



THE POLITICS OF ACCESS: UNIVERSITY EDUCATION AND NATION-BUILDING IN NIGERIA, 1948-2000

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Crisis of Nationhood: Funding Issues, Socio-Political Instability, and Private University Education, 1990–2000

If you ask any Vice Chancellor of a Nigerian university what keeps him awake in the night, the response is likely student problems: accommodation, electricity, water and classrooms. Note that these are basically municipal services. The other core responsibilities of the university such as research, innovation, and publications are not on their radar not because they do not care but it reflects the reality of the day-to-day existence in campuses.

– KOLE AHMED SHETTIMA, 2006

Introduction

The pursuit of rationalization policies by the regimes of presidents Mahammed Buhari and Ibrahim Babangida checked university expansion between 1983 and 1990. Funding decreased as university facilities consequently deteriorated, leading to a decline in annual percentage of student enrolment. In its 2 April 1990 cover story, “The Crash of Education,” *Newswatch* articulated the gradual decay of the physical and instructional facilities in all universities.¹ As the problems in the universities persisted, the country’s economic, political, and social crisis deepened, motivating an unsuccessful coup attempt to topple the Babangida administration in

1990. This chapter examines university education at a time of ongoing political and economic crisis in the Nigerian nation-state. It shows how the attempted military coup in 1990 and the renewed debate over a quota system highlighted the lingering divisions and conflicts that continue to threaten the nation-building project of postcolonial Nigerian governments. It also demonstrates how economic and political instability affected adequate funding and expansion of universities, making the establishment of satellite campuses inevitable and the emergence of private universities a welcome initiative. As this chapter demonstrates, the impact of political instability on the universities, the politicization of university expansion, and the radicalization of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) are essential in understanding the problems confronting universities during the period of incessant socio-economic and political crisis in Nigeria, 1990–2000.

Nigeria, Still a Divided Nation

The successive postcolonial governments in Nigeria had sought to engage, among other things, mass university education in promoting both economic development and nation-building. The country's domestic scene in the 1990s showed that the goal was improbable. As in many developing countries, the implementation of the IMF-Structural Adjustment Program since 1986 led to increased poverty, inflation, unemployment, crime, and unrest in Nigeria.² Ethnic/religious conflicts, largely involving northerners and southerners, continued to generate bad blood in national politics.³ In spite of its abundant human and materials resources, Nigeria seemed, as many analysts have acknowledged, a dream unfulfilled. Thomas-Ogboji captures Nigeria's situation fittingly when he states,

Nigeria, the comatose giant of Africa, may go down in history as the biggest country ever to go directly from colonial subjugation to complete collapse, without an intervening period of successful rule. So much promise, so much waste; such a disappointment. Such a shame. Makes you sick.⁴

Faced with increasing economic hardship, many southerners easily blamed northern political elite for mismanaging the country's resources and for holding on to power endlessly. Beside President Olusegun Obasanjo, whose regime was brief, only lasting from 1976 to 1979, all past Nigerian presidents since independence were northerners. Babangida had, beginning in 1986, started an endless process of transfer of power to civilian regime, frequently renegeing on his promises. Major Gideon Okar, a military officer from a minority ethnic group in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria, captured the frustrations of many Nigerians with the country's political leadership in a coup he led in April 1990. This coup highlighted the instability in Nigeria and the fear of domination and deprivation that had dominated the relations between the North and the South since the amalgamation of the two areas in 1914.⁵ Emphasizing southern misgivings, Gideon Orkar declared that the coup was different from others as it was "a well conceived, planned and executed revolution for the marginalized, oppressed and enslaved peoples of the Middle Belt and the south with a view to freeing ourselves and children yet unborn from eternal slavery and colonization by a clique of this country."⁶

The coup plotters viewed Babangida's transition program with suspicion, believing that he wanted to remain in power in order to protect the privilege the North had enjoyed since Nigeria's independence.⁷ They saw Babangida's delays in handing over power as an attempt to "install himself as Nigeria's life president at all cost," and an example of "repressive intrigues by those who think it is their birthright to dominate till eternity the political and economic privileges of this great country to the exclusion of the people of the Middle Belt and the south."⁸ The coup plotters demonstrated their seriousness when Orkar announced "a temporary decision to excise the following states namely, Sokoto, Borno, Katsina, Kano and Bauchi states from the Federal Republic of Nigeria."⁹ These states are located in the far North and had produced most of the presidents from the North who dictated major policies in the country. Orkar summed up the obstacle to Nigeria's development when he blamed the leadership controlled by northerners:

This clique has an unabated penchant for domination and unrivalled fostering of mediocrity and outright detest for

accountability, all put together have been our undoing as a nation. This will ever remain our threat if not checked immediately. It is strongly believed that without the intrigues perpetrated by this clique and misrule, Nigeria will have in all ways achieved developmental virtues comparable to those in Korea, Taiwan, Brazil, India, and even Japan.¹⁰

With reference to quota system, which many southerners criticized, Orkar blamed the leaders for the “deliberate disruption of the educational culture and retarding its place to suit the favoured class to the detriment of other educational minded parts of this country.”¹¹ Although Babangida’s administration eventually apprehended and executed the coup plotters, the coup continued to resonate in different circles in the country, including in university education. For instance when Babangida set up the commission on *Higher Education in the 90s and Beyond* chaired by Gray Longe to mainly “review the development of Post-Secondary and Higher Education in Nigeria since the last comprehensive report of the 1960 commission,” the issue of a quota system resurfaced.¹² Most of the submissions to the Gray Longe Commission from South questioned the quota system of admission that continued to mandate 20 per cent of intakes from the educationally disadvantaged states. Particularly infuriating for many southerners was the wisdom of basing significant percentage of university admission on the “disadvantaged status” and “catchment area” formula. Many of the submissions argued that the quota system was morally defenceless and contrary to the spirit of the constitution. The argument was that if the system was justified two decades ago because of imbalance in educational opportunity, the creation of thousands of primary and hundreds of secondary schools in the North ought to have given the so-called disadvantaged states the opportunity to catch up.¹³

