

# **Reforming and Revitalizing the Nigerian Higher Education System**

**By**

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## **Introduction**

I appreciate the honor done to me, and the privilege given to me by the organizers of this 2016 Nigerian Education Summit, the Committee of Vice Chancellors of Nigerian Universities and the TRUST AFRICA, to give these opening remarks as the Chairman of the Occasion.

This kind of partnership, which has delivered this gathering of the most important and relevant stakeholders, is highly desirable and I commend the organizers for this. I also commend the participants for responding to the invitation and coming in such large numbers. The rich diversity of participants is a good omen for the quality of the discussions and the richness of the deliberations.

In making my few remarks, I draw from my reflections in two recent presentations, namely, a Keynote Address delivered to the

I would like to believe that, no one any longer doubts the fact that the Nigerian Higher Education system needs reforms and revitalization. The challenges, which stare us in the face are starkly stacked. These range from issues with access; to those of quality; all intricately related to inadequacy of funding, infrastructure and facilities; staffing; quality assurance and so on.

In bringing this about, the need for stakeholder dialogue, debate and consensus

Higher education is the driver of development in the contemporary world. This fact has for long been recognized in the so called developed countries, as a consequence of which they have invested heavily in higher education; an investment that has yielded remarkable results, as demonstrated by the quality of their universities in teaching and research, and the profound impact these

have on their development processes, especially in this age of knowledge driven economies. In these countries presently, there is the constant striving to widen access to higher education institutions, increase the scope and diversity of their courses and programs, as well as improve the quality of research and development in these institutions. It is only of recent that many developing countries are beginning to wake up to the reality of how investment in higher education can increase competitiveness in the global political economy in addition to its remarkable role in transforming national economies.

In spite of this global re-awakening however, higher education in Sub-Saharan Africa in general, and in Nigeria in particular, leaves much to be desired. The prevailing situation in our higher education institutions is characterized by turmoil, unrest, instability and turbulence. All-pervasive challenges, which bedevil the system, range from those associated with enrolment and access, to those relating to quality of courses and programs, to those pertaining to the relevance of the curricular, to those associated with lack or inadequacy of infrastructure and facilities, and those of shortages of qualified staff; all aggravated by policy flip-flop and the issue of chronic under funding.

Given this context, more serious effort backed by strong political will is required of our leaders for wide ranging reforms to reposition and revitalize higher education and make it play its appropriate role in the transformation of our national economy and increasing our

country's competitiveness in the global political economy (Jega 2015, p. 1).

The reform and revitalizing effort has to be strategically planned, with short-, medium- and long-term objectives clearly delineated and aggressively pursued.

In the past 15 years or so, the Nigerian higher education system has expanded remarkably and has become more diversified. The number of these institutions and the range of programs, which they offer have increased, some have become more specialized, and the ownership structure has diversified. Thus, the Nigerian higher education system is diverse and multi-faceted. Broadly defined, it currently consists of no less than: 141 universities; 83 Colleges of Education; 95 Polytechnics; 27 Mono-technics; 36 Colleges of Agriculture; 50 Colleges of Health Technology; 132 Technical Colleges and 135 Vocational Educational Institutions and Innovative Enterprise Institutions (VEIs and IEIs). There are also 141 schools of Nursing, Basic Midwifery and Basic Post Midwifery. Altogether there are in Nigeria at least 840 tertiary or third level or post-secondary institutions, as Table 1 illustrates. My emphasis is, of course, on the university sub-sector, with which I am more familiar and from which I draw most of the data and illustrations for this presentation.

#### **Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria**

S/no.	Institution	Federal	State	Private	Total
1.	Universities	40	40	61	141
2.	Polytechnics	25	40	30	95
3.	Monotechnics	23	4	-	27
4.	Colleges of Education				83

5.	Colleges of Agriculture	17	19	-	36
6.	Colleges of Health Tech	9	40	1	50
7.	Technical Colleges	19	110	3	132
8.	Voc. Ed. Institutions/IEIs				135
9.	Schools of Nursing/ Midwifery				141
		133	253	95	840

The number of tertiary educational institutions in Nigeria has grown remarkably from the mid-1970s. In the university sub-sector in particular, it is almost like exponential growth, which is unplanned and poorly funded, with profound negative consequences. A profound crisis beset the sector in the mid-1980s to the 1990s, with rippling effects, which still pervade it. Attempts to contain and address the crisis have been akin to fire-brigade solutions, often too little too late, and therefore ineffectual in consequence. As a result, as universities continue to proliferate, with all sorts of proprietorship, (akin to “The good, the bad and the ugly”), many are just barely universities in name and not in content and substance; be it in the areas of teaching, research link with industry, or community service. And what we observe with regards to university sub-sector, we can do so almost verbatim with regards to the other tertiary institutions.

