

RESCUING THE EDUCATION SECTOR IN NIGERIA: THE ROLE OF PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES

DOMINION UNIVERSITY MATRICULATION LECTURE

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By

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1. INTRODUCTION

One way to look at the theme of this lecture is to suggest that a redemptive mission for the education sector is ongoing and in this mission, the private universities are actively involved. A second way is to look at the challenges of higher education provision and the role of private universities in helping to mitigate the challenges. I choose the second approach because it is more open to objective evaluation. The framing questions therefore are:

- I. What are the challenges of the education sector in Nigeria?
- II. How are private universities helping to resolve these challenges?

The foregoing means that we need to provide good background information against which we can situate our analysis.

Private Universities refer to non – public or autonomous institutions of higher learning which do not receive funding from the government and are licensed to operate in the academic industry by government. Private universities are mostly solely owned, financed and managed by private individuals with the primary motives of profit maximisation and manpower development. There are presently 99 universities privately owned by individuals, organizations and religious bodies. Thus, from 1999 when the pioneer three private universities were established, private universities have operated for about twenty (20) years in Nigeria (James and Botimi-Slaboh 2019).

Private involvement in higher education is not restricted to formal university set up. Some examples of private participation in higher education delivery in Nigeria are: Portal Services Providers; Tutorial Centers; Electronic Test Centers; Big Cyber Café Operators; content developers; Community and Private Libraries; Telecommunications Operators; N.G.O's & C.B.O's Involved in Education; Professional Institutes; Private Hostel Operators; training and consultancy outfits, among others.

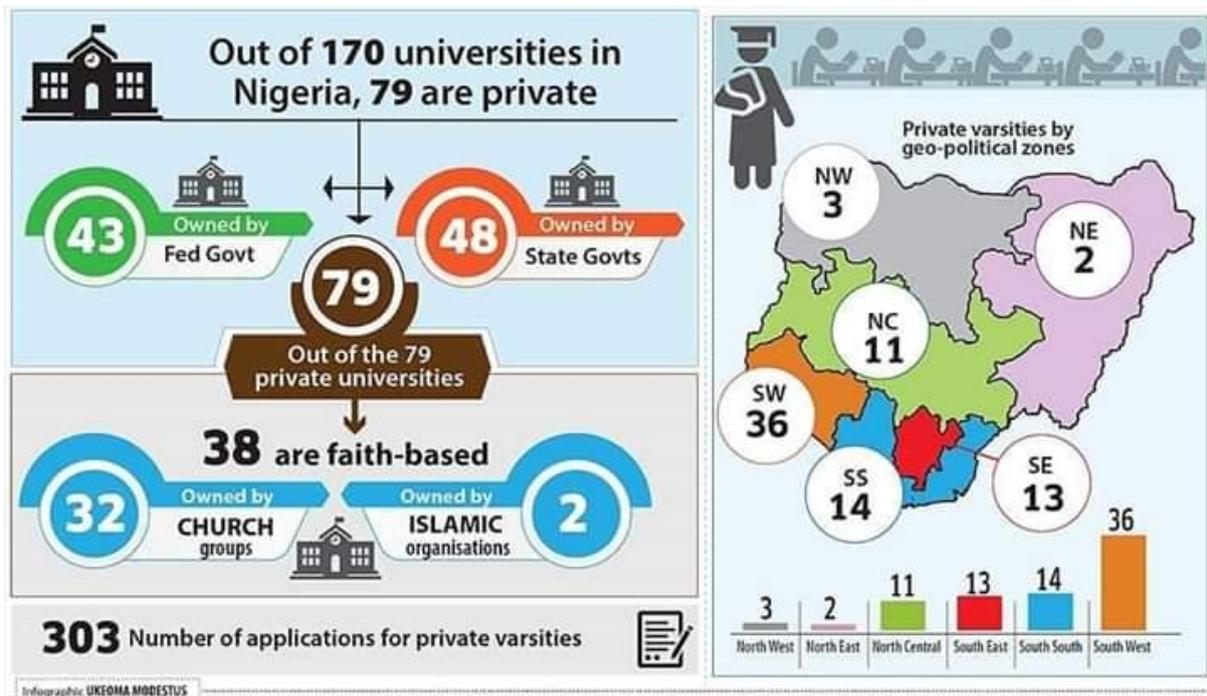
2. BRIEF HISTORY OF PRIVATE EDUCATION IN NIGERIA (1999-2020)

