UNIJERPS
Unizik Journal of Educational Research and Policy Studies VOL.19 (2);
January-June, 2025 https://unijerps.org
2023 Impact Factor:* 6.834;** 2022 ***Impact Factor: 5.156; ***2021 Impact Factor: 5.641;***
2020 Impact Factor: 5.355. *Indexing and Impact Factor URL:* http://sjifactor.com/passport.php?id=21363

TERTIARY EDUCATION IN NIGERIA: THE CHALLENGES, REFORMS, AND ROAD AHEAD

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ABSTRACT

In Nigeria, tertiary education plays a crucial role in fostering national development by generating the knowledgeable labor force, intellectuals, and innovators required for the nation's social and economic progress. With a wide range of federal, state, and private universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education, the industry has grown dramatically over time. However, this expansion has not resulted in fair or high-quality access. Persistent problems with the system include low funding, failing infrastructure, a lack of academic staff with the necessary qualifications, frequent industrial actions, and a mismatch between labor market demands and academic programs. These problems have resulted in a growing disparity between the outputs of higher education and the needs of national development, a decline in educational quality, and graduate unemployment. The Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund), student loan programs, and university autonomy initiatives are examples of government initiatives that have shown some promise but have mostly failed because of poor implementation and governance limitations. Although there are still financial obstacles, the private sector has helped to increase access. This essay assesses the effects of previous changes, critically examines the structural and systemic issues facing Nigerian tertiary education, and looks into potential ways to reposition the industry. It makes the case for a comprehensive and long-term reform plan that includes more public funding, curriculum modernization, improved quality assurance, research promotion, and digital transformation. In addition to improving Nigeria's competitiveness in the global knowledge economy, strengthening the country's tertiary education system is essential for tackling social inequality, young unemployment, and the larger objectives of sustainable development.

Introduction

Tertiary education, being the cornerstone for creating a workforce that is highly qualified and informed, is essential to the growth of any country. By shaping human capital that supports sustainable growth and development, universities serve as catalysts for national advancement (Olatunji, 2018; Ogunode, 2020). In addition to giving people specialized knowledge, it promotes entrepreneurship, research, and innovation—all of which are essential for maintaining economic competitiveness (Asiyai, 2013; Igwe et al., 2021;). Thus, Nigeria's demographic growth, especially among its youth, has made the importance of

postsecondary education in the country more obvious. Millions of young Nigerians are vying for access to high-quality education, which has increased demand for college, university, and polytechnic education. Through higher education and skill development, the populace hopes to improve their work prospects and make a significant contribution to society, which is reflected in this rising demand (Birabil & Ogeh, 2020; Ukeje & Aisiku, 2022). However, a number of obstacles prevent Nigeria's postsecondary education system from meeting this rising demand. Poor facilities, packed classrooms, out-of-date curricula, and a shortage of academic staff are plaguing many universities (Osuji & Iheanyichukwu, 2021; Imo, Egbe, & Terfa, 2024). Due to these structural inefficiencies, education quality is declining and graduates are not adequately equipped to satisfy the demands of the contemporary economy (Saint, Hartnett, & Strassner, 2003; Ogunode & Musa, 2020). Consequently, graduates' abilities and those needed in the labor market are becoming increasingly out of sync (Jacob & Samuel, 2020; Idogho, 2011).

