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## Private Universities in Nigeria: Their Emergence, Proliferation, Significance and Funding

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### **Abstract:**

*The Nigerian public university education system has faced challenges in recent years, affecting the timely graduation of many students. The smaller number of universities, their insufficient enrolment spaces and frequent strikes by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) have been greatly responsible for the problem. This has led to a shift in attitudes towards public universities, with parents and students increasingly patronizing private universities over them. This, in turn, has led to the proliferation of the said private universities. However, many students and parents cannot afford private universities due to high tuition fees since the institutions have to fund all their programmes and pay staff salaries and other administrative costs, which amount to a lot of expenses. This has led to a question of whether the Federal Government could partner with private universities to fund them, even if partially. This present study, therefore, argues that, given their usefulness, private universities should be encouraged and supported by the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund), which was established by the Nigerian government to support public tertiary institutions in the country.*

**Keywords:** Public universities, private universities in Nigeria, strikes in public universities, funding, tuition fees, Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund)

### **1. Introduction**

Education is often considered the key to a successful life. In Nigeria, the demand for higher education has been on the rise in recent years. However, the available public universities cannot cater for the increasing number of university admission-seeking candidates. There is also the problem of frequent strikes by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU). As a result of these, students are turning towards private institutions of higher learning to fulfill their academic aspirations. Consequently, private universities in Nigeria have also seen a significant surge in their numbers over the past few years. These institutions require a significant amount of funds to sustain themselves and provide the desired quality education to their students. This, too, has left private universities with no choice but to demand high tuition fees from their students. The question then arises: Can there be complementary funding for private universities in Nigeria?

This article is built on the understanding that the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund) is not meant to play a role in financing private universities; the fund was established by the federal government to provide supplementary funding for critical infrastructure and academic development projects in public tertiary institutions. Its mandate and jurisdiction are limited to public tertiary institutions, including universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education. Thus, private universities are not eligible for the funds as of now as they are privately owned and operated establishments that do not receive government funding.) However, private universities can explore other financing options, such as loans, grants, donations, and partnerships with corporate organizations. This article explores these various financing options available to private universities, highlights the financing challenges faced by private universities in Nigeria and suggests

possible solutions to overcome them. With this knowledge, readers will be better equipped to understand the financial dynamics involved in running a private university in Nigeria.

## 2. Brief History of University Education in Nigeria

The history of University Education in Nigeria began with the Eliot Commission of 1943, which then led to the establishment of the University College, Ibadan. At the time it was established as an affiliate of the University of London in 1948. The University College Ibadan, acronymized UCL, suffered a number of problems in its early years, not least among them being poor staffing, low enrolment, high dropout rate, and inadequate funding. In 1959, the Ashby Commission was set up by the federal government to advise it on the needs of the country's higher education sector (Abubakar Rasheed, 2020).

In 1960, the Eastern region established its own University – The University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Two years later, in 1962, the Western region and Northern region established the University of Ife, which later became Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife and Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, respectively. The Federal Government then established the University of Lagos and made the University College Ibadan a full-fledged university in the same year. Hence, the University of Ibadan and the University of Lagos became the country's first Federal Universities. The other Universities, however, remained regional. In 1970, the Midwestern Region joined the Northern, Eastern and Western Regions in the club of university-owning regions by establishing their own, the University of Benin (Jake Otonko, 2012).

The first set of universities in Nigeria, popularly called the First Generation Universities, were thus born.

Seven more Universities were established by the Federal Government during the period of the Third National Development Plan (1975-1980). They were the Universities of Port-Harcourt, Calabar, Jos, Ilorin, Maiduguri, Sokoto and Bayero University Kano and were generally designated as the Second-generation Universities).

In the 1980-1990 period, the federal government saw the establishment of Nigeria's third-generation universities in Owerri, Makurdi, Yola, Akure, and Bauchi. State Universities were also created in Lagos, Imo, Ondo, Oyo, Cross-River and Akwa-Ibom (Abubakar Rasheed, 2020). More Universities were established down to the fourth generation Universities and the National Open University of Nigeria of the present day. However, as the following table shows, other than the federal and state universities, there are privately owned universities, hence the popular designation "Private Universities."

