



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

by Ogechi Emmanuel Anyanwu

ISBN 978-1-55238-580-7

THIS BOOK IS AN OPEN ACCESS E-BOOK. It is an electronic version of a book that can be purchased in physical form through any bookseller or on-line retailer, or from our distributors. Please support this open access publication by requesting that your university purchase a print copy of this book, or by purchasing a copy yourself. If you have any questions, please contact us at ucpress@ucalgary.ca

Cover Art: The artwork on the cover of this book is not open access and falls under traditional copyright provisions; it cannot be reproduced in any way without written permission of the artists and their agents. The cover can be displayed as a complete cover image for the purposes of publicizing this work, but the artwork cannot be extracted from the context of the cover of this specific work without breaching the artist's copyright.

COPYRIGHT NOTICE: This open-access work is published under a Creative Commons licence.

This means that you are free to copy, distribute, display or perform the work as long as you clearly attribute the work to its authors and publisher, that you do not use this work for any commercial gain in any form, and that you in no way alter, transform, or build on the work outside of its use in normal academic scholarship without our express permission. If you want to reuse or distribute the work, you must inform its new audience of the licence terms of this work. For more information, see details of the Creative Commons licence at: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>

UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU MAY:

- read and store this document free of charge;
- distribute it for personal use free of charge;
- print sections of the work for personal use;
- read or perform parts of the work in a context where no financial transactions take place.

UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU MAY NOT:

- gain financially from the work in any way;
- sell the work or seek monies in relation to the distribution of the work;
- use the work in any commercial activity of any kind;
- profit a third party indirectly via use or distribution of the work;
- distribute in or through a commercial body (with the exception of academic usage within educational institutions such as schools and universities);
- reproduce, distribute, or store the cover image outside of its function as a cover of this work;
- alter or build on the work outside of normal academic scholarship.

Conclusion

Colonial Origins

Overwhelming demand for university education and limited opportunities typified the higher educational scene in twentieth-century Nigeria. The British colonial educational policy did not aim to promote nation-building or socio-economic development of Nigeria. From 1948 when the first degree-awarding institution in Nigeria, the University College of Ibadan (UCI), was established, until 1960, the British upheld an elitist admission policy at the college. Many qualified Nigerians thereby lost the chance to receive higher education training at the college. Only very few who had the means travelled to Europe, North America and Australia to obtain university degrees. As an ivory tower devoted to educating the country's future leaders, UCI fulfilled the British educational vision for Nigeria; colonial authorities were thus consistently reluctant to expand higher education facilities and opportunities.

Nationalist struggle for educational expansion began in the 1950s. Then, dissatisfied with the elitist British educational practices, some highly educated Nigerians led a campaign against UCI and demanded changes in its enrolment and curriculum policies to satisfy high demand and lay the foundation for nation-building after independence. The exclusive control of all levels of education by either the missionaries or colonial government ended when two constitutional changes empowered Nigerians to legislate

on education. The Macpherson Constitution (created in 1951) granted regional legislatures the power to legislate on primary and secondary school education. In prompt exercise of its new legislative power, the two regions in the South, the Western and Eastern Regions, declared universal primary free education in 1952 and 1953 respectively. These steps underscored the importance that the South attached to the expansion of educational opportunities, an importance depicted by S.O. Awokoya as “a national emergency, second only to war.”¹ The predominantly Muslim North, a region educationally disadvantaged due to religious, geographical, and political factors, was rather slow in pushing for expansion. Consequently, the educational gap between the North and South widened, and, as the country moved towards independence, it became a source of disunity. As this work has demonstrated, it was largely due to their desire to promote nation-building that successive postcolonial governments embraced policies aimed at equal opportunity, educational expansion, and the controversial quota system (affirmative action).