Thus, presently, the Nigerian tertiary education system, especially the university sub-sector, is in dire need of ever more focused reforms. It can be said that some sort of reform process has been on for many years. Pressure from striking staff, especially academics, has compelled the federal government to put some measures in place to address some of the challenges. For example, in the past 3 – 4 years, demands by ASUU, backed by incessant strikes, have led to a

“Needs Assessment” for each university, followed by an infusion of funds, the effective utilization of which is beginning to make a difference in physical development in some universities. Additionally, a more focused and systematic intervention by the TETFund has remarkably improved infrastructure and facilities, expanded staff development and, to some extent, boosted research and publications in the tertiary education system. Yet, overall, things could and should be better. Be it with regards to access, quality, funding or cost effectiveness, a lot more still needs to be done. Besides, there is more to a university than good buildings and roads. There is a whole culture pertaining to work, discourse, teaching and research and character molding, which make a university in the real sense of the word.

In this presentation, I explore the challenges and prospects of reforming the Nigerian tertiary education system in general and the university sector in particular. I call for increased funding to education, expansion of infrastructure and facilities, widening access, improving quality, reviewing curricular to making degrees and diplomas more relevant to a variety of employers, expanding the scope and quality of research both basic and applied, and especially improving the contribution of our tertiary institutions to sustainable national development. It may be difficult, it is not impossible to do this; as others have done it; and the lesson to learn is basically about focused policies and resilience and doggedness in their implementation.

So, what are the challenges and prospects of reforming tertiary education in Nigeria? To this question I now return.

### **Challenges**

There are three main areas with formidable challenges, on which reforms need to focus upon. First, widening access for inclusiveness and increased massification, with a focus also on addressing inequities and inequalities. Second, improving quality and increasing the relevance of higher education. Third, increasing public funding, while at the same time enhancing the capacity of the institutions for sensible revenue generation and cost-effectiveness; (i.e. the capacity to do more with less). There are also other related issues, such as ethical/moral and other concerns that need to be addressed.

### **Widening Access**

The first challenge that needs to be addressed is that of access. Education in general and tertiary education in particular needs to be made more accessible to the citizens without any unnecessary restrictions or discrimination. There seems to be a positive correlation between high levels or percentages of populations of a country with post-secondary education and the quality of its human development (UN Human Development Report 2015). UNESCO's 2009 World Conference on Higher Education observed that:

... at no time in history has it been more important to invest in higher education as a major force in building an inclusive and diverse knowledge society and to advance research, innovation and creativity (Communiqué, Preamble).

Ironically, this all-important recognition by UNESCO came after close to two decades of the World Bank telling African countries and their leaders that they do not need universities; that what they need is basic education!

In any case, the whole world is now being gripped by the fever of “massification” of education, i.e. securing growing levels of participation in higher education, or “the move from a system that served an elite only to one that every member of society might aspire to experience” (Prondzynski 2015).

According to Uvalick-Trumbic:

The two principal trends in HE are the rising demand for it and its massification. Nearly one-third of the world’s population (29.3%) is under 15 and today there are 158 million people enrolled in tertiary education. Projections suggest that participation will peak at 263 million in 2025. Accommodating the additional 105 million students would require more than four major universities (30,000 students) to open every week for the next fifteen years (2012, xxviii).

But it seems as if Nigeria is yet to be affected by this global trend. Regrettably, notwithstanding the 61% literacy rate, at both the basic and tertiary levels, opportunities and access are shrinking rather than expanding, as illustrated by declining enrollment figures in relative and comparative terms. While demand is increasing, access is constrained, if not constricting. An estimated 10 million out of 30



million school aged children are not in school at the basic education level. With regards to the tertiary education, gross enrollment ratios are less than 6%, which is the African average, while the average for the developed world is 26%. With specific reference to the university system, a relatively small percentage of those who qualify to enter universities are actually enrolled. For example, in the 2008/09 academic year, while 1,054,060 applied to enter the universities, only 200,000 (18.9%) were admitted (Shuwara 2010, p. 11). Furthermore, when enrollment figures are disaggregated, far more men are enrolled than women. Between 2008 and 2010, average enrollment into Nigerian universities is said to be 37.6% women and 62.4 % men (US Embassy 2012). And, contrary to what would seem to be the global trend, in Nigeria, students prefer to enroll into universities, the apex of the tertiary education system, rather than to polytechnics, colleges of education or mono-technics. For example in 2010, while 1,330,531 sat for the UME, only 45,140 sat for the MPCE (Shuwara 2010, p. 7).