S/N	Year of Establishment	No. of Federal Universities	No. of State Universities	No. of Private Universities
1	1960 - 1969	5	00	00
2	1970 - 1979	9	00	00
3	1980 -1989	14	1	00
4	1990 - 1999	4	5	3
5	2000 - 2009	3	20	35
6	2010 - 2019	18	10	43
7	2020 – August 2022	6	9	33
		59	46	114

Table 1: Universities in Nigeria by Season of Establishment and Ownership

Source: (Mogaji, E., 2019)

## 3. Advent and Proliferation of Private Universities in Nigeria

From the above table, it is obvious that there is an increasing proliferation of private universities. The emergence of these private universities came to be when the federal government of Nigeria decided to encourage private participation in the establishment of universities as a means of expanding access to higher education in the country. This decision was motivated by the need to address the high demand for university education, which was not being met by the few existing public universities. An added advantage to this is that the establishment of private universities has created job opportunities for both academic and non-academic staff and opportunities for private sector investment in higher education.

Since the first private university in Nigeria (Igbinedion University was founded in 1999 by Gabriel Igbinedion (Ekpe, 2023), there has been a significant increase in the number of private universities in the country. The need for private sector intervention in university education is crucial, given the high number of unadmitted applicants to Nigerian universities annually. For instance, in 2020 alone, the Joint Admission Matriculation Board (JAMB) (insert year of the publication) saw 1,415,501 applications for university admissions, with only 37.2 percent being admitted to Nigerian universities. As stated earlier, even though public universities have long dominated Nigeria's higher education system, it became increasingly evident in the 1990s that they were unable to handle the burden of admissions. Less than 50,000 applicants, or 20 percent, of the approximately 250,000 who applied for admission in 1990, were ultimately admitted (State the source). Nearly 300,000 people sought admission in 1992, and 50,000 of them (17%) were accepted. 400,000 people applied in 1994 for admission into Nigerian universities, fewer than 50,000 (13%).

Thus, access to higher education and the system's inability to accommodate the number of applicants to higher education institutions represented a major concern. This led to the licensing of private universities as a means of increasing access, which is now one of the most popular. During the administration of President Olusegun Obasanjo in 1999, the private sector began to offer higher education. The National Universities Commission was given the authority to accept applications from serious applicants to establish private universities in the country and authenticate their facilities. Thus, three private universities, Igbinedion University in Okada, Edo State; Babcock University in Ileshan Remo, Ogun

State; and Madonna University in Okija, Anambra State, were licensed. These were the first private universities in Nigeria (Iruonagbe C.T et al., 2015).

However, the rise of private universities in Nigeria has raised concerns about the high cost of tuition fees, which may limit access to higher education for low-income students. This is so because private universities in Nigeria are typically owned by private individuals or organizations who invest their own funds to establish and maintain them. Owners of such establishments explain that universities have to be more expensive than public universities because they rely on tuition fees to finance their operations. The cost implication for students notwithstanding, the establishment of private universities in Nigeria has significantly impacted the country's higher education sector, expanding access to higher education and bringing innovation and competition, leading to improvements in the quality of education provided by both public and private universities. In order to harmonize them, the government of Nigeria has taken steps to establish regulatory bodies such as the National Universities Commission (NUC), which is responsible for the accreditation and regulation of all universities in Nigeria, both public and private.

#### 4. Factors that Led to the Establishment of Private Universities in Nigeria

As Ige (2013) would say, "Nothing could have come at the right time than the re-emergence of private universities in Nigeria in 1999." In this regard, there are several factors that led to the establishment of private universities in Nigeria. Some of these factors include:

