



The Role Of The National Universities Commission (Nuc) In The Development Of University Education In Nigeria: Reflections And Projections

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Abstract

Just about two years after Nigeria's independence, the National University Commission (NUC) was established as an advisory agency on higher education in the cabinet office of the First Republic of Nigeria. The NUC was charged with the responsibility of advising government on financial needs of the universities and to handle the planning of a balanced and coordinated development of university education in Nigeria. These functions were further expanded with the enactment of Decree No. 1 of 1974 that transformed NUC from advisory capacity to a statutory body. This was an outcome of the centralization of university education in the country, during which the Federal Government took over all the then existing regional universities in the country. The expansion of university education in Nigeria reached its nadir in recent time with the efforts by governments, the private sector and faith based organizations establishing new universities and expanding the existing ones. This development brought with it enormous responsibilities and challenges. How the NUC has been able to cope with its new status and its responsibilities is the prime focus of this paper. The paper examines the Nigerian University system before the formation of NUC. It discusses the establishment and role of NUC and evaluates its impact on university education in the country. The paper highlights the challenges that have constrained the operations of the Commission. It concludes by suggesting recommendations that might be of help to overcome the identified challenges and further enhance the development of university education in Nigeria.

Keywords: National Universities Commission, Funding, Satellite Campuses, University autonomy, Academic freedom.

THE NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY SYSTEM BEFORE THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE NATIONAL UNIVERSITY COMMISSION

The quest for higher education in Nigeria dates back to the second half of the nineteenth century when the well-to-do Africans in Lagos sent their children overseas for professional training. Upon the completion of their studies abroad, some of them returned to Nigeria and began to demand for the establishment of institutions of higher learning in the country. Consequently, the Yaba Higher College was established in 1934. In terms of standard however, the college was not a university; nevertheless, its students became the foundation students of the University College, Ibadan (UCI) when it was established in 1948 (Lawal, 2008:55-60).

The establishment of Yaba Higher College was vehemently criticized and lampooned by the Nigerian Nationalists who preferred a University to the college (Magida, 2013:2). In the eyes of the West African intellectuals; the curriculum of the college was too narrow, incapable of meeting the needs of the country (Fafunwa, 1974:151).

With these criticisms, the colonial government was forced to set up two distinct commissions to look into the possibility of establishing universities in the British colonies in West Africa.

The Asquith and Elliot Commissions were therefore set up in 1943 and both commissions submitted reports culminating in the establishment of University College Ibadan in 1948.

The first striking thing we discovered from the onset of the history of university education in Nigeria is that the first ivory tower (UCI) was heavily dependent on the government for its finances. The bulk of the money needed for the running of UCI was provided by the colonial government. (Fafunwa, 1971:65) This scenario was to serve as precedent to the subsequent universities established by Nigerian government (Ajayi & Tamuno, 1973:22-48).

Also, in order to regulate the affairs of the University College Ibadan, the colonial government established Inter-University Council (IUC) (Fafunwa, 1971:212). For the period it existed, the council conducted visitations, helped to recruit staff and provided advice on various administrative and academic matters. Side by side with the University of London, the IUC showed abiding interest in establishing and maintaining high academic standards at UCI. Not only this, the IUC in conjunction with the London University and Colonial Office helped to provide colonial training in the United Kingdom for Nigerian Students who had completed their pre-medical and pre-chemical courses at the UCI. It supported UCI's policy of high standard in staff recruitment, students selection, the protection of examination standard, the appointment of external examiners, facilities for research or library resources and urged that the maintenance of high academic standard must be paramount (Fafunwa, 1971:259).

In a nutshell, one can safely conclude that the proud image of UCI in the academic world was in many ways a product of the dedication and care which the IUC gave the emergent university in Nigeria. This achievement notwithstanding, IUC could only operate in advisory capacity within the period it existed. Its advisory role persisted until 1962 when it was replaced by National Universities Commission (NUC) (Fafunwa, 1971:222).

The Establishment of the National Universities Commission

Following the recommendation of the Ashby commission on Higher Education in Nigeria, the National Universities Commission (NUC) similar to those in Britain, Australia and New Zealand was established in 1962 as an advisory agency in the Cabinet Office ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/education in Nigeria](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/education_in_Nigeria). Retrieved on 28 February, 2013). At its inception, the role of the NUC was advisory to the Federal Government on the financial needs and development of university education in Nigeria. However in 1974, the Gowon's administration ordered the reconstitution of the commission. This led to the enactment of Decree No. 1 of 1974 that established the NUC as a statutory body (Newswatch, March 28, 1988:21). The decree gave the commission broad responsibilities and functions relating to the coordination, development and financing of Nigerian Universities. Statutorily, the Commission was charged with the following responsibilities:

To advise on the establishment and location of new universities and other degree granting institutions; to estimate and request from government, annual grants for the universities and to distribute this in accordance with a set of formular; to collate, analyse and publish information relating to university development and education in Nigeria; to develop general programmes to be pursued by universities in order to ensure that they are fully adequate for national needs and objectives; to recommend the establishment of new faculties or postgraduate institutions in existing universities; and to make such other recommendations to the Federal Government or to Universities relating to higher education as the Commission may consider to be in the national interest among others. This term of reference meant that the NUC was to

coordinate and control the administrative and financial matters of the Nigerian publicly owned universities.