As some Nigerians argued, the quota system failed to close the gap between the two regions due to northerner’s negative attitude towards Western education. According to Emman Shehu, a northerner and the publisher of *Envoy*, a weekly newspaper, “the feudal order has made it difficult for parents to allow their children to stay in school. You want to bridge the gap, yet you tell people that Western education is evil.”¹⁴ However, Shehu perceived the quota system as an insult to the North because it cast

the region as inherently inferior to the South. As he said, “I write the same examination with somebody from another state. Then you say because I am from Sokoto, my cut-off is 20 percent while the other man’s cut-off is 60 percent. This is an insult.”¹⁵ Although the northern states had been classified as disadvantaged since independence, the status was not meant to confer on them a permanent advantage. In fact, the underlying philosophy of the quota system was to place the North ultimately on equal footing with the South. But the most sustainable approach to closing the educational gap was to set a timeframe when the implementation of the quota system would stop while at the same time addressing the root causes of the North’s disadvantaged status. Chimere Ikoku, the vice-chancellor of UNN, affirmed that the idea of a quota system is

that someday in the future, the policy will dissolve. And we should ask the question, how have these states fared? Yes, state *X* is disadvantaged today. If we really want to remove the disadvantage, we must time the process. When will that state stop being disadvantaged? ... What is responsible for the disadvantaged status? Is it classrooms, books, or teachers?”¹⁶

Although the introduction of a quota system represents government’s efforts to guarantee equal representations of all Nigerians in order to foster national unity, ironically it became a source of disunity itself. It seemed to be an easy way out for the disadvantaged status of the North, but after what the Longe commission described as a “considerable soul-searching” and “careful weighting of the pros and cons,” it proposed a quota formula to correct many deep-seated prejudices and mollify “justified indignation” toward a quota system. As shown in Table 7.1, the commission wanted the percentage of admission allocated to merit to increase while those for disadvantaged states and catchment area were to decrease. It also wanted the criteria for discretionary admission to remain at 10 per cent from 1990 to 2000.¹⁷

Table 7.1: Percentage of Admission Allocated to: Merit, Catchment Area, Disadvantaged States, and Discretion.

	1990	1992	1994	1996	1998	2000
Merit	40	50	55	60	65	70
Catchment Area	30	25	25	25	20	20
Disadvantaged States	20	15	10	5	5	0
Discretion	10	10	10	10	10	10

Source: Federal Republic of Nigeria, *Higher Education in the 90s and Beyond: Report of the Commission on the Review of Higher Education in Nigeria* (Lagos: Government Printing Office, 1991), 153.

Not all the members of the commission accepted the gradual phasing out of the quota system. For instance, Rex F.O. Akpofure argued that the majority report did not go far enough. In a minority report, Akpofure stressed that the quota system had continued to harm the minds of Nigerian youth precisely because its implementation contradicted the spirit of social justice. According to him, “the system should be ended quickly, before it does more harm to our ethos as one people.”¹⁸ Akpofure affirmed that since a quota system was first introduced in 1976 in admissions to federal government secondary schools, “it should substantially have solved or reduced the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged States. That it is said not to have done so, is in my honest view because those it was intended to assist, no longer see the need for that special effort to close the gap.”¹⁹ The debate on the quota system meant that the Nigerian state still carried with it the burden of history. It shows that the desire to forge a united nation through quota in a pluralistic society where educational attainments and opportunities were unequal presents a risk of compromising the unity that the policy originally intended to affirm.

The federal government rejected the recommendation of the commission with respect to quota. In a white paper on the recommendations of the Longe’s Commission, the federal government insisted that inequality was an inescapable ‘fact of life’ and the government’s duty was to “recognize and address the problem pragmatically,” noting, however, that it will “continue to review the admissions formula from time to time within the context of our development.”²⁰ This decision only confirmed southern

suspicion of northern domination and further added to their frustration. That the government discarded the phasing out of the quota system is not surprising. The quota system was introduced to enhance equal representations of northerners and southerners in all universities. The educationally 'backward' North hoped that the system would help the region catch up with the educationally advanced South. The phasing out of the quota system would affect northerners, who, of course, dominated the apex of the federal government. Therefore, it was only natural (though not excusable) for the federal government to resist this aspect of the commission's recommendations. Since the federal government was conscious of closing the educational gap between the North and the South, regional and ethnic considerations, not academic quality, overshadowed government's decision.

The continuing tension in the country affected university education. Given the instability in the country, education assumed less importance in the scheme of things, as keeping the country together became an overriding concern of the government. Unrest in the country relegated university education to the background as maintaining the integrity of the state through dictatorial powers became crucial. The Orkar coup, which was popular in the South and the Middle Belt, showed how vulnerable the state was; it made the federal government desperate to protect it at all cost. Thus, during the 1990s, according to *The Economist*, "Defense and police budgets enjoy the largest slice of the national cake (and even so the figures are underestimated, since the military imports are paid for with dollars bought cheaply at the government exchange rates)."²¹ As funding for universities shrank in spite of government's rhetoric regarding its commitment to the expansion of university education, facilities deteriorated and learning suffered. Thus, the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) was compelled to embark on a difficult crusade to rescue the life of universities.

