

POLITICS AND QUALITY OF NIGERIAN TERTIARY EDUCATION: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract

Nigeria's tertiary education system stands at a critical crossroads, where the standards has been compromised due to the interplay of politics and educational quality. This has become a central concern. This paper wades into the intricate relationships between the country's political landscape and the standard of higher education to x-ray the factors and the ways forward. The paper adopts the explorative and analytic approaches and uses the agency theory to explicate the factors and variables involved. The Article begins by outlining the historical context of Nigeria's higher education system, highlighting the role of politics in its development. Subsequently, it discusses the impact of political interference on academic autonomy, funding, on institutional administration, and ultimately, on quality assurance of tertiary education in Nigeria. Furthermore, the consequences of a fragmented and inconsistent educational policies resulting from changes in government has led to lack of sustained investment in infrastructure, curriculum and research, impacting negatively on the quality of education imparted. The study sheds light on the brain drain phenomenon where the political situation and poor quality of education and working environments and conditions drive academics and professionals abroad in pursuit of better opportunities. These have dire implications and consequences for knowledge transfer, the availability of quality educators, and ultimately, overall quality of tertiary education in Nigeria. The paper underscores the urgent need for a harmonious relationship between politics and education, consistency in policies and commitment to programs among others, to enhance the quality of Nigeria's tertiary education. It advocates stable, long-term educational policies, adequate funding, and academic autonomy to facilitate substantial improvements. The article ultimately argues that only through addressing the intricate nexus between politics and education can Nigeria achieve a higher education system that meets international standards and global best practices and prepares its youths for the challenges of the twenty-first century knowledge-based economy.

Keywords: Politics, Nigerian Tertiary Education, Quality Assurance.

Introduction

Politics and education in Nigeria is often considered as engaging in unhealthy romance and the outcome is always satirical and retrogressive in nature. While Education remains the cornerstone of any meaningful progress and development of any nation and the quality of

education plays a pivotal role in shaping the nation's future, the situation is different in Nigeria. Though a country with rich cultural heritage and diverse population, natural endowments and human resources, the state of tertiary education has always been a subject of concern and discussions for several decades. The relationship between politics and the quality of Nigeria's tertiary education is a complex, multifaceted and crucial topic that warrants careful examination.

At the heart of this challenge of quality education is the influence of politics. The political system in Nigeria, like many other nations, significantly affects the education sector. The government's role in funding, policy development and implementation, the appointment of key officials within the education sector, quality control, all have a direct impact on the effectiveness and quality of tertiary education.

We will examine the various aspects of this complex interplay, seeking to understand how politics shapes the educational landscape in Nigeria. We will examine the historical context, funding dynamics, policy formulation, and their subsequent impact on the quality of education in Nigeria's higher institutions. Furthermore, we will discuss the way forward from these challenges to a future that is worthwhile, innovative and globally competitive.

This examination will contribute to a more informed dialogue on the way forward for Nigeria's higher education system and, in turn, the nation's development and progress as a whole. By examining the intricate relationship between politics and the quality of Nigeria's tertiary education, this article aims to foster a deeper understanding of the challenges, opportunities, and the way forward for the nation's higher education system. Through a comprehensive exploration of historical, current, and potential future developments, readers will gain valuable insights into the complex dynamics at play and the prospects for a brighter educational future in Nigeria. Governments and school boards will find the paper rewarding.

Concept and Nature of Politics

Politics, in its broadest sense, is the art and science of governance, encompassing the allocation of resources, decision-making processes, and the distribution of power within a society.

The concept of politics is ubiquitous and universal phenomenon- that spread to all human organization such as the family, trade unions, corporations, universities, etc. In all these organizations, politics is characterized by struggle for power and influence, conflict, bargaining, reconciliation, resolution and consensus. Easton in Anifowose and Francis (1999) sees politics as the "authoritative allocation of values for a society" within the political system. However, Harold Lasswell in Anifowose and Francis (1999) considered politics as 'the study of who gets what, when, and how'? It is the study of influence and the influential, shaping and sharing of power. Robert Darh defined politics in terms of power, influence and authority in the opinion of Karl Marx, politics is about class struggle and the history of all hitherto existing society is class struggle between the 'Bourgeois and Proletariat'. More so, Vernon Van Dyke (1960) sees politic as struggle among actors pursuing conflict desire on public issues. Therefore, Mohammed and Shittu (2020) posited that politics is a struggle

among actors seeking for political power and influence through authoritative allocation of values in their society.