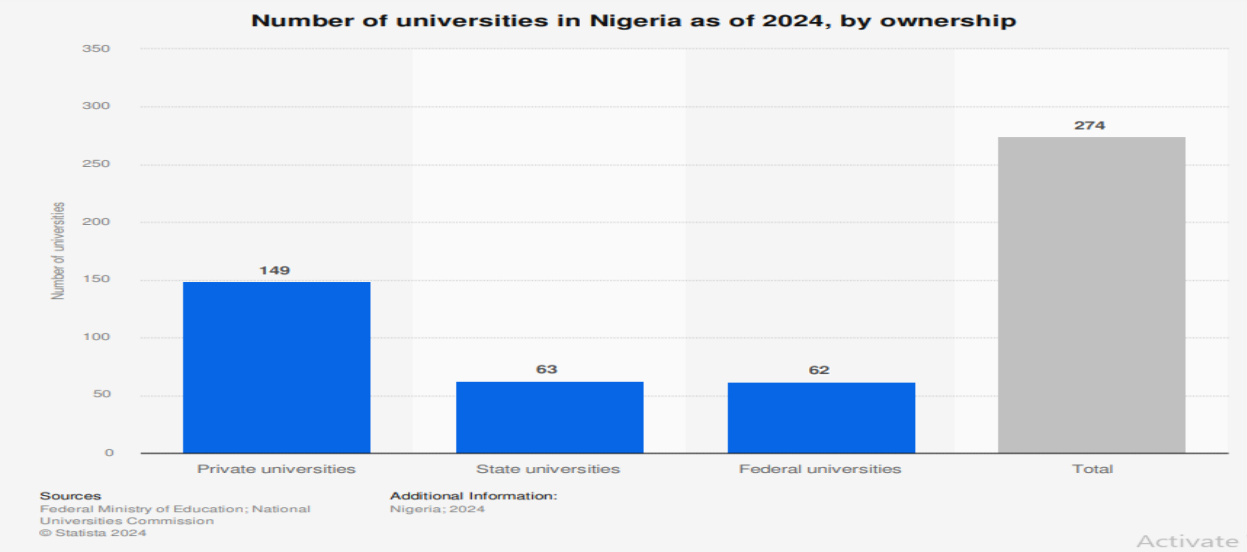
Nigerian tertiary institutions continue to struggle with finance in addition to infrastructure limitation. Particularly, public universities depend significantly on government funding, which is often insufficient to meet their operating requirements (Akinyemi & Bassey, 2012; Yusuf et al., 2022). This financial burden limits the growth of academic programs, hinders research efforts, and makes it more difficult for institutions to recruit and retain skilled staff (Wapmuk & Amini, 2018; Ogunode, Johnson & Olatunde-Aiyedun, 2022). As a result, technological advancement and innovation—two essential elements of national development—are suppressed (Iruonagbe, Imhonopi, & Egharevba, 2015; Monday & Mallo, 2021).

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Structure of Tertiary Education in Nigeria

Universities, polytechnics and monotechnics, and colleges of education make up the three primary forms of Nigeria's tertiary education system. Every category has a specific function in the educational system and helps the nation's human capital grow holistically (Olatunji, 2018; Imo, Egbe & Terfa, 2024). This methodical approach seeks to promote Nigeria's socio-economic and technical goals while meeting the varied academic and professional interests of its students (Birabil & Ogeh, 2020; Ukeje & Aisiku, 2022).

The most notable form and most sought-after of the postsecondary education system is university education. Federal, state, and private are the three categories into which these fall. More than 140 private universities, 62 federal universities, and 63 state universities make up Nigeria's more than 270 tertiary institutions as of 2024. These universities are frequently regarded as the nation's top academic training institutions, offering a broad range of academic programs from undergraduate degrees to postgraduate studies (Ogunode, 2020; Ibobor, 2023).



Source: Statistica.com

The technical and vocational component of postsecondary education is represented by polytechnics and monotechnics. In engineering, technology, applied sciences, business studies, and other professional domains, these establishments prioritize offering hands-on, skill-based training (Birabil & Ogeh, 2020; Ogunode, 2020). National Diplomas (ND) and Higher National Diplomas (HND), which are intended to prepare students for direct entry into the workforce or for future academic endeavors, are commonly offered by polytechnics. In contrast, monotechnics provide specialized instruction in particular sectors, such as maritime studies, health technology, or agriculture (Iruonagbe, Imhonopi, & Egharevba, 2015). Nigeria's industrial and technological progress depends on the middle-level labor produced by these institutions (Saint, Hartnett, & Strassner, 2003; Odukoya, Bowale, & Okunlola, 2018).

Education colleges are establishments created especially, to prepare teachers for the elementary and secondary education systems. They provide graduates with the Nigeria Certificate in studies (NCE), which enables them to continue their studies at universities or teach in classrooms (Jacob & Samuel, 2020; Igwe et al., 2021). These universities contribute to the nation's continuous need for skilled teachers by playing a crucial part in the educational pipeline. If students wish to further their academic careers, they can easily transfer into degree programs because many institutions of education are associated with universities (Yusuf et al., 2022).

Nigeria's tertiary education system is all-encompassing and developed to meet a range of professional and educational demands.

Polytechnics and monotechnics focus on developing technical skills, colleges of education guarantee a consistent supply of qualified teachers, and universities offer a broad academic and research-based education (Olatunji, 2018; Ukeje & Aisiku, 2022). The efficiency of every category is frequently hampered by problems including insufficient money, subpar infrastructure, and inconsistent policies, even with this well-structured framework (Ogunode & Musa, 2020; Imo, Egbe, & Terfa, 2024). However, as the nation looks to satisfy the needs of a young and expanding population, the structure itself provides a strong basis for reform and growth (Birabil & Ogeh, 2020).

