

Ensuring quality and adequate funding crucial to meeting universities needs

Higher Education Needs Urgent Attention

BY KOLE SHETTIMA

POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION IN NIGERIA HAS BEEN shaped by the country's evolution through colonial rule, the first republic in 1960, civil war, intervention of the military in politics and the striving for national unity, the oil boom and bust over several decades, and finally the transition to civil rule in 1999.

Different aspects of post-secondary education, such as its scope, admissions policies, regulation, autonomy, research, unionization, and reform, have all been affected by this evolution. Historically, higher education has been a joint function of the federal and state governments. Even under military regimes this concurrency of function was understood, if not always observed.

The first post-secondary institution in Nigeria was Yaba College, established in 1934 by the colonial administration primarily to produce graduates with mid-level technical skills. It was followed by the University College of Ibadan in 1948.

Immediately after independence, half a dozen universities and a handful of colleges of technology, polytechnics, and advanced teachers colleges came into being.

Since the 1960s, the size and shape of post-secondary education in Nigeria has changed

significantly. There are now 88 universities (compared to just five in 1962), 85 polytechnics and monotronics (four in 1964), and 64 Colleges of Education (four in 1964).

Each type of school has federal, state, and private institutions. This expansion of the post-secondary sector was related to the increase in constituent states in Nigeria, which tripled

from four in the 1960s to 12 in the 1970s, and tripled again to 36 by the 1990s.

The post-secondary sector in Nigeria is characterized by a high level of unionization. Many of the unions are affiliated with each other, enabling sympathy strikes. Hence, national strikes have been common in the post-secondary sector, particularly in the universities. Indeed, university unions, especially those of academic staff, were one of the few organizations with enough societal rank to challenge the military.

Accreditation Can Be Revoked

Most institutions are regulated by national organizations that are empowered to oversee the quality of education in their respective jurisdictions. Disciplines and programs that receive partial accreditation are expected to remedy their deficiencies within a short time while those not accredited will not be allowed to award degrees.

All students must sit for an exam organized by the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) to gain admission into universities, colleges of education, or polytechnics. Under the 1999 Constitution, post-secondary institutions are expected to reflect more accurately the diversity of the country in admissions and recruitment of staff.

There has been little organized support for research in the post-secondary sector and successive governments have failed to provide adequate funds. A more systematic approach was recently announced with the proposed National Council on Research and Development, endowed with \$5 billion, to award research grants on a competitive basis.

Universities enjoyed considerable autonomy during the colonial period and for the following decade, being insulated from the vagaries of politicians and politics. But the incursion of the military into the body politic in 1966, with its centralizing tendency, contributed to much less institutional autonomy. The Chief Executives of post-secondary institutions are appointed by the president of the country or a state governor on the recommendation of the governing councils.



REUTERS/GEORGESIRI

Students at the University of Ibadan celebrate at their graduation ceremonies.

SPECIAL SECTION

Post-Secondary Education



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of advanced education and the older university system, thus doubling overnight the number of higher education providers, from about 19 public universities to the current 38 (plus three private facilities). Even Dawkins's critics applauded those moves. And that legacy endures: about one-fifth per cent of Australians have acquired a bachelor's degree, a 250 per cent increase since 1996, and the student population has jumped to nearly one million including nearly 250,000 fee-paying overseas students.

A funding revolution underpinned the changes of the age called "the user pays." The federal government argued that a university experience was not just a public good but a private benefit. The Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) was introduced along with massification. This ingenious delayed-student-fee regime was based on equitable notions that higher education would be "free at the point of entry," but would then be claimed back in the form of student debts owed on an income contingent basis after graduation. An average graduating HECS debt is now \$10,500 Australian (\$8,751 U.S.) and the income threshold for repayment is \$39,825 Australian. Some fee-paying students owe more than \$50,000 Australian under a new scheme called FEE-Help.