There are formal, semi-formal and informal politics. Formal politics, among others refers to the operation of a constitutional system of government and public institutions and procedures. A lot of people view formal politics as something that is not in them, but can still affect their daily lives. Semi-formal politics is politics in government associations such as neighbourhood associations or students' associations where politics is often practiced. Student Union activities promotes students' success by offering a variety of programmes, serves and facilities which combine to represent well-tailored plan for the development of the school environment (Wing-Yat Yu, 2007; Painter and Jeffrey, 2009). Informal politics refers to forming alliances, exercising power, protecting and advancing particular ideas. This includes anything affecting people's daily life, such as the way an office or household is managed or how a person or group exercises influence over another. Informal politics is usually seen as every day politics which results to the idea of everywhere politics. However, this paper focused on how politics of the day influence quality of tertiary education in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework of Analysis

Agency theory (also known as the principal-agent or principal agency theory/model) describes the relationship between two or more parties, in which one party, designated as the principal, engages another party, designated as the agent, to perform some task on behalf of the principal (Jensen and Meckling, 1976; Moe, 1984; Ross, 1973). The theory assumes that once principals delegate authority to agents, they often have problems controlling them, because agents' goals often differ from their own and because agents often have better information about their capacity and activities than do principals. The key question of the principal-agent framework is, 'How does one empower an agent to fulfil the needs of the principal, while at the same time constraining the agent from shirking on their responsibilities?' Although strongly influenced by its original background in economics (Alchian and Demsetz, 1972; Jensen and Meckling, 1976; Ross, 1973) and political science (Mitnick, 1975; Moe, 1984; Rose-Ackerman, 1978), agency theory has never been the exclusive property of any particular paradigm, discipline or field of study. Rather, due to its generic nature, it has proven to be a widely applied theoretical and empirical framework in many different disciplines and approaches. To this date, the theory has been utilized widely in fields as diverse as accounting, finance, marketing, law, sociology, public administration, organization and management studies and applied psychology, to name a few. Its growing popularity lies in its ability in providing insights for bilateral relations between self-interested parties, where each party is faced with information asymmetry about the other party's effort and interests (cf. Cuevas-Rodríguez, Gomez-Mejia and Wiseman, 2012). In the field of higher education research, agency theory remained largely unknown throughout 1980s and 1990s. More recently, the context of application of the theory has been extended to cover a broader range of topics such as leadership and strategic planning in higher education institutions (Auld, 2010), regulation and monitoring of cross-border higher education (Borgos, 2013; Lane, Kinser and Knox, 2013) and university autonomy (Enders, de Boer and Weyer, 2013).

Politicking with Nigerian Tertiary Education

There are so many factors influencing political interference in our tertiary institution, but the two major factors will be discussed below.

Political Factors: Federal and state governments dictate a lot of what happens in higher education institutions. They impact public institutions more so than private ones. Government policies shape the admission process, funding, accessibility, tuition rates, and faculty and student demographics.

Socio-Economic Factors: Social and economic factors play a role in almost everything, and higher education is not an exception. Every year there is a list released of the top colleges and universities. Of course, every institution of higher learning wants to be on that list. In order to do this, Post-Secondary Institutions must have top ratings in several categories, including faculty, dorms, and student life activities and sports teams.

Ethnic and Religious Factors

Parochial considerations have more often than taken more preferences over quality and professionalism in both political appointments and sometimes within the educational settings. This has enormous consequences in the quality assurance and efficiency index of the educational output.

Admissions and Appointments: Political influence is often exerted in the admission process to tertiary institutions and the appointment of academic and administrative staff. This practice can undermine merit-based selection and weaken the educational system.

Politics and Tertiary Education in Nigeria Since 1999: A Review Of Government Policies And Practices

- **Funding and Budget Allocation:** The introduction of the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund) in 2011 was a significant policy aimed at providing additional funding for tertiary institutions. TETFund is mandated to collect and disburse funds for the improvement of infrastructure and staff development.
- **Access to Tertiary Education:** The number of universities and tertiary institutions has grown significantly since 1999, expanding access to higher education. However, there are concerns about the equitable distribution of these institutions across the country, leading to regional disparities in access.
- **Regulatory Bodies and Accreditation:** The National Universities Commission (NUC) oversees and regulates university education in Nigeria, while the National Board for Technical Education (NBTE) oversees polytechnics and similar institutions. Challenges related to accreditation processes and the quality of institutions have been a subject of debate.
- **Globalization and International Collaboration:** Nigerian universities have increasingly sought international collaborations and partnerships with foreign institutions. Policies promoting internationalization have been developed to enhance the global standing of Nigerian universities.