Widening access is absolutely necessary. But it would require substantial investments in both expanding the capacity of existing institutions and the establishment of additional ones. Extant education policy in Nigeria seems to favor establishment of private fee-paying institutions, especially universities, as a means of expanding/widening access to tertiary education. This is under the presumption that the government is already spending too much and that the private sector should come in to compliment. However, current level of investments in this area contributes relatively insignificantly to enrollment in tertiary education. For example, in

the 2010/2011 academic year the total enrollment of private universities was only 7.2%, while that of state universities was 27.8% and that of federal universities was 64% (see Jega 2015). What this suggests, is that private sector involvement in tertiary education may open up spaces for a privileged few able to pay exorbitant fees but it will not necessarily expand access to the wider society. Clearly, then, a policy shift focusing on expanding the carrying capacity of existing public tertiary institutions is most desirable in the short- to medium-term, while in the long term new ones should be well planned and appropriately established.

In any case, widening access would be meaningless without requisite investment in recruitment and training of academic staff and expansion of facilities. This then leads us to the associated challenges of inadequacy of staffing, infrastructure and facilities, to which I will later return.

### **Quality and Relevance**

The contribution of tertiary education to national and sustainable development globally is only as good as its quality and the relevance of its curricular and programs to the wider political economy. So it is not essentially the number of institutions that matter, as important as this is; rather, it is their quality and relevance of the education that they provide that really matters. The quality of a product, or graduate, of a tertiary institution is a function of many qualities: academic staff; facilities and infrastructure; etc. The quality of knowledge, skills and ideas imparted are very important, but they

must also be relevant to the needs and expectations of employers, whether in the public or private sectors of the political economy. In the modern global political economy, knowledge is important but it is not sufficient; it must be accompanied by requisite skills, versatility and adaptability honed to the requirements of the market for employment.

Concerns with quality and relevance bedevil the Nigerian tertiary education system. Proliferation of institutions has been at the expense of quality as well as relevance. Many observers have noted that the system suffers from gross deterioration of quality. A lot of this is associated with the declining quality of the products of basic education system, which have come through the pipeline. But a lot more have to do with the deteriorating conditions of learning and the inadequacy of facilities, and shortages of qualified senior academic staff in these institutions. For example, until recently, ICT infrastructure, which is an absolute requirement in the contemporary knowledge-driven economies, has been virtually absent in our tertiary institutions. Even as at now, few institutions have wisely invested in robust ICT facilities and infrastructure. In addition, curricular seems to be archaic in many institutions; not having been reviewed and upgraded in over a decade, most curricular seem incapable of responding to the needs of employers in the increasingly globalized and competitive work environment.

The contribution of tertiary education to sustainable development is not just in knowledge production and re-production, but it is especially in the quality and relevance of applied research and

development. Most top-rated tertiary institutions in the world are linked to industry and hence the wider political economy through research and development (R&D). In Nigeria this leaves much to be desired. For most of the 1980's and the 1990's research capacity of tertiary institutions was drastically undermined and eroded by chronic underfunding, brain drain and deterioration of facilities. This was reflected in declining number of published articles by academics in our tertiary institutions in reputable peer-reviewed publications. Indeed, the culture of research and peer-reviewed publication was almost totally undermined and replaced by the phenomenon of self-funded, essentially junk, publication; with which many have risen to be "professors" in the system and which in itself is another dimension of the crisis that has engulfed the system requiring to be addressed.

Until recently, linkage with industry through R&D has essentially been virtually absent in our tertiary institutions. And curricular was devoid of entrepreneurial capacity building. Stories abound about how companies have to make additional investments in retraining and upgrading recruited engineers, etc., or how Nigerian graduates have to undergo additional proficiency tests and refresher courses, before they are admitted into post-graduate schools in universities abroad. This sharply contrasts to what obtained up to the early 1980s, before the onset of the crisis in our tertiary education system, when graduates of Nigerian universities were coveted by reputable graduate schools abroad, in which they distinguished themselves due to the excellent undergraduate training that they had obtained.

Clearly, therefore, many persisting inadequacies affecting quality and relevance make Nigerian tertiary institutions uncompetitive, if not incompetent, in the globalized knowledge production and reproduction enterprise. The deficiencies need to be remedied and additional investments made to boost both quality and relevance.