The entrepreneurial university has also arrived in Australia. Many major Australian universities today draw less than 25 per cent of their budgets from the federal government, with the balance mostly taken from fees, charges and international operations.

In short, the strong centralizing impulses in Australian federalism since the Second World War have become ever stronger.

Making it Work


There is one key consultative mechanism that makes this current and peculiarly Australian system work by ensuring that all the policy gears engage. That mechanism is the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, or MCEETYA.

Significant policy changes bearing on the universities have to win the assent of MCEETYA members. The states have the ability through their numbers to veto federal initiatives, while the federal government has the purse strings to make things happen.

Assuring Quality

MCEETYA members are the major stakeholders in the Australian Universities Quality Agency, or AUQA. This agency is an independent corporation reporting to MCEETYA, with a board of directors nominated by MCEETYA, the federal government, the university sector, plus the non-self accrediting providers, businesses and the community.

And the Federation itself is still on the move. An impassioned *Sydney Morning Herald* editorial of March 10, 2007 – titled "States of disarray: it's time to fix the federation" – argued for major constitutional reform. It said that in a quest for votes, politicians had "created a ham-fisted patch-work of shared responsibility," not least in the area of educational policies. But whether that will happen, what impact it will have on universities and what improvements it will bring, remains to be seen.

Democratic federal systems are among the glories of the Western liberal tradition. They are also human creations which have small regard for symmetry, let alone simplicity, as they evolve the politics and policies of their pluralistic modern nations. 

Free Tuition No Longer Sustainable

The financing of post-secondary education is another area where the lack of institutional autonomy is obvious. With increased oil revenues in the 1970s, the federal government took over some state universities and abolished tuition fees. As a result, these institutions became much more dependent on the federal government for most of their needs. These levels of support, however, are not sustainable in the long term.

Yet the policy of free tuition at all public institutions remains in effect despite the government not being able to take care of even the most basic budget needs. Salaries are often in arrears, and institutions are dependent on monthly allocations from the state capitals.

Robust federal and state scholarships existed until the 1980s when oil prices turned down. The Federal Government tried to rejuvenate scholarships but that initiative collapsed due to lack of foresight and management skills. Scholarship and bursary programs are more readily available at the state level. Regrettably, these schemes are not sufficiently funded and many thousands of fully qualified students are unable to attend institutions of higher learning due to prohibitive costs. Increasingly, children of the poor are shut out. Private universities charge as much as \$7,000 for tuition fees, and very few provide student aid. Most parents who send their children to private schools do so not because of their quality but rather because of the instability of the public institutions.

Post-Secondary Sector Needs Major Reforms

Ms. Obiageli Ezekwesili, appointed Minister of Education in 2006, has proposed wide-ranging reform initiatives, including a controversial one to consolidate many post-secondary institutions. Under the scheme, all federal Colleges of Education and polytechnics (with two exceptions) would become satellite campuses of the universities. Benefits of the consolidation plan, according to its supporters, include saving costs through the reduction of supervisory agencies and bureaucracies. In the long run, this would also increase admission spaces by more than 50 per cent. Criticisms of the plan are the lack of infrastructure and low quality of instruction in many of the colleges of education and polytechnics, and that it is a World Bank plan, as Minister Ezekwesili is taking a post there in 2007.

Whatever the outcome of the consolidation plan, broad reforms of post-secondary education in Nigeria are badly needed for the sector to grow and improve. As Minister Ezekwesili has said, Nigeria's is a national crisis, not an educational one. The new president elect, Umaru Yar'Adua, should declare a state of emergency in the educational sector. Addressing issues of quality and adequate funding, from both public and private sources, must certainly be high on the list. But so, too, must be the issue of equity and whether the traditional Nigerian approach of free tuition in public institutions along with limited amounts of student financial aid can succeed in opening up education opportunities to traditionally underserved populations. Nigeria needs to look at international experience to learn what might be done to improve both equity and quality, and to do so by going beyond the traditional influence of politics in shaping post-secondary policies. 