Poor Funding, ASUU, and Military Dictatorship

The Orkar's coup terrified Babangida, but he was relieved that the country's economic fortunes changed dramatically following the U.S.-led war against Iraq (Gulf War) in 1990/91. Oil prices suddenly rose with a positive effect on Nigerian finances. The World Bank estimated that the total

oil export revenue in 1990 was US\$14 billion, a 49 per cent increase over the 1989 level.²² Having successfully rescheduled Nigerian debts, there was far less fiscal pressure on the federal government. One would have thought that addressing social and economic issues would take centre stage in government's policies. In fact, in a memorandum to the Longe Commission, the Committee of Vice-Chancellors advised that the oil "windfall should be institutionalized and made at not less than ₦20 million for at least 5 years from 1990, specifically for the provision and maintenance of [university] projects of a capital nature."²³ The CVC knew that oil sales had brought increased revenue to the government and called on the government to apply the money to maintain and expand university facilities. Judging by previous experience where the federal government went on a spending spree in similar circumstances, the CVC had good reasons to demand the institutionalization of grants over a five-year period.

In its report, the Longe commission blamed the funding crisis facing Nigerian universities on the military and civilian regime of the 1970s and 1980 for pursuing an extravagant and unrestrained proliferation of universities because of a mistaken faith in the continuity of oil revenue. It noted that Nigeria's "higher educational institutions have grown far more rapidly in numbers than the Ashby commission could possibly have projected."²⁴ Although many factors accounted for this expansion, the commission located "political considerations" as the "predominant single factor."²⁵ It stated that for the next ten to twenty years, Nigeria would not be able to afford the luxury of indiscriminate establishment of institutions because of the "far reaching and often irrevocable consequences of inadequate planning for such institutions."²⁶ Such consequences, as the World Bank noted, include the incidence of "extravagance in physical development of the universities, with many grandiose projects started without the fund needed to complete them."²⁷ The commission revealed that the cost of unfinished projects in 1988 was ₦1.2 billion, and at 1991 rates, "the cost of completion could be up to ₦3.0 billion."²⁸ The commission cautioned government to avoid haphazard establishment of institutions and embarking on extravagant physical projects. The *Guardian* special report on the "Sorry State of the Universities" uncovered many abandoned projects in most universities, which limited student enrolment as well as tied university funds.²⁹ What the commission implied in its recommendation was that adequate financial

and physical planning ought to precede the establishment of universities in order to guarantee sustainable expansion of university education.

Notwithstanding the recommendation of the Longe Commission, political considerations still drove the founding of new universities that emerged in the 1990s. Although the federal government retained the states' right to own universities since 1979, the creation of states, which were mostly economically unviable, reinforced their dependency on the federal government.³⁰ In 1991, the federal government created ten states, bringing the total number of states to thirty-one. Due to the centralized nature of military governments, the federal government did not perceive state creation as a tool for decentralization, yet the beneficiaries saw them as federal handouts or their fair share of the national wealth. While political in its motivation, the creation of states had implications for university expansion. Some of the newly created states were fortunate to inherit existing universities within their territories, leaving the parent states without either a state or federal university. For instance, Imo State forfeited Imo State University located in Okigwe to the newly created Abia State. Consequently, Imo State commenced plans to set up a university, since they had no control over the federal university of technology located within it. Because Akwa Ibom State, created in 1987, had secured a federal university, the newly created states demanded the same, including the location of federal universities in their states. By 1992, five state universities emerged to satisfy political interests. The federal government set up the Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, in Anambra State, in addition to establishing the University of Agriculture, Umudike, to balance the location of the federal universities of agriculture in the former northern and western regions.³¹ Similarly, four state universities were also established: Imo State University, Owerri; Benue State University; Bagauda University of Science and Technology, Kano; and Delta State University, Abraka. These new universities had one thing in common: they followed the creation of new states. For instance, the creation of Abia State from former Imo State and subsequent forfeiture of former Imo State University (established in 1981) to Abia State, compelled Imo to establish its own university. The same applied to all other universities. The politics of state creation were, therefore, an essential part of the politics of founding universities.

Members of the Longe Commission were aware of the 1990 oil boom and the improved financial strength of the federal government and as such requested the federal government to provide “80 percent of the annual recurrent expenditure of each of the Federal Universities and those institutions should find the balance of 20 percent from internal revenue generation efforts and other sources.”³² Implementation of this recommendation would have halted the decay in the universities but the federal government issued a response in 1992 that flatly rejected it. Instead, it insisted that the government would “continue to make its contributions towards higher education within its budgetary constraint [while] ... each institution should work towards self-sufficiency.”³³ It was odd that a government that asked JAMB in 1991 to increase student intake by 20 per cent would at the same time refuse to make a financial commitment to universities mindful of the potential pressure the increase would put on the existing facilities. Nigerians aspiring for university education hoped that the directive would boost the supply of university education by reducing the pressure mounted on JAMB each year. A very high number of candidates sat for UME exams yearly owing to the cumulative carry-over of unsuccessful candidates from previous years. Due to insufficient facilities, many students who passed the exam still failed to secure admission.³⁴ In any case, increasing student intake without an urgent and corresponding expansion of facilities was certainly not in the interest of universities. If anything, it threatened to strain already overstretched facilities.