To adequately increase quality and improve relevance, attention has to be paid to recruitment and training of academic staff; rehabilitation and expansion of infrastructure and facilities; revitalizing research and R&D; and reviewing and remodeling curricular. With regards to academic staff, presently, more than 60% are said to be lecturer 1 or below on account of 'inter and intra sector brain drain' (US Embassy Nigeria 2012). For many universities, growing enrollment occurs amidst staff shortages. The universities poach senior academics from one another, or literally rent them for the purposes of accreditation, that is if they do not lose them to others abroad or to high paying sectors of the domestic economy. In 2010, it was estimated that while universities required 50,000 academic staff, they had only 30,452, leaving a shortfall of 19,548 (39.1%). Polytechnics and Monotechnics required 30,016, had 12,938, with a shortfall of 17,078 (56.9%). And Colleges of Education required 26,114, had 11,256, with a short fall of 14,858 (56.9%) (Shuwara 2010, p. 14).

Training academic staff for post-graduate studies cost money and takes time but there is no alternative to doing so in order to have qualitative and responsive tertiary education system. Increased support to universities by the TETFund in the past decade has been

beneficial but it has to be boosted so that it does not become too little too late.

### **Funding**

Funding is the key challenge in reforming the Nigerian tertiary education system. It has been characterized by insufficient investment, with resulting chronic underfunding and wide-ranging consequences. The public funding profile does not reflect an appreciation of the significance of tertiary education and the dire need for the requisite reformation, rehabilitation, restoration and expansion of it. The 2015 Human Development Report illustrates the correlation between substantial public expenditure in education (>6% of GNP) and high ranking of Human Development Index (HDI). Regrettably Nigeria ranks very low on both accounts. Nigeria needs to rearrange its priorities and place education in general, and tertiary education in particular at the top of its development and therefore public funding/budgeting agenda. Countries, such as Ghana, South Africa and Botswana, are doing commendably well in this regard; why not Nigeria, which is celebrated as the biggest economy in Africa?

### **Ethical and moral concerns**

Accompanying the key challenges of access, quality, relevance, funding, deteriorating learning environment, shortages of academic and other essential staff, are what I refer to here as ethical and moral concerns, which have posed additional, significant, challenges. A few of these deserve mention. The phenomenon of junk publication; plagiarism; and indolence afflicting academic work have become

endemic due to the embedded culture of “public or perish” in the system. The persistent issue of commercialization of grades, certificates and “Handouts”, even honorary degrees, deserve attention. As are the concerns with cultism, sexual harassment, drug addiction, human rights violations and discrimination against disempowered or marginalized groups, such as women and the physically challenged, or those with HIV/AIDs. There are even concerns with incessant trade disputes and strikes by unions. All these pose substantial ethical, moral and even criminal / legal issues that need to be taken on board and addressed in the envisaged required reform processes. It is important to note, however, that a lot of the public discourse on the extent and magnitude of these ethical and moral issues is perceptual rather than informed by the reality of what is on the ground. But, since perception can often be more serious and dangerous than the reality, a lot must be done, and be seen to be done, to address these concerns.

### **Prospects**

Quite clearly, the challenges confronting the Nigerian tertiary education system, and especially the university sub-sector are formidable, and they have been allowed to fester so much for so long, that there are no easy solutions. Nonetheless, while reversing the trend may be difficult, it is not impossible to do so, and every effort must be made by all stakeholders to effectively address and overcome these challenges.

The current political environment, infused as it is with the mantra of “change”, should be seized upon to, first vigorously and persuasively articulate the role of higher education as the catalyst and “driver” of socioeconomic and sustainable human development and second, constructively push for and get positive changes to happen in the Nigerian tertiary education system, especially the university sub-sector, as soon as is possible. We have already wasted too much time and cannot afford to waste more time before this can happen.

In contemplating the prospects of urgent and effective reform measures for revitalization and rejuvenation of the tertiary education system, the following recommendations may be worthy of consideration:

1. Substantial public commitment to funding education should be made by the federal, state and local governments, to be reflected in remarkable increases in public expenditure in education, both as a percentage of the budget and as a percentage of the GDP. Even if Nigeria cannot spend 12.8% of its GDP on education, as Cuba does, why can't it devote 8.1% as Ghana has done? Or even 9.5% as Botswana does? The least to be expected, is that Nigeria should commit itself to spend on a sustainable basis, substantially more than 5.1% of its GDP on education, which is the average for Sub-Saharan Africa. That is, if it cannot allocate 13%, as Lesotho has done between 2005 and 2014 (See Table 10 of the 2015 Human Development Report).
2. The contribution of companies to the TETFund should be raised from 2% profit tax to 5% for the next 10 years.



