

Elitism and its Impact on the Expansion of University Education in Nigeria. A Philosophical Perspective

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Abstract

Since the establishment of a University College at Ibadan, Nigeria in 1948, there has been a rapid expansion of universities across the country. The elites are seen to have played some prominent roles in the expansion of these universities. The paper identifies the elite group as dominated by the politicians, the military, the economic groups, the pressure groups and even public officials. The paper x-rays the impact of the elite class in the expansion process and proffers solutions where possible.

Key Words: Elitism, the university, pressure groups.

Introduction

The Nigerian National Policy on Education (2004) defines education as the process that helps to develop the whole being, physically, mentally, morally, politically, socially and technologically to enable individuals function in any environment in which they may find themselves.

This national blueprint also states the aims of university education amongst others to include:

1. To contribute to national development through high-level relevant manpower training;
2. To develop the intellectual capability of individuals to understand and appreciate their local environment;
3. To promote and encourage scholarship and community service;
4. To promote national and international understanding and interaction.

The aims of university education as enunciated above are in tandem with the philosophy of Nigerian education which states that education is an instrument “par excellence” for effecting national development (National Policy on Education, 2004). In a multi-cultural nation created out of political expediency and other economic interests, education is used as a tool to foster national unity. The impression that universities are agents for promoting national unity must have influenced the establishment of at least one university in each state of the federation by the federal government of Nigeria. The state governments are not found wanting in this new quest as most of the states have state universities established in their domains.

In the last decade, the establishment of an increasing number of private faith-based and other privately owned universities have added impetus to the expansion of university education in Nigeria.

Undoubtedly, there are wide differences in income, prestige and political power among different categories of people living in the same society, such that those recognized as ‘superior individuals’ are formed into groups, endowed with appropriate powers and honours. They are often times referred to as the elites.

Eliot (1980) opines that “those groups, formed of individuals apt for powers of government and administration, will direct the public life of the nation, the individuals composing them will be spoken of as leaders. He further categorizes these leaders. According to him, “There will be groups concerned with art and groups concerned with science and groups concerned with philosophy and groups consisting of men of action and these groups are what we call elites”.

Ekpu (1989) describes the elite as the prime movers of their environments and adds that their recruitment into this special cult is affected principally in two ways: by birth and inheritance as well as by talent and personal achievements.

Conceptual Clarification

The paper would at this stage give conceptual clarification of some key words used in the discourse of the expansion of university education in Nigeria. These include: the elite, the university and the pressure groups.

Concept of Elitism

MeLean and McMillan (2009) define elitism as the belief that government ought in principles, always and everywhere confined to elites. Mills (1957) describes the elite as “those political, economic, and military circles, which as an intricate set of overlapping small but dominant groups share decision having at least national consequences”. He goes further to state that “insofar as national events are decided, the power elite are those who decide them”.

Doob (2013) states that the power elite members recognize other members' mutual exalted position in society, Hence they accept one another, understand one another, marry one another, tend to work and to think, if not together at least alike. He equally observes that it is a well-regulated existence where education plays a critical role".

Doob further holds that youthful upper-class members attend prominent preparatory schools, which only open doors to such elite universities ... But also to the universities' highly exclusive clubs. He goes on to state that the men who receive the education necessary for elitist privilege obtain the background and contacts that allow them to enter the main branches of the elite club.

Boltmore (1965) shares the views of Doob (2013) when he describes the 'power elite' as a group which, having come to power with the support or acquiescence of the particular classes in the population, maintains itself in power chiefly by virtue of being an organized minority confronting the unorganized majority. Aron (1967) also shares the opinion that the ruling minority directs "the economy, making decisions about investment and wage differentials. It commands the military and controls the media, education and public welfare".

According to Aron (1967) the unity of the ruling elite stems from the fact that "politicians, trade union leaders, public officials, generals and managers, all belong to one party and are part of an authoritarian organization". The outcome of this, according to him, is that the mass of the population is left without any means of defence against the elite.

Concept of the University

Charlton (1951) describes universities as "associations of scholars and students, teachers and taught, whose ideal is to make the life of learning and science possible, whose greatest function is the advancement of learning". The American Heritage Dictionary (2011) states that the word 'university' must have been coined from a French word "universite" or a Medieval Latin word "universitas" meaning guild, society, body of men, or from Latin meaning whole, totality or universe, The American Heritage Dictionary defines the university as an institution of higher education having authority to award bachelors' and higher degrees, usually having research facilities.