Challenges Facing Tertiary Education

The challenges include the following:

Funding Deficits

Inadequate finance is arguably the most enduring and harmful issue affecting Nigerian higher education. Nigeria frequently devotes less than 10% of its national budget to education, falling well short of the widely accepted UNESCO recommendation that countries devote at least 26% of their budgets to this area (Akinyemi & Bassey, 2012; Asiyai, 2013). The implications of this large funding imbalance are profound and affect all facets of postsecondary education. Because many institutions find it difficult to pay competitive salaries, academic staff frequently engage in industrial actions and brain drain, which has a direct influence on the quality of teaching and learning (Yusuf et al., 2022; Ogunode, 2020).

With numerous campuses functioning in deteriorated circumstances, packed classrooms, and antiquated laboratories, infrastructure growth is also seriously hampered (Osuji & Iheanyichukwu, 2021; Ekundayo & Ajayi, 2009). Additionally, the lack of grants, contemporary tools, and academic resources hinders research production, which hinders innovation and scientific progress (Igwe et al., 2021; Wapmuk & Amini, 2018). Underfunding or a complete lack of student support services, such as libraries, counseling, and medical facilities, has a detrimental impact on students' academic performance and well-being (Saint, Hartnett, & Strassner, 2003; Idogho, 2011). The ability of postsecondary institutions to provide high-quality instruction and carry out their function in promoting national development is ultimately compromised by this ongoing underfunding (Ogunode & Musa, 2020; Imo, Egbe, & Terfa, 2024).

Infrastructure Decay

The physical conditions of many Nigerian public tertiary institutions are deteriorating, which has a major negative impact on the standard of education as a whole. Classrooms are frequently too packed, with little room for effective learning and insufficient seating (Idogho, 2011; Osuji & Iheanyichukwu, 2021). Students find it difficult to raise questions, participate in meaningful debates, or obtain individualized attention from lecturers in this overcrowded setting (Ekundayo & Ajayi, 2009; Imo, Egbe, & Terfa, 2024). Inadequately equipped laboratories, which are necessary for hands-

on teaching in disciplines like science, engineering, and technology, restrict students' practical experience and their capacity to apply theoretical knowledge (Ogunode & Musa, 2020; Wapmuk & Amini, 2018).

Additionally, the dorms, which are meant to house students, are frequently overcrowded, filthy, and lacking in basic amenities (Monday & Mallo, 2021; Saint, Hartnett, & Strassner, 2003). Students become frustrated and distracted by these institutions' general physical state, which has a direct effect on their educational experience (Igwe et al., 2021). Their academic performance is also impacted since physical pain and a lack of a comfortable study space can cause stress and demotivation (Akinyemi & Bassey, 2012; Birabil & Ogeh, 2020). In addition to degrading the standard of instruction, inadequate infrastructure also affects student morale, which may result in high dropout rates and a lack of pride in one's school (Ogunode, 2020; Yusuf et al., 2022).

Brain Drain and Staffing Gaps

One of the biggest issues facing Nigeria's tertiary education system is a noticeable lack of trained academic personnel. The prevalent problem of "brain drain," in which highly qualified and experienced professors and lecturers go for higher-paying opportunities overseas, makes this shortfall worse (Ogunode & Musa, 2020; Ogunode, Johnson & Olatunde-Aiyedun, 2022). Meeting the nation's rising demand for higher education becomes even more challenging as a result of this talent movement, which drastically reduces the pool of skilled professionals inside the system (Birabil & Ogeh, 2020; Igwe et al., 2021). Consequently, student-to-lecturer ratio is a growing problem for many universities, frequently surpassing the National Universities Commission's (NUC) requirements (Jacob & Samuel, 2020).

Students in overcrowded classrooms receive less individualized instruction and attention as a result of this imbalance (Wapmuk & Amini, 2018; Osuji & Iheanyichukwu, 2021). Additionally, it puts a great deal of strain on the remaining faculty members, who must manage big class numbers and a heavy workload, which may lower the standard of instruction (Ekundayo & Ajayi, 2009; Imo, Egbe & Terfa, 2024). A cycle of instability is created in the academic environment by the lack of qualified faculty members and the high rate of migration-related turnover, which makes it more difficult for institutions to provide high-quality instruction and effectively prepare students for the workforce (Saint, Hartnett, & Strassner, 2003; Ogunode & Musa, 2020).