- *Inadequate capacity in public universities:* Prior to the establishment of private universities, public universities in Nigeria were the only option for students seeking higher education. However, the limited capacity of public universities meant that many qualified students were unable to gain admission. This created a demand for alternative options, which private universities were able to provide (Okoro & Okoro, 2014).
- *Ethical issues in the public universities:* In Nigeria today, public universities have been experiencing many ethical challenges like sexual harassment, examination malpractice, forgery of academic certificates, plagiarism, truancy, indolence, cultism, stealing, robbery, cheating, etc., all the ethical challenges are attributed to inadequate supervision, poor staff motivation, incessant strikes and stress and stressors. The problem, therefore, affects the quality of education provided; the causes of the ethical challenges, therefore, influenced individuals, societies, associations and religious bodies to think of establishing their own private universities, which will be effectively supervised. (Ogundele, M. O. et al, 2021)
- *Need for specialized programs:* Public universities in Nigeria tend to offer a broad range of programs but may not have the resources or expertise to provide specialized programs in areas such as business, technology, and the arts. Private universities, on the other hand, are able to focus on specific areas of study and provide more specialized programs. (Bouchrika, I., 2023).
- *Government policy:* The Nigerian government has played a role in the establishment of private universities by granting licenses to private individuals and organizations to establish universities. This policy was aimed at expanding access to quality higher education and increasing the number of university graduates in the country (Okoro & Okoro, 2014).
- *Business opportunities:* Establishing a private university can be a lucrative business opportunity for investors. Private universities charge higher tuition fees than public universities and, as such, can generate significant revenue. This has attracted entrepreneurs and investors to the education sector in Nigeria.
- *Globalization and internationalization:* The globalization of higher education has led to the establishment of private universities in Nigeria with international partnerships and collaborations. Private universities have been able to attract foreign students and faculty and provide opportunities for Nigerian students to study abroad.

In summary, the establishment of private universities in Nigeria was driven by a combination of factors, including the need to expand access to higher education, provide specialized programs, government policy, business opportunities, and globalization. These factors have contributed to the growth and development of the Nigerian educational system, providing students with more options and opportunities for higher education.

#### 5. Performance of Private Universities in Nigeria

Universities' performance in Nigeria is influenced by a number of factors, including but not limited to finance, infrastructure, instructional effectiveness, research output, and student satisfaction. Accordingly, Nigeria's higher education market has been significantly impacted by the advent of private universities. For instance, students who are unable to gain entrance into the few openings in public universities have increased access to higher education. Additionally, they have increased innovation and competition in the industry, which has improved the standard of education offered by both public and private colleges. Thus, private universities typically offer high-quality education. They frequently offer excellent facilities, knowledgeable instructors, and a more student-centred teaching style. Among others, for example, Veritas University, Covenant University, Babcock University, Afe Babalola University, and Bowen University are a few of Nigeria's finest private universities. These institutions are renowned for their excellent academic standards, instruction, and research output. However, it is also important to note that not all private universities in Nigeria perform at the same level. Some private universities may face financial challenges or have inadequate facilities, which can affect their overall performance.

Along the line, some private colleges in Nigeria were alleged to have been providing subpar education and operating without sufficient regulatory monitoring. Moreover, there were concerns regarding the regulation and accreditation of these institutions. However, by establishing regulatory authorities like the National Universities

Commission (NUC), which is in charge of accrediting and regulating all institutions in Nigeria, both public and private, the government of Nigeria has taken action to address these problems.

## 6. Global Ranking of Nigerian Universities

There are several global university rankings that provide rankings for universities around the world, including Nigerian private universities. However, it is important to note that not all Nigerian private universities may be included in these rankings, and the rankings may vary depending on the criteria used by the ranking organizations. Some of the global university rankings that include Nigerian private universities are:

### 6.1. QS World University Rankings

This ranking organization provides an annual list of the top universities in the world based on a range of criteria, including academic reputation, employer reputation, faculty-student ratio, citations per faculty, and international faculty and student ratios. As of 2022, no Nigerian private university was ranked in the top 1000 (OCallaghan, 2023).

### 6.2. Times Higher Education World University Rankings

This ranking organization provides an annual list of the top universities in the world based on a range of criteria, including teaching, research, citations, international outlook, and industry income. As of 2021, no Nigerian private university was ranked in the top 1000.

