

# Politics and the Establishment of Public Universities in Nigeria: Implications for University Education

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## Abstract.

This paper examines the role politics has played in establishment of universities in Nigeria from the colonial era up to 2010 and the attendant implications of this for the development of university education. The result of the study, through critical analysis, reveals that politics contributed positively in the emergence of the premier university but was wrongly deployed in the creation of more universities. It also discovers that the political motives or interests that informed the expansion of universities created a yawning gap between the real needs in university education and the political expediency for the establishment of universities. Based on the findings, and as strategies or measures for new frontiers in university education in Nigeria, the paper recommends, among other things, that there should be consolidation of existing universities and that the establishment of universities be devoid of vested political interests or considerations.

**Keywords:** Politics, Interests, Expansion, Implications

## Introduction.

The influence of politics on any tier of education has always been a concern for many educators. It is established that one of the trends in modern education of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Europe was that the political influence of the nation-states on school systems correspondingly grew stronger (The New Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2002). The history of how nation-states use politics to develop their university educational systems is well documented in history books. This stems from the fact that although earliest universities were developed under the aegis of the church they became popular all over Europe as rulers and governments began to create them to satisfy the thirst for knowledge and with the belief that society would benefit from the scholarly expertise they generated (Wikipedia, Free, Encyclopaedia, 2013). Thus, governments' creation of universities for the purpose of gaining knowledge could only have portrayed the positive use of politics for the establishment of universities. In Nigeria, Kosemani (1982) observes that university education is a highly politicized issue. But whether the instrumentality of politics in the country has been positively used to drive the development of university education or not, particularly in the establishment of universities, is aptly a subject for historical investigation.

## Statement of the Problem.

When the Nigerian government takes some political steps in respect to issues in university education such steps likely become the major bane to achieving the desired progress in the university system. The problem therefore is that articulate political steps or practices, needed to positively drive university education, are lacking in Nigeria.

## Politics in the Establishment of the Premier University (1925-1948).

The introduction of university education in Nigeria is remotely traceable to the 1925 Memorandum on Education Policy in British Tropical Africa, which historically set the stage for a co-ordinated colonial government's involvement in the development of higher education in British Tropical Africa. The Memorandum made proposal for "the gradual building up of a complete school organization embracing all schools leading from the village school eventually to a University" (Kosemani and Okorosaye-Orubite, 1995). Nevertheless, this gradual build up was tied to the political dictates of British colonial officers.

However, nationalists' struggle was also known to be instrumental to the emergence of university education in Nigeria. Aminigo (2003) noted that during the process of decolonization, it was the instrument of politics in education that most nationalists used to gain popular support at the grassroots level. Therefore prior to political independence in Nigeria and other parts of Africa, the nationalists/political class moved aggressively for the establishment of functional university education in their territories or countries (Okoli, 2003). As such, by the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the establishment of a university was on the front burner of nationalists' demands and discussions between them and colonial officials in British West Africa. Although this initial exclusive African initiative for the demand for a university in the sub-region did not yield substantial result, but then the awareness for the need to have a university was created in the people through the activities of the nationalists.

According to Osoba & Fajana (1999), as a further recognition in principle of the legitimacy of the demands being made by the Nigerian people for the provision of appropriate higher educational facilities, two Commissions-the Asquith Commission and the Elliot Commission were set up by the colonial secretary, Oliver Stanley in 1943. Taiwo, (1986), notes that the recommendations of the Asquith commission were unanimous. They covered the place of universities and university colleges in the development of higher education. Key to the recommendations of the commission was that university should be established as soon as possible in areas not served by an existing university, the first step being the creation of University Colleges. Like the Asquith Commission, members of the Elliot Commission found themselves in unanimous agreement that the need for the extension of higher education and of university education in West Africa was urgent and that the time was ripe. However, the members were divided on the number and type of institutions to be established. Kosemani and Okorosaye-Orubite (1995) specifically note that this split went along political lines. The majority report (signed by the members of the conservative and the West Africans on the Commission) recommended the immediate establishment of three University Colleges in West Africa, to be sited in Ibadan, Nigeria; Achimota, Gold Coast (Ghana); and Sierra Leone. The minority report (signed by members of the Labour and Liberal parties) recommended the establishment of only one University at Ibadan, Nigeria. The intrigues of domestic party politics in Britain further reflected on the fate of what was to become the first university in Nigeria via the events that ensued. The General Report of the Elliot Commission was presented to the British Parliament (Conservative-controlled) in June 1945, and the majority report was accepted. However, in the July 1945 British general election, the Labour Party defeated the Conservatives, and Clement Atlee became Prime Minister. Arthur Creech Jones, one of the members of the Commission that had submitted the minority report, replaced Colonel Oliver Stanley as Secretary of State for the colonies. In this capacity, he reversed his predecessor's decision by accepting the minority report which recommended the establishment of a University College at Ibadan in 1948 (Fafunwa, 1971).