The Role of Politics in Nigeria Tertiary Education

The role of politics in Nigeria's tertiary education system is significant and complex. **Any nation's development cannot be possible without adequate and clear-cut policy on the way to educate its citizens in order to achieve set national objectives.** In Nigeria, this 'adequate and clear-cut policy' on education has been put down in black and white and on marble in the National Policy On Education. All geared towards ensuring that our national development is achieved through a proper and adequately thought out and planned education system. The roles of politics in Nigeria tertiary education includes:

1. **Budgetary Allocations:** Political decisions on budget allocation significantly affect the quality and accessibility of education. Frequent changes in government leadership can lead to fluctuations in education funding.
2. **Appointment of University Leadership:** The appointment of Vice-Chancellors and other university leaders often involves political considerations, which can impact the autonomy and effectiveness of these institutions.
3. **Influence of Interest Groups:** Interest groups and unions, including ASUU, exert political pressure to advocate for their interests, which can lead to strikes and disruptions.
4. **Institutional Autonomy:** The level of autonomy granted to tertiary institutions often varies with government policies, which can affect the decision-making and operational efficiency of these institutions.

Reforming Nigeria's Tertiary Education System: A Path to Academic Excellence

The Nigerian government has taken several notable steps to address these issues and bring about positive change in the tertiary education sector.

1. **TETFund:** The Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund) plays a pivotal role in funding education. In recent years, the government has increased its allocation to TETFund, allowing for improved infrastructure, research funding, and staff development.
2. **Curriculum Revision:** The government, in collaboration with academic stakeholders, has embarked on a process to revise and update outdated curricula to meet the demands of the modern world. This ensures that graduates are better equipped for the job market.
3. **ASUU Agreements:** The Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) has historically engaged in prolonged strikes, disrupting academic calendars. Recent negotiations and agreements between ASUU and the government seek to address the concerns of academic staff, providing more stable academic sessions.
4. **Digital Learning:** The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital learning. Nigeria has made efforts to improve digital infrastructure in higher institutions and enhance e-learning platforms.
5. **Quality Assurance:** Regulatory bodies like the National Universities Commission (NUC) are intensifying efforts to ensure quality and standards are maintained in tertiary institutions. This involves the accreditation and evaluation of programs and institutions.

Challenges of Politics and Quality of Nigeria Tertiary Education

Several factors pose as challenges of politics and quality of Nigeria tertiary Education in the 21st century. These factors are highlighted and discussed below:

Inadequate Funding: Inadequate funding is the most critical challenge that has threatened the attainment of good quality higher education in Nigeria. The problem of inadequate funding of education has been a bane to educational development in the country. Onokerrhoraye, (1995) maintained that a major constraint to attaining academic excellence in Nigerian universities is financial constraints which made many academics and non-academics to be working under difficult circumstances.

Inadequate Teaching Staff /Poor Quality of Teaching Staff: A big challenge to the attainment of quality higher education in Nigeria is the lack of academic staff. According to Coombs (1970), teachers are the hub of any educational system. Teachers determine the quality of education because they transmit educational policies into practice and action.

Poor Policy Implementation: Poor policy implementation is a challenge to quality delivery in education. The poor-quality delivery is responsible for the abysmal low performance of graduates of institutions of higher learning in Nigeria in their world of work and the alarming incidence of examination malpractice.

Frequent Labour Disputes and Closures of Universities: A big challenge to quality higher education in Nigeria is the incessant staff union disputes and subsequent closures of the institutions. Closure of the institutions affects staff productivity and the realization of educational aim and objectives. Asiyai (2005) provided a catalogue of strikes by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and the Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities (SSANU) within fourteen years. She revealed that they were too many strikes, some of which lasted up to six months. Asiyai (2006) identified the variables inducing the frequent trade union disputes as poor conditions of service of staff, non-implementation of ASUU/FGN or SSANU/FGN agreements, lack of autonomy and academic freedom and poor funding.

