue of funding vis-à-vis sustainability. It was discovered that a number of the established private universities do not have enough capital votes to set up required

infrastructure that can guarantee that adequate learning is taking place. The initial capital outlay of N200 million required by intending proprietors soon became insufficient with gradual devaluation of the naira within the context of a pressurized global finance system. The Nigerian currency that was less than N50 to \$1 at the take-off years is currently N460 to \$1 at the government rate or as much as N760 to \$1 at the parallel market.

Then, there is the attendant issue of quality assurance (Erinosho, Aina, Okhomina, and Temilola 2007, 1) of the course offerings and unacceptable status of campus facilities leading to aberrant behaviors (Aina 2002, 1). Where finances have become hydra headed problem, it was logical that quality would be compromised as the universities grapple with inability to acquire needed equipment to guarantee effective teaching and laboratory works by the sciences. These universities were unable to attract high quality personnel as many of them became financially unstable and a few owing salary arrears to staff and faculty. The outcome of this is the continued low labor productivity in Africa due to poor educational quality (Oyelaran-Oyeyinka 2020, 7)

There are also corporate governance issues in human resources management. Some of the proprietors of the universities resort to sharp practices in appointment and human resources management. It is common to see principal officers of the universities appointed from family members and friends of the proprietors rather than based on global best practices of competency and capacity.

The worst case scenario is the *massification* of private higher institutions, especially universities in response to political expediency of regional balancing. Like they do with the establishment of government owned universities, conscious efforts are now made to establish or approve private universities based on unacceptable regional balancing sentiments. This policy inconsistency (Joseph 2019, 2), (Aina, Nwogwugwu, Joseph, 2019, 28) has been pursued with reckless abandon in the last two years, 2021 and 2022. This act has become part of the overall practice of a thieving vampires and insensitive elite corps who exhibits perfunctory commitment to corporate good (Mimiko 2010, 46), (Adebanwi 2012, 12), and (Aina 2016, 5). In the end, the youth feel marginalized, manipulated, and used (Efuntade 2021, 36), (Efuntade and Aina, 2019, 67). Given such an outlook as this, we face a generation of students for whom much in life has lost its meaning, for whom education may have lost its attraction (Aina 2005, 192).

### **Statement of the problem**

The charter of private universities has been a deliberate response of government to the critical question of inadequate access of eligible candidates who are interested in university education. This is occasioned by the low enrolment capacity by government owned universities and their inability to absorb the surging numbers of applicants. While the first two decades (1999-2019) in Nigeria saw the registration of 79 private universities, the last two years (2021-2022) witnessed a dramatic turn of event with an unprecedented *massification* of private universities with 32 new ones chartered without a corresponding justification for adequacy of manpower and finances required to run these institutions. The obvious introduction of regional representation into the approval process and attendant *mushrooming* has now raised the question of sustainability to the level of a red alert. This gap in policy consciousness and the ridiculous outcomes on quality assurance is what this paper attempts to fill by giving an insider's perspective to the growing concern about the future of private universities. The insider's perspective is a view of a practitioner, who was not only a pioneer staff of one of the first three private universities, but one who has served as pioneer/foundation President/Vice Chancellor (CEO) of one of the universities (Adeleke University: 2011-2013); third substantive President/Vice Chancellor of another (Caleb University: 2016-2019). He currently serves as Provost of the college of postgraduate studies in one that is arguably the most influential, Babcock University, 2020-2023.

## Categories of Founders or donors and philosophy of education

There are four broad categories of founders of private universities in Nigeria. These can be highlighted as follows:

1. Church/religious institutions owned or funded ones like Babcock, Bowen, Covenant, Al-Hikmah, Fountain and Crawford universities.
2. Individual philanthropists' owned or funded universities like Lead City, Igbinedion, Afe Babalola, Bells and American University of Yola.
3. Individual philanthropists-church/mosque inspired or funded universities like Adeleke, Crescent, Caleb universities.
4. Foreign interests' collaborators funded universities like Turkish-Nile University, and American University, Yola.

For the church/religious institutions funded universities, the philosophy of education seem to see education as part of the redemption goal of the missionary institutions (Aina 2006, 18). For them, to educate is to redeem (*educat et redemi*). The religious institutions-funded universities claim that they engage in wholistic education involving training of the hands, the heads and the mind (Aina 2005, 195). It is their assumption the moral and character basis of educational objective are sacrosanct in a society where morality is looking southward or as Segun Ayobolu (2023, np) puts it, part of the “decay of values which heightened state fragility and developmental degeneracy”.