To successfully carry out its functions, the Commission was divided into twelve major departments each headed by a director. These departments are:

Academic Standards; Inspection, and Monitoring; Management Support Services; Students Support Services; Research and Innovations; Information and Communication Technology; Finance and Accounts; Quality Assurance; Physical Planning and Development; Open and Distance Education, among others (<http://www.nuc.edu.ng/pages.asp?id=27>).

NUC Contributions to the Development of Nigerian Universities

During the 1970s, when the Federal Government took over all universities and the NUC became statutory and more powerful, the orientation of academic programmes in Nigerian Universities to Nigerian needs was pursued with vigour. The University of Benin, for example, changed its original philosophy into the mainstream of the new Science/Humanities orientation with the provision that the constituent ratio would be 60:40 in that order. By early 1980s, what the University of Benin began in the 1970s had begun to yield positive results in the establishment of universities of technology in the country. This was accelerated by the establishment of Iron and Steel Industry in Ajaokuta and the need to diversify the economy toward a technological balance (Tamuno and Atanda, 1989:297).

In line with its objective of channeling external aid to the universities to ensure high academic standards, the NUC in 1976, sent scouting team to Europe, America, Middle and Far East with the aim of exploring the possibilities of finding quality staff for Nigerian universities. The teams were also sent out to make feasibility studies on the establishment of inter-institutional linkages with overseas universities as well as the expansion of postgraduate facilities. Prior to the reports of the scouting teams, the Commission took over the universities liaison offices in Britain under the name Nigerian Universities Office. It also signed an agreement with the American Council of Education for cooperation in such areas as recruitment of staff in the United States and the establishment of inter-institutional linkages with the U.S. Universities. The London office began operation in 1978 and other offices were opened in Washington D.C., Ottawa, and Cairo. Each office was headed by a Director and assisted by another home-based officer and a number of locally recruited staff (New Nigerian, Nov. 20 1992:p. 31).

The Commission was able to lay down minimum academic standards for all programmes being taught in all Nigerian Universities. This role was vested in NUC's Amendment Decree No. 49 of 1988. Using indices such as quality of academic staff, academic content, physical facilities, library and funding, the Commission has also been able to conduct regular comprehensive accreditation of all undergraduate programmes in Nigerian Universities. The accreditation exercise by the NUC has ensured standardization of all academic programmes in Nigerian Universities.

In 2005, the Commission introduced new academic curricula for all Nigerian Universities. The aim was to provide a better skilled and entrepreneurial graduate suitable not only for Nigerian labour market but also the global market. This new curriculum also came up with the fact that student seeking admission into any Nigerian university must have a minimum of five credits at O' level, and this must include English Language and Mathematics. A Post-JAMB Examination was equally set-up in order to screen students properly before entering into the university. Moreover, it came up with the idea that, the minimum qualification for teaching in the university should be masters degree (NUC Annual Report, 2006). The new system has helped

to eradicate the outdated curriculums which were replaced with the modern ones that are relevant to the needs of the Nigerian economy and the global market.

The NUC also made available material resources to improve the communication system in the universities. In 1993, the commission installed E-mail facilities in some major Federal Universities to improve electronic communication system on the campuses on a sustainable basis. Successful implementation of the E-mail project, to some extent, has helped to remove the threat of complete isolation of the Nigerian academic community in the rapidly advancing information technology world (NUC Annual Report, 1994:20-24).

In its bid to ensure a better way of collecting, analyzing and managing data, the commission had also introduced the computer-based Management Information Service (MIS) into Nigerian University System. Primarily, the objective of the MIS project, among others is:

- I. To standardize the system of obtaining reports and statistical information from the various universities on students, staff, libraries and financial matters;
- II. To record such information on diskettes, tapes to the NUC, for information storage, analysis and retrieval purpose;
- III. To ensure that such information are accurate and timely;
- IV. To organize for planning, budgeting and decision making; and
- V. To help the universities put in place an effective management system and improve utilization of resources (NUC Annual Report, 1994).