While Babangida acknowledged in his 1991 budget speech that the universities “are the apex of our educational system and a veritable lever for national cohesion and development,” his subsequent actions contradicted his words.³⁵ Consolidation of political power through patronage of members of the armed forces became a top priority for the government. While the government did not favour the idea of providing 80 per cent of the financial needs of the universities, it was willing to spend lavishly to retain power. Motivated by the oil wealth and determined to sustain the loyalty of the armed forces, the Babangida regime launched a huge, irresponsible spending program aimed at rehabilitating the police and military barracks, thus increasing spending on security. A World Bank report completed in early 1991 noted that “there was a breakdown in fiscal and monetary discipline in 1990 ... not only characterized by additional spending and

monetary expansion but also by a major surge in expenditures bypassing budgetary mechanisms for expenditure authorization and control.”³⁶ In 1992, Babangida offered new Peugeot cars to nearly 3,000 of his loyal military officers, which cost the equivalent of \$21,000 each. This amount was five times the yearly salary of a senior university professor, who earned about \$4,000 a year.³⁷

Equal attention was not paid to other sectors of the economy, including university education where limited vacancies denied admission to a “large number of eligible candidates aspiring to study in these institutions.”³⁸ This apparent disregard of the plight of universities irked the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU). It was largely due to the neglect of university education that ASUU emerged as a strong voice for the university system. Since the introduction of SAP in 1986, ASUU had made unsuccessful demands on the government to provide adequate funds for the universities, often citing the decay of infrastructural facilities. The government rejection of the Longe Commission recommendation to increase its financial allocation for universities while it continued to spend on security, as well as mismanaging the oil revenue, compelled ASUU to embark on a strike on May 1992, forcing all the universities to close down.³⁹

The reasons for the ASUU strike and their demands echoed the main proposal of Longe’s report. The union proposed three ways the government could fund the universities, namely: (1) Stabilization (or Restoration) Grant of at least 5 per cent of total government revenue to be earmarked for universities and phased in over five years; (2) Endowment Fund of ₦1billion, administered by NUC, under an appropriate Trust Deed to finance research, which would insulate the universities against “variability in grants and assure them of the funds needed to pursue their objectives vigorously”; and (3) a three year Rolling Plan for recurrent grant allocations to the universities.⁴⁰ With the universities closed down, the federal government was compelled to commence negotiation with ASUU in June. As the ASUU/federal government negotiation commenced, the minister for education inaugurated the National Implementation Committee on the Report of the Review of Higher Education in Nigeria (NICRHEN) on 19 June 1992. Part of the role of NICRHEN was to advise the federal government, among other things, on all financial, material, and other implications of Longe’s recommendations.⁴¹ ASUU strike, which paralyzed

university activities, delayed the work of the committee. However, due to intense pressure from the civil society between 25 May and 3 September 1992, Babangida accepted ASUU proposal and signed the agreement that met their demands. Universities reopened.

To guarantee sustainable financing of public universities, and in line with its agreement with ASUU, the federal government promulgated Decree No. 7 of 1993, which established the Education Tax Fund (ETF). Among other things, the objective of ETF was to provide funding for educational facilities and infrastructural development in all universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education, both federal and state. This included the construction and renovation of lecture theatres, auditoriums, administrative blocks, and hostels.⁴² The decree required companies registered in Nigeria to pay 2 per cent of yearly profit to the ETF fund as an education tax. In addition, it stipulated that 50 per cent of the total collectable revenue would go to higher education, shared in the ratio of 2:1:1 for universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education, respectively.⁴³ When the government imposed the education tax, many foreign oil companies demanded exemption, arguing that the policy ran contrary to the Petroleum Profit Tax (PPT) Act of 1959, which precluded oil companies from paying any other tax after paying the PPT. The oil companies subsequently petitioned the finance minister, Anthony Ani. After a series of meetings, the federal government exempted the foreign companies from paying the education tax for 1993 but demanded that they still pay it to the tune of ₦2 billion in 1994 and 1995.⁴⁴ However, since the federal government did not appoint an ETF board until 1998, there was no assessment for the education tax for all companies in 1993 or collections. However, collections were made subsequently as follows: ₦4.5 billion in 1994–95; ₦6.6 billion in 1996–97; ₦6.4 billion in 1998–99. Nevertheless, it was not until 1999 that the money was allocated to different levels of the educational system.⁴⁵

Following ASUU's agreement with the federal government, the federal government increased the capital and recurrent grants to the federal universities from ₦3,055,864,940 in 1992 to ₦3,905,915,278 in 1993.⁴⁶ However, this increase did not have a significant impact on the universities partly because the value of the national currency had gone down such that the huge budgetary allocations amounted to little in real terms. According to the executive secretary of NUC, "the rate at which the Naira value has

been deteriorating has been faster than the rate at which we have been able to utilize the new funds that have been allocated to the universities for both recurrent and capital needs.”⁴⁷ Besides, given the widespread corruption in the Babangida administration, there was a gap between what the government budgeted and what it eventually disbursed.⁴⁸ Therefore, the ASUU accused the government of non-implementation and violation of the 1992 agreement and embarked on another four-month strike from May through September 1993.

Worse still was that due to the financial irresponsibility of the federal government in implementing the Structural Adjustment Program, the IMF withdrew its adjustment support, which led to the termination of the program. The attendant large fiscal deficits and economic stagnation heated the body politic, worsened the plight of universities, and showed that Nigeria’s economic problems were not necessarily fiscal, as the World Bank/IMF had dubiously suggested – and as Nigerian leaders had naively believed. Fiscal adjustment is not a panacea for the country’s fiscal-related ills unless it is “supported by measures to strengthen the quality of spending, addressing corruption and transparency issues.”⁴⁹ Therefore, as Alexander Bamiloye commented, “The structural adjustment ... is academic. The real adjustment is that of the mind as a people and as a nation.”⁵⁰ Clearly, the real problem was human, not fiscal, and any solution that failed to address the human problem was bound to fail, as SAP’s failure demonstrated. The major human problem was leadership. As Chinua Achebe aptly stated,

There is nothing wrong with the Nigerian land or climate or water or air or anything else. The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenges of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership.⁵¹

This is not, of course, a simple task, given the pluralistic nature of Nigerian society and the historic regional conflict.

The fear of continued northern domination of the country crystallized in 1993 when Babangida annulled the 12 June 1993 presidential election in which a southerner, Moshood Abiola, emerged as the winner. The violence that followed the annulment threatened the corporate existence of the

Nigerian state, forcing Babangida to resign in August 1993.⁵² In an apparent ploy to appease the South, Babangida handed over power to an interim government headed by a southerner, Ernest Shonekan. Three months into the new government, another military coup swept Shonekan out of power; Sani Abacha, a northerner, emerged as the new president. Increased violent pressure on Abacha to honour the June 12 election was met with brutal force, even as Abiola was thrown in prison, where he later died in 1998.