From the foregoing, it was evident that the turn in the political tide of the British home politics favoured the colonial establishment of a university in Nigeria other than in any other Anglo-phone West African country that was equally zealous to have a university at that period. But then, it should also be underscored that the advent of the first university in Nigeria was remotely as a result of the persistent political demands for a university in Nigeria by the Nationalists. Dike (1983) notes that without these constant agitations, it was doubtful if the colonial office would have acted at the time it did. Moreover, before the university became accepted by the Nigerian public, sequel to the resistance to imperial model that the university was subjected to in the early years of its existence, the nationalists had to mount pressures that eventually led to efforts towards what Nwideduh (2003) termed as the 'Nigerianization' of the university. Therefore, the pre-independence political class could have been said to have articulately employed politics for the dawn and right-footing of the premier Nigerian university.

### **Regional Politics and the Establishment of Regional Universities (1955-1972).**

Before we zero-in on the role of politics in the establishment of regional universities, it is incumbent that we succinctly recall a cardinal recommendation of the Report of the Commission on Post-School Certificate and Higher Education, otherwise known as the Ashby Commission report, as it affected post-colonial university education in Nigeria. This is necessary because, as Adesina (1988) observes, the advent of these regional or first generation universities was partly as a consequence of the 1959 Ashby Commission report. The Ashby Commission had, amongst other things, clearly recommended that "All universities in Nigeria should be national in outlook and general policy." (FRN, 1960:44). Therefore, it should have been imperative that the universities that were to be created following the recommendation of this Commission would have been really national in outlook but that was not the case. As a matter of fact, much more than that articulate proposal of the Ashby Commission, it was the interests and intrigues of regional politics that dominantly gave form and shape to the first set of post-colonial universities in Nigeria.

The creation of University of Nigeria, Nsukka was an exclusive affair of Dr. Nnandi Azikiwe and his Eastern Regional government. Indeed, Azikiwe pioneered the early years of this institution (Dike, 1988). The establishment of Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) was ab initio anchored on the religio-political traditions of Northern Nigeria because the delegation that was sent by the inter-university council for Higher Education Oversea (I.U.C) to advice on the scope of the proposed university particularly noted that: "the Northern Region has its own cultural traditions which distinguish it from the other regions; care for these traditions should be the main function of the (proposed) University" (Nduka, 1976:122). Again, the speech of Sir Ahmadu Bello, the then Northern Region Premier and after whom the university was named, betrayed the vested interest of the

region in the university when he stated during his installation as the first chancellor of the university that the institution must be founded on the heritage of the North (Adamu 2005). Equally, there is no better reference to the bearings of petty regional politics on the establishment of a university than in the case of University of Ife. According to Anuna (2008), the political background to the establishment of the University of Ife cannot be easily overlooked. The West and the Action Group wanted a regional university under their control because of the earlier decision of the East to do so. In this same vein, the fourth regional university in Nigeria, University of Benin, was established as a result of the Mid-West political demands rather than an act of deliberate planning (Dike 1983; Ukwu, 2002).

