

The State of Nigerian Higher Education: A Threat to National Development

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Abstract

Generally, Countries thrive and flourish by investing in their educational system. To this end, this paper examines the difficulties and potential solutions facing Nigerian education. The notion of education and the structures of the Nigerian educational system are analysed in this paper. There are some issues facing the education system, such as the absence of functional infrastructure, insufficient budgetary support, high cost of education, inadequate planning, non-use of educational research, etc. The study presented some recommendations that should receive priority attention and can help to reduce the challenges in the Nigerian educational system.

Keywords: Education, Nigerian higher education, National development, Education crisis, Higher education reform

Introduction

Education plays a crucial role in economic and social development, serving as a fundamental factor in achieving sustainable progress (McCowan, 2019). Education in every sense is one of the fundamental factors of development. No country can achieve sustainable economic development without substantial investment in human capital. President Muhammadu Buhari is quoted as saying: “No country can develop beyond the capacity of its educational system” (Vanguard, 2022)

Despite these enormous benefits education holds in stock, the standard of education in Nigeria is decelerating alarmingly. Educational policies are not carefully implemented and monitored and, thus: ineffective. There is poor funding, the

educational system is in disarray with a growing uncoordinated private sector participation with diminishing standards, malpractices (corruption) of all forms and at all levels now characterise the educational sector in Nigeria. Foreign education is now more valued and adored than domestically acquired education. All these have affected the quality of human capital thus leading to a slow rate of research and innovation necessary for desired development in the present and future.

Of most concern and severe consequences on national development, is the decay in the higher educational system. The system is currently in an undesirable state. Its standards and quality are subpar, its scope is constrained, and its prospects are troubling. For instance, the inability of the Nigerian government to objectively accept and implement the 26% funding formula for education recommended by UNESCO impact negatively on the performance and sustainability of higher education. The issues of poor and decaying infrastructure, high student-lecturer ratio, brain drain of academic staff, corruption, etc., are other woes that have put the system below standard.

In Nigeria, recent graduates are not only mocked but also characterised as being of low quality, low perception, unfit skilled employed. (Lawal, 2018; Orji, 2024). This has greatly affected the return to education in Nigeria, thereby upturning the long-held traditional belief that the return to education in developing countries, especially Sub-Saharan Africa, is much higher than that in the developed world and the human capital theory which posits that human capital can be made to increase its productive capacity through greater education and skills training. Returns to education are said to be higher when educated workers are more likely to work for the government or big companies than to be self-employed or work for small-scale enterprises.

It is in this regard that this paper, through a descriptive method of analysis, employing secondary data, explores the state of higher education in Nigeria and discusses its effects on research, invention and innovation that leads to development.

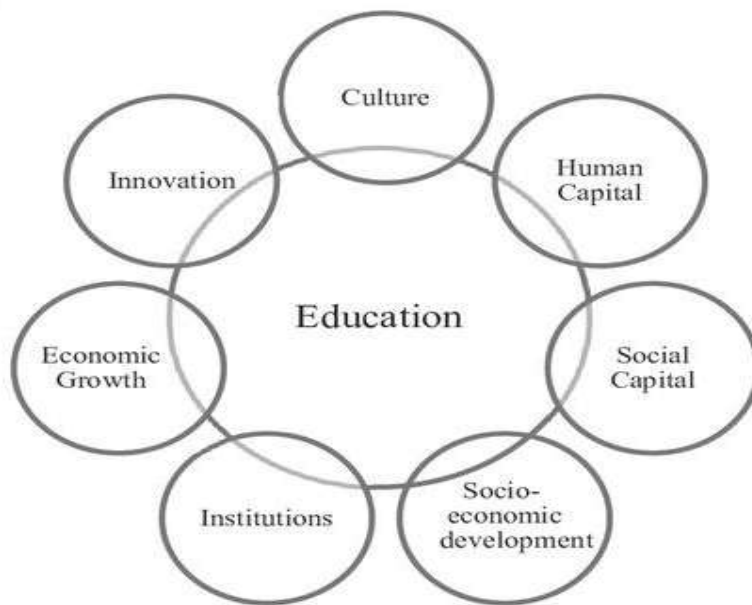
2. Education as the Base of Development

There is broad consensus that the most significant drivers of long-term economic transformation today are education and information acquisition. A new development paradigm known as the knowledge-based economy has emerged as a result of dynamic developments in the global economy (Głodowska, 2017). Human capital theory and empirical evidence have established a correlation between education and economic progress (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2004; Głodowska, 2017). The relationship shows that investing in people's education can help to improve the human capital. Education increases human capital in fields like research, technology, and management and brings improvements in participation rates, social well-being, and productivity, all of which support economic growth and development. In other words, education encourages entrepreneurship and technological advancements that increase productivity and creativity. All these contribute to increased output and economic growth. Thus, the human capital theory acknowledges that not all labour is equal but, the quality of human capital can, however, be raised by investing in education where more knowledge, skills, abilities, and experience can be acquired. It is based on this positive correlation between the two, that some governments offer higher education (HE) at low or no cost. This is because they understand the connection between human capital development and economic development. HE is thus, strategic in this education relationship.