Educational development in Nigeria took a remarkable turn in 1954 when the Lyttleton Constitution granted the regions legislative power over higher education matters, prompting the three regions to contemplate establishing universities. Although the regions independently pursued their education policies without central coordination, the scheduled independence of Nigeria, agreed upon at the 1957 London Constitutional Conference, meant that the three regions would be merged into one country. Educational concerns immediately assumed a national dimension. With the dire shortages of high-level personnel and the regional disparity in educational attainment, the need for higher education reforms became compelling. However, while nationalists called for educational reform, no study had been conducted to assess the country’s educational needs. When the Carnegie Corporation of New York, which had previously advocated the expansion of education in British colonies, particularly in Nigeria, offered to sponsor a study on Nigeria’s higher education needs, the national and regional governments enthusiastically accepted the proposal. Driven by the politics of the Cold War and decolonization, the Carnegie Corporation hoped that pushing for a reform of the British higher education system was vital, not only in winning the Cold War, but also in America’s future involvement in the emerging African nations, beginning with Nigeria.

This book has demonstrated that the mutual understanding of higher educational reforms reached by the departing colonial officials, the Carnegie Corporation, and emerging Nigerian leaders led to the setting up of the Commission on Post-Secondary and Higher Education in Nigeria (the Ashby Commission) in 1959. The timing was significant. The Ashby Commission was appointed on the eve of independence when the role of university graduates in the process of national development had become imperative. In addition, the commission was set up when the North had realized the importance of Western education largely due to an uncomfortable prospect of southern domination of the country's top policy-making positions. Thus, Nigeria's new leaders reformed the university system to help fulfill a new mission. As Okojie, the executive secretary of the NUC stated,

It is through education that the human resource capacity of a nation is developed, harnessed and deployed for nation building. Simply put, without education, we have no society or future as a nation.²

The 1960s

Following the report of the Ashby Commission that called for 'massive' expansion of university education, the federal and regional governments realigned university education policies to build a modern nation at independence in 1960. This study has revealed that the implementation of the Ashby recommendations marked a turning point in the development of higher education, particularly in the 1960s. During that period, the federal and regional governments expanded the opportunities for university education in order to train the human resources for economic development and engaged university education in a conscious attempt to integrate Nigeria's pluralistic society. Consequently, the federal government approved the establishment of four universities, at Nsukka, Zaria, Ife, and Lagos, between 1960 and 1962, and expanded the university curriculum to include courses in African studies, commerce and business administration,

teaching, engineering, medicine and veterinary science, agriculture, law, and extension services.

The federal government underscored the importance of enhanced access to universities, particularly in science and technology courses, when it increased the Ashby Commission's projection of 7,500 students to 10,000 students.³ It also insisted that "7,580 should be taking courses in pure and applied sciences in view of the shortage of qualified Nigerians in those fields of study."⁴ By establishing more universities and projecting higher enrolment in sciences, the federal government demonstrated its belief that training the work force in the universities was a vital component of national development. The emphasis on science courses reflects the trend of thinking in the 1960s, when many political elites and scholars believed that the wonders of the Western world derived from the sciences. Therefore, to sustain independence as well as to justify itself to Nigerians, the government sought to train Nigerians in diverse fields to help in transforming the economy. The emphasis on science subjects was a radical departure from the British concept of university education, which the Ashby report described as "too inflexible and too academic to meet national needs."⁵ Thus, the pursuit of diversity, modeled after the American land-grant colleges, coupled with the federal and regional awarding of scholarships and external financial support, greatly increased student enrolment from 939 in 1959 (excluding about 1,000 who were studying overseas) to 9,695 in 1969 (excluding enrolment in UNN).⁶

Even though top government officials, policy-makers, and other proponents of change emphasized applied sciences and vocational subjects as in America's land-grant colleges, the actual implementation of the project, with the exception of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, did not reflect this emphasis. Unlike UNN, which admitted candidates with GCE Ordinary Level certificates, other universities still followed the British pattern, insisting on Advanced Level. Only a few sixth form schools were available to prepare candidates for 'A' Level examinations. Because the cost of expanding these schools to prepare enough candidates for university education was enormous, there were shortages of candidates, especially for science courses, including those in applied sciences. Besides, fewer candidates demanded courses in the sciences, compared to those in the humanities, law, and liberal arts. The retention of the sixth form was

largely responsible for this. In fact, six years after the publication of the Ashby Commission report, its chair, Eric Ashby, regretted the decision to retain the sixth form. According to Ashby, “The consequences are already unfortunate: a valuable opportunity to provide flexibility in the educational system has been lost, and one university [UNN] has found it advisable to circumvent the rigidities of the British pattern of schooling by admitting students at O level.”⁷