From the foregoing, the effects of regional influence of politics in the establishment of these afore-mentioned universities could only be consequential. This is in concurrence with the observations of Nwideduh in Nwideduh (2003) that the ethnic tendencies characteristic of Nigerian politicians significantly influenced their decisions to establish regional universities. Political leaders of the governments in these Regions—Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, Chief Obafemi Awolowo and Sir Ahmadu Bello were instrumental to the founding of these universities to enhance their political legitimacies in their Regions (Abernethy, 1969). The bottom-line being that in the era of regionalization, the demand among the Regions to acquire and established universities was borne out of vested ethno-political interests. It was the Regions that determined what kind of universities they wanted and where they were to be located. It was equally the political manifestations of each Region's determination not to be outdone and therefore dominated by the others that dictated the mode of operation for the regional universities (Aminigo, 1995). Thus, by implication, these universities before they were federalized, beginning from 1971, remained regional or sectional in their orientations (Kosemani and Okorosaye-Orubite, 1995). Aminu (1983) even notes that each of the regional universities consequently “developed into unassailable ethnic and cultural fortresses”. The aftermath of which was that these universities were, to adumbrate Okoli (2003:38), “turned into centres of ethnic tussle”. This was in sharp contrast to the very fundamental recommendation of the Ashby Commission that all universities to be established in the post-colonial Nigeria should be national in outlook, a development that consequently became the precursor to the evident ethnic interests that became visible in the governance of these universities even after they were eventually converted to Federal universities (Obadan, 2011). Aminu (1983) observes that, after the takeover of these regional universities, attempts at fostering a complete federal or national image in any of them have not succeeded. Thus, for all their current federal status, these universities retain much of their regional linkages (Ukwu, 2002).

### **Politics and the Establishment of Federal Universities (1975-2010).**

By 1972, the Third Development Plan (1975-80) of the Federal Republic of Nigeria proposed to establish four universities within the period. Consequently, in April 1975, the Federal Military Government announced the establishment of four universities. However, it was evident during the Gowon regime that the universities were not in actuality set up to address areas of national needs as enumerated in the Third National Development Plan (Aminigo, 1995). For one, there was no clear nexus between the universities so established and their contributions in the actualization of Third National Development Plan. Of course, historical evidences show that during those years of the Third Development Plan, government did not do enough to explore and exploit the resources of its universities for the purposes of attaining genuine development or national aspirations, as was proposed in the National Development Plan (Okoli, Uche & Nyewusira, 2011; Ujomu, 2005). Thus, the Gowon government's reason for linking the establishment of these universities to the Third National Development Plan was at best secondary because even the sites for the universities were decided based on one of the major concerns in the country which the Plan identified as “lopsidedness in the geographical distribution of educational facilities across the Nation” (Kosemani & Okorosaye-Orubite, 1995:148). Primarily therefore, the government covertly embarked on the geo-political distribution of university education under the pretext of the Third National Development Plan.

Furthermore, with the creation of nineteen states in the country in 1976 came the ambition for government to ensure that a Federal university was located in all the nineteen states (NUC Handbook, 2009). This consequently informed the birth and spread of Universities of Technology. While government admitted that these universities would focus on development of technologies for the country it did not lose sight or mince words to confirm to the public, through the then vice President Dr. Alex Ekweme, that government also used them to ensure the distribution and location of the universities along each geo-political States of the country (Kosemani and Okorosaye-Orubite, 1995). Evidently, the political desire of government in the Second Republic to ensure that the nineteen-state structure had Federal universities, in such a way that each State would benefit, became the common denominator for the universities that were established at that period (NUC Handbook, 2009). However,

government's ambition at this time to create a Federal university in every State was put on course but was not eventually realized.

At the demise of the Second Republic, the Federal Government, through the years of the military governments that followed, continued in the stream of the creation of new universities across the federation for the purposes of political satisfaction—a situation which Okoye (1992) acknowledges became worrisome to President Ibrahim Babangida to the point where the latter, during a lecture to members of Oxford-Cambridge Club in 1989, aptly asked: How many new universities or institutions have been created, essentially when all window dressing is removed, only because of bad and selfish advice of some persons seeking new 'empires' over to preside? This poser merely represents the smacks of selfish political predispositions that President Babangida would have noted as being responsible for the creation of universities that period.