The World Economic Forum identified three channels through which education affects a country's productivity: through the increase of collective ability of the workforce to carry out existing tasks more quickly; improved secondary and tertiary education that facilitates the transfer of knowledge about new information, products, and technologies created by others; and by increasing creativity that boosts a country's capacity to create a new knowledge, products, and technologies (Grant, 2017). A simple but clear impact of education can be viewed in Figure 1, in which education lead to human capital development, improvement in social capital,

institutional development, invocation, economic growth, cultural transformation, and socio-economic development. This shows the relevance of education as covering all human endeavours including the quality of a country's governance and institutions.

Figure 1. The impact of education on the economy.



Source: Adopted from Głodowska (2017:108).

Educational levels vary significantly across developed and developing nations, which is a crucial distinguishing factor between the two divides of the world. Although, there are undoubtedly other factors, such as geography and resource availability, having better-trained personnel has favourable externalities that spread throughout the economy. A well-trained workforce makes it possible for an externality to have a favourable impact on an economy. In other words, having a skilled labour pool from which to hire is an external factor that benefits all businesses. The high concentration of skilled workforce in a particular geographic area pulls related businesses into such an area, resulting in benefits to the economy.

Countries and their economies compete with one another to benefit from globalisation and international trade. Although a single nation rarely specialises in a particular industry, economically successful countries will hold competitive and comparative advantages over other economies. Various industries with varied competitive advantages and disadvantages in the global marketplace will be present in a typical developed economy. How well a country's economy will do depends largely on how well-educated and trained its workforce is. Therefore, many nations now concentrate on creating educational systems that can generate employees qualified to operate in emerging areas like science and technology. Even older industries in developed nations are now less likely to dominate in the industrial landscape due to their decreased competitiveness, hence the need to educate their employees or hire those with better skills that can bring a turnaround in their operations.

Education is truly one of the most powerful instruments for reducing poverty and inequality and it sets the foundation for sustained economic growth (Patrinos, 2016, 2017). At the individual and household level, individuals with greater education are expected to gain employment more easily, be more productive, earn higher incomes, have a high living standard, live a healthy life, have high fertility levels, etc. Cumulatively, this transcends into the general development of a country.

3. The Nigerian Higher Education Landscape

The Nigerian Higher Education (HE) comprise all educational levels above secondary education. These include but are not limited to, the Monotechnics, Polytechnics, Colleges of Education, Colleges of Health Sciences, Colleges of Technology, Correspondence Colleges, and Universities. According to Adeyemi in Ogunode and Abubakar, 2020), the HE is a system of education which is the hub of a country's research capacity and reproduces the majority of the skilled professionals required in the labour market. The Nigerian HE, including professional education, seeks to achieve the following for the country:

- i. The acquisition, development and inculcation of the proper value orientation for the survival of the individual and societies;
- ii. The development of the intellectual capacities of individuals to understand and appreciate the environment;
- iii. the acquisition of both physical and intellectual skills which will enable individuals to develop into useful members of the community;
- iv. The acquisition of an overview of the local and external environments (National Policy on Education, 2014).

For a country like Nigeria that is seeking to be industrialised, this kind of education is the most fit.

The HE in Nigeria has witnessed a numerical growth over time. As at 2022, Nigeria has 184 universities (49 federal-owned, 59 state-owned & 76 private universities), 40 polytechnics, 70 federal and state-owned colleges of health, 17 private colleges of health, and 219 Colleges of Education. Soon to be added to these numbers are another 63 new universities, polytechnics, colleges of education and mono technics whose establishment bills are before the National Assembly.

While the numbers are rising, the institutions are becoming more characterised by decay in educational facilities, poor funding, falling standards, incessant strikes, outdated curricula, paucity of quality teachers, poor pay, politicisation of education, poor governance/management, etc. Most of the HE institutions in Nigeria can best be described as moribund. HE in Nigeria is suffocated by inadequate funding, which is the most potent and life-wire of the educational system. It has become very hard for the HE in Nigeria to strive and meet its goals and objectives. The importance of funding is encapsulated in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) advice to developing nations to set aside 26% of their annual budget allocation to the education sector (Odigwe & Owan, 2019).