The fate of universities was sealed when Abacha became the president in November 1993. Taking over power in the wake of violence generated by the cancellation of the 12 June presidential elections, Abacha's government was in no mood to negotiate with ASUU, much less implement the 1992 ASUU/FGN agreement. Consequently, ASUU embarked on another strike in order to secure a commitment by government to respect the 1992 agreement, thereby paralyzing academic activities for five months from August 1994 to January 1995. In his 1995 budget speech, Abacha promised, as many of his predecessors had done, to devote a huge amount of funds to rehabilitate facilities in the existing universities in line with ASUU's agreement with government in September 1992.⁵³ Aware that no social and economic program would be executed successfully without addressing the root causes of Nigerian economic problems, Abacha launched the Economic Recovery Programme, 1996–98. He argued that under SAP, debt rescheduling imposed a burden by bunching up payments later as well as attracting an extra annual sum of \$2.5 billion in interest payments.⁵⁴ Despite Abacha's economic recovery policies, the conditions of universities did not get better; his government ignored ASSU's consistent demand for improved condition of service and better funding of universities. Consequently, the union embarked on a seven-month strike in 1996. Incensed by the frequent suspension of academic activities in the universities due to ASUU strikes, Abacha banned ASUU, including other university staff unions. He also dissolved their executives and asked them to forfeit their assets to the government.⁵⁵ ASUU went underground and became ineffective. This ban remained in force until 1999.

Partly in search of a solution to social, economic, and political problems, and mostly to divert Nigerian attention from the dictatorship and corruption of his administration, Abacha promised to set up a committee to review the current situation of higher education, particularly to explain

why it had failed “to meet the nation’s developmental aspirations.”⁵⁶ In his address, Abacha expressed concern about the sad situation of universities, emphasizing the need for immediate action “to address the issues so as to lay a solid foundation for the emergence of a befitting educational system that will help propel the nation into the 21st Century.”⁵⁷ On 1 October 1996, Abacha set up the Committee on the Future of Higher Education (COFHE), comprised of twenty-five Nigerians and chaired by a traditional ruler, Alhaji Umaru Sanda Ndayako. Abacha’s decision to include five traditional rulers in COFHE was remarkable. In Nigeria, successive military governments since 1983 had relied on the support of traditional rulers to further legitimize their regimes. Abacha’s regime went further to grant the traditional rulers throughout Nigeria 5 per cent of local government’s monthly allocations. The traditional rulers visited the government house, often wining and dining with the dictator. Among those who supported Abacha’s continued stay in power were the traditional rulers who unequivocally said that Abacha was the only viable candidate to lead Nigeria.⁵⁸ Thus, by involving traditional rulers in the COFHE, the government hoped to receive recommendations that would reflect its preferences.

The terms of reference of the COFHE were largely similar to those of the Longe Commission. It was odd that Abacha had not fully implemented the recommendations of the Longe Commission before setting up the COFHE. In fact, the setting up of higher education committees, especially since 1983, had become a favourite pastime of the military rulers whose motives were anything but sheer love of higher education and who used them as tools for political distraction and diversion. This often produced discontinuity and public ruse in policy formulation and implementation. The COFHE’s conscious desire to please the government informed its recommendations to reduce the number of universities, reduce grants to universities, and thus save Abacha the financial nightmare of financial demands by the universities. However, until Abacha’s regime ended in 1998, these recommendations were not implemented.

Low financial allocations to the universities since 1994 affected the maintenance and expansion of facilities to accommodate increasing demand. Admission statistics revealed that demand for university places continued to outstrip its supply. In 1996/97, for instance, 472,362 applied for admission into all Nigerian universities but 76,430 secured

admissions (16%). In 1997/98, 419,807 applied but only 72,791 were admitted (17.3%).⁵⁹ The major reason for low intake was inadequate facilities arising from low funding and mismanagement of resources. A 1997 special report titled “The Sorry State of the Universities,” published by one of Nigeria’s leading newspapers (*The Guardian*), revealed how the infrastructural decay in all Nigerian universities not only affected the quality of learning but also limited the intake of students. It noted, for instance, that since the establishment of the Lagos State University in 1984 with 300 students, the population of the institution had increased to 15,000 without any meaningful improvement in the initial infrastructures with the consequence that “the classrooms, laboratories (where they exist), offices, and equipment have become overstretched.”⁶⁰ At the Rivers State University of Science and Technology, the story of lack of facilities was the same. The head of the petroleum and chemical engineering department bemoaned the sorry state of the university thus: “the system is dead and buried. No other comment.”⁶¹ In the University of Jos, the report noted: “There are no seats to accommodate [students].”⁶² The report also observed that, due to insufficient classrooms in Imo State University, many lecturers fought literally over classrooms located at C and D blocks.⁶³

Since universities lacked funds to expand facilities, many universities that were designed to accommodate 10,000 students ended up admitting many more. Data from the planning office of the University of Ibadan shows that “whereas student enrolment was 9,176 in the 1982/83 session, it had risen to 18,228 (about 100%) by 1998/99 session without any corresponding expansion in facilities.”⁶⁴ These problems, common in all Nigerian universities, significantly affected enrolment. Faced with tight financial constraints as well as rising public demand for university opportunities, universities, especially the state-owned, were left with no choice but to establish satellite campuses around the country, aimed at generating enough revenue to meet their financial obligations while expanding access.

Satellite Campuses

The phenomenon of satellite campuses was not new in the 1990s. In fact, many universities had begun as satellite campuses of older universities.