With the return of civil rule in 1999, the Obasanjo administration established the Federal University of Petroleum Resources (FUPRE), Effurun in 2007. The political frenzy that surrounded the establishment of the FUPRE began to manifest when the Ya'ardua regime attempted to relocate the university to Kaduna State. This attempt was met with brick walls as it was vehemently opposed by the people of the Niger Delta region through students' protests, altercations from Niger Delta activists and threats from South-South Governors' Forum. Thus, Ojameruaye (2009:10) writes:

...the Governors of the South-South geo-political zone met in Asaba, Delta State to express their indignation over the purported movement of the University of Petroleum Resources from Effurun to Kaduna. At the end of their meeting the Governors threatened to withdraw from the amnesty deal of the Federal Government if the contentious issue was not resolved. It was after the Asaba meeting that the Presidency sent the Minister of State for the Niger Delta, Mr.Orubebe, to re-assure the Governors that the FG did not intend to relocate neither the PTI nor the FUPRE from Effurun to Kaduna as alleged.

By November 2010, the total number of Federal universities had come to 27 (FRN, 2010; Okojie, 2011). However, in December, 2010, the administration of President Goodluck Jonathan, without any known feasibility studies or prior planning, went ahead to pronounce another nine Federal universities into existence. Sequel to the creation of these nine universities by an executive fiat, as it seemed to be, because the National Assembly had not yet then passed any law to that effect, President Jonathan in a speech to delegates at the Peoples Democratic Party presidential primary election in Abuja, January 2010, said that his administration would ensure that every State gets a Federal university. (Nigeria School Blog, 2011). Thus, in a single swoop and quite unprecedented in the chronicles of university education in the country, the Jonathan government established twelve universities it said was for the remaining States without Federal universities. The politicization that beclouded the location of these set of universities made Ukachukwu Awuzie, then the President of Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), to remark that "government and President Jonathan were politicizing the issue of the locations of these new universities as if it was a constituency project" (Spur Magazine, 2011:1). Thus, government established twelve universities just to ensure that every State had a Federal university.

### **Politics and the Establishment of State Universities (1979-2010).**

The development of State universities was predicated on the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1979. The constitution which became operational by October 1<sup>st</sup> 1979 reversed the military government decree of 1971 by transferring higher education into the concurrent list. By this development, while the Federal government was establishing universities, it was another parallel development taking place in the States.

The spate of the spread of State-owned universities was astronomical during the Second Republic. Between October 1, 1979 and 1983 eight State-owned universities were established. The first of these State universities in Nigeria, the Rivers State Universities of Science and Technology, Port Harcourt, came into being when the State College of Science and Technology was converted to a university. The conversion of the college to a university was Melford Okoli's justification for his electoral success in 1979. Thereafter, States of the South-West embarked on the establishment of their own universities. Anuna (2008) observes that the South-West States of Lagos, Ondo and Ogun, which were States dominated by the defunct Unity Party of Nigeria, had to establish State universities because it would have been political suicide, had the government of these States not done so.

However, it is noteworthy that while the States in the Southern part of the country were in the free race for establishing universities in the 1980s, the North did not join their Southern counterparts. One reason that Baïke (2006) advances for this was that there were pockets of political resistance coming from those who were opposed

to the idea of State universities. However, much as this could have been a possible cause why the North did not, at that time, join their Southern compatriots in the establishment of State universities, it was also evident that the delay was not unconnected with the historical socio-political conservatism of the North to education matters and the gradual approach with which political leaders in the North handled the development of education in the region (Kosemani, 1982). To this end, the first State university to be established in the entire Northern geo-political landscape was in 1999 when the Kogi State University, Anyigba started. This was almost 19 years after the first State university was founded in the South. But then, the North has suddenly realized the politics associated with the creation of universities and thus all the States in the North are now in the rush to own universities, mostly in order to close the gap with their Southern counterparts.

As at 2010, there were 37 State universities in Nigeria (FRN, 2010; Okojie, 2011). Really, one cannot but further refer to the possible underlying political motives for the establishment of State universities. Aonyekakeyah (2010) submits that throughout the 80s and the 90s, it only became fashionable for every State to own a university for political considerations, just as Toye (2010) observes that (from newspaper reports of policy statements credited to various Governors and Commissioners of Education of States, about proposals to establish their own State universities, either through upgrading of their existing colleges of education or polytechnics) one feature common to all the sponsors of State universities is that they tend to see the existence of such institutions more as political venture and a status symbol.