According to Biobaku (1985) university education must have emerged from Europe at a time, perhaps, when Christianity offered the world a common religion and Latin a common language and both formed the basis of a common international culture. Biobaku also states that the principal tasks of the universities then were the traditional ones of teaching and research, with a view to providing educated and well-informed men for the services of the church and the state.

Some university teachers hold the view that a university is the pursuit of truth in its various forms. This is not completely in tandem with the view that to educate involves at least the intentional transmission of such a worthwhile pursuit (Peters, 1974). According to Peters, this is because many scholars and researchers might regard the instruction of others as extraneous to their concept of a "university". Griffiths in Archambult (1972), also holds the opinion that the pursuit of learning is, then, an activity having value as an end in itself. But because its objects are distinguished from others by their universality, they can be sought only in a certain kind of environment. That environment he opines must be one in which there is time to pursue that activity; for the universal objects of the highest excellence are those that demand most systematic attention, and are practically inexhaustible ... That environment, according to him, is one which has been traditionally provided by universities.

The argument put forward by Griffiths is that a centre of learning should provide the environment in which its products should acquire a general culture, where possible, so far as it concerns universal objects of learning from those who are deeply immersed in some aspect of culture different from theirs. The idea being mooted here is that the university should train students who are marked as leaders and who will have most to contribute to the solution of our social, moral and political problems (Nowell-Smith, 1958). He stresses that the academic training given in universities should develop not special but general skills, creative "imagination, practical wisdom, and logical thought".

One principal function of universities is research. There is no doubt that the teaching function and the interaction between teachers and students generate research, yet there is need for universities to undertake long term research which, in developed economies, engenders the expansion of knowledge. This explains why Audu (1985) opines "if we are to respond to human concern for our people and cope with conditions peculiar to our situation, we have no choice but to create locally the conditions under which certain forms of research can be carried out and to undertake a great part of the research ourselves".

Aderalegbe (1969), in his presentation of the summary of the Report of the Nigerian National Curriculum Conference, also posited that through research, dialogue and criticism, the university must provide the country with an intellectual climate necessary for the survival of our civilization. That through their research, basic or

applied, whether in the immediate or distant future, should fulfill their modernization role with their impact on agriculture, industry, trade and business, (which are) conditions of living and human relationships.

On the issue of who should teach in the universities the conference felt that the Nigerian academician should be a man of many parts – a teacher, a researcher, a public relations man, and a good citizen, who must always be in the vanguard of the search for solutions to our real, immediate and practical problems.

In an answer to the question, “Is every human activity then to find a niche at the university?” Rousseau (1957) answers “Yes, any human concern is worthy of research, and if it affects basic, widely branching complex human needs, it also merits teaching, while bricklaying and architecture both serve the basic human need for shelter, the former is relatively simple and repetitive, the latter complex and infinitely variable. In consequence, bricklaying can be better learnt in a trade school and on the job”. “It is the higher knowledge which requires the considerations of meanings rather than facts that is essentially the concern of the university”. The implication of Rousseau’s contribution is that “nothing that concerns man is alien to a university”.

Concept of Interest/Pressure Groups

Encyclopedia Britannica (2014) defines interest group, also called, pressure group, as any association of individuals or organisation, usually formally organized that, on the basis of one or more share concerns, attempts to influence public policy on its favour. It goes further to state that the common goals and sources of interest groups obscure, however, the fact they vary widely in their form and lobbying strategies both within and across political systems. Howbeit it is important to note that interest groups are outgrowth of the parochial interests that exist in most societies.

Mckenzie (1969) states that unlike political parties, interest groups do not aim to take power in the sense of forming a government. Rather, they seek to influence political parties and the various departments of state.

Haralambos and Heald (1984) state that interest groups exert their influence in a number of ways. Firstly, by contributions to the funds of political parties. Secondly, by illegal payments to elected representatives and state officials. Thirdly, by appealing to public opinion by ways of effective public campaigns. Fourthly, by various forms of civil disobedience; and fifthly, by the provision of expertise.