Industrial Action

A major and ongoing issue in Nigeria's tertiary education system is the frequent strikes by academic and non-academic unions, especially the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) (Adebayo & Adesina, 2019; Okafor, 2021). These strikes, frequently caused by unsolved issues like as inadequate funding, bad working conditions, and unfulfilled agreements with the government, disrupt academic calendars and cause major delays in students' growth

(Oyewole & Igbokwe, 2017; Ogunode & Musa, 2020). Strike activities frequently cause what should be a typical academic year to drag on for months, delaying graduation dates and wasting important teaching time (Oko, 2022; Imo et al., 2024).

In addition to impairing students' academic performance, this disturbance harms the schools' reputations (Ogunode, Johnson & Olatunde-Aiyedun, 2022). Long-term strike actions can make Nigerian universities less reputable both domestically and abroad, which discourages scholars and potential students from interacting with them (Okafor, 2021). Additionally, frequent disruptions to the academic timetable can cause staff and students to become frustrated and demoralized, which exacerbates the issue in the educational sector (Adebayo & Adesina, 2019; Osuji & Iheanyichukwu, 2021). If uncontrolled, this pattern of industrial action poses a threat to the nation's higher education system's long-term viability and quality (Oko, 2022; Imo et al., 2024).

Curriculum Irrelevance

Many higher schools in Nigeria have out-of-date curricula that do not meet the needs of the modern workforce (Adewale & Olorunfemi, 2020; Ogbonnaya, 2021). Many Nigerian educational programs continue to be inflexible and out of step with the world's rapid technological breakthroughs and changes in global industry (Ogunyemi, 2022; Umar, 2023). Graduate unemployment and underemployment are greatly exacerbated by this discrepancy between what students are taught and the abilities that businesses require (Olawale & Sulaimon, 2020; Okoro & Ogbu, 2022). Companies usually point to graduates' deficiency in analytical, critical thinking, and practical skills as a major obstacle (Adebayo & Adesina, 2019; Igbokwe, 2020). Despite having theoretical knowledge, graduates frequently lack practical experience and the ability to adjust to changing work situations (Adewale & Olorunfemi, 2020; Ogbonnaya, 2021). This results in a surplus of underemployed people in fields unrelated to their academic training, since many graduates struggle to find occupations that match their skills (Umar, 2023; Okoro & Ogbu, 2022). Because the workforce lacks the skills needed to spur innovation and economic progress, this divergence not only hinders national production but also graduates' employability (Igbokwe, 2020). In order to solve these problems, curriculum must be updated frequently and adapted to market trends, encouraging the development of highly sought-after soft skills as well as technical expertise (Adebayo & Adesina, 2019; Ogunyemi, 2022).

Government Policies and Reforms

The government has implemented a number of strategic reforms to address the enduring issues in Nigeria's higher education sector, including inadequate facilities, restricted access, and ineffective administration (Ogunyemi, 2022; Okoro & Ogbu, 2022). One of the most significant is the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund), which was created to address the sector's ongoing underfunding by consistently providing funds for the advancement of academic

research, human capital, and physical infrastructure in public tertiary institutions (Adebayo & Adesina, 2019). With a focus on working professionals, rural communities, and individuals unable to attend traditional universities, the government also established the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) to increase access to higher education through flexible, open, and distance learning models (Ogbonnaya, 2021; Igbokwe, 2020). University Autonomy and Governance Reforms have been implemented in an attempt to enhance institutional performance and accountability. These reforms give universities the authority to run their own operations, make administrative choices, and manage internal finances with little intervention from the government (Adewale & Olorunfemi, 2020; Ogbonnaya, 2021). In addition, the Student Loan Act of 2023 was passed in order to increase affordability by providing low-interest loans for living expenses and tuition, guaranteeing that qualifying students can pursue higher education despite financial limitations (Olawale & Sulaimon, 2020). Despite these initiatives, bureaucracy, corruption, and inconsistent policy execution make implementation difficult (Okoro & Ogbu, 2022).