Unfortunately, since the advent of democracy in Nigeria in 1999, no government has been able to reach this mark. Worrisome also is the fact that for the past six years, the budgetary allocation to the education sector as a whole has continued to witness a downward fluctuation as shown by Table 1 and Figure 2.

Table 1:

Budgetary Allocation to the Education Sector from 1999 to 2022

Year	Budgetary Allocation
1999	6.61
2000	8.36
2001	7.00
2002	6.90
2003	1.82
2004	5.07
2005	4.98
2006	4.84
2007	8.09
2008	10.04
2009	7.25
2010	4.83

2011	6.16
2012	8.20
2013	8.54
2014	9.94
2015	7.74
2016	6.53
2017	7.39
2018	7.03
2019	7.05
2020	6.70
2021	5.60
2022	5.39

Source: Compiled from Central Bank of Nigeria Statistical Bulletin (2021) and 2022 budget document.

These values show an average of about 6% of budgetary allocation going to education, with only 2008 receiving the highest allocation to education of about 10% of the total budget. This is far below the 26% (or 15 – 20%) benchmark recommended by UNESCO.

As Abdullahi (2015) found out, the provision of physical facilities in higher institutions is below average. These facilities which facilitate and support HE in

achieving their goals and objectives are in short supply and in bad state. This affects the quality of teaching and learning which can affect the quality of graduates in terms of their ability to compete favourably in the international job market.

Due to the increasing difficulty of the government of Nigeria to perform its statutory responsibility of providing quality education to its citizens, licenses have been granted to private investors who are involved in the provision of higher educational services. The roles played by private investors in rescuing the bad image of the public schools in Nigeria are very highly commendable. But as commendable as these roles are, private educational institutions are said to be surrounded by some unhealthy practices such as charging exorbitant fees, existing mainly for-profit motives with less attention to the quality of education, widening gaps between the rich and the poor, proliferations of illegal and substandard schools and employment of unqualified and inadequate personnel, among others. There are, therefore, concerns as to whether these private schools are helping the Nigerian government in contributing to educational development (particularly at the higher level) and by extension to national development.

Evidence of Weak Higher Education in Nigeria

The poor state of Nigeria's HE briefly highlighted above has placed it in a weak situation that is finding it hard to achieve its mandate. This weakness is exemplified in the following ways:

1. ***Lack of global competitiveness:*** No Nigerian tertiary institution ranks among the top 100 in the world. The Times Higher Education (THE) ranking of universities considers the performance indicators in five areas - Teaching (the learning environment); Research (volume, income and reputation); Citations (research influence); International outlook (staff, students and research); and Industry income (knowledge transfer) (THE, 2021). None of the Nigerian universities is found to have met these qualities to make it to the 100th position. The learning environment in Nigeria's tertiary institutions is highly toxic. It is filled with inadequate and poor

facilities, examination malpractices, grade racketeering, etc. and low performance of the country's HE in the other areas of the ranking methodology. This clearly shows how weak the HE system in Nigeria is. This has placed foreign acquired knowledge higher than that got from Nigeria. This is reflected in the high demand for foreign education and even the outlets for research and publication.

2. Over-emphasis on the certificate as against skills: There seems to be a drastic shift in attention to university education than other HE. This has led to certificate-seeking students and awarding higher institutions. Even the skills-based higher institutions like the polytechnics have drifted to the syndrome of merely awarding certificates as against skills. Worried about this ugly trend, the Tribune (2021) cited the Federal Government through the Minister of Finance, Budget and National Planning, Mrs Rainab Ahmed, to have tasked universities in Nigeria to redesign their curriculum to lay more emphasis on building skills in students, saying this should be a major consideration above issuance of certificates to those who are usually referred to as half-baked and unemployable. According to her, the call became necessary because what the global community is looking out for is the skills and not the certificates.

3. Poor funding: A characteristic of a weak higher educational system is poor funding. This has permeated through all strata of Nigeria's HE incapacitated on many fronts, with some hanging only on past glories. The poor funding has led to a dearth of basic facilities, a harsh learning environment, improper or complete absence of cutting-edge research, innovation and inventions, poor pay/remuneration, etc. As shown above, the percentage of the annual budget allocated to the whole educational sector in Nigeria is abysmally below the UNESCO 26% recommended for developing countries like Nigeria. Further dissection of this meagre allocation into the various components of the educational sector will reveal how HE is underfunded and how frail it is in delivering on the lofty set objectives. Hudu (2000) gave a brief highlight of the situation when he pointed out that, the peculiar situation in Nigeria is such that

the emoluments of academic and administrative staff represent more than 90 per cent of the annual budget of each university, and so, virtually nothing is left for the purchase of equipment needed by the lecturers for basic training and research (books, furniture, laboratory equipment, etc.). This has been a recurrent issue that almost every scholar, analyst, or commentator is concerned with. For instance, Birabil and Ogeh (2020) considered this as one of the challenges of education in Nigeria.