So far so good, the MIS has helped the Commission in taking effective decision and making its day to day operations easier. For better quality performance, the Nigerian University Commission (NUC) in 2003/2004 academic session established the carrying capacity of every programme to be offered in Nigeria Universities. Carrying capability is the minimum number of students that the human and material resources available in the university can support for quality delivery of education on that programme (The Comet, 9 June, 2005:26). If a university enrolls just to the point of its carrying capacity (or less) for a programme, chances are that the quality of products from that programme will be assured, if no collateral distortions such as strikes come to bear at some point during the course of training. The balance between quantity and quality is established through a policy of not exceeding enrolment carrying capacity (The Comet, 9 June, 2005:26).

The NUC had also been responsible for granting of licences for the establishment of private universities in Nigeria. As at 2009, there were over 74 states and private universities in Nigeria. These universities provided the much needed admission space for thousands of eligible and qualified candidates. The private universities so licensed have emerged worthy competitors for the public universities. For instance, whereas federal universities had 17.8 percent of their programmes attaining the full accreditation status in 2004/2005, the private universities had 16.9 percent of their programmes with full accreditation. (The Comet, Lagos: 9 June, 2005: 27). Similarly, a private university – Pan African University, Lagos came in the overall second position ranking of all universities in the 2004 academic session.

The NUC had also made possible introduction of E-learning technology in Nigeria universities. Billions of Naira was expended to install such technology in many Nigerian universities, the E-learning is a manifestation of the notion of flexible learning which includes computer mediated communication, electronic delivery of independent learning resources, learning in simulated electronic environments, learning how to use technological tools and software and electronic enrolment and course administration.

The main motives of e-learning are to improve the quality of learning, to provide learners with skills needed for their professional development, to widen access to education, and to reduce cost and improve cost-effectiveness of education. The University of Lagos was the first to do a pilot run of the e-learning scheme. And, the hub of the virtual library component of the e-learning project was later commissioned by the NUC. As at 2003 the NUC had gained useful experience in the implementation of e-learning protocols via the UNESCO-NUC virtual institute for Higher education in Africa.

The NUC had also strengthened the National Open University by way of human and material resources to enable it enroll many students as projected in its blueprint (The Comet 9 June, 2005: 27). It had helped Nigerian universities to establish a number of collaborations and linkages with top American universities. In 2006, the Commission initiated a 10-day study tour of the United States of America for 10 Vice-Chancellors of Nigerian Universities. The tour took them to the famous Harvard University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and a carefully selected group of American Universities where academic and cultural linkages were established with Harvard and MIT, and the benefitting universities in Nigeria (Daily Independent, 29 May, 2006:E7). The authorities of Harvard and MIT and all universities visited during the tour agreed to established linkages with Nigerian universities. The NUC helped to coordinate the processes leading to the establishment of such academic and cultural linkages (Daily Independent 29 May, 2006:E7).

One of the major dividends of the visit was the approval by MIT for Nigerian universities to be connected to its "iLab facility" which provides remote web-accessible laboratories that allow for more efficient use of laboratory equipment and give students the opportunity to conduct experiments from the comfort of an internet accessible browser (Daily Independent 29 May, 2006: E7). The Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife was the first beneficiary of the project. Agreements were also reached that would involve NUC's coordination of Nigerian universities with members of staff and students of MIT iLab (Daily Independent, 29 May, 2006). Other collaborations established during the study tour include free use and participation in MIT Open Course Ware (OCW) project, which makes the teaching materials used in almost all MIT undergraduate and graduate courses available on the web free of charge to any user anywhere in the world. The Nigerian delegation was promised mirror sites of OCW so that staff and students in Nigerian universities would be able to use the resources without the rigour and experience of direct Internet link (Daily Independent 29 May, 2000).

The Nigerian visitors were also able to secure the promise of Professor Akinwande, a Nigerian don, of the Department of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science of MIT, to offer training to Engineering lecturers in Nigerian universities. The training would focus on latest techniques in teaching and research in Electronics and Computer Engineering (Daily Independent, 29 May, 2006:E7).

The NUC in conjunction with the Federal Ministry of Education was determined to improve the quality of students seeking admission into Nigerian universities. In line with this thinking, the Commission in 2006 introduced the post-Jamb screening for intending entrants into Nigerian universities, a policy which a public commentator has likened to "a revolution" (The Comet, Friday 21 October, 2005: 36). It is easily the most important policy statement that had been made since the return to civil democratic governance in Nigeria in 1999.

The idea of a centralized Federal Government – Controlled Examination Body for all universities and polytechnics in Nigeria, and whose decisions were binding on these institutions was an anathema to federalism. It was more the case with the emergence of states,

and now private universities all over the place, who in spite of their funding independence of the central government, still had to wait on the latter to select candidates for them. And, what is more, the universities that were the end-products of these exercises had no input whatsoever into how examinations were conducted such that the entire exercise was devoid of the requisite legitimacy.