Role of Private Sector and International Organizations

As an alternative to the overcrowded and inadequately supported public universities, private universities have become more and more important in extending access to higher education in Nigeria (Adeyemi, 2021; Nwosu, 2020). The whole student experience can be improved by these private colleges' superior facilities, smaller class sizes, and contemporary curricula (Igbokwe, 2020; Ezeani & Eze, 2022). However, a significant section of the Nigerian populace cannot afford the hefty tuition costs associated with private universities. Only those who can afford it can pursue higher education because the tuition at these institutions is unaffordable for many households (Adewale & Olorunfemi, 2020). Since most children are forced to attend public schools that might not have the resources needed to provide a high-quality education, this financial barrier leads to disparity in educational possibilities (Olayiwola, 2021; Ezeani & Eze, 2022). Meanwhile, through capacity-building programs meant to raise the standard of tertiary education in Nigeria, foreign development partners including the World Bank, UNESCO, and the African Development Bank have contributed significantly (Ogunyemi, 2022; Igbokwe, 2020). These programs frequently concentrate on research support, faculty training, and infrastructure development (Okoro & Ogbu, 2022). Although these initiatives are praiseworthy, ineffective collaboration with local institutions has restricted their effectiveness (Adebayo & Adesina, 2019). The potential advantages of these collaborations can be lessened in the absence of a well-thought-out plan that combines these outside initiatives with the unique requirements and objectives of Nigerian colleges (Olawale & Sulaimon, 2020). To guarantee that the resources and knowledge offered are used efficiently and to build a responsive and sustainable higher

education system that can satisfy both domestic and international demands, there needs to be increased cooperation between international partners and local institutions (Adewale & Olorunfemi, 2020; Ogunyemi, 2022).

Opportunities and the Way Forward

A number of crucial actions must be performed in order to unleash the potential of Nigeria's tertiary education system and enable it to fully contribute to the country's growth.

Increase Public Investment: The Nigerian government must prioritize education in national budgeting, ensuring that adequate resources are allocated to the sector. This includes implementing transparent and efficient funding mechanisms that ensure funds are properly allocated to critical areas like infrastructure, research, and faculty development. Public investment in education must reflect its central role in driving national growth, thereby fostering a more competitive and skilled workforce.

Revise Curricula: Modernizing academic curricula to better meet the quickly shifting demands of the labor market is one of the most urgent concerns. This entails incorporating entrepreneurship, digital skills, and vocational training into curricula to guarantee that students graduate with both theoretical knowledge and employable abilities that companies highly value. By doing this, the educational system can generate graduates who are more capable of handling the ever-changing demands of the contemporary labor market.

Strengthen Quality Assurance: To impose strict academic standards across institutions, regulatory agencies such as the National Universities Commission (NUC), National Board for Technical Education (NBTE), and National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE) need to be given more authority. By ensuring that colleges and universities maintain high standards for research, teaching, and administrative procedures, strengthening quality assurance methods helps to preserve the integrity of the educational system and raise the caliber of graduates.

Promote Research and Innovation: Universities ought to be viewed as hubs for research and innovation in addition to being places of instruction. University research funding has to be expanded, and collaborations with businesses, governmental organizations, and foreign academic institutions need to be encouraged more. Through these partnerships, Nigeria may become a major player in research and development worldwide, spur innovation, enhance technology, and help solve practical issues.

Enhance Inclusivity: It is crucial to guarantee that all Nigerians, irrespective of gender, geography, or handicap, have equal access to postsecondary education. Ensuring that everyone has the chance to succeed, particularly those from marginalized groups, requires addressing inequalities in access and retention. Initiatives and policies that support inclusion will empower all facets of society

and contribute to the development of a more varied and representative academic community.

Digital Transformation: Due to the speed at which technology is developing, digital literacy is now an essential ability for both teachers and students. In addition to raising educational standards, funding e-learning platforms, ICT infrastructure, and digital skills training would increase educational accessibility nationwide, especially in rural areas. Better learning possibilities, distant learning, and student readiness for a tech-driven global market are all made possible by a robust digital transformation.

Conclusion

In Nigeria, tertiary education is at a critical juncture when the sector may be transformed into a driver of innovation, job creation, and sustainable development with the help of audacious reforms, more money, and efficient policy implementation. The potential for change is enormous, notwithstanding the major obstacles, which include a lack of finance, out-of-date curricula, and inadequate infrastructure. Nigeria can give its young people the tools they need to succeed in a worldwide economy by enhancing governance, coordinating education with changing labor market demands, and encouraging cooperation between the public and commercial sectors as well as with foreign partners. Even if the road ahead may be challenging, it is imperative and worthwhile to invest in education because it will be crucial for Nigeria's future and its youth.

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