### 6.3. Webometrics Ranking of World Universities

This ranking organization provides a list of the top universities in the world based on their web presence and impact. As of 2022, Covenant University is the highest-ranked Nigerian private university, occupying the 2193<sup>rd</sup> position globally. It is worth noting that university rankings are not the only measure of the quality of education provided by a university. Other factors, such as the quality of teaching, research output, student satisfaction, and employability of graduates, should also be considered when evaluating the performance of Nigerian private universities.

### 6.4. Financing Private Universities in Nigeria

From the foregoing, it is clear that in the Nigerian academic system, students and parents have the option to choose between training and educating their children in either public or private higher institutions such as universities, polytechnics or mono-technics. The so-called public academic institutions refer to those that are funded by either the federal or state government resources (Ogbaga, C. C., et al., 2022). However, financing private universities in Nigeria typically involves a combination of funding sources and strategies (Ugwulali et al., 2023). Typically, private universities in Nigeria are funded through tuition, boarding and other fees paid by students (Adesoji & Olaniyi, 2022). Additionally, funds and other revenue streams such as endowments, grants, donations, and partnerships play a significant part in funding (Daarego et al., 2023).

Thus, private universities charge tuition fees as their primary source of revenue. These fees are usually significantly higher than in public Nigerian universities and vary depending on the institution and programs of study. Moreover, they rely on individuals, alumni, corporations, and philanthropic organizations for endowments and donations. Partnerships are also often formed with corporate organizations, government agencies, and international institutions. These collaborations can provide financial support through research grants, sponsorship of academic programs, infrastructure development, and other forms of support (Daarego et al., 2023). Private universities also actively seek research grants from government agencies, foundations, and international funding bodies.

Some private universities engage in income-generating activities such as offering executive education programs, professional courses, vocational training, consultancy services, and entrepreneurship.

The funds and revenues raised and generated cover expenses such as faculty salaries, infrastructure development, administrative costs, and student services. Funds are also used for scholarships, research grants, infrastructure projects, and faculty development. Research grants can help finance research projects, equipment purchases, and faculty development while also enhancing the institution's academic reputation (Ogbaga, C. C., et al., 2022).

Improving the funding of private universities in Nigeria can be achieved through various strategies and initiatives. The government can provide financial incentives and support in the form of tax breaks, grants for infrastructure development, research funding, and scholarship programs specifically targeting private university students. Ogbaga et al. (2022) have argued that collaborative efforts between private universities and the government can result in mutually beneficial partnerships. This kind of partnership can be extended to industries and corporate organizations to include research collaborations, sponsorship of academic programs, and infrastructure development. Industries may also provide internship opportunities and job placement for students (Odeji K., et al. 2023). However, this should not stop the active pursuit of grants from government agencies, international organizations, and research funding bodies. Further fund diversification can be achieved by offering vocational training, executive education programs, professional courses, and consultancy services. Income generated from these sources can supplement the core funding and support university operations.

## 7. Does TETFund Help Finance Private Universities in Nigeria?

Adediji et al. (2023) have affirmed, "Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund) is a main funding source to some Nigerian Federal and State Universities." The designation TETFund refers to an intervention agency established to give supplementary aid to all levels of public tertiary institutions with the main objective of using funding alongside project

management for the rehabilitation, renovation and consolidation of tertiary education in Nigeria. The Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund) was originally established as Education Trust Fund (ETF) by Act No. 7 of 1993 as amended by Act No. 40 of 1998 (now repealed and replaced with Tertiary Education Trust Fund Act 2011). The source from which it funds such tertiary institutions is tax paid from the profits of registered companies in Nigeria, namely their two percent education tax (Adediji et al., 2023).

There is, however, the question begging an answer, viz. "Does TETFund help finance Private Universities in Nigeria?" The answer to this is in the negative: TETFund does not finance private universities in Nigeria. As the description above shows, TETFund's mandate is specifically focused on providing financial support to public tertiary institutions, including universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education. In contrast, however, private universities in Nigeria rely on their own funding sources, such as tuition fees, endowments, donations, industry partnerships, and other revenue-generating activities. They are responsible for managing their finances independently and are not eligible to receive direct funding from TETFund. Additionally, private universities do not directly benefit from TETFund. However, they may still seek other funding sources, such as partnerships with corporate organizations, philanthropic donations, research grants, and alumni contributions, as discussed earlier. These avenues can help private universities enhance their financial sustainability and support their academic programs, infrastructure development, and student scholarships.

