

COMMODITIZATION OF EDUCATION IN NIGERIA AND PAUCITY OF RESEARCH IN HUMANITIES

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Abstract

Commoditization is the process by which goods that has economic value are distinguishable in terms of attributes (uniqueness or brand) end up becoming simple in the eyes of the market. Commoditization is the movement of a market from differentiated to undifferentiated price competition and from monopolistic to perfect competition. The advent of structural adjustment programme in most developing countries including Nigeria marked an era of rolling back of the state and withdrawals of the state from the provision of social services. The Breton wood institution encouraged governments to scale down funding, which had implication of not only lowering the standard, but also gave rise to the emergence of private schools at all strata of education including the tertiary level. The past two decades has seen sweeping changes in the higher education space, the most significant of which has been the increasing competition in the tertiary marketplace. The proliferation of private universities has changed the landscape notwithstanding that prospective candidates in the country still cannot be fully absorbed into the institutions. Though the number of institutions has ballooned, a cursory look indicates that the programmes offered by these institutions are market driven. Most of these universities only offer courses that appeals to the market and most programme that has little market effect and undersubscribed are shutdown. Courses such as History, philosophy, counseling, French, Anthropology among others are either not offered in most private schools or closed down. Even the public funded institutions, have had cause to combine certain courses to attract subscribers and applicants. The questions that arise therefore are; what does commoditization mean for higher education? How can institutions compete in the commoditized higher education space? What impact is the proliferation of private universities having on the higher education and research? How does commoditization impact research and development? The paper examines such issues and proffers solution to the challenges resulting from that development.

Keywords: commoditization, Higher Education, Research, Nigeria, Humanities.

1 INTRODUCTION

The economic crisis that plagued African countries in the 1980s compelled African governments to make changes in their expenditure pattern. One area where these changes were effected was in education. In fact the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) which International Financial Institutions forced African government, including Nigeria to implement demanded cut in social spending leaving education and health the major casualty (Ihonvbere, 2000). The consequence thereform was the change in the government policy on education which emphasized more of science and technology as priority for the of government dwindling resources particularly support for research which is vital for the economic recovery of the country (Adelamo, 2001). The humanities were most hit as government funding completely dried up. Furthermore expansion for universities which were publicly owned was halted. The way-out for the government was to open the space for ownership where private operators were allowed and licensed to operate Universities (2004). However the coming of these private universities heralded the era of commoditization of education as the owners who got no support from the government were mainly entering for the sake of profit (Small, 2004). The glaring consequence of this is the hunt for subscription of the courses on offer as students' subscription determines profitability. As a result, the owners prioritized and mounted only courses that attract students most of whom are not prepared to apply for courses that hold no future prospect in the market in a private university where the fees are out of the roof compared with what obtains in public universities. What is the implication of this paucity of research in humanities to the socio-political development of the country? In what ways can these be remedied given the trendlines of events? The paper examines these issues using data collected through documented materials and interviews of academicians, and descriptive analysis was used to analysed data collected.

2 THE CONCEPT OF COMMODITIZATION

A commodity is a product that is used as input in the production process to produce other finished goods that will be ready for consumption. However, the concept of commoditization is better understood when we examine it from the perspective of capitalist mode of production. Capital in this system is seen value that has capacity to generate more wealth or surplus value. According to Ake (1981) capital is self-augmenting value which occurs when it is transformed into goods or services that are then sold profitably

The capitalist mode of production is the system whereby capital penetrates and takes over production with the sole aim of producing for sales or exchange. Ake (1981) had further explained that capitalism production is geared towards exchange or buying and selling which is governed by the laws of supply and demand. This system is characterized by competition which contributes to the development of productive forces as the capitalist seeks to be efficient ways of production in the quest for profit, fabricates new tools for greater productive efficiency.

3 HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF UNIVERSITY EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

The thirst for University education by the colonials, who kept flooding the mother country (Europe and Americas) to satisfy their quest, was part of what prompted the British colonial government to set up a committee headed by Walter Elliot in 1943 to look into possibilities of establishing higher institutions in the colonies. To compliment that committee, another one headed by Justice Cyril Asquith was established in the same year to determine the principles that will govern the Universities when established (Ike, 1976).