Notable among them was the Jos campus of the University of Ibadan, which later became University of Jos in 1975. However, the satellite campuses that emerged in the 1990s were different. The government did not establish them, rather the respective universities did. Lectures were often conducted in primary or secondary school buildings – sometimes in business centres. While the original intent of establishing satellite campuses was to turn them eventually into full-fledged universities, the universities that established these campuses had no such plan since they mostly intended to use them as revenue-generating outlets. Most satellite campuses were located in major cities, notably Lagos, and were established without NUC approval. Institutions with campuses in Lagos include, among others, Enugu State University of Science and Technology, Delta State University, Ogun State University, University of Calabar, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, and Obafemi Awolowo University.⁶⁵

Financial gains largely motivated the proliferation of satellite campuses. This phenomenon followed increasing demand for part-time university training by full-time-employed Nigerians. According to Sola Dixon and Victor Onyeka-Ben, “Because of the resources at the disposal of such working candidates, the universities in no time began to see in them opportunities to boost their revenue and thus supplement their lean purses.”⁶⁶ Thus, due to the government’s insufficient funding of universities and their bid to look for alternative sources of revenue, universities rushed to establish many learning centres in major cities. Maduabuchi Dukor, a senior lecturer in Lagos State University, stated that “the proliferation of satellite campuses, certificates and Diplomas has a primitive capitalist underpinning. It is symptom of the overall greed and avarice in the Nigerian society.”⁶⁷

On the other hand, the explosion of satellite campuses was motivated by the desire of universities to satisfy the yearning of a large number of citizens to further their education. O. Eruvbetine and Bamidele Folarin of the University of Lagos argued that the situation was “necessitated by the law of demand and supply in the face of the inability of government and the conventional university system to cope.”⁶⁸ For instance, at the matriculation of the Lagos satellite students of Delta State University, the vice-chancellor, Pius Sada, affirmed that the popularity of the program was manifest in the number of applicants for the program. According to him, out of the 6,000 qualified applicants, only 2,736 secured admission.⁶⁹

He further noted that, in due time when facilities of the campus located at Ikorodu Road expanded, more students would secure places.⁷⁰

Although the increase of these campuses under questionable circumstances and learning environments had the potential effect of expanding access, it threatened the quality of university education. Facing mounting complaints, the NUC whose responsibility it was to advise government on the establishment of universities, ordered all satellite campuses to close down in January 1998. A letter signed by Professor I.I. Uvah, director of academic planning for NUC, alleged that the satellite campuses were established without due clearance from government. He further insisted that such a development was contrary to the requirements that all degree courses be domiciled in academic departments. As Uvah warned, "It is illegal for any university to set up a satellite campus or study center outside the location approved at its inception by the federal government for its academic activity towards the award of degree of whatever nature without fresh clearance."⁷¹ The federal minister for education, Dauda Birma, later endorsed this decision.⁷² Since over 90 per cent of the satellite campuses were located in the South and were largely dominated by southerners, critics from the South dismissed the decision as anti-southern and largely inspired by political considerations. However, the reduction of the issue here to regional politics seemed misplaced. Although satellite campuses were banned, many universities established institute of continuing education programs within their campuses to cater for the interests of non-traditional students.

Private Universities

From 1948 (when Nigeria's first university was established) to 1998, state and federal governments monopolized the provision of university education. In 1983 twenty-six private universities were founded or proposed in Nigeria. These universities were still in the process of securing facilities to admit students when the Buhari government closed them down by promulgating Decree No. 19 of February, called the "Private Universities (Abolition and Prohibition) Decree 1984."⁷³ By criminalizing the establishment of private universities in Nigeria, the military government chose

to ignore other options and seemed to offer a misleading impression that the emergence of these private universities had contributed to the financial difficulties that confronted the university system in particular and the country in general. If anything, the existence of private universities was supposed to spare the government the headache of being the sole provider of university education. It was difficult to understand Buhari's justification in abolishing private universities when the government had the option of restructuring their operations with stiff guidelines stipulated by the NUC to ensure quality and standards. Pursuing this option would have gone a long way towards meeting the increasing demand for university places. Perhaps the idea of commercially run universities was strange to an average Nigerian in 1984 because the government had monopolized the sector since independence and was unprepared to shift its position notwithstanding the economic situation.

Buhari's swift closure of private universities after barely two months in office and without plans to fund the public universities adequately seemed short-sighted. In addition, Babangida's inability to reopen the issue until 1993 in the midst of poor funding of universities reveals the contradictions and confusions of government policy. However, the point of how people could afford private education in a period of negative economic climate must have probably weighed heavily on the minds of policy-makers. Yet, private universities had the potential of discouraging many wealthy Nigerians from sending their children abroad for university training. In spite of the country's economic recession, government's inability to maintain and expand facilities in the existing universities and the short supply of university places, successive Nigerian governments prohibited the private sector from supplying university education until 1998 when General Abdulsalami Abubakar issued licences to three private universities. The shift in the conservative attitude of policy-makers toward private ownership of universities was primarily born out of rising unmet demand for university admission, bred by the steady deterioration of facilities in public universities, and ultimately nourished by World Bank/IMF's intervention in Nigeria's domestic economic policies.

