



Higher Education in Nigeria: Private Universities' Challenges and Coping Strategies

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. Author AM initiated the work and wrote the skeleton and the body of the work. Author DMG sourced for the data and wrote the introductory aspect while author IA edited and proofread the work. All authors read proofread the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Private university education has come to stay in Nigeria as part of the tertiary education system. Of course, there will be some difficulties, hence the need to examine the challenges and coping strategies for private universities management. Secondary data sources were used in this paper to support the opinion of the researchers. It was revealed that inadequate funding, decrease in enrollment, heavy reliance on part-time and visiting lecturers, increase in competition, corruption, mass closure of private universities, etc. were among the challenges facing private universities in Nigeria. Meanwhile, mergers among private universities, partnerships, diversification of income, and the introduction of online and distance learning programs, among others, were identified as coping strategies for resilient and sustainable private university management in Nigeria. It was concluded that private university education is highly needed and, despite the challenges facing them, they can still thrive and contribute to the development of the Nigerian education sector in particular and the economy in general.

Keywords: *Private universities; challenges; coping strategies; management; Nigeria.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The need for private sector intervention in the provision of university education in Nigeria is imperative, considering the number of unadmitted applicants to Nigerian universities annually. For instance, Omoregie [1] posited that the highest number of university admission applicants ever admitted between 2001 to 2009 was 17.90%, leaving 82.1% or more unadmitted. With the establishment of more new

private and public universities in recent years, statistics have shown that the total number of applications for university admissions for the Joint Admission Matriculation Board's (JAMB) 2020 Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME) was 1,415,501, with just 527,929, or 37.2 percent, being admitted to universities in Nigeria [2]. These statistics are enough justification for the establishment of many universities in recent years and even the need for more.

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Different authors have defined university management in different ways. Griffin (2003) in Musa and Vincent [3] define management as “a set of functions directed at effective utilization of resources in the pursuit of organizational goal”. According to Terry and Franklin [4] University management is a specific process that consists of the activities of planning, organizing, acting, and controlling that are performed to determine and accomplish stated university objectives using human beings and other resources.

or independent universities who do not receive government funding and are usually administered by denominational or secular boards; others are universities operated for profit”. Private universities, therefore, are those universities that are owned, financed, and managed by a private individual or group of individuals, or any university that is not owned by the government, with the aim of making profits or rendering free services to humanity, such as those owned by religious institutions.

2. THE CONCEPT OF PRIVATE UNIVERSITY

University education is a tertiary education acquired after secondary education with the aim of training higher-level manpower for economic development. Ndebbio (1983) and Olaniyan (2001) in Ajadi [5] referred to private universities as those universities that are solely owned, financed and managed by private individuals with intention to recover cost in short time and make profit. Belfied and Lerin (2003) in Ajadi [5] put forward that “private universities are non-public

3. EVOLUTION OF PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES IN NIGERIA

The history of private universities in Nigeria can be traced back to the founding of Igbinedion University, Okada (IUO), which was founded in 1999. The University is located at Okada, headquarters of Ovia North-East Local Government Area, Edo state followed by Madonna University Okija which was also established in 1999 [6,7]. The history of private universities in Nigeria can be summarized as follows (on Table 1):

Table 1. List of private universities in Nigeria

S/N	Name of University	Year	S/N	Name of University	Year
1	Achievers University, Owo	2007	56	Veritas University, Abuja	2007
2	Adeleke University, Ede	2011	57	Wellspring University, Evbuobanosa - Edo State	2009
3	Afe Babalola University, Ado-Ekiti - Ekiti State	2009	58	Wesley University Ondo	2007
4	African University of Science & Technology, Abuja	2007	59	Western Delta University, Oghara Delta State	2007
5	Ajayi Crowther University, Ibadan	2005	60	Christopher University Mowe	2015
6	Al-Hikmah University, Ilorin	2005	61	Kola Daisi University Ibadan, Oyo State	2021
7	Al-Qalam University, Katsina	2005	62	Anchor University Ayobo Lagos State	2021
8	American University of Nigeria, Yola	2003	63	Dominican University Ibadan Oyo State	2021
9	Augustine University	2015	64	Legacy University, Okija Anambra State	2021
10	Babcock University, Ilishan-Remo	1999	65	Arthur Jarvis University Akpoyubo Cross river State	2021
11	Baze University	2011	66	Crown Hill University Eiyenkorin, Kwara State	2021
12	Bells University of Technology, Otta	2005	67	Coal City University Enugu State	2021
13	Benson Idahosa University, Benin City	2002	68	Clifford University Owerrinta Abia State	2021
14	Bingham University, New Karu	2005	69	Admiralty University of Nigeria, Ibusa Delta State	2021