It was based on the report of the two committees submitted in 1945 that the environment for the establishment of the University College Ibadan (UCI) was created. Dr Kenneth Mellanby was appointed to see to the takeoff of UCI which was aided by the transfer of students of the Yaba College which was already established in 1932 to as fulcrum for the takeoff in 1947 (Aluko,2000).

In fact the Yaba Higher College (YHC), Lagos, which opened in 1930 and closed in 1947, was the first higher institution in Nigeria; it was when its students were transferred to the UCI in 1947 that it closed. At the time it operated, YHC was for many years Nigeria's local source for teachers, medical assistants, assistant agricultural officers, forest supervisors, surveyors and other administrators (Aluko, 2000).

However the UCI which began in 1948 was the first University in Nigeria. It was owned by the central government or what we know today as the Federal Government. The university was affiliated to the University of London (UL) and the arrangement, allowed UCI to prepare its students to receive UL degrees which was in the same tradition of British universities like Exeter and Hull (Aluko, 2000). When the UCI cut its "umbilical cord" with UL in 1962 it became the University of Ibadan (UI), thereby becoming a fully-fledged autonomous self-degree-granting university. It was the 1960, report of Ashby Commission on Post-School Certificate and Higher Education in Nigeria that recommended the establishment of three more universities in Lagos, Zaria (on the site of the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology NCAST), and the one (the University of Nigeria) being already planned in the Eastern Region, all to operate as autonomous universities (Aluko, 2000). The recommendation by the Ashby Commission was based on the idea that each of the existing regions (North, East, West) to have a university, with one in the capital, Lagos. The University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN) was the first Regional University in Nigeria and the first fully-fledged autonomous university. UNN began October 7, 1960 as fully fledged autonomous university which UI attained by UI only in 1962 (Aluko, 2000). According to Aluko (2000) UNN's classes started October 10, with 220 students and had significant American participation, particularly of Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan, with its first two Vice-Chancellors being American, and at times even its Registrar. Aluko further posited that planning for the university in the Eastern Region started since 1955 when Dr. Azikiwe was the premier of the region; however Dr. Michael Okpara who replaced him completed the project (Aluko, 2000).

In 1962 The University of Zaria was opened on Zaria campus of Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology (NCAST) as a regional university with partial federal support. Also opened at the same time was the University of Lagos fully-funded by the Central government the second of its kind to UI. At the same time, NCAST Enugu campus was turned over by the federal government to UNN as its second campus, instead of a full-fledged university. The University of Ife, which was established by Obafemi Awolowo in 1962, was not proposed by the Ashby commission though the intentions were

on as at 1960 (Aluko, 2000). According to Aluko, University of Ife can claim the first indigenous Nigerian University in terms of the background to its establishment and initial management. As at the time these streams of Universities such as UI, Zaria, Unilag and Unife were ready to turn out first crop of autonomous Nigerian university graduates in July 1965, UNN had turned out two sets of such graduates, grabbing that publicity and distinction (Aluko, 2000).

It was under Military regime that another generation of Universities often referred to as the second generation was established. This started with the establishment of the University of Benin in 1970 and by 1975 Universities were established in all the then existing 12 state capitals in Nigeria without a university (Jubril, 2000). The universities include, University of Calabar, University of Ilorin, University of Jos, University of Maiduguri and University of Port Harcourt (Ajayi and Hastrup, 2009). As more states were created in 1976, there came a need to also establish federal universities in those capitals where none existed. However in the second Republic under a democratic regime, state governments particularly in the south of the country, whose citizens could not be absorbed by the Federal Universities which now uses quota system as entry requirement, started to establish state owned Universities, including Imo State University, Lagos State University, Anambra State University, Bendel State University, Ogun State University, Ondo state University, Rivers State University, Cross Rivers state University among other.

Emergence of private universities in Nigeria Osagie (2009) is linked with the ideology of deregulation. The Nigeria government in the 1980s adopted the International Monetary Fund's inspired Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) which demanded cuts in social spending that significantly affected education budget in Nigeria (Ihonvbere, 2000). In line with the trend in other parts of the world, it became necessary that education cannot be entirely funded by the government, which apart from liberalizing the sector, resulting in the establishment of privately owned universities in the late 1990s. Madonna University Okija, Igbinedion University, Okada and Bowen University were among the first to be established (Obasi, 2005).