Dowse and Hughes (1972) opine that interest groups constitute a continuous mandate for the government and without them no government could conceivably be regarded as democratic. They describe political parties and interest groups as cornerstones of democracy. This is because they are avenues by which representative government is “possible in large, complex societies. (Through these organizations a multitude of interests are articulated and mobilized to participate in the running of society” (Dowse and Hughes, 1972). They see politics as a process of competition and bargaining, and government as a process of mediation and compromise. Thus, according to them, power is dispersed among a variety of groups, and as a result, all major interests in society are able to have some say in the conduct of affairs.

University Expansion in Nigeria

The introduction of Federal Constitution in 1954 placed higher education on the concurrent legislative list. Thus, three regional governments of North, East and West cashed in on this and established regional universities at Zaria, Ife 1962 and Nsukka in 1960 as the first full-fledged university in Nigeria.

The University College, Ibadan also became a full-fledged university of Ibadan in 1962. Then the University of Lagos was founded in 1962 and these five universities formed the nucleus of federal universities in Nigeria. By 1975, the Federal government took over the Mid West Institute of Technology which had converted to a University of Benin in 1972.

The establishment of seven universities which were to be sited in states where there were no federal universities at the time gave birth to seven new universities at Calabar (1973), Jos (1971), Maiduguri (1975), Ilorin (1977), Port Harcourt (1977) and Kano (1976).

Again, the 1979 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria placed university education on the Concurrent Legislative list, empowering state governments to establish their own universities. This gave rise to the establishment of eight state universities at Ekpoma (1980), Enugu (1980), Okigwe (1981), Port Harcourt (1981), Ado Ekiti (1982), Ago-Iwoye (1982), Badagry (1983) and Uyo (1984).

The Federal Government further established universities of Abuja (1988), Tafawa Balewa (1989), University of Technology, Akure (1989), Makurdi (1989), Yola (1989), Minna (1989), Owerri (1989). By 1989, Nigeria had a total of twenty federal universities and eight state universities.

According to National Universities Commission (NUC) bulletin published 7th July, 2014, the first private universities in Nigeria were those of Babcock, Ilishan Remo; Madonna, Okija; Igbinedion, Okada; all established in 1999. Since then the crescendo has been on the rise, with over 50 private universities as at 2015.

The state universities have also been on the increase. The latest entrants according to the NUC Bulletin (2014) are Akwa Ibom State University, Ikot Ikpaden (2010); Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rumuolumeni (2010); Bauchi State University, Gadau (2011); Northwest University, Kano (2012); the Technical University, Ibadan (2012) and Jigawa State University, Kafin Hausa (2013). The federal government further blazed a trail by establishing fourteen new universities at Lokoja, Lafia, Kashere, Wukari, Dutsin-Ma, Otuoke, all in 2011 and upgrading the Police Academy at Wudil, Kano to a university in 2012. Others were sited at Birnin-Kebbi, Gusau and Gashua, all in 2013. Petroleum Institute Effurun was also updated to a federal university of Petroleum Resources in 2007. According to NUC Bulletin (2014) the total number of universities in Nigeria stands above 130.

It is pertinent to note that political expediency has been employed in the geographical spread of these universities, and that recruitment of staff and students to these institutions reflect broad national base. The quest for the provision of intellectual leadership must have fuelled the spirit of competition among the different individuals, state governments and federal government in the expansion of universities in Nigeria.

Elite Impact in the Expansion Process

Some elites see the establishment of universities from the angle of their individual benefits. Others see it as a materialistic investment, which makes it a subject of competition among the power brokers in Nigeria. To the politicians, university education is a means of attracting votes and other forms of political support. They see the actual money spent to finance the university education in their geopolitical areas on the basis of if you have more universities sited in or more students enrolled from you constituency, then you attract a greater share of the federal or state 'cake'.

The different interest groups, parents and others feel that university education enhances the opportunities and status of the individual and that it does so for groups. They also share the common belief that university education tilts power and income distribution in favour of a group. This explains why the elites found among this pressure group lobby and intensity demand for sitting of universities in their communities.

Top government functionaries who by their own definition are among the elite group, oftentimes use their positions to ensure that new university campuses are located in places influenced by political expediency rather than demand. The establishment of Bendel State University, now Ambrose Ali University at Ekpoma, the home town of the former governor of Bendel State, Professor Ambrose Ali, "gives a lucid picture of how power brokers in Nigeria use their positions to influence the geographical distribution of institutions of higher learning in Nigeria (Nwogu, 2001).