The philosophical focus of the individual philanthropists funded institution is slightly different. For this group, education is perceived as a form of philanthropy. It could also assume as it were, a form of status symbol, a sign of affluence. Some of the promoters of these institutions see the setting up of the universities as platform for building social capital as the universities somehow contribute to social economic transformation of the rural communities where they are located. The individual philanthropists-religious bodies' inspired universities share similar objectives as the one just explained above. Education is both a philanthropic gesture and a source of social capital networking and net worth.

Lastly, the foreign interest collaborators funded universities perceive education as a tool for cultural exchange and a means of livelihood for the practitioners or investors.

## The political economy of setting up private universities

Chapter II of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria deals with the Fundamental Objectives and Direct Principles of State Policy. It makes it the duty and responsibility of government to “conform to, observe and apply...(its)...provisions” (Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999, 11). Article 18 says “Government shall direct its policy towards ensuring that there are equal and adequate educational opportunities at all levels”. Education therefore should be seen as public good. This means government ought to strive to ensure no citizen is left without level plain field in the legitimate pursuit of education and self-development.

The political economy of setting up private universities seems to have highlighted the government as not placing education as priority. While the government embarked on *massification* of private universities on the one hand, it displayed utter neglect to the funding and sustainability of the publicly owned universities. In the end, the private universities that are supposed to be complimentary to the public ones then wear the toga of the alternative or substitution to state owned universities and colleges. While government owned universities languish in total neglect, the private ones were experiencing patronage by those who can afford their fees.

With attention almost significantly shifted to the private universities, especially the ones that are doing well, the tendency to grant licenses became very attractive and the idea of regional balancing set in. The figure below collated from the Monday Bulletin of the National

Universities Commission (NUC), the agency of the federal ministry of education saddled with the responsibility of licensing universities indicated an incredible imbalance in favor of three southern geopolitical zones as against those of the three northern geopolitical zones in the first two decades as extracted from the NUC Bulletin of March 20, 2023:

*Private universities as instruments of regional balancing:*

- South West (1999-2019) 39.
- South East (1999-2019) 14.
- South South (1999-2019) 13.
- North Central (1999-2019) 09.
- North West (1999-2019) 03.
- North East (1999-2019) 01.
- Total: 79

The south west geopolitical zone was host to about 50% in the first 20 years while the entire south accounted for about 84% for same period, and the entire north accounted for just a little above 15%. The reasons are not far-fetched: the influence of Christianity and western education was more predominant in the southern states than those of the north where emphasis was mainly on Islamic education; also the legacies of colonialism left the southern states to be more educationally advantaged over the north.

### ***Cacophony of bleats***

To address this seeming regional imbalance, 32 private universities were approved in 2021 and 2022 representing about 29% of the number approved since 1999 (or in 22 years). Of the 32 private universities approved in 2021 and 2022, the North accounted for 68.8% while only 31% was approved for the entire South. In just two years (2021 and 2022) the demography of private intervention saw the dominance of the South West reduced to 40%; the entire south now stands at 68.5%. while the North moved from 14% to 31.5%. This cacophony of bleats portends danger for quality assurance as the basic tenets of human and physical infrastructure seem to be in short supply, thereby creating undue pressure bothering on sustainability. Some universities stated with two or three professorial members, who often times are the aging personnel who for some years have disengaged or retired from active service.

The marginal increment in the number of private universities in the three geopolitical zones of the north however did not positively affect the north east geopolitical zone. The zone with all the efforts at mushrooming had only three out of 111 private universities nation-wide, and out of 35 in the entire North. The various approvals for the two years and the previous figures of each geopolitical zones extracted from the Monday Bulletin (NUC Bulletin, March 20, 2023) can be presented as below:

- South West (1999-2019) 39+2 =41.
- South East (1999-2019) 14 +3 =17
- South South (1999-2019) 13 + 5 =18
- North Central (1999-2019) 09 + 11=20
- North West (1999-2019) 03 + 09=12
- North East (1999-2019) 01 + 02 = 03

### **Donors and founders interventionist models**

The mushrooming and *massification* of private universities have left the higher education sector in Nigeria gasping for breadth in the area of adequate infrastructure financing and human capital development. Research and development have therefore taken the back seat in a good number of the private universities with efforts largely concentrated at getting manpower to cater for teaching. In the process, and as a result of this growing concern which partly has become an African

regional issues as private universities in other African countries suffer similar challenge, various efforts are being collated to address the malaise.