S/N	Name of University	Year	S/N	Name of University	Year
15	Bowen University, Iwo	2001	70	Spiritan University, Nneochi Abia State	2021
16	Caleb University, Lagos	2007	71	Precious Cornerstone University, Oyo	2021
17	Caritas University, Enugu	2005	72	PAMO University of Medical Sciences, Portharcourt	2021
18	Chrisland University	2015	73	Atiba University Oyo	2021
19	Covenant University Ota	2002	74	Eko University of Medical and Health Sciences Ijanikin, Lagos	2021
20	Crawford University Igbesa	2005	75	Skyline University, Kano	2021
21	Crescent University	2005	76	Greenfield University, Kaduna	2021
22	Edwin Clark University, Kaigbodo	2015	77	Dominion University Ibadan, Oyo State	2021
23	Elizade University, Ilara-Mokin	2012	78	Trinity University Ogun State	2021
24	Evangel University, Akaeze	2012	79	Westland University Iwo, Osun State	2021
25	Fountain Unveristy, Oshogbo	2007	80	Topfaith University, Mkpatak, Akwa Ibom State	2021
26	Godfrey Okoye University, Ugwuomu-Nike - Enugu State	2009	81	Thomas Adewumi University, Oko-Irese, Kwara State	2021
27	Gregory University, Uturu	2012	82	Maranathan University, Mgbidi, Imo State	2021
28	Hallmark University, Ijebi Itele, Ogun	2015	83	Ave Maria University, Piyanko, Nasarawa State	2021
29	Hezekiah University, Umudi	2015	84	Al-Istiqama University, Sumaila, Kano State	2021
30	Igbinedion University Okada	1999	85	Mudiame University, Irrua, Edo State	2021
31	Joseph Ayo Babalola University, Ikeji-Arakeji	2006	86	Havilla University, Nde-Ikom, Cross River State	2021
32	Kings University, Ode Omu	2015	87	Claretian University of Nigeria, Nekede, Imo State	2021
33	Kwararafa University, Wukari	2005	88	NOK University, Kachia, Kaduna State	2021
34	Landmark University, Omu-Aran.	2011	89	Karl-Kumm University, Vom, Plateau State	2021
35	Lead City University, Ibadan	2005	90	James Hope University, Lagos, Lagos State	2021
36	Madonna University, Okija	1999	91	Maryam Abacha American University of Nigeria, Kano State	2021
37	Mcpherson University, Seriki Sotayo, Ajebo	2012	92	Capital City University, Kano State	2021
38	Micheal & Cecilia Ibru University	2015	93	Ahman Pategi University, Kwara State	2021
39	Mountain Top University	2015	94	University of Offa, Kwara State	2021
40	Nile University of Nigeria, Abuja	2009	95	Mewar International University, Masaka, Nasarawa State	2021
41	Novena University, Ogume	2005	96	Edusoko University, Bida, Niger State	2021
42	Obong University, Obong Ntak	2007	97	Philomath University, Kuje,	2021

S/N	Name of University	Year	S/N	Name of University	Year
43	Oduduwa University, Ipetumodu - Osun State	2009	97	Abuja Khadija University, Majia, Jigawa State	2021
44	Pan-Atlantic University, Lagos	2002	99	Anan University, Kwall, Plateau State	2021
45	Paul University, Awka - Anambra State	2009	100	PEN Resource University, Gombe	2022
46	Redeemer's University, Ede	2005	101	Al-Ansar University, Maiduguri, Borno	2022
47	Renaissance University, Enugu	2005	102	Margaret Lawrence University, Umunede, Delta State	2022
48	Rhema University, Obeama-Asa - Rivers State	2009	103	Khalifa Isiyaku Rabi University, Kano	2022
49	Ritman University, Ikot Ekpene, Akwa Ibom	2015	104	Sports University, Idumuje, Ugboko, Delta State	2022
50	Salem University, Lokoja	2007	105	Baba Ahmed University, Kano State	2022
51	Samuel Adegboyega University, Ogwa.	2011	106	Saisa University of Medical Sciences and Technology, Sokoto State	2022
52	Southwestern University, Oku Owa	2012	107	Nigerian British University, Asa, Abia State	2022
53	Summit University, Offa	2015	108	Peter University, Achina-Onneh Anambra State	2022
54	Tansian University, Umunya	2007	109	Newgate University, Minna, Niger State	2022
55	University of Mkar, Mkar	2005	110	European University of Nigeria, Duboyi, FCT	2022
			111	NorthWest University Sokoto State	2022