By upholding even geographical location of universities to all the regions, the federal government sought to promote national unity through the provision of equal educational opportunity to all Nigerians. Yet, rivalries between the North and the South undermined government’s efforts. A notable example was the call by the vice-chancellor of Ahmadu Bello University, Ishaya Audu, and other lecturers in the institution in 1969 to scrap the inter-regional scholarships awarded to poor students under the *Indigent Students Scheme*. Their opposition was simply because the scheme benefited candidates from the South, who maintained higher enrolment in all Nigerian universities.⁸ Instead of helping to unite the country, regional universities became the axis of bitter inter-regional rivalries. Animosities intensified when the Eastern Region decided to separate from the rest of the country, resulting in the Nigerian Civil War (1967–70). The war exemplified the lack of national unity in Nigeria. After the war, the president, Yakubu Gowon, adopted a centralized approach to governance in his administration’s determination to promote national unity and reconciliation, a posture largely shaped by the recommendations of the Dina Committee and the Curriculum Conference in 1968 and 1969 respectively. Federal management of university expansion likewise characterized the postwar government’s social policies.

Post-Civil War Nation-Building

Official attempts to increase access to university education regardless of class, ethnicity, gender, or creed manifest themselves in the 1970s and 1980s with the award of regional and federal scholarships to indigent students, the equitable geographical location and expansion of university facilities, the introduction of free education and the quota system, and the

establishment of federal regulatory and admission agencies such as the National Universities Commission (NUC) and the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board. Some of these policies were either ill-conceived or poorly implemented. They, in fact, mirrored larger problems in Nigeria's pluralistic society. More consequential were the efforts by military regimes of 1966–79 and 1983–99 at pursuing centralization of university education policies aimed at fostering a sense of national unity and promoting socio-economic development. The implementation of these policies had unintended consequences. Not only did they compromise the sustainable expansion of universities but they also threatened to diminish, if not wipe out, the collective consciousness of Nigerians that mass university education originally sought to affirm.

It was in search of greater national unity after the bitter experience of the Nigerian civil war that Gowon embraced the notion of “fairer spread of higher education facilities” by locating five new universities (established in 1975) in the educationally disadvantaged states, mostly in the north. This policy sought to promote the understanding that “there can only be true unity where educational opportunities and resultant facilities, amenities and benefits are evenly distributed.”⁹ The sudden oil wealth of 1973, occasioned by the Yom Kippur War, swayed the Gowon's regime to pursue university expansion confidently. In 1970, Gowon's regime committed itself to building “a land of bright and full opportunities for all its citizens” by providing education not only for its own sake as a means of developing an individual's full potentials but also to prepare Nigerians for specific tasks and skills needed to transform the country. Oil became a major contributor to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) beginning in 1973. The country's buoyant oil revenue provided the basis for huge increases in government expenditures intended to expand infrastructure and non-oil productive capacity.

Amid the euphoria of the oil price boom, Gowon outlined grand plans to expand virtually all sectors of the economy in order to facilitate economic development. The expansion of the productive base of the economy simultaneously required the production of skilled labour to manage the expanding economy. Educating Nigerians, especially in the sciences, became central to fulfilling Gowon's plans and greatly influenced the federal government's deliberate pursuit of a 60:40 science/humanities

ratio in university admission. Nevertheless, despite the government's determination to promote science education, students in the arts and social sciences predominated in all the universities, largely because the government failed to pay attention to the teaching and funding of science education at the secondary-school level.

Gowon's search for a common inter-regional educational policy led him to grant statutory powers to the NUC and to convene a seminar on national educational policy in 1973. While the NUC became an instrument in maintaining central control of universities, the national seminar provided the blueprint for the implementation of an ambitious educational program such as free education, the geographical distribution of educational facilities, the abolition of the British sixth form, and the introduction of the American-style 6-3-3-4 system of education. What influenced these changes were recommendations of the Curriculum Conference of 1969, the UNESCO report of 1972, and increased Nigerian interest in the American system of education. Furthermore, to remove the bottlenecks that impeded access to the universities as well as to promote national unity, the Obasanjo regime (1976-79) further centralized university admission by setting up the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB) in 1978, introduced a free university education policy, and adopted 'O' Level certificates as the minimum entry requirements to all universities. Due to the federal government's policies during the second attempt at expansion, the university education system witnessed an accelerated growth. Student population increased from 9,695 in 1969 to 57,742 in 1979, while the number of universities increased from five to thirteen.