The yeoman's job of the leadership of JAMB notwithstanding, the institutions had become increasingly helpless as the evil genius that is arguably distinctively, Nigerian had continued to compromise the integrity of the examinations. This was to the extent that reasonable members of the society had had cause to doubt the validity of scores derisively referred to as "JAMB scores" across the country. Thus, the Universities were faced with a situation in which they had to take in candidates whose competence they doubted and whose moral standing was such that they would rather not have touched the candidates with a long pole as long as JAMB had issued such candidates some results (The Comet, 21 Oct. 2005: 36). This for many years constituted the dilemma of the university as JAMB effectively became the very first platform for entrance into the University system of sundry undesirable elements who come in not because they came to read and can read, but only to ensure that the system got turned into a jungle of violence, increasingly taking the character of the Hobbesian state of nature where life was supposedly brutish, nasty and short. It was so bad that for the image of the ivory towers by which universities are known globally, Nigeria's own universities became effective garrisons of violence and crime.

But all that is gone now as the universities can now go beyond JAMB and begin to individually screen those who will come in. This, indeed is autonomy in practice. And it is expected that this would manifest immediately in improved quality of students and by implication, of education at the tertiary level. It would also make secondary schools students much more serious when they begin to realize the full implications that whatever JAMB score you parade, you will be subjected to further examination/screening which ordinarily would be better monitored and surely better conducted than JAMB's, in which the good would be sifted from the ugly. This will also reduce the desperation on the part of candidates to pass JAMB examination at all cost as a high JAMB score would no longer guarantee admission to a university.

The point is that no matter from whatever perspective it is being viewed, the new policy is one that will change the face of the university for the better. It has the potential to improve the quality of education in the country in general, and at the university level in particular, stem the degeneration of Nigerian universities into manageable outposts of cultic and violent activities and of moral decay.

There is a caveat, however. The realization of the potentials above-highlighted would depend on how the universities handle the new power that has been given to them. As a matter of fact, the way this is used would go a long way to inform on how the autonomy which they had clamoured for, for so long, would be canalized if and when eventually it comes. But then, this no doubt is a great statement on the federal government's much advertised commitment to autonomy in the universities.

Other notable contribution of the NUC is the Development of the Minimum Academic Standards (DMAS) used for programme accreditation in the university system, introduction of modern method of teaching larger classrooms, giving the NUC international visibility through the Global University Network for Innovation (GUNI), Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), the Visual Library Project and the ranking of Nigerian universities, based on accreditation results (The Guardian 31 October, 2013:4).

Furthermore, the NUC has continued to discharge its responsibilities to the universities in accordance with its original mandate of quality assurance in respect of the establishment and orderly development of universities in Nigeria. For instance it had expanded access to university education with the establishment of many Federal, state and private universities; it had also carried out a review of, the Benchmark Minimum Academic Standard (BMAS), curricula and development of new programmes, like mechatronics, gerontology, robotics and entrepreneurial studies. The Commission had also streamlined part-times degree programme and solicited for review of NUC laws, which were unarguably weak, to tackle the challenges of the system (The Guardian 31 October, 2013: 49).

As part of its mandate to address infrastructural challenges across the public universities in Nigeria, the NUC had embarked on provision of modern video conferencing facilities initially to 27 Federal Universities hooked and connected to the wider world. These facilities were provided to enable lecturers and students from all across these universities to share information and academic resources for the improvement of the nation. Since this noble experiment began, more universities across the country have been accommodated. The video conferencing facilities have fully brought improvement to the internet bandwidth of the Nigerian universities, though most of them have issues with the speed of their facilities. The professionals overseeing this programme have considerably increased the bandwidth of the participating universities. This initiative is critical to the overall development of the universities as it would avail the nation opportunity of the desired linkages with universities worldwide (The Nigerian Tribune, 17 October, 2013: 20).

The NUC in collaboration with the Federal Ministry of Education had designed also the Nigerian Universities Electronic Teaching and Learning Platform. This is a project designed for the purpose of addressing the population challenge confronting Nigerian universities especially the case of those with large students' population and classes. The programme uses technology to assist lecturers to have interactive classrooms that help students to assimilate at a faster level.

Under this project, interactive white boards with networking capacities, high resolution audio-visual aids and electronic clipart resources were provided for 12 state and federal universities. The first phase of the project got the financial backing of Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFUND) to the tune of N32m. Five Federal universities were in the first phase namely: University of Agriculture Abeokuta, Federal University of Technology, Minna, Usmanu Dan Fodio University, Sokoto, University of Uyo and Federal University of Technology, Owerri. The State Universities that benefited included Osun State University, Osogbo, Kogi State University, Anyingba, Adamawa State University, Kano, Niger-Delta University, Amassoma Wilberforce Island, and Abia State University, Uturu (The Nigerian Tribune, 17 October, 2008: 20).