### 8. Should TETFund Be Amended to Fund Private Universities?

The discussion so far has shown that the emergence and proliferation of private universities occurred during the last few decades. To be precise, it gained a favourable environment only since the introduction of democratic government. (Iruonagbe et al. 2015). However, as earlier indicated, TETFund is younger than democracy itself. Accordingly, it is possible that if private universities were trending, perhaps they would have constituted part of the list of its beneficiaries. Thus, one may argue that since private universities are making quality education accessible to the teeming youths who are hardly accommodated by the public universities in Nigeria (Victor and Chukwuma, 2014), there is a need for TETFund to be amended to fund private universities. Indeed, it has been argued that one major challenge faced by private universities is funding (Ugwulali et al., 2023). This intervention would go a long way to ameliorate the financial burden suffered by parents and sponsors of students in private universities (Ige, 2023) and make quality education more accessible to many indigent youths in Nigeria. The decision to amend TETFund to include private universities as beneficiaries is a matter of policy and permissible changes to such policy. However, this may depend on various factors and perspectives. In this connection, the following are some considerations that may be related to amending TETFund to fund private universities:

- *Equity and Access:* Including private universities in TETFund could be seen as a step towards ensuring equity and access to funding for all tertiary institutions. It would provide financial support to private universities, potentially reducing the resource disparity between public and private institutions.
- *Quality Assurance:* Extending TETFund to private universities may come with the requirement for quality assurance measures. Similar to public universities, private universities would have to meet certain standards in terms of infrastructure, faculty qualifications, curriculum, and student support services. This can help maintain and enhance the overall quality of education in private universities.
- *Sustainability and Resource Allocation:* Expanding TETFund to include private universities would require a substantial increase in funding to accommodate the additional beneficiaries. It would be crucial to ensure that public universities, which typically serve a larger number of students, do not face a significant reduction in funding as a result.
- *Autonomy and Regulation:* Including private universities in TETFund could raise concerns regarding the autonomy and independence of these institutions. Private universities often value their autonomy in decision-making, and government funding may come with increased regulations and reporting requirements. Ige (2023) has substantiated the argument that one of the reasons why young Nigerians and their parents or sponsors prefer private universities is that they do not go on strike. Thus, striking a balance between financial support and preserving the autonomy of private universities would be important.
- *Alternatives for Private University Funding:* It has been established that private universities in Nigeria have traditionally relied on their own revenue sources, such as tuition fees, donations, and industry partnerships, making it quite expensive to be afforded by many (Victor and Chukwuma, 2014). Exploring alternative funding models specific to private universities, such as tax incentives or targeted grants, could be considered instead of amending TETFund
- Ultimately, the decision to amend TETFund to fund private universities would require careful evaluation of the potential benefits, challenges, and implications for both public and private higher education sectors. It would involve policy discussions, consultations with stakeholders, and considerations of the broader goals and priorities of the education system in Nigeria. By and large, however, and as Victor and Chukwuma (2014) would assert, the benefits would far outweigh the challenges.

### 9. Way Forward (Fund Raising Opportunities and Recommendations)

As shown from the foregoing, the importance of adequate finance in running the education enterprise successfully cannot be overemphasized. Nigeria emphatically states that adequate financing is one of the three pillars on which the success of education stands (National Policy on Education, 2014: 62). The National Policy on Education also openly acknowledges the inability of the government alone to successfully handle education provision. It has, therefore, democratized education provision and made the private sector a principal partner.