After thirteen years of military dictatorship in Nigeria, a civilian government headed by Shehu Shagari came to power in 1979. Aided by the 1979/81 oil windfall, Shagari continued the expansion of universities in response to public demand. Notwithstanding the collapse of crude oil prices in the world market in 1981/82, the federal government borrowed from external financial institutions in order to finance its ambitious social programs, including free education and university expansion. It established seven universities of science and technology between 1981 and 1983. The location of the new federal universities in Bauchi, Gongola, Niger, Imo, Ogun, Benue, and Ondo states reflected the federal government's sensitivity to states without universities, an attempt to 'democratize' university facilities

in the country. These universities were designed as specialized institutions meant to meet Nigeria's growing needs for scientific and technological developments. Yet, the massive corruption among government officials and the mismanagement of the economy affected not just the economy but also sustainable expansion of university education.

Eager to close the educational gap between the North and the South, the Shagari regime introduced the quota system (affirmative action) in university admissions in 1981. From the 1950s to the 1970s, both the British and the southerners had objected to implementing a quota system in university admission. While the British rejected it because of their insistence on merit and high academic standards, the southerners feared that it would halt their educational advancement. However, by 1981 Shagari believed that the policy was vital in facilitating national unity. Of the four criteria for securing university admission under the new quota system, the Educational Disadvantaged criterion, which allocated 20 per cent of admissions into the federal universities to students from the twelve educationally disadvantaged states (ten from the North), was the most contentious. By all accounts, the introduction of the quota system represented a flawed solution to closing the educational gap between the South and the North. As the data on university enrolment reveal, enrolment of northerners in universities remained significantly low in comparison with southerners. Although the policy sought to reduce tension that educational disparities generated between the two areas, it achieved the opposite effect. Perceiving the policy as a form of discrimination favouring the under-represented states, the 'advantaged' states, mostly in the South, were exasperated. Faced with the increasing number of their qualified indigenes who were denied admission into federal universities partly due to the new quota policy, state governors in the South moved swiftly to establish their own institutions. Backed, of course, by the 1979 constitution that empowered states to own universities, eight states established universities between 1981 and 1983, even when their financial capabilities declined sharply due to the fall in oil revenue.

The short period of civilian rule from 1979 to 1983 witnessed rapid expansion of university education. The number of universities increased from thirteen to fifty-three; and student enrolment rose from 57,742 to 116,822. Yet, the economic depression of 1982/83, occasioned by the decline in oil revenue and aggravated by official corruption and mismanagement

of the economy, forced the Shagari regime to reduce the government's social expenditure and attempted to impose higher fees for public services, including university education. Although the Shagari regime ended in a military coup in December 1983, the military administrations that ruled Nigeria between 1983 and 1990 implemented the policy initiated by Shagari in 1983. This study has shown that official reaction to the economic meltdown of 1983 shaped the rationalization policy instituted by the Buhari and Babangida administrations from 1983 to 1999. During this period, economic recovery overshadowed the goal of national integration and development through liberal social policies.

Setbacks in Expansion

One of the most potentially significant steps in the push for mass university education was the creation of the National Open University (NOU) in 1983. NOU conceptually was at the heart of education for all. It sought to put university education within the reach of all Nigerians, regardless of age or location. Poor communication infrastructure, however, delayed the successful commencement of studies. Lacking the financial resources to address the problems, the Buhari regime disbanded NOU in 1984, just a few months after he came to office. In this same year, Buhari also abolished the twenty-six private universities that had emerged under questionable circumstances in 1983. The swiftness with which the federal government promulgated the decrees that shut down these universities underscores how policy decisions were often rooted not in thoughtful considerations but in hysteria. It provides a window into the problems of Nigeria itself that made Chinua Achebe to liken the country as "a child. Gifted, enormously talented, prodigiously endowed and incredibly wayward."¹⁰ Engaging the private sector in providing higher education would have afforded the country a viable option to expand educational opportunities. The idea of private ownership of universities that Buhari overlooked in 1984 ultimately became a welcome initiative in 1998 when the Abubakar government issued licenses to three private universities. Along with NOU, which was resuscitated in 2001, private university education has remained a common feature of the country's educational scene since 2000.