The NUC had also frowned at the indiscriminate introduction and duplication of programmes and courses which were not approved by the NUC (The Nigerian Tribune, 10 May, 2007:4). It was discovered that authorities of the affected universities often introduced programmes and courses not relevant to the nation's economy without recourse to the NUC. This impunity was impacting negatively on the quality of programmes being run in the universities. To stop this practice, the NUC set up a regulatory body made up of seasoned professors and staff of the NUC to carry out periodic audit of programmes and courses in Nigerian universities. Such programmes and courses without prior approval of the NUC were denied accreditation and JAMB, the regulatory body responsible for quality control in the admission to universities, was mandated to suspend admissions into programmes with "denied status" (The Nigerian Tribune, 10 May, 2007:4).

Laudable as these contributions might be, the NUC was in the eye of the storm. The Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) had called into question the integrity of the Commission regarding its handling of the accreditation procedure in Nigerian universities as well as its involvement in contract award bazaar derived from its alleged abuse of the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFUND). ASUU called for a probe into what they called the fraudulent role of the NUC. The Union called for the stoppage of the fraud going on in NUC over the accreditation of courses in Nigerian universities. It wondered, for example, how “the clean bill of health given by the NUC to several public universities could be reconciled with the findings of the Needs Assessment Committee set up by the Federal Government, which found widespread not in the system”(The Nigerian Tribune 10 September, 2013”: 19).

Equally, serious and worthy of note is the allegation that the Commission was always in the habit of awarding severely inflated contracts in respect of new universities. The Union expressed concern on how a supposedly quality assurance institution such as the NUC transformed itself into a tender’s board for the award of hyper-inflated contracts thereby depriving the universities their much needed fund. There were allegations of fraud and double standards leveled against the NUC in its accreditation process. ASUU expressed worry as to why “friends of the Commission are left off the hook while some institutions are targeted for reprisals and de-marketing campaigns” (The Nigerian Tribune, 10 September, 2013:19).

The Commission was also accused of accumulating powers which were not granted to it by the enabling law which set it up. For example, in a federal system such as Nigeria’s where education is on the concurrent list, the state governments are supposed to be carried along by the NUC in its ombudsman’s role as done in several Federal systems like Canada and India. But in the Nigeria’s case, it is not so, rather, the NUC often breathes down the necks of state and private universities.

No wonder, many students and other critical stakeholders took to the streets in July, 2006 calling for the abolition of the NUC. The students, under the banner of the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS) demonstrated along major roads in Nigeria. They called for financial autonomy of tertiary institutions and chanted “no” to privatization and commercialization of education in Nigeria among other claims. The Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities (SSANU) in collaboration with NANS also called for the scrapping of the NUC.

Thus, the various allegations of fraud, corruption of the highest order, lack of integrity, double standards, buying and selling of accreditations in the universities, lack of openness and opaqueness in the accreditation exercise, excessive personalisation of the commission, are weighty allegations that have compromised and dented the image of the NUC.

However, the panel set up by the Federal Government to examine the decrees that set up the body and review its activities over the years recommended that the NUC should stay but that the body be trimmed down both in structure and power so it could function better. The time may have come for the Federal Government to begin the process of regulating “the regulator (NUC) and cleansing what is fast, becoming the Augean stable in the education sector.

CHALLENGES AND IMPACT

In the course of discharging its duties, the NUC had1 encountered a lot of challenges. The good intention of Gowon administration to give the nation a virile university system led to the reconstitution of NUC in 1974 when it became a statutory body. The outcome of that effort led to the erosion of university autonomy in Nigeria. Under the Decree No. 1 of 1974, Universities

in the country lost their financial autonomy to hitherto reticent NUC. Henceforth, the Commission could receive block grants from the Federal Government and allocate them to universities in accordance with such formulae as may be spelt out by the Federal government. The decree also formally established NUC as a buffer body between government and universities (Tamuno & Atanda, 1989:272). Since then, the Nigerian universities financial freedom and unhindered access to the seat of power, have been annulled. Before 1974, Vice-Chancellors had direct access to the Federal Government. Thus, the trouble between the NUC and the universities started following the efforts of the former to control the latter. Relationship between the two became essentially antagonistic almost immediately NUC became a statutory body. Also the situation heightened universities/students friction and led to the clamping down of unionism in various campuses (The Punch, 18 May, 2000:8). The system also opened up a plethora of charges and counter-charges between the NUC and universities. This unpalatable situation has led to the clamoring for the restoration of autonomy to the Nigerian universities (Newswatch Magazine, 28 March, 1988, p. 21).