Even though the current privately owned universities started under the Fourth Republic dispensation under the administration of Olusegun Obasanjo, during the second Republic, some stakeholders decided to utilize the opportunity of the democratic freedom to establish private universities (Enahoro, 2013). This effort was spearheaded by Dr. Nnanna Ukaegbu who established a technical university called IMOTECH in Nekede near Owerri. This attempt by these bold individuals was resisted by the Federal Government. However, the issues as to the right of private operators to establish universities was litigated up to the Supreme Court of Nigeria which ruled in favour of the right of private citizens and non-governmental bodies to establish universities though with a caveat that the quality of the programmes to be offered by private institutions could be legislated by the National Assembly (Enahoro, 2013).

That ruling opened the floodgate for others to set up their own universities. At least twenty-six of these private universities were established across the country until the advent of the military in 1983 who through military fiat cancelled all the private universities established in the second republic including IMOTECH (Omuta, 2010).

Currently, the Nigerian Universities may be classified according to ownership into Federal, State and Private institutions respectively. The Federal Universities are categorized according to age into first, second and third generation institutions. Many more State and Private Universities emerged from the many proposals that were evaluated by the NUC. Oloyede and Adekola (2010) observe that private universities are recent developments in Nigeria as compared to the Federal and State government-owned universities.

4 THE IMPORTANCE OF HUMANITIES TO THE SOCIETY

The challenges that beset societies are complex and cannot be explained by physical, environmental and biological causes alone. This is because humans play a central role that must not be ignored. Therefore understanding the human factor is very fundamental and can only be attained by means of investigation or researching into the historical, cultural and communication processes in which human life is set in. This is what courses in the arts and humanities were designed to fulfill to create the balance to research in the sciences and technologies (Small, 2004). Consequently, research in the arts and humanities are all-encompassing component in addressing the societal challenges which must not be neglected by any country that is forward looking.

Research in the humanities can demonstrate tangible impacts in the real-world on such issues as sustainable housing, energy conservation and urban renewal, crime fighting, anti-corruption crusade among others. Furthermore, research in the humanities can also lead to innovation that can rarely be foreseen as we can see in methodologies derived from linguistics which have helped to create a cost-effective instrument to improve the diagnosis of patients with epileptic seizures. Another example worth mentioning is the area of re-thinking 'waste' as a resource, rather than junk, which is transforming how the construction industry approaches waste disposal and in the process contributing in the significant reduction in the amount of waste.

No doubt the humanities should constitute an integrative component of in the research for development that should of course tilt heavily to the sciences and technologies.

5 FUNDING OF UNIVERSITY RESEARCH

Funding of research in Nigerian universities received tremendous boost at the inception of university education in the country with the budget exceeding the UNESCO recommendation of 26%. The years of the oil boom shortly after the Nigerian civil war coincided with the 2nd National Development plan, research was at its peak in terms of support from the government which monopolized the management of education. It was also at this period that more universities often referred as second generation universities were established by the federal government (Ajayi and Haastrup, 2009).

However the economic crisis of the late 1970s and 1980s particularly the crash in the commodity market leading to shortfall in the revenues of the country affected budgets of social services including education. The consequent implementation of the structural adjustment programme of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) further led to depletion of funding to education and to research. The establishment of Education Trust Fund (ETF) which has metamorphosed to TERFUND has not helped matters as it regards to funding of research. Without a well defined policy of research funding some funds that have remained inaccessible to researcher is stacked up in the vaults of the body (Enahoro and Adeyinka, 2013).

The vast majority of Nigerian researcher resort to foreign institutions and foundations which accepts only projects that fulfill their research agendas. The little local resources available to researchers in Nigeria were channeled to the sciences and technologies. The implication is the paucity of research in the humanities who are even more disadvantaged seeking foreign support against a stiff competition from researchers from the mother country of the foundation.