Buhari's austerity measure gave way to the IMF-sponsored Structural Adjustment Program introduced by Ibrahim Babangida (1985–93) to revamp the economy. SAP implied a reduction in the government's social expenditures. The federal government reintroduced fees in universities; reduced the grants allocated to universities, and required them to generate income to supplement government grants. This was the thrust of the rationalization policy. Expansion contracted. Although student population increased from 116,822 in 1983 to 180,871 in 1990, the annual percentage increase dropped from 10.9 per cent in 1986 to 4.9 per cent in 1989/90. Worse still, as this study has demonstrated, the population increase without improvement in funding or the establishment of more universities or the maintenance of existing facilities resulted in overcrowding and deterioration in university facilities, a decline in academic quality, a brain drain, and the radicalization of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) in the 1980s and 1990s.

Nigeria's sudden increases in oil revenue following the Gulf War in 1990/91 seemed to have inspired Babangida to set up the Gray Longe Commission, aimed at articulating a proposal to guide the federal government's long-term sustainable support of universities. The commission, among other things, recommended that government should phase out the 20 per cent admission quota allocated to candidates from the disadvantaged states and provide 80 per cent of the capital and recurrent financial needs of the universities. Babangida rejected these proposals. Notwithstanding the failure of the quota system to close the educational gap between the North and the South, the federal government's refusal to phase it out shows its stubborn refusal to acknowledge reality. It also demonstrates that the quota system performed a political rather than an educational purpose for the ruling northern elite.

Rejecting the funding proposal even as the administration carried on with its corrupt practices and wasteful spending caused great disaffection within the university community. Demand by ASUU for adequate funding of universities and the resultant showdown with successive governments in Nigeria came to dominate the higher education scene throughout the 1990s. Frequent boycotts of classes by ASUU to press for their demands disrupted academic activities in all universities, compelling Abacha's government to proscribe the union in 1996. Deprived of funds to expand their facilities,

many universities set up satellite campuses around the country to expand access and generate revenue to meet their financial obligations. By all standards, the satellite campuses made a mockery of higher education since they operated under questionable circumstances with inadequate learning facilities. The total student population of 526,780 in the year 2000 was a remarkable increase in access to university education, yet only less than 20 per cent of the qualified and aspiring candidates secured admission each year due to the lack of available spaces.¹¹ The expansion of university facilities did not keep pace with increase in student population. As universities admitted students beyond their capacity to absorb them, the result was overcrowding. Data from the University of Ibadan show that “whereas student enrolment was 9,176 in the 1982/83 session, it had risen by about 100% to 18,228 by the 1998/99 session without any corresponding expansion in facilities.”¹²

Recent Trends

By 1999, “Nigeria emerged from the more than three decades of political instability and military dictatorship with its once-proud university in tatters.”¹³ The new civilian government under President Obasanjo believed that “in the knowledge economy of the twenty-first century, human capital contributes up to 60% of the wealth of nations,” and therefore insisted that “The key instrument for our development lies ... in education, especially tertiary education.”¹⁴ Renewed emphasis on university expansion led to major developments in the education system since 1999. Not only is it outside the parameters of this study to attempt a historical account of these events, but it is also imprudent for historical studies to focus on current issues. Yet no history text on Nigeria that ignores the accelerated and astonishing changes in the country’s higher educational scene since 2000 can claim completeness.