The imposition of the NUC on the Nigerian universities has done an incalculable damage to the relationship hitherto existing between the universities and federal government (Omoregie, 1994). With the establishment of the NUC as a buffer between government and the universities, Nigerian universities have been cut off from direct communication with government. Academics in the country's universities more or less see the Commission as the interventionist arm of government for oppression (Omoregie, 1994), This may be true if the buffer status of the Commission is critically examined. According to Professor Jubril Aminu, the first Executive Secretary of the Commission, this buffer status of the NUC made it a convenient punching bag behind which government hides

the hand which doles out unpopular policies to the universities in the perceived national interest (Newswatch 28 March, 1988, p. 22).

Unwarranted government's intervention in the affairs of the universities

through the NUC and the activities of some leaders of the university communities who tend to lobby government and its agents for support in the pursuit of their selfish interests is a clear violation of one of the most cherished principles of university administration and its code of conduct. Government's constant teleguiding of the universities on courses to be taught to students, not to be offered admission, drawing of academic calendar for universities as well as termination of sessions and positions of Vice-Chancellors are issues which have undermined autonomy and academic freedom of Nigerian universities.

Besides, the distance between the government and the universities represented by the ministry of education and NUC has seriously blurred the understanding which the government used to have for the needs of the universities during the 1960s and early 1970s. Gross underfunding of university education and disbursement of same by the NUC have undermined development of Nigerian university system. Consequently funds meant for the universities became depleted resulting in the lack of effectiveness in the Nigerian university system (Omoregie, 1994). Individuals and bodies with abiding interest in the wholesomeness of the Nigerian university education have regularly raised the alarm over deteriorating and non-existing facilities and the flights of talents called "brain-drain" from the education industry. The Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) was in the forefront of the advocacy for proper funding of the universities by those who established them. However, each time ASUU embarked on strike, government always made the issue of the remuneration of academic staff the bone of contention between the unions and government. Government often downplayed the equally, if not more important, issue of funding of the universities. Both state and federal

governments almost always portrayed ASUU as selfish and self-conceited before the undiscerning gullible and ignorant public (Ogonor, 1994).

To understand the extent of under-funding of education in Nigeria, it is important to note that, since 1990 Nigerian government has been spending less than 10 percent of its annual budget on education (NUC, 1999). In the 2006 budget, for instance, a meager 9 percent went to education; the sum which is a far cry from the 26 percent recommended by UNESCO. It is important to note that university administrators do not even have the faintest idea of what they will get in a year from government through the NUC. What they get as 'handouts' from the body always turn out to be too paltry to bring about any meaningful development. Right from the late 1980s, the recurrent grants given to the universities have been reduced to just 30 percent of the amount normally received (NUC, 1999: 8). Reacting to this development, the former Vice-Chancellor of Usmanu Dan Fodio University, Sokoto, Professor Mahdi Adamu, declared that "the grants available to the universities were only sufficient to pay staff salaries with nothing left to carry out research" (Newswatch, April 12, 1990: 14).

This decline in funding was also evident from allocations per student since the 1970s. In 1975/76, this was N3,424.00 while it was N536.00 in 1988/89, showing a decline (Ajayi, K. 1999: 19-23). In 1991, 697 dollars was used as subsidy on each student in the year 2000 (Ajayi, K. 2001). As a result of the decline in funding of Nigerian universities, enormous time and energy that should have been devoted to promoting research and scholarship are spent on generating funds. Most of the ways in which universities especially those in urban areas have sought to make up for the shortfall in statutory allocations from government is the introduction of executive, part-time programme and consultancy services. The already overworked lecturers/researchers get sucked into teaching overtime for survival with little regard for quality, research and the supervision of their students. Even the younger lecturers are not left out of the race; they often target the so-called satellite campus/outreach study centres at the expense of their pre-doctoral research programmes thus stunting their scholarly development and research capacity.

Underfunding of Nigerian universities has indeed undermined the growth of Libraries, laboratories and virtually wiped off research and conferences. The federal government instead of adequately funding and providing good management through NUC for the nation's universities has over the years reduced funding and gets itself locked in perennial disputes with ASUU (Jega, 1993). The situation which normally resulted in prolonged disruption of academic calendar and declining standards of university education.

Moreso, the supply of qualified and experienced university teachers is getting thinner as there is hardly enough to go round. In the face of ever-declining grants, most of the best minds of Nigerian academics complain of deterioration of teaching and research environment in Nigerian universities. Coupled with this, is the issue of salary (Jega, 1993, 1994). In spite of the 2001 pay rise, Nigerian universities lecturers and administrators remain some of the poorest paid in the world. This has led to academic brain drain in Nigerian universities.