Political elites also use their position to influence the appointment of Vice Chancellors and other key officers of our universities. Legal provisions of the land vest responsibilities for all appointments including that of Vice Chancellors in the University Council. Series of crises have beclouded this process, hence the political leadership at both federal and state levels, has now assumed direct responsibility for such appointments. The appointment of Vice Chancellors has in the process become politicized as other positions of chief executive of government owned parastatals.

Even the appointments of chancellors, Pro-chancellors and Registrars of Universities owned by government have political undertones. Sometimes the right calibers of educational administrators are side-tracked while party stalwarts and sycophants are appointed.

It may not be wrong to suggest that the children of the elite benefit most from the federal and state owned universities. A number of variables may be responsible for this assertion. The first is the fact that most educated parents are those occupying the best jobs which fetch some of the highest incomes. Secondly, the general cultural environment of the home may tend to favour the elite child at school. Thirdly, over representation of children from privileged homes at university level of education provided by the Nigerian state may have accounted for elite domination of the number of graduates turned out of our universities.

This explains why Foster (1972) opines that government intervention in education far from facilitating social equity and assisting the power groups, present arrangements are merely to perpetuate inequality and reinforce the occupational status of groups that are already among the 'haves'.

President Ibrahim Babangida in a lecture he delivered to the Oxford and Cambridge Club on March 17, 1989 had shared the views of Foster when he questioned the role of the elite in the educational development of Nigeria. He quipped:

How many new universities ... have been created essentially when all window dressing is removed, only because of bad and selfish advice of some persons seeking new 'empires' over which to preside? Was it optimal to spread so thinly our resources – with more going into replicating basic infrastructure on many campuses, and less to developing,

equipping, maintaining and manning excellent centres and facilities able to turn out more and better products – and thus more efficiently utilizing basic infrastructure?

The Oxford and Cambridge Club addressed by President Babangida was a gathering of a small elite group in Nigeria. Yet it is within this group, perhaps, that the power to establish more universities, to appoint Vice Chancellors, the power to recruit lecturers of different statuses and grades lie. It is within this group that government contracts for the building of the university infrastructure lie. It is also within this elite group that award of government bursaries and scholarships are released to their children and wards, all geared towards replicating the group and ensuring that the plum jobs are reserved for them on graduation.

The introduction of the private sector participation in the establishment of universities has not helped matters, but has rather escalated the production of the elite class. These private universities, no doubt provide specialized fields. Some of them are fitted with state of the art laboratories, halls of residence, classrooms, studios and in some cases, the best engineering and medical laboratories in the land. Some owned by the faith-based groups have very strong religious inclinations and discipline. Many of them are well funded. Nwangwu (2005) opines that when education is not adequately funded the foundations of such education are weak, consequently the products of such educational systems are generally weak.

Howbeit, a common feature of these private universities is high tuition and accommodation fees which mark them out as elitist universities where the children of the rich attend. This view is supported by Etuk (2005), who states that private universities charge high fees, which not many Nigerians can afford to pay

Critique

Public owned universities have not been adequately funded by federal and state governments. Most of the infrastructures in the older universities are decaying and our universities are characterized by capital flight as the best lecturers, doctors, engineers and environmentalists leave the shores of Nigeria for greener pastures abroad. Many university applicants are not provided placements as a result of ‘constrictions’ in our admission policies, such as carrying capacity regulations of National University Commission, reserved admission quotas for the children of the politicians. Even where students are matriculated, visible high handedness on the part of lecturers who sell marks for cash, cultism, examination malpractices and other vices, force many elite children to flee to neighbouring West African Universities.

Okigbo (1998) in a public lecture entitled crisis in the Temple decried the poor state in which our universities have been ‘turned from intellectual citadels to a purely political market place’. This scenario aptly describes the situations in which academics who occupy elitist positions in institutions of higher learning have “surrendered themselves to the superior wisdom of the ignorant” (Nduka, 1998). It is the opinion of Okigbo that our universities have progressively moved away from generating and defending knowledge into a “political arena where the administrators, that is heads of those institutions have become the centre, the alpha and omega”.

This agrees with the opinion of Achebe (1983) when he stated that the “problem with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership”. The leadership in our universities are the elites. Toyo (1993) listed the vices of ‘the leadership’ of our universities as corruption, admission irregularities, ethnicity, nepotism, tyranny and flagrant illegality, sloppy administration, sycophancy, degradation of scholarly colleagues and hostility to academic staff unions”.