4. *Inadequate teaching staff/poor quality of teaching staff:* This stands out as a big hurdle in the path of progress of the HE in Nigeria. Accordig to Ogunode and Adamu (2021), the public higher institutions in Nigeria are plagued with many challenges. One of such crucial challenges include the shortage of academic staff. This has remained a big challenge to the attainment of quality higher education in Nigeria. Poor recruitment process, poor pay, poor working environment, poor monitoring, and other discouraging factors have brought in many unqualified people and have pushed out capable hands and discouraged foreign ones from coming in to man the various programmes/fields in the higher educational institutions in the country. This has left most of the programmes in these institutions attended to by adjunct/visiting lecturers, junior lecturers or few lecturers taking too many courses. As pointed out by Aminullahi and Olojuola (2021), teaching a large class, supervising more than five students' theses/dissertations, and projects in a semester, and handling more than five courses in a semester among others are the factors that constitute excess workload in the Nigerian university system. This leads to inefficiency and, is reflected in the poor performance of students after graduation and ultimately causes disinvestment to the government.

5. *High level of politicisation:* The politicisation of HE in Nigeria has entrenched in this critical level of education high level of sectionalism, and mediocrity. This is reflected in the licensing, siting, monitoring, regulation, employment, and students' admission and graduation. Indigenisation of the appointment of heads and other principal staff of institutions like Vice-Chancellors (VCs), rectors, registrars, bursars,

and other staff of institutions has become the norm against qualification and experience. It is hard to see a most qualified candidate from one part of the country occupying any of these key positions in an institution in a region that is not his or hers. This unhealthy politicisation of the HE in Nigeria has done greater harm for the country than good as it has ushered in favouritism, ethnicity, nepotism, and corruption thereby leading to immense reduction in the standards and quality of education. To Birabil and Ogeh (2020:45), “Most attempts at educational reforms fail to succeed partly due to disparate political ideologies by leaders. Lack of continuity also exists from one administration to the other. In accreditations, some schools that did not meet up the standard are allowed to operate too.”

6. *Uncoordinated private sector participation:* The uncontrollable private sector participation reflected in the high numbers of illegal higher institutions (as of 2022, about 58 universities and 68 polytechnics and monotechnics) in the country awarding certificates to unsuspecting and helpless Nigerians is a point to a weak higher educational system. Even those legally licensed to operate are not properly monitored except through the 5 yearly accreditation exercises which are themselves questionable. Where few of these private higher institutions are doing well, the majority are just operating as for-profit business outlets with no serious concern about the involvement in the task of creating the needed human capital for the country. Thus, there exists a parallel private sector with divergent objectives (profit maximisation) from that of national development. As observed by Thisday (2022) the emergence of private universities has not led to a rise in academic standards. There are several crying questions but the main worry stems from the sheer incompetence in tackling the problems in the existing public universities and the reckless recourse to all manner of low-standard private universities. Lecturers who cannot hold their own in public universities are being hired as professors and even vice-chancellors in some of these private universities where first-class degrees are churned out in hundreds annually (Thisday, 2022). Private Universities' mode of examination is not

completely at variance with the public ones but still hinges on the commercial mindset of most private universities. Though oftentimes they cleverly evade the supervisory eyes of the NUC. Nevertheless, the nature or mode of examination of most of these private universities is semester and the various examination ills and jiggery-pokery prevalent in the public universities are very much alive at the private universities (James & Botimi-Slaboh, 2019).

Threats to HE Contribution to National Development

National development is simply viewed as the improvement in all political, economic, social, cultural, scientific, and material areas of a country. It reflects the capacity of a nation to enhance its citizens' standard of living. According to Lawal and Oluwatoyin (2011:238), “national development can be described as the overall development of a collective socio-economic, political as well as religious advancement of a country or nation.” National development is thus a fairly broad concept covering every facet of an individual's and a country's life. It is a process of rebuilding, growth in various facets of a country, and personal development that uses a holistic strategy. This can be made or marred by the quality of education of the nation. That is to say, it depends on the state of the educational sector which in turn depends on it. HE serves as the final level of education that blends and supplies the necessary required skills that enable individuals and/or groups to identify the ways and means to cause development in various areas of the country. Where this finishing level is weak, whatever knowledge is acquired at the basic education level produces minimal levels of development.