Motivated by the Structural Adjustment Program, which endorsed both privatization and reduction in government spending, Babangida asked the Longe Commission to consider the possibility of engaging the

private sector in the provision of university education. It was the first time in the country's educational history that a commission seriously considered the issue of private university education. While recognizing the right of the federal and state governments to own universities, the commission proposed similar rights to private individuals and corporations.⁷⁴ This recommendation superseded the ban on private universities by the Buhari regime in 1984, and it was based on the recognition that private universities would complement public universities in providing more opportunities for university training. However, the commission required evidence of adequate and diverse sources of capital and recurrent funding by the sponsoring body, public or private, before the government would approve the establishment of a new university.⁷⁵

Although the federal government declined to make fundamental changes in university funding and quota as the Longe Commission had recommended, it nonetheless endorsed the commission's recommendation to lift the ban on private ownership of universities. Clearly, the federal government knew that the establishment of private universities would further expand opportunities for university education as well as ease its burden of financing university expansion. Thus, it whole-heartedly accepted the idea and added that "individuals that satisfy the eligibility criteria can establish higher institutions."⁷⁶ The federal government knew that the rationalization policies of the IMF/World Bank would make adequate funding of universities difficult. The emergence of private universities would thus be a welcome relief for the government.

In 1993, the federal government promulgated the National Minimum Standards and Establishment of Institutions (Amendment) Decree No. 9 of 1993. This decree, among other things, repealed the Decree No. 19 of 1984 called "The Private University (Abolition and Prohibition) Decree 1984." Decree No. 9 granted the right to establish universities to local governments, companies incorporated in Nigeria, and even individuals or associations of individuals who were citizens and who meet the criteria for founding new universities. It legitimized the involvement of the private sector in the provision of higher education. Unlike the emergence of private universities in 1983 without prescribed regulatory guidelines, Decree No. 9 stipulated rigid criteria for the establishment of private universities. The main criteria were evidence of concrete and guaranteed sources of financial

support to the tune of ₦200 million and a minimum land area of 100 hectares.⁷⁷ These conditions recognized that lack of sustainable funding of public universities affected the maintenance and expansion of facilities. Buhari had faced a similar choice in 1984, but he chose to abolish the private universities. But after nine years of banning private universities, the federal government decided to permit their operation. It was inadequate funding of universities as well as the rising demand for university places in the face of deteriorating facilities between the late 1980s and the 1990s that Nigeria, like many other African countries, welcomed private-sector involvement in the provision of university education.⁷⁸

Public response to Decree No. 9 was cautious. Twelve private individuals and organizations collected application forms from NUC in 1993 for their proposed universities.⁷⁹ Yet no private university was established until 1998. The delay reflects the problem associated with private firms in Nigeria as well as the country's unstable polity. According to the COFHE, private firms in the country experienced many problems that also affected private universities. They relied too largely on a single individual, and such firms survive only in the lifetime of the individual, even where the firms are incorporated. In addition, the firms were over-dependent on patronage by the governments as the main financier of the economy, thus making their fortunes unstable with each change in government. This factor, including the stringent requirement established by the NUC, may have accounted for why many persons who obtained application forms in 1991 for private universities were reluctant to submit them. Of the twenty-nine applications forms collected from 1993 to 1996, only six were completed and duly returned to the NUC.⁸⁰ One other reason was the scepticism of the public, who saw what happened to private universities in 1984, coupled with the uncertainties of the country's political arena. However, by the end of 1998 when the country's political situation quieted, more Nigerians submitted applications to establish private universities.

Under Abubakar, the military leader who replaced Abacha at his death in 1998, the process was accelerated in that by April 1999 he approved licences to three private universities: Igbinedion University, Okada; Babcock University, Ilishan Remo; and Madonna University, Okija.⁸¹ The philosophies of these universities demonstrated awareness of the unstable and decaying atmosphere under which students studied in the public universities,

the limited intake of students, and the need to make a difference. Madonna University sought to “provide higher education and well balanced training in an atmosphere of peace without discrimination.”⁸² The philosophy of Igbinedion University was to “provide opportunity for young men and women to learn under the most conducive atmosphere, imbibe the highest moral and ethical values and to develop their entrepreneurial instincts.”⁸³ Babcock University’s mission was “to offer high quality professional, pre-professional, general and vocational education to prepare men and women for responsible, dedicated and committed service to God and humanity.”⁸⁴

Many Nigerians found private universities very attractive because of the prospect of uninterrupted academic activities. Also, some of these private universities, such as Babcock and Madonna, were founded by religious organizations, and parents expected them to have an impact on their children in both academic knowledge and high morals. Moreover, many parents whose children were denied admissions in the public universities due to limited and inadequate facilities hoped that the private universities would provide an alternative route. As a *Punch* editorial noted, since only about 14.73 per cent of applicants secured admission into the few Nigerian universities, the establishment of private universities became “a normal and commendable supply response to a huge and growing demand for university education.”⁸⁵

With the establishment of three private universities, the total number of universities in Nigeria climbed to forty-five in 2000 with a total student enrolment of about 526,780. This number was huge but the pressure for expansion remained. For instance, out of the 550,399 candidates that applied for admission to all the universities in 1999/2000, only 60,718 secured admission (11.0%).⁸⁶ States from the South accounted for the highest number of applicants and admission while those in the North accounted for the lowest.⁸⁷ That the South maintained its lead in university enrolment in spite of their bigger population showed that the quota system had failed to address the educational disparity. Besides, the fact that the demand for university training remained high despite graduate unemployment occasioned by economic downturn demonstrated the importance Nigerians attached to university education both as a means to an end and as an end in itself. According to Y. Lebeau,

Even if the university as a direct passport to becoming an elite in the country is no longer a reality ... higher education as a pre-requisite to social climbing is an ideology that is still widely supported in Nigeria.⁸⁸

This was (and is) the most formidable driving force behind the demand for university education.