The Way Forward: Proposals and Suggestions for Enhancing Politics and Tertiary Education Quality in Nigeria

Tertiary education is a critical element of human development, and it is essential to the growth and development of any country. A country's ability to experience changes, surmount challenges, and keep up with the latest global developments across all sectors is derived mainly from its educated populace. However, for tertiary education to contribute meaningfully to the making of balanced and analytical citizens capable of leading governments as well as driving economies and industries, its quality has to be excellent and tertiary education in Nigeria is far from this. Some steps can be taken to boost the quality of tertiary education in Nigeria, and they include:

Lawmakers and Frameworks: The lawmakers in Nigeria are important stakeholders in improving the quality of its tertiary education. As a recommendation, a policy should be made that stipulates the compulsory increase of funds channeled towards tertiary education in

Nigeria. This policy may also perform the advisory role of stating how the funds should be spent and enforcing it.

Establishment of more Tertiary Institutions in the Country: With one of the largest youth populations in the world, Nigeria requires more well-equipped tertiary institutions as the number of applicants seeking admission will only continue to increase annually. The establishment of more fully equipped tertiary institutions across all the geo-political zones in the country will reduce the number of out-of-school youths and help to improve the quality of tertiary education in Nigeria.

Increase Budgetary Allocation and Prioritize Welfare of Academics: We have had enough of the ASUU strikes. It is embarrassing and very unnecessary. We have been perambulating on the same issues for decades. The Federal Government (and of course State Governments for State owned institutions) need to pay ASUU maximum attention, in the interest of students and the whole nation. We need to significantly increase the budgetary allocation for the education sector and pay academics adequately. This is very important.

Internationalized the Nigerian Education System: Nigerians have been going abroad to study since the 1960s. Lately, this trend has gotten even worse. A lot of Nigerians study abroad because of the inadequacies of the Nigerian education system. If we fix higher education in Nigeria, we can reverse this trend.

Improve Staff Development: A lot of people blame the Government, specifically, the Federal Government. It is the role of the State or Federal Government who own these Universities or Polytechnics to ensure staff development.

Conclusion

The intertwining of politics with Nigeria's tertiary education system has had far-reaching consequences. One significant issue is the appointment of university leadership. Historically, political influence has often played a role in these appointments, leading to individuals with little or no academic experience assuming leadership positions. This has had a detrimental impact on the quality of education, as administrators lacking educational expertise may prioritize political loyalty over academic excellence.

Furthermore, inconsistent funding, frequently subject to political whims, has left many institutions financially strained. Frequent strikes by academic staff, demanding better pay and working conditions, are often linked to these funding challenges. As a result, students' academic calendars are disrupted, leading to subpar educational outcomes.

Political interference also affects the quality of instruction. The emphasis on political considerations sometimes results in a curriculum that doesn't meet the needs of the job market. Instructors, facing low morale due to inadequate compensation and poor working conditions, may not be motivated to deliver high-quality education. This, in turn, impacts the competence of graduates.

Nigeria's higher education institutions have also struggled with issues of corruption and academic malpractice. These issues are exacerbated by political patronage. The pursuit of

political interests can lead to lax enforcement of academic standards, allowing for unethical practices such as examination malpractice and diploma mills to thrive.

The future of Nigeria's tertiary education relies on its ability to free itself from the shackles of political interference, prioritizing academic excellence, research, and innovation. Only then can it produce graduates capable of driving the nation's development and global competitiveness.

Recommendations

To address the challenges of quality in higher education in Nigeria, the following are recommended for higher education policy makers

- Government of Nigeria should place high premium on education by meeting up the recommended 26% educational spending prescribed by UNESCO, to help revitalize the higher education system.
- Enabling environment should be created for staff through improved conditions of service, provision of basic infrastructures, virtual libraries and information communication technologies and internet connectivity.
- Institutions of higher learning in Nigeria should set up internal quality assurance and monitoring of lecture units to enhance good quality delivery.
- Reform in existing higher education institutions in Nigeria can be promoted through deliberate collaborative efforts by government, business sectors, civil society and the academia. This could help to reinvent Nigerian higher education system for better quality delivery in research, teaching and community services.
- To improve quality, lecturers and non lecturers should be motivated to make them more dedicated, devoted and committed and effective in their jobs.
- Institutions of higher learning in Nigeria should employ more lecturers to match the students' population. Institutional policies should be revised to ensure that more emphasis is paid on teaching effectiveness of lecturers for better quality education.

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