On top of these problems, Nigerian universities have been bedeviled for so many years by debilitating labour unrest. The end result is that, there is hardly any university in Nigeria that has not been disrupted or which can boast of not putting its students through crash programme at one stage or another of their studies. This does not augur well for the educational development of the country. The employers are complaining of Nigeria graduates being hardly literate; yet the number of students, admitted to Nigerian universities keeps on rising yearly without corresponding facilities and manpower to train them, no thanks to NUC

policy of unilaterally determining the so-called carrying capacity of each university (Obi, C. 2000).

The NUC and other related bodies set up to play regulatory and advisory role have become, a cog in the wheel of progress in the life of universities in Nigeria. For sometimes now, it has become a practice for the NUC to either withhold funds allocated to the universities or interfere with the disbursement of such funds. The Commission has increasingly become a sprawling bureaucracy, a drawback on the university system in Nigeria. The NUC was originally tasked with liaising between the universities on the one hand and the state on the other hand. It was also meant to make funds available to the universities. The role of the Commission has drifted towards an increasing control of university education in recent times. The NUC controls not just the level of funds going to the universities but when, how and for what purposes such funds are meant for. In fact, universities now require prior approval for their budget, academic programme, physical development etc. THE NUC also regulates the fees charge in the Universities, and controls the enrolment of students (Akinkugbe, 2001:22-26). This development indeed marks a fundamental shift in policy from the liberal university system of yester-years for which Nigerian ivory towers were known for. (Fawole, J.O. 2001) (Nigerian Tribune, 16 January, 2001:25). Again, this has destroyed the time-honoured conventions of the universities and incapacitated them to serve as a genuine market place of ideas.

Not only this, NUC has been accused of indiscriminate granting of licenses to many universities to take off. Compared with other developing nations, it appears, Nigeria has too many universities it can cater for. Quite a number of universities in Nigeria that were licensed by NUC took off without the requisite basic infrastructure that is expected of a university worldwide. Many State Universities and some Federal ones commenced operation with substandard facilities. Many of them are even located in remote villages without running water or stable electricity supply. This high rate of proliferation can be linked to political consideration and pressure to which NUC is subjected to and not necessarily in response to any deliberate planning or demand (Aliyu, 1994:4).

However, such proliferation has had negative impact on the nations' economy. There is production of surplus graduates which the Nigerian economy cannot absorb. This has resulted in a serious unemployment crisis. This is similar to what has happened in India where there is such huge unemployment of university graduates that the problem is being partially solved by 'brain drain'.

However, this problem is being blamed on the curriculum and teaching since these unemployed graduates are expected to be able to fend for themselves. This criticism has no basis as Nigeria's universities provide the necessary mental exercise to enable their graduates brace up to the challenges of society. What is missing is a greater rate of generation of job opportunities because of the low level activities in the industrial sectors. Moreso, Nigerian graduate lack capital to invest in independent work.

CONCLUSION

In our discussion so far, we have examined the role of the NUC in the growth and development of university education in Nigeria. Indubitably, the Nigerian university system has benefitted immeasurably from the NUC intervention. The transformation policies and programmes initiated by the NUC have expanded access to university education, promoted equity among the geo-political zones and between gender, assured and improved efficiency in governance and management of universities. However, the implementation of NUC policies and programmes

for the transformation of university education sub-sector was constrained by such issues as material resources, human resources, quality of students' input, industrial disputes and funding.

The Way Forward

To check-mate the declining trend in the Nigerian university system and maintain high academic standards, it requires the efforts of all critical stakeholders in the educational sector. Government on its part should show genuine commitment to improve university education in the country. Governments at all levels must rise up to their responsibility by adequately funding university education in the country. Such intervention will no doubt bring significant improvement to the state of university education in Nigeria. While it may be conceded that government alone cannot fund education, it must be seen clearly to have done its own part. Education must be lifted above partisan politics. As recommended by UNESCO, any nation that spends less than 26 percent of its budget on education does not desire development.

There is the need for government and other stakeholders in the Nigerian University system to show sincerity of purpose. Centres of excellence like universities are not created by decrees or laws. Rather, they are worked out through hard work, dedication and commitment. To maintain excellence in all Nigerian universities therefore, there should be proper planning and provision of adequate infrastructure, high quality and well motivated staff, admission of only qualified students and inspirational leadership.

The NUC needs to review all the existing conditions of universities in the country so as to ascertain their viability or otherwise. Any sub-standard university, be it public or private, should have its operating license revoked. By doing this, every university in Nigeria will sit tight and improve on its facilities and manpower once it is known to its management that its operating license can be seized by higher authority. By doing this, quality will not be sacrificed for quantity and the Nigerian university system will be better for it.