Source: NUC, [2]

Table 2. Number of universities in Nigeria

Ownership status	Number of universities
Federal Government	49
State Government	57
Private ownership	111
Total	217

Source: NUC, [2]

Table 2 clearly shows that the number of private universities in Nigeria exceeds the number of federal and state universities combined. Therefore, the proliferation of private universities in Nigeria cannot come without some peculiar challenges, hence the need to analyze the challenges and coping strategies of private universities in Nigeria.

4. CHALLENGES OF PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES IN NIGERIA

Some of the challenges confronting private universities in Nigeria are as follows:

- 1. Excessive reliance on part-time and visiting lecturers:** Majority of private universities rely excessively on part-time lecturers, owing to their limited financial resources to hire permanent teaching staff [5,1,8,9,10,11] (Varghese, 2004; Abiodun-Oyebanji, 2011). It was revealed that the part-time lecturers tend to combine multiple part-time teaching appointments, with a negative impact on their teaching [11]. In a study carried out by Varghese (2004) it was discovered that reliance on part time academic staff is a common feature of private universities irrespective of their location and orientation.
- 2. Inadequate funding:** inadequate funding has appeared to be a major problem facing private universities as identified by Omoregie, [1]; Olawore & Ajayi [8]; Stander & Herman, [12]; Mungathia, [9]; James & Botimi-Slaboh, [10]; Ofosu, [11]; and WUS, [13]. Olugbamila, (2008) in Olawore & Ajayi, [8] is of the view that

inadequate funding and the apparent shortage of fund available to private universities system have been responsible for inadequate facilities in many of these universities; many of them seem to be groaning, silently for lack of funds. This makes it increasingly difficult for private universities to advertise extensively to attract potential students, pay salaries and utility bills, and meet other financial obligations. This situation has forced some private universities to lay off staff, cease infrastructure development, delay payment of salaries, and reduce funding for research activities [11,1].

3. Negative perception of private universities graduates by the employers: Some employers in both the public and private sector believe that graduates from private universities are substandard, inferior in quality compared with those from public universities. Some employers perceive that graduates from private universities lack skills and knowledge and cannot perform satisfactorily on the job. Ofosu, [11] and Mungathia, [9] posit that it is a huge challenge for private universities to address the negative public perceptions about them. It was also revealed that the poor reputation of private higher education institutions in society, perceptions of the low quality of education among graduates, lack of willingness among organizations to recruit graduates from private universities, lack of job opportunities for graduates of private universities were among the challenges facing private universities [9].

4. Mass closure of private universities: Many private universities were closed by the National Universities Commission (NUC) due to their inability to meet the minimum standards required to establish private universities in Nigeria. With the decreasing level of enrollment due to an increasing number of public universities, coupled with economic hardship, which in turn has led to a high rate of dropouts and a decrease in the demand for private universities, there is a high tendency for more universities to close in the near future, probably as a result of poor enrollment and high competition. The National Universities Commission (NUC) has released a list of 58 illegal universities in Nigeria. The commission said the universities are yet to be licensed by the

federal government and have been shut down for violating the national minimum standard for education [14].

5. Decline in enrollment and rising drop-out rates: student enrollment is declining overall and at the same time there is an increasing rate of drop out due to economic hardship in the country and other parts of the world [5,13,9]. There is general decline in enrollment into private universities in Nigeria due to increasing number of public universities and high rate of drop out.

6. Increase in competition: Higher education competition is fierce, with more universities than ever before, including small, specialty universities, and an influx of online education and training options [15].

7. High cost of operation: University management in the computer age requires constant power supply to enable staff to power their information technology facilities for day-to-day running of the universities. However, the unstable power supply in Nigeria has constituted a huge problem for private universities, which forces them to provide electricity through generators at a very expensive rate [5].