The proliferation of universities, the struggle for funding, and the resultant instability in universities are some of the conspicuous trends in the country’s higher educational scene during the first decade of the twenty-first century. By 2008, the number of universities stood at 93. While the federal and state governments respectively owned 27 and 32

of these universities, 34 were private institutions. Only 9 out of 34 private universities were located in North, meaning that 11 out of the 19 states in the North had no private universities.¹⁵ This, no doubt, has the potential of widening the educational gap between the North and the South. Even with a total student population of 1,096,312, only 150,000 out of over a million candidates who apply annually for admission into universities secured spots.¹⁶ Taking advantage of candidates who are desperate to obtain higher education, many profit-motivated and criminally minded persons have established universities without approval. Since 2000, universities of questionable legal status “have mushroomed across Nigeria.”¹⁷ Although the NUC embarked on a crusade to identify and close these universities, their existence underscored the limited opportunities that characterized university education since 1948.

If Nigeria hopes to realize its ambition to become one of the top twenty world economies by 2020, it has to provide adequate higher education facilities and opportunities for training a workforce capable of meeting the challenges of global competition. Given the inadequate facilities in Nigerian universities, that prospect seem “entirely delusional,” as Dan Agbese of *Newswatch* affirmed.¹⁸ Harnessing its abundant human capital as other industrialized countries do stands between Nigeria and economic development. During his visit to some Nigerian universities in 2001, MacArthur Foundation president, Jonathan Fanton, came away with two distinct impressions of Nigeria:

the people I met with ... were truly inspiring. The deep reservoir of human talent is there. But the conditions are clearly not equal to the potential of the people: under-maintained buildings, empty library shelves, over-crowded classrooms, science labs without modern equipment.¹⁹

Nothing much has changed since Fanton made his assessment in 2001. ASUU’s insistence on better funding of universities led to frequent strikes for most of the subsequent years, disrupting academic activities in universities. ASUU’s four-month strike (June–October 2009) ended when the federal government made a commitment to progressively attain “UNESCO’s prescription that a minimum of 26 per cent of the annual budget should

be allocated to education” by 2020.²⁰ That remains to be seen. Troubled by the incidence of malpractices and irregularities in the conduct of JAMB’s annual conduct of the University Entrance Examination (UME), most universities have instituted post-UMEs, which threaten the legitimacy of JAMB. Since JAMB has failed to accomplish what it was established to do, i.e., ease access to university education, its abrogation is only a matter of time.

While public universities enroll 96.6 per cent of university students, the 34 private universities contribute only 3.4 per cent.²¹ Private universities can only make significant contributions to educational expansion and human capital development if they address what Okebukola, the former executive secretary of the NUC, called their “high fee regime” and “aristocratic network.”²² Even so, Okebukola, like other stakeholders, must recognize that, unless government plays an active role in university education, as many advanced countries did at various periods in their history, crushing demand and limited opportunities will continue to defer the country’s dream of becoming an industrial power. Blind obedience to the IMF/World Bank’s one-size-fits-all prescription of both reducing subsidies to education and pursuing privatization is a recipe for failure. Although the involvement of the private sector is a welcome development, they alone cannot meet the demand for university education. Unless government takes investment in higher education as a high order political business and holds university administrators accountable for the funds allocated to improve the quantity and quality of education, Nigeria may lose the critical human capital needed to maximize its developmental potentials in the twenty-first century.

Holding the university managers accountable is as critical as allocating adequate funds. In that regard, efforts by Ikedi Ohakim, the governor of Imo State, to investigate top university administrators at Imo State University is a refreshing development in the search for the soul of university education. Ohakim constituted a panel in 2008, headed by Nnamdi Asika, to investigate, among other things, the award of contracts in the university. In its report, released in 2009, the panel indicted, among other persons, the vice-chancellor, I.C. Okonkwo for various offences.²³ Okonkwo appeared before the panel in November 2008 and claimed that he was receiving only ₦57.5 million as a monthly subvention, whereas the actual sum, according to the panel, was ₦113 million. The panel found him liable of

corruption, gross mismanagement of funds, and questionable practices. Okonkwo was immediately retired and was asked to refund ₦55 million to the university.²⁴ Adequate funding of universities while instilling financial discipline, as Okonkwo's case illustrates, may be a model (if done without political considerations) in overhauling the battered university system. This is crucial because, as Ray Ekpū cautioned, "If we don't rescue education, we can't rescue anything, not the economy, not democracy, not development, not our values."²⁵