Another clear pattern in the establishment of State universities for political esteem could be well established in the case of Kogi State where Abubakar Audu, as a sitting governor, established and christened the State university after himself. The university was only re-named after Kogi State by his successor and political opponent, Governor Abubakar Idris, when he was elected in 2003. The other form of political motive in the establishment of State universities can be identifiable in the way Governors not only proposed but eventually established such universities in their places of nativity irrespective of the difficulties in geographical topography of the universities, visibly to score political point (Adesina, 1988). A clear case of this was in Bayelsa State where Diepriye Alamieyesiegha established and located the Niger Delta University (NDU) at his home town. To this end, Ogbondah (2006:37) observes:

Governor D.S.P. Alamieyesiegha has established a State university known as Niger Delta University but it is located at the Governor's place, Amasoma, Wilberforce Island. This has political undertones. His place and people have to be favoured in the location of the university even with the difficult geographical terrain.

The scenario in the case of Governor Alamieyeigha was reminiscence of what Governor Sam Mbakwe did during the Second Republic, by initially establishing the Imo State University in Etititi, his remote home town (Anuna, 2008). Governor Ambrose Ali did same when he started Bendel State University (now Ambrose Ali University, Ekpoma) in his home town. According to Nwagwu, (2003), a study of the history behind the latter university reveals that it started on an erosion prone site simply because the then Governor, Ambrose Ali, wanted to site it in his home town. Similar examples existed around the States of the Federation.

All the preceding historical portrayals establish that political expedience or convenience was an overwhelming factor in the founding of State universities. This fact concurs with the assertion of Aliu (2005:26) that: "the history of state university (sic) in Nigeria is normally rooted on certain imperatives. The first, and the most important imperative, is political. State universities are set up to satisfy political motives."

### **Implications for the Expansion of Universities.**

It is established, from the information at the disposal of the above sub-sections of our discourse, that from pre to post independence Nigeria, politics was a formidable factor that determined the emergence of university education and the establishment of more universities in Nigeria. However, what can also be deduced is that while politics was positively explored for the emergence and initial repositioning of the earliest university in Nigeria, the role that it played in the subsequent expansion of universities mostly in post-independence period betrayed a lot of political interests that would not have augured well for the budding and development of the universities so established. From the investigations in the above sub-sections, it is discovered that by December, 2010 the total number of public universities in Nigeria has come to 73 (comprising 36 Federal and 37 State) universities. Apparently, while the Federal government was bent on geo-political balancing of Federal universities, the States and their Governors were engrossed in the political zests to have their own universities. This phenomenon no doubt had its attendant implications for the pattern of university expansion. The political preconceptions in the establishment of universities did not only lead to what has come to be termed as the proliferation of universities; they also tended to risk or sacrifice the establishment of quality universities on the altar of quantity. For one,

mere creation and increase of universities for political purposes would only harm university education. Alele-Williams in Babarinde (1994:33) corroborates this when she notes that:

The more proliferation of universities does not solve the problem of producing the needed manpower nor has it affected the attitude of our graduates to build the nation. Nigeria would appear to hold the record amongst developing nations for establishing the largest number of universities within the shortest possible period. The problems of ill-equipped, undeveloped, poorly staffed campuses are the direct consequences of setting up Universities for purely political reasons.

Nwabueze (1995: 109) also affirms this by admitting that:

The increase in the number of universities in Nigeria is one major cause of the trouble being experienced by the system. The trouble is not just in the absolute numbers, it lies perhaps even more in the pace at which the increase took place, which manifest sheer lack of planning. Universities just grew like mushroom. The number and the mushroom rate of increase have stretched the resources available for the purpose beyond the limits they can sustain. The inevitable result is decline, decay and crises.

Similarly, Aonyekakeyah (2010) specifically supports that much input of politics in the expansion of universities led to the miscalculated rush to have a university in every State in Nigeria, which in turn made these universities glorified institutions that have less reckoning of whatsoever a university stands for. The validity of this position is very plausible considering that no Nigerian university is ranked in the first 30 of the top 100 universities and colleges in Africa by 2010. (University Web Ranking, 2010).