In 2012, the Association of African Universities (AAU) in collaboration with the African Union (AU) organized a summit on sustainability of private universities in Africa. At that conference and in most other meetings by concerned stakeholders in Namibia, Cote D'Ivoire, Senegal, Cameroon and Nigeria, a number of funding sources were highlighted to address the challenge of sustainability created by the chartered of many private universities. Some of these are summarized below:

1. Proprietor/promoter grants: It is envisaged that promoters of private universities should consider substantial grants.
2. School fees: Private universities apart from the promoters' grants which are largely for capital development should charge tuition and fees that can take care of overhead or running costs.
3. Short term and long term bank facilities: Those facing critical survival threats have had to resort to short term bank facilities to augment operating costs while they access long term credit facilities for capital (infrastructure) development.
4. Development of capital campaigns and advancement: Most of the early starters have had to embark of donor funding drive, research grant writing to international agencies and the yet to be resolved debate on the need for the federal government to accommodate private universities under the state tax accruable fund code named: Tertiary Education Fund (TETFUND).

### **Challenges facing sustainability discourse**

Higher education in general and private higher education in particular in Nigeria are experiencing huge challenges that are existential. Private universities, wrongly perceived as profit making by entities in and out of government face a number of challenges:

1. There is the challenge of hostile/volatile operating economic environment. Components of hostile operating environment include the forex regime that is south bound and spiraling inflation. Additionally, some private universities come under the harassment of state tax authorities who insist certain taxes that are supposed to be meant for profit making organizations are also paid by private universities.
2. Related to the volatile operating environment is the unstable operating cost. The cost of power generation has become almost a death knell on private and public universities. Power generation is central to academic activities, research and development.
3. Perhaps the most devastating of late is the crisis of manpower or acute human resources in the nation with exodus to Europe, Asia and the Americas by few qualified hands in a move that has been nick-named as *japa* syndrome.
4. Added to the crisis in the private universities is the industrial action by Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU). This has negatively affected some private universities as areas of collaboration with public universities whose staff are on long industrial action (the latest industrial action in year 2022 lasted eight months) suffer fatal neglect. A good instance is the problem of resource sharing by those who run medical programs and have joint clinical rotation with the public institutions.
5. Still on manpower issue is the cost of training additional manpower in and out of Nigeria.

### **Recommendations**

The sustainability issues confronting private universities in Nigeria are not insurmountable. The first task is to ensure that the universities develop realistic strategic plans. The strategic plan should ensure minimum of five years to be devoted to massive infrastructure support by the

promoters of such institutions while management set up operations funding flow from enrolment fees and donor cum grant seeking ventures.

The strategic plan to be developed should clearly highlight program development schedule. Programs or course of studies when haphazardly added is a sign of desperation and inadequate or realistic strategic plans. Experience shows that some private universities commissioned people who instead of developing a strategic plan that fits purpose merely reproduce or copy those of existing universities.

There should also be a structure development of funding sources and partnerships with private subscribers and promoters. Struggling private universities should give strong considerations to widening its ownership base to integrate additional promoters who can subscribe to the vision. The system should encourage those struggling to survive to allow additional investors to come in within agreed equity participation.

The federal government of Nigeria should urgently consider the integration of private universities into national TETFUND program for research grant and ICT infrastructure funding. The promoters of private universities are not calling on government to help them pay salaries or defray overhead but to assist staff and students of private universities to access funds for research and development. If the outcome of the research and development is in the overall interest of the nation or humanity, there is no justification that should exclude those in the private sector from being listed as potential beneficiary on a competitive basis.

The government should make real the mentorship scheme that allow deliberate institutional support of private universities by older universities in the areas of manpower development and institutional consolidation.

In view of the challenges of quality assurance, a moratorium on further charter of new private universities should come into effect for minimum of five years to allow the agencies of government saddled with the responsibilities recalibrate its charter instrument and consolidate on monitoring of those struggling to survive.

## Conclusion

Sustainability has become a major issue among stakeholders of private universities in Nigeria. This is due partly to the indiscriminate licensing of more private universities at a time that when even the ones established in two decades are still struggling to find fit, and at a time that in the operating environment that has become so increasingly hostile. This has implications for regulatory agencies, the government, as well as the promoters, employees, and students. Funding has dwindled, so is human resources as well as basic infrastructure that are supposed to guarantee effective delivery of teaching and research. Many coping strategies have been developed by stakeholders but a lot still need to be done to stabilize and sustain private investment in higher education at the university level. This includes, but is not limited to arresting the mushrooming of private universities under the guise of providing access and creative ways of funding university operations and capital needs.

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