The current state of HE in Nigeria, as described above, portends a great threat to national development. The multiplier effect of its misdoings has long-term effects that are antithetical to national development. The various ways in which these can be seen are highlighted below.

A dearth of skilled labour. The higher educational institutions in Nigeria are producing graduates who do not possess the basic problem-identification and solving

skills. Noting that a sizable, competent, and formidable workforce is a prerequisite for furthering economic development. Works like Okuntade (2015) and Bilau, Ajagbe, Habila, Kigbu and Sholanke. (2015), have pointed out the dearth and mismatch of skills needed in industries like the construction industry which is affecting organization's productivity, quality of work, duration of projects and profits. In the same way, Sunnews (2021) reported John Udeagbala to have lamented the shortage of semi-skilled labour in the manufacturing and construction sectors of Nigeria and its serious implications for both businesses and the economy. This syndrome of mismatched skills has heightened the level of unemployment (which stands at 33%) and high dependence on government jobs as many of the graduates are found unemployable and cannot create self-employment for themselves.

Given this situation in this new world, the ability of Nigerian workers and the economy to compete is handicapped by the poor performance of the higher education system. Technological change and global competition demand the mastery of competencies and the acquisition of new skills (Patrinos, 2016) which the Nigerian HE, is finding difficult to supply. This will include:

1. Slow real sector growth: Due to an inadequate supply of skilled human capital to drive the real sector of the economy, Nigeria's economy is still majorly oil-dependent. This has led to widening income inequality and poverty gaps, high import dependence, unstable general prices in foreign exchange, etc.
2. Social vices: The unemployable products of Nigeria's HE are hit with depression from lack of sustainable income, and in efforts to escape that, they have hired themselves out to perpetrators of violence and crime, with some engineering illicit ways of getting money like cybercrimes (popularly known as Yahoo-business), armed-robbery, kidnapping, etc. These acts have put a heavy burden on the nation's developmental efforts, making it still a less developed nation.
3. Brain drain: The increasing outward flow of valuable human capital (i.e., brain drain) from Nigeria can be attributed to some factors (or causes) prominent

among which is the state of Nigeria's educational sector. With the decay in educational infrastructure, poor funding, falling standards, incessant strikes, outdated curricula, paucity of quality teachers, poor pay, politicization of education etc., many qualified Nigerians have sought haven in other countries with standard educational systems. This, recently, seems to be the prime cause of the brain drain the country is witnessing.

Conclusion

This paper examines the current state of the higher educational system in Nigeria highlighting its weaknesses and how these have posed serious threats to national development. Lack of global competitiveness, overemphasis on certificates as against skills, poor funding, inadequate teaching staff/poor quality of teaching staff, high level of politicization, and uncoordinated private sector participation have been discussed as the pronounced symptoms showing the weaknesses of the higher education institution in Nigeria. Unemployment, high dependence on government jobs, absence of skilled labour, economic retardation, social vices, and brain drain are the various ways in which the weak HE in Nigeria is threatening national development in the country. This poor state of HE in Nigeria poses a serious threat to the national development of the country. If no conscious efforts are made to save it from its precarious state, the desire of the country to be reckoned among the comity of developed countries will not be attainable soonest.

The way forward

A weak HE system can be a clog on the wheel of development of any nation as witnessed in Nigeria. To overcome this, the following are hereby recommended:

1. The government must increase its budgetary allocation to education, particularly HE. If possible, 26 per cent of the total budget, as recommended by UNESCO, should be allocated to the educational sector. This will provide and maintain basic facilities for better teaching and learning.

2. The entire HE curriculum in Nigeria needs to be overhauled to focus more on the development of critical skills needed in an era of a knowledge-driven global economy. Policy and curriculum planners should plan for meaningful and purposeful change over time based on circumstances.
3. Government and politicians should not politicize education in the country. Emphasis should be on merits rather than other irrelevant reasons that do not serve the interest of the nation.
4. Effective management of education, especially at higher levels should be seriously sought. There should be synergy between the government and all stakeholders in the HE to check and punish erring administrators.
5. Proper regulation and monitoring of the privately owned higher education institutions in the country should be done regularly. There should be mechanisms in place to monitor the activities of these private institutions to make sure they comply with the set standard.
6. Teachers' welfare should be prioritized by the government and other employers in the HE sector. They should be paid better, competitive and motivating salaries that will attract the best hands from within and outside Nigeria. With this, they can adequately attend workshops, seminars and refresher courses so as to update their knowledge. They should also be supervised to ensure they are performing to expectation.

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