The analysis here is not to say that there are too many universities in Nigeria considering the numbers of universities in some other developed or other developing nations. However, the pattern of expansion to more universities, occasioned by political dictates, is found to be defective because not a few of these universities, particularly those that came into existence in post-war years of Nigeria, were established with the benefits of feasibility studies or proper planning or to ensure accessibility to adequate basic infrastructure of building, equipment, library or compliments of enough staff strength. This fact can hardly be contradicted because the lack of these basic necessities constitutes some of the insalubrious situations and major challenges facing university education over the years. In effect, establishing universities to satisfy political interests rather than promoting the educational needs of the institutions poses serious danger to their sustainability.

Again, the information before us showed that government did not at any point in history attempt sustainable consolidation of existing universities. Thus, rather than focus or explore the option of consolidating existing universities, by expanding the facilities in these universities as a deliberate policy that could have catered for the increase in the demand of university education, government only resorted to the establishment of more universities. This inaction of government spelt trouble for university education because it is instructive to note that while government was busy establishing new universities, it has always struggled to maintain the older ones. The sum analysis of the discussion is that the political drives in the establishment of university institutions by both the Federal and State governments could only have promoted a chaotic expansion of university education in Nigeria. Government failed to balance the plethora of politically motivated desires for the establishment of these institutions and the actual need or desirability for them. Hence, the rapid expansion of universities manifested more in the number than in the worth of these institutions.

### **Conclusion.**

Politics of nationalism, much as the domestic politics of Britain, were very much instrumental to the emergence of university education in Nigeria. Political expediencies rather than other factors were dominantly responsible for the establishment of more universities both by the Federal and Regional/State governments but the rate of the creation and expansion of universities did not cater for adequate infrastructure and other needs for the universities so created.

### **The Way Forward.**

It is established that politics, much more than any reason(s), has propelled the creation of more universities in Nigeria and that this has impacted negatively on the sustainability of the universities. It is germane therefore that government should, as matter of policy measure, rather than continue on the path of establishing more universities, focus on the consolidation and revitalization of all existing universities after the manner it did with the banking consolidation policy in 2007, which went a long way in the repositioning of that sector. Thus, where

a university is found to be ineffective, it is only instructive that such be merged with a more viable one so as to strengthen the system. In 1984, four Universities of Technology at Markurdi, Bauchi, Yola and Abeokuta were merged with the older traditional comprehensive universities of Jos, Ahmadu Bello, Maiduguri and Lagos respectively (Kosemani and Okorosaye-Orubite, 1995) but this measure was not continued as government, in a volte face, demerged the institutions in 1987. The merger policy then was only a rational option in the face of the poor funding of the universities but unfortunately government did not sustain this policy approach in the system. The idea of merger, as advocated here, should not accommodate recent government's proposal to create six mega-universities for the six geo-political zones on the country, out of some existing universities. Government cannot continue to establish more new universities when it cannot conveniently provide resources for the maintenance of the old ones. In fact, it is unwise for government to contemplate establishing any more forms of universities without maximizing the potentials of existing ones. Good universities do not come cheap, so government as a deliberate policy should aim at limiting the number of universities to that which it can manage and based on resources available. As at November 2010, the total number of Federal and State universities and their geographical locations were enough to achieve regional representation in university education. So, it is needless establishing more universities for the purposes of geographical spread as the administration of Jonathan did and as some State Governors are planning to do (Adelakun, 2012). Government can still pursue or attain its goals of educational spread or balance for the nation through the use of diverse forms of compensatory education.

Moreso, because of the current doubt on the economic viability of some States of the Federation, it is recommended that two or more States can collaborate to co-own a university particularly where such States are contiguous and have found it increasingly inconvenient to sponsor a university all alone. The co-ownership of Ladoke Akintola University of Technology (LAUTECH) by Oyo and Osun states is a model experiment that is sustainable if only the partnering States can continue to eschew political sentiments in the management of the university. According to Prof. Benjamin Adeleke, one time Vice Chancellor of the university, the co-operation of the two funding States has been one of the factors for the landmark achievements of LAUTECH (TELL Magazine, 2008)

Finally, what Nigeria requires at the moment is for government to divorce the university system from unnecessary politicization if the universities are to develop into acceptable global models. Politics in education demands that the good of the university system should override vested political, sectional or self-centred considerations.

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