3. State and Federal Scholarships and Bursary Schemes should be reviewed, reinvigorated and well organized. And these should be disbursed through the institutions, rather than through the unwholesome bureaucracies of various ineffective and often corrupt scholarships Boards.
4. A well funded Students Loan Scheme should be established, so that whosoever merits to pursue studies in tertiary institution, and cannot get a scholarship, will not be prevented from doing so by lack of funding opportunities.

As funding is critical to addressing challenges of access and quality, recommendations nos. 1-4 above would increase the funding profile of all tertiary education institutions and pave the way for expansion of facilities, infrastructure and research, as well as staff recruitment and training, etc. of course, as the funding profile improves and increases, so should accountability mechanisms be strengthened in the institutions to ensure efficient and cost-effective utilization of the funds.

Other recommendations worthy of consideration are as follows:

5. Universities must revert to the good culture of the academia of peer-reviewed publications for the purposes of individual academic progression in the system, and most importantly, in order to be globally competitive and relevant. Thus, the negative tendencies, which have proliferated and which have eaten away the fabric of moral and ethical conduct of the academia, which have been highlighted earlier in this presentation, must be decisively tackled and overcome.

6. The governance processes in the system must be continuously reformed and democratized. they must be made more open, inclusive, transparent and accountable, imbued with the principles of academic freedom and relative autonomy, as well as respect for fundamental human rights, but at the same time fully compliant with the Rule of Law. Staff recruitment and students' enrollment, as well as progression within the system must be primarily merit- based. No matter the amount of funds provided or generated, could effectively transform the system and rid it of the rot if the governance structures are weak and leadership is lacking or is ineffective. Thus, attention must be focused also on not just the governance structures but also the recruitment of leaders in the system as well from heads of the institutions to those of the smallest units within the institution.
7. Tertiary institutions must also introduce effective strategies of coping and dealing with the ethical and moral challenges bedeviling them; including having effective disciplinary procedures, criminal prosecution where necessary, including naming and shaming. A situation in which institutions seem complicit, or too protective of 'its own', is undesirable and must be avoided.
8. The National Universities Commission (NUC) and/or other relevant bodies must engage the institutions and guide a comprehensive review of the curricular to improve its quality, as well as relevance to the needs of public and private employers. While minimum standards are necessary, care must be taken to avoid imposing uniformity; there must be sufficient flexibility and scope for innovation. The effort, in recent years,

to encourage entrepreneurial studies is commendable, but must be re-jigged and repositioned for effective value-addition.

9. There is need for an open and realistic dialogue between the federal, state and local governments on the one hand and the key education stakeholders on the other, on the burning issue of cost sharing and the obligations of government with respect to tertiary education. The absence of this, has continued to nurture the illusion that, higher education can be sustained without charging school fees, and in the context of governments' persistent abnegation of their funding obligations. This impasse must be resolved one way or another, but as soon as possible. This dialogue needs to be organized systematically and in a decentralized manner. The so-called "education summits" of the past have not been well structured and were rushed in a "jamboree" fashion, devoid of serious and comprehensive interrogation of the critical issues. The method and strategy have to change.

## **Conclusion**

It is worthy of note that globally, higher Education is changing in response to the challenges of sustainable development (See GUNI 2012). As has been observed by Escarigas,

...higher education's greatest challenge in the coming years is to materialize the contribution made by knowledge to building a sustainable future for humanity and for the planet (2012, xxv)

In Africa in general and Nigeria in particular, this is not yet being given the attention it deserves. Things need to change for the better

in this regard. Hence a reform agenda for revitalization of the tertiary education system must also take on board the imperative of sustainable development in the contemporary world. Our tertiary institutions should be in the forefront of generating ideas and producing knowledge requisite to the imperatives of sustainable development.

In conclusion, I agree with Akin Aina, that what is needed in African Higher Education is:

True transformation, which will involve practical and epistemological ruptures with previous ways of doing things and a reconstruction of structures, relations, cultures and institutions (2010, p. 21).

It is certainly what is needed in the present context of Nigerian higher education. This kind of desirable transformation requires political will, careful and dogged planning, stakeholder partnerships and engagement, and sustained funding. Governments need to move away from being defensive, to becoming more and more pro-active in engagement with stakeholders, especially on how such contentious issues as funding and cost sharing can be easily addressed. There is a lot to do to reform the Nigerian tertiary education system and earlier we to it the better it would be.

Thank you.

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