From the above submissions, it is noted that private universities play a very important role in education provision in Nigeria; they came up in Nigeria in recent times to answer the government's call. The governments and the private sector, however, do not jointly build and run schools, but each builds and runs its own schools to meet basic minimum requirements. Thus, both the three tiers of government and the private sector experience inadequate funds to run their educational institutions successfully. Government (Federal, state and local government) have very broad and diversified sources of revenue, and their major challenge regarding education tends to be in the management of available resources. It has better chances of effective funding. The private universities, which are at most times Mission-owned, and a few times private organizations- and individuals- owned, are the ones that need to work harder for ways of improving funds generation. In order to improve its revenue generation, the private universities need to take the following to heart:

The government should perform their education finance role. Governments across the world are known for funding the educational provision for their citizens – both those in public schools and those in private institutions. In this light, government subventions and grants are usually given to private schools across the world, including the world's developed nations (Eresimadu, 1996). Since education has the overriding objective of making citizens useful to themselves, their immediate community, and the larger society, government funding of education is not limited to its own institutions but also includes private institutions, especially universities.

Other avenues for funding of private universities include the following:

- Endowment funds: Private universities should be looking for persons and organizations ready to support their university programs and activities. There are usually persons and organizations, both locally and internationally, who give great gifts towards university projects or activities. Engaging in activities that make the universities known or visible far and wide goes a long way in promoting this. Private universities should, in an effort to be visible, engage in inter-university competitions, essays, projects, sports, exchange programs and the like.
- Promotion of Alumni activities: Former students of the universities can be encouraged to be so appreciative of their alma mater that they will contribute significantly to projects and activities of the institution. When universities, which people have graduated from, regularly get in touch with their alumni and endeavor to celebrate their victories with them and invite them to share the glory, good moments or joys of the university, such persons usually give back to the university. They would contribute to funding projects or activities and even work to make the university more popular.
- Engagement in social responsibility activities: Private universities should engage in activities that show their goodwill for their communities by rendering free services that solve some thorny problems of society. A simple pedestrian bridge, a scholarship to a needy or deserving group, research into a knotty issue of the community, and the like will do a good salesman's job for the university.
- Establishment of viable businesses: Businesses that could generate reasonable funds for running universities would include agricultural businesses for feeding their students, research consultancy for government and other organizations and even establishing radio stations for commercial purposes. Enterprises of this nature generate funds for the university, make the university better known around the world, and become places of training for their students. This will be possible with the engagement of aggressive salesmen.
- Deliberate government patronage of private universities in their areas of comparative advantage: Private universities are characterized by the private rugged business drive for success in their endeavors as opposed to the usual relaxed government attitude to such issues. Projects or works such as research activities on key needs of the land should, in this regard, be given to private universities to ensure their finances. A good number of countries are known to practice this. The Federal Government of Nigeria (National Policy on Education, 2014) has posited that without the contribution of the private sector, education provision in Nigeria will not be a success. The government, therefore, has to support the private sector through such patronage.
- Engagement of International Development Partners: Institutions engaged in development across the countries of the world, such as UNO, UNESCO, and UNICEF, as well as agencies of countries in bilateral agreements with Nigeria, such as Korean International Cooperation Agency and Japan International Cooperation Agency, United States Aid Agency and European Union agency and British equivalent are always disposed to give some worthwhile assistance in education to Nigerian universities both public and private. Private universities have approached the agencies with useful proposals for collaboration. This collaboration will result in improved financing of private universities
- and conferment of honorary degrees to members of the society who have made outstanding contributions to society and launched some university projects. The honor that goes with the gathering of a large number of people provides an occasion for popularizing the university's objectives, raising sponsors for university projects and making people become admirers of the university. This goes a long way in improving the fortunes of the university as more funds, goodwill and favor could follow. Private universities should take advantage of it while watching to avoid controversial ones.

## 10. Deliberate Private Universities' Lobby for Government Subvention

The private universities should form pressure groups such as associations to move the federal government to start regular funds allocation to private universities. Private universities in even the capitalist nations of the world enjoy regular financial support from their governments. As stated by Enesator and Nduka (1998), the Colonial Government in Nigeria equally supported private schools with regular subventions. The Nigeran government should be made to understand that the private universities are supporting it by educating Nigerians; it should, therefore, offer them some financial assistance.

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