Towards a Renewed Commitment to Educational Expansion

The late 1990s were a remarkable period in the country's history as well as university education. World Bank's rethinking on investment in university education coincided with Nigeria's return to democracy to open up a new chapter in university expansion. The reduction in university funding since 1986 was largely due to the IMF condition for SAP and the World Bank reports that had encouraged Africans to reduce funding for higher education. This advice was driven by the conviction that public investment in universities brought meagre returns compared to investment in primary and secondary schools. This advice influenced the federal government's drastic reduction of grants to universities. However, the bank eventually realized that this economic analysis was both narrow and misleading. In its 2000 report, the bank affirmed that the prevailing "traditional economic arguments are based on a limited understanding of what higher education institutions contribute."⁸⁹ It emphasized the importance of educated people as "economic and social entrepreneurs" who are needed in "creating an environment in which economic development is possible."⁹⁰ That need was acute in developing countries, especially in Africa because

Demographic change, income growth, urbanization, and the growing economic importance of knowledge and skills have combined to ensure that, in most developing countries, higher education is no longer a small cultural enterprise for the elite. Rather, it has become vital to nearly every nation's plans for development.⁹¹

Having accorded high priority to higher education, the World Bank encouraged governments around the world to invest in higher education. This is because, as Malcolm Gills, president of Rice University, affirmed, “Today, more than ever before in human history, the wealth – or poverty – of nations depends on the quality of higher education. Those with a larger repertoire of skills and a greater capacity for learning can look forward to lifetimes of unprecedented economic fulfillment.”⁹² Gills further stressed that the poorly educated would face hard times in the coming decades.⁹³ In support of renewed attention to higher education, the bank’s president, James D. Wolfensohn declared that “it is impossible to have a complete education system without appropriate and strong higher education system.” For him,

You have to have centers of excellence and learning and training if you are going to advance the issue of poverty and development in developing countries ... the key is ... higher education, not just on the technological side, but to create people with enough wisdom to be able to use it.⁹⁴

Training people with “enough wisdom” to champion economic development had been one of the major goals of Nigeria’s massification program since 1960. Poor policy formulation and execution, coupled with geo-ethnic politics and economic meltdown compromised that goal, as university facilities failed to accommodate rising demand. The World Bank’s recognition of the critical importance of higher education and call for expansion thus became a renewed slogan for the revitalization of Nigeria’s university education. It was a slogan that gathered momentum as Nigeria returned to a democratic form of government in 1999 after seven years of military dictatorship.

The sudden death of Abacha on 8 June 1998 and his replacement by Abubakar marked a turning point in the history of the country and university education. Abubakar successfully calmed the heated North/South tension by lifting the ban on political activities and successfully returning the country to democratic governance in 1999, led by a southerner and former military head of state, Obasanjo. Also, Abubakar lifted the ban on ASUU in 1998. Until its ban in 1996 by Abacha regime, ASUU was

in the forefront of the call for better funding of universities to ensure high standards and provide adequate facilities to accommodate increasing demand. Shortly after lifting the ban on ASUU, it commenced negotiations with the new civilian government for better “salaries, wages and other conditions of service in the university system.”⁹⁵ Though the government and ASUU signed an agreement on these three issues on 25 May 1999, the government’s negotiating team promised to negotiate other aspects of university problems. The agreement was “intended to be an interim palliative measure to enhance the income of academics, without prejudice to a comprehensive negotiation at a future date.”⁹⁶ It only adjusted allowances without covering other aspects of university funding.

A comprehensive negotiation between ASUU and the federal government took place in 2000. The agenda for negotiation was arranged in order of importance with the funding of universities at the top, followed by basic salary, university autonomy, academic freedom, and other matters.⁹⁷ Negotiation between government and ASUU teams began on 28 August 2000, and by 11 September 2000 they reached an agreement.⁹⁸ The agreement was comprehensive. It addressed the contentious issues of funding, basic salary, university autonomy, and academic freedom. It provided specific funds for recurrent and capital expenditure, as well as restoration and stabilization funds. It also included a clause providing for the subvention of state universities by the federal government. It contained a provision whereby the federal and state governments would allocate to education a minimum of 26 per cent of their annual budgets, subject to an upward review beginning in 2003. In addition, it agreed that half of the 26 per cent annual budget allocation would be allocated to the universities. Finally, it provided for the restructuring of NUC and JAMB with additional admission requirements to be stipulated by the senate of each university.⁹⁹

The 2000 ASUU agreement with the federal government aimed at reversing “the decay in the universities, in order to reposition them for greater responsibilities in national development ... the restoration of Nigerian universities through immediate massive and sustained financial intervention [and] a vast improvement in the living and learning conditions of university students.”¹⁰⁰ It aimed to stabilize and restore universities, enhance opportunities for university education, halt brain drain, and promote high standards. In his speech at the CVC annual seminar in 2000, President

Obasanjo reiterated the federal government's commitment to honour the August agreement and expand university education when he declared, "If we must join the league of developed nations, we must expand access to twelve times the present [university] size in the next decade."¹⁰¹ By implication, the president envisaged the enrolment of about 5 million students in the universities by 2010. To make that possible, the communiqué at the end of the seminar declared: "Open access based on the principle of social demand for university places, remains the best option for providing entry to university education."¹⁰²

These pronouncements reflect the country's' postcolonial pursuit of expansion, democratization, and liberalization of opportunities for university education not only to train high-level personnel for economic and technological development but also to promote national unity and cohesion. In addition, they demonstrate the awareness of government and other education stakeholders of the place of highly educated Nigerians in the twenty-first century knowledge-driven world. Fulfilling these promises in the midst of economic decline, ethnic clashes, official corruption, and regional tension constituted the major challenge of university education between 2000 and 2008. It is a challenge that must be met in order to achieve the country's postcolonial goal of using university education to promote economic development and nation-building. As Julius A. Okojie, executive secretary National Universities Commission puts it,

To realize the vision of becoming one of the top 20 economies in the world by 2020AD, Nigeria must produce world class manpower, possible only through world class tertiary institutions, with world class physical infrastructure, world class instructional facilities and, above all, world class human capacity to impart knowledge, conduct research, publish the outcomes and administer/run the institutions properly.¹⁰³