These negative tendencies on the part of the elite university administrators in the public universities must have made parents heave a sigh of relief when private individuals were issued licenses to establish universities. So many reasons have been advanced for the growth of private universities in Nigeria. In addition to the vices pointed out by Toyo, others include inadequate learning/educational resources in public universities, loss of confidence by parents/guardians and students in public universities due to insecurity, cultism, incessant industrial actions etc – (Ayodele, 2011). Perhaps the need to expand access to match increasing demand for university education added a boost to arguments in favour of granting licenses to private entrepreneurs to establish universities.

On the contrary, the widely believed notion that private universities charge high fees seems to dim the expectations of Nigerians. There is a rider however, that monies charged in public universities in form of tuition fees are heavily subsidized by government. There is also the argument that these public universities apart from subventions from governments, accept gifts, endowments, consultancy fees and other business ventures which help them to make ends meet.

There are speculations that the growth of private universities in the country will encourage healthy competition between public and private universities, in terms of instructional delivery and other activities put in place for the production of quality graduates to drive the economy. Competition brings improved quality of education inputs

and outputs (Ibadin, Shofeyehe and Ilusanya, 2005). This, it is hoped will stabilize the cost of operation leading to more rational and efficient allocation of resources.

No matter how savoury the arguments put forward may sound, educationists are of the view that elitist universities in the private hands, widen the social gaps, thus bringing about a widening gap between the 'haves' and the 'have nots'. It is also feared that in the bid to make big profits, their elite proprietors may compromise quality on the altar of cost and quick returns recovery plans.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that Nigerians are witnessing a boom in university education demand in the country. The cost of meeting this demand is astronomical. This cost cannot be borne by government alone. Public-private partnership may provide the necessary panacea to solving some of the envisaged problems of university education in Nigeria. The elites have been identified as prime movers in the establishment and expansion of universities in Nigeria. It is also common knowledge that what the government hopes to achieve in their intervention in university expansion, sometimes, are limited. Hence, the need for galvanized efforts to establish, finance and administer high quality standard universities which must stand the test of time in ensuring that educational standards are not compromised.

Although private universities have contributed immensely to providing further choices for our teeming youths who apply for university placements, yet these 'elitist institutions' are said to have metamorphosed into profit-making ventures. Steps should be taken to ensure that standards laid down by the National Universities Commission (NUC), are maintained and that administration is not compromised, run mainly for profit, or academics undermined (Ehiamentor, 2005).

Recommendations

It is common knowledge that most of our public universities have come into being as a result of government initiatives. Such public universities are all financed from the public purse which is depleting by the day. The study recommends that university policies should be let in the hands of the governing councils of the universities. Unnecessary interference from the political elites in dictating what transpires in the public universities has turned them into 'political battle-grounds'.

Unnecessary duplication of faculties in government owned universities should be avoided. Certain faculties in designated universities should be strengthened to enable them serve as Centres of Excellence in particular fields of research.

In the area of research, little or no funds, are made available to scholars. Yet the government expects universities to make technological and scientific breakthrough as their counterparts in the developed economies. Widening the scope of research activities would help to broaden areas of knowledge as well as solve some of the most pressing problems of the country in the fields of technology, medicine, agriculture, education and so on. Federal and state governments are advised to pay more attention to research activities in our universities by providing money for academic researches.

Despite the high costs of building and operating universities, elites (individuals and government) are itching to establish more universities. Most of these agitations may be political or as in the case of private entrepreneurs, monetary reason. It is difficult to equip and maintain a university. Again, it is difficult to recruit high caliber personnel to man these new universities. The paper recommends that these new universities adhere strictly to the Minimum Academic Standard (MAS) as recommended by the National Universities Commission (NUC). This is to ensure that the minimum standards in facilities, materials, members and levels of academics are met before the universities are issued their operational licenses. This would no doubt provide necessary checks on unplanned and haphazard university education proliferation in Nigeria.

The universities cry out for funds. There are noticeable traces of abandoned projects dotting most campuses. Students study under distress situations and in some cases, government finds it difficult to pay staff salaries and spare a little fund for research grants. The country needs graduates in all fields. There is need for books written by Nigerians that are related to Nigerian conditions. The country needs specialists who can supervise multi-national industries in Nigeria. This can only be achieved through continuous research and experimentation. The study recommends that the elites should not only be interested in spreading university education to the nooks and crannies of Nigeria but include in their annual budgets sizeable amount that should promote research in our universities.

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