6 IMPACT OF COMMODITIZATION OF EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

Commoditization of tertiary education in Nigeria has given it a business-like nature where the principles of demand and supply are in full effect. In other words, the laws of Demand and Supply determine the programs that are offered by institutions. Put succinctly, most universities, especially the private ones, find it cost-effective to only run programs that are in high demand. The implication of this is that programs that students hardly register for are either merged with other programs or in the worst case scenario, get scrapped. In fact, newly established academic institutions do not even bother to include them among the list of programs offered. Unfortunately, it is mostly programs in the humanities that suffer this fate. For example, most private universities in Nigeria such as, Crawford University, Afe Babalola University and Babcock University amongst others don't run programs such as philosophy, or Religious studies (Omuta,2010). In the case of Covenant University, the Philosophy program was scrapped due to poor "patronage" (Izedomi, 2009). In other cases, programs like French and History (which are not in demand) are attached to high demand programs like International Relations. This explains why in some universities such as the University of Benin there is no longer a department of History rather what now exists is a department of History and International Studies and Diplomacy. The ripple effect of this is that over time these "less patronized" programs face the risk of extinction. This is the case of programs like Nigerian languages and cultural studies which is not offered by any of the private universities and only a handful of the public ones. This situation is a reflection of the existing realities in the society where certain disciplines are favored over others. The demands of the labour market more often than not shape students' decisions on programs that they should study at the university. This in return influences the ability and capability of academic institutions to continually maintain the less patronized programs.

7 IMPLICATION OF THE PAUCITY OF RESEARCH IN THE HUMANITIES

Amongst the ripple effect of the commoditization of education is the fact that over time, as these programs get scrapped or merged, the number of students in these programs continues to dwindle. This will ultimately lead to the reduction of the number of experts in these areas; by implication, it also has the possibility of seriously hindering research in these fields of humanities. While research in the sciences may seem to be more in demand by the society, the humanities cannot be neglected. In other words, though research in the sciences and technology are often to be the most recognized and celebrated by the society, the importance of research in the humanities nevertheless remains very important and extremely relevant in any society. First of all, the absence or paucity of research in Humanities can lead to the poor development of the society. For example, the history of any society is extremely vital to its the future. Societies continue to learn not only from their past but also from the past of others, hence the popular quote by Sir Winston Churchill that says that “those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it” (Bowers, 2008). It also needs to be noted that it is research in the humanities that continuously provide the blueprint for the development of societies. The principles of social justice and equality upon which societies are built and sustained are embedded in the humanities. It is within this context that Small (2014) noted that the humanities are a force for democracy as well. In other words, societies that neglect the humanities face the risk of having weak democratic and political institutions as it is the case in Nigeria.

In addition, a close assessment of the humanities would reveal that they promote critical and creative thinking. In this regard, Terras, Priego, Liu, Rockwell, Sinclair, Hensler, and Thomas (2013) posited that the humanities “teach us to weigh evidence skeptically, and consider more than one side of every question”. They further stated that they “teach us to deal critically and logically with subjective, complex, imperfect information”. In this regard, the humanities help us understand others through their languages, histories and cultures. A society that fails to accord the necessary value to the humanities could create a system with people who are not only ignorant but also intolerant and prejudiced of other cultures. Within this context, it could be argued that a number of cultural and religious crises that Nigeria has undergone in recent times could have been avoided or quickly resolved if more attention and emphasis had been put on research in the humanities.

8 CONCLUSION

It is a fact that development for most global societies is driven by knowledge which is created through research to chart a new path that improves the human condition. But the knowledge that moves society to greater development is that which integrates all branches of knowledge.

The case of University education and research in Nigeria has been pathetic particularly since the country experienced economic downturn in the late 1970s and early 1980s when the funding of university education and research plummeted. Research in the humanities were worst hit as the dwindled funds from the government were channelled to the sciences and technology, whereas the resort for foreign support for research funds did not favour researchers in the humanities whose researches falls outside the agendas of these agencies coupled with the stiff competition and preference from scholars of the mother countries.

The paucity of research in the humanities is already telling on the courses as majority of the universities in the country particularly the privately owned ones hardly mounts such programmes. Even the public universities where such courses are mounted witnesses’ very low subscription, making it difficult to produce scholars vast in these areas. A good instance had been history which is no longer taught in Nigeria secondary schools.

The result of course being that any development that excludes these humanities will ultimately be counterproductive.

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