8. Corruption: corruption has affected every sector of the Nigerian economy including education at both public and private institutions which has caused a great setback for education sector in the country [6,7]. Oloyede posited that private university operators violate several laws guiding university operations in Nigeria, particularly admissions and academic work [16].

9. Organisation structural problem: this refer to any existing operational structure that is hindering the development of the university. One of the internal challenges affecting the sustainability of the private universities is leadership and structures that are put in place in the universities [9,10].

10. Regulatory Bodies: Government Regulations through its agencies such as the National Universities Commission (NUC) has laid down the requirement for accreditations of programmes which is very expensive as it requires the provision of some huge finances for provision of human resources and physical facilities among others. Mungathia, [9] revealed that due to shortage of capital, private

universities found it difficult to cope with the demand for programmes accreditation.

11. **Nepotism:** Some private universities in Nigeria appoint family and friends to occupy some key positions in the university management, which mostly leads to insubordination and mismanagement of the institutions. Some of the proprietors choose to run the universities like a family business, and it ought not to be so [16]. The case of treating private universities as a family business has led some individuals to establish private universities in their towns and even villages without due consideration of factors to be considered for establishing a university. And this has made such universities inaccessible and vulnerable due to the issue of insecurity in the country.
12. **Marketing challenges:** Private universities cannot function effectively without effective and functional marketing department or unit which is responsible for the recruitment of students and the university publicity in general. Mungathia [9] in a study conducted in Kenya, found that private universities are faced with the challenges of publicity (visibility) and marketing (recruitment) which were also prevalent across all the universities.

5. COPING STRATEGIES

The following are the strategies employed by private universities for coping with the challenges facing them:

1. **Multiple academic programmes:** private universities can embark on multiple ways to deliver their academic programmes such as online and distance learning education, operating satellite campuses across the country and running weekend, evening and sandwich programmes [11]. A survey of chief academic officers conducted by Inside Higher Ed revealed that 82 percent plan to grow their institution's online course offerings to expand access to adult and non-traditional students in the next year [13].
2. **Partnership:** This involves facilities sharing, programme sharing, joint purchases, personnel sharing, student and staff exchange programmes, etc. Affiliation with other private and public universities within and outside the country is also a partnership arrangement. The partnership among private universities would help to reduce operational costs, thereby strengthening the partners.
3. **Consortium arrangement:** A consortium is a group of two or more individuals, businesses, or governments that collaborate to achieve a common goal. Entities that participate in a consortium pool resources but are only liable for the obligations outlined in the consortium agreement. As a result, each entity in the consortium maintains its independence in its normal business operations and has no say over the operations of another member that are unrelated to the consortium. Several consortiums of North American colleges and universities exist. In Massachusetts, for example, the Five College Consortium includes the University of Massachusetts Amherst, Mount Holyoke College, Hampshire College, Smith College, and Amherst College [17].
4. **Merger among private universities:** Universities mergers and acquisitions are a situation in which schools with little brand recognition and low endowments may be unable to effectively navigate the impact of decreased domestic and international student enrollments and funding. Some institutions may decide to merge in order to save money, increase the depth or breadth of their operations, or supplement resources [13].
5. **Diversification of income:** To improve the funding of private universities, universities should diversify their sources of revenue beyond tuition fees and other academic charges [1].
6. **Restructuring of operational structure:** This involves trying to do away with any existing operational structure that is hindering the development of the university. This could be organizational structure, marketing, enrollment, grants, accreditation, information technology, etc., which need restructuring for better management. Some proprietors intervene in the day-to-day management of the universities; despite that, it is the responsibility of the vice chancellors [18,19].
7. **Government intervention:** Private universities' proprietors and proprietresses should persuade the government through their association to intervene through the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TET Fund)

to provide financial support to private universities based on performance.

8. **Registration of universities as limited liability companies:** Private universities should be registered as public limited liability companies to avoid closure after the death of the proprietors or proprietresses, as well as to enable the universities to mobilize more capital for expansion and growth.

6. CONCLUSION

Private universities are indispensable in Nigeria as they meet the high demand for university education. There is a rapid growth of private universities in the country, especially in the last few years. This cannot be done without hurdles such as financial problems, inadequate academic staff, etc., which are surmountable with effective strategies such as partnership, consortium arrangement, merger, among others.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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