Unplanned increase in the number of universities in the country would worsen the near-crises situation in the Nigerian higher education system. We do not need this chaotic number of additional universities now. Rather, effort should be geared towards ensuring that the existing ones are made to develop in terms of equipment, staffing and research. There is no doubt that Nigeria would need more state and private universities in future but licensing of these universities should be a gradual process and in response to national needs and priority and not something to be done for the sake of establishing universities. The establishment of new universities ought to be preceded by adequate planning and preparation to ensure that such universities get the best in terms of staffing and infrastructural needs in order to avoid the present problems facing the nation's universities. The federal government is hereby enjoined to seriously consider expanding the existing universities so that they can rise to the challenge of the ever-increasing demand for university education.

In the attempt by the federal government to revamp the nation's entire education system, it is important that it finds solutions to the problem of manpower shortage, falling educational standard and general decline in education particularly at the university level. It is quite sad that in the recent ranking of African and World's best universities, none of Nigeria's over one hundred universities made an appreciable impact. To attract good hands into the system, there is urgent need to improve the working conditions of the average university teacher in terms of wages and other allowances that would ginger enthusiasm in teaching and research (Daily Sun 29 March, 2006:8).

While there may be an element of truth in the opinion of the Nigerian Universities Commission that web-ranking may not be a perfect way of knowing the true academic standing of a university (This Day, 24 March, 2006:9). It needs to be said that so much is wrong with universities in Nigeria. As far as they remain in their current state of underdevelopment, they cannot measure up to the best in the world. Infact, the NUC's defensive approach to this major failing is not the answer to the problem. Rather, the answer lies in the total overhaul of the Nigerian university system to bring it in line with global standards. Merely licensing more universities to go into operation will only further compound the crisis. Consolidating the existing universities will help more. In truth, some of the existing universities are no more than glorified high schools. They lack the basic essentials needed in a university. To continue to refer to them as universities would be a misnomer. The NUC must think of concrete ways of salvaging university education if the country is not to continue to set the kind of rating it is getting now in the web-metric ranking (This Day, Friday 24 March, 2006: 9).

Moreover to ensure quality graduates from our universities, the NUC should control and monitor the activities of the so-called satellite campuses and study centres. If at all they will be allowed to operate, certain measures must be put in place. Quality should not, under any guise, be sacrificed for quantity. The requirements for admission and graduation for all categories of students in the parent universities must be maintained by their satellite campuses. Moderation, monitoring and evaluation of the activities at study centres and campuses must be institutionalized by the Parent Universities to ensure compliance with all directives and policies by these centres and campuses. This can be carried out jointly by the parent universities, the NUC and the Federal Minister of Education and other relevant stakeholders.

The NUC should, as a matter of urgency, ensure that all universities in Nigeria are ICT compliant. This is the era of Information and Communication Technology and any academic leadership that neglects its potential in attaining academic excellence will draw back such an institution to the 18th century. This is because ICT itself connotes dynamism and since it affects all areas, it moves institutions forward in such a way that things will not be the same if utilized appropriately. The use of ICT in an academic environment will not only bring about the dynamism in the academia but also enhance students' academic attainment.

Finally, it is high time the NUC as a body be reconstituted and full autonomy granted to the universities. Autonomy must involve the universities being able to have input into the selection of credible candidates to be appointed as Vice-Chancellors and members of Governing Council of each university. The era of imposing political Vice-Chancellors on the entire university community should be stopped for ever. Each university should be allowed to choose credible candidates versed in administration for the post of Vice-Chancellor and other important positions in the universities.

NUC should only act as an advisory body and an information centre instead of a supervisory body which it now occupies. Experience has shown that autonomous institutions are more responsive to incentives for quality improvements and efficiency gains (Vaught, 1991:17). For instance, the governments of France, Netherlands and Japan have granted increased financial autonomy to individual faculties and departments in their national universities in order to stimulate innovation in research and teaching.

The constraint on the academic freedom for the universities is one of the national objectives (National Policy on Education, 1977:17, Section 5(42)). This should be watched lest it erode the essence of a university. The NUC has grown from its advisory role as a unit in the cabinet office to an executive role as a statutory body with responsibility for the universities.(NUC Annual

Report, July 1975-June 1977:9). In the discharge of its responsibility, it must not be allowed to jeopardize the autonomy of individual universities and the academic freedom of the lecturers. This will augur well for industrial harmony and management of the universities.

In developing countries like Chile, Thailand and Vietnam, the governments of these nations have transferred many powers and responsibilities affecting cost to universities while establishing policy structure to guide effective development of their respective university systems from a great distance. Why should Nigeria's case be different? In the words of Professor J.F. Ade-Ajayi, "If all is well with the University sector, all will be well with the rest of higher education in Nigeria" (Ajayi, J.F.A. 2001:1).

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