According to Tomori (2014), "the idea of private universities was mooted in the 1960, but lack of funding and primary government intolerance and rejection led to the premature death of the idea". Before 1979, the power to establish universities was placed under the Exclusive Legislative list, however, it was not until the making of the 1979 Constitution that the power to establish university was placed under the concurrent Legislative list meaning that both federal and state governments can establish, fund, regulate and operate universities (sections

24, 25, and 26). However, it is pertinent to state that even the 1979 Constitution did not explicitly permit the founding of a university by private individuals or initiatives (James and Botimi-Slaboh, 2019). The supreme court, in one of its landmark judgments, was the one that created both the basis for private universities and the justification for their regulation. This followed the legal challenge by Dr Basil Ukaegbu of the Imo State Government, which declared the Imo Technical University or Tandem established by him in 1980 illegal and unapproved. Dr. Ukaegbu, the proprietor, took his case to court to seek protection of his fundamental rights. Though he lost his case at the State High Court and the Federal Court of Appeal the Supreme Court eventually ruled in his favour. In 1982, the Shagari Administration approved the establishing of private universities. However, riding on the coattail of Ukaegbu’s victory at the Supreme Court, before concrete action and due process had been taken, 26 private universities had been established (See Tomori 2014). It was not surprising therefore that following a change of government in 1983, the universities were closed down through Decree 19 of 1984, by General Buhari.

In 1991, the report of the Commission on the Review of Higher Education in Nigeria popularly called “the Longe Commission” gave credence to the establishment of university education by private organizations and individuals. The Federal Government accepted the above recommendations leading to the promulgation of the Education (National Minimum Standards and Establishment of Institutions) (Amendment) Decree No. 9 of 1993, thereby paving way for the abrogation of federal or state governments’ monopoly of university education.

Figure 1 below shows the number of universities in Nigeria as at 2021. Observe that there are more private universities than either the federal public or state ones. At the last count, there are now perhaps more private universities than public ones.



3. RATIONALE FOR ESTABLISHING PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES IN NIGERIA

The idea has often been espoused that the establishment of private university is solely for profit. Those who make this argument have often argued against the application of public funds to private universities. Some have in fact pointed attention to the so-called prohibitive fees charged by private universities as tuition as evidence that profit is the first order of business for private universities. Education is indeed a business. It has been commodified at all levels all over the world. Thus, there is no need for anyone to be apologetic about any business or profit motive in the establishment of private universities. However, we need to point out an error of judgement in the positions espoused above. The idea that fees are prohibitive is a delusion created by poor understanding of basic cost parameters of educational services delivery. One of the illusions that continues to be perpetuated is the idea that public universities are free. Truth is that these institutions are infinitely more expensive in terms of actual cost of running them compared to Private ones. Apart from the fact that the various governments subsidize the institutions, the cost of redundancy and inefficiencies are so much that the institutions cannot be run sustainably by private entities. We need to state that the recurring strikes are predominantly due to funding gaps. The gaps are created both by economic distortions and high cost of inefficiencies. Thus, on a comparative basis, private universities are able to deliver more for less because of better adapted management systems.

Though, not all private universities operate at the same level of quality a few of the institutions possess better equipment, newer buildings and better facilities than the public universities (James and Botimi-Slaboh, 2019). There are several justifications for the creation of private universities, some are as follows:

- a) To encourage healthy rivalry with private universities.
- b) For meeting the local demands for human capital development
- c) For increasing the number of employable job seekers.
- d) For catalysing development in the host communities.
- e) To reduce brain-drain in the country.
- f) To instil discipline and moral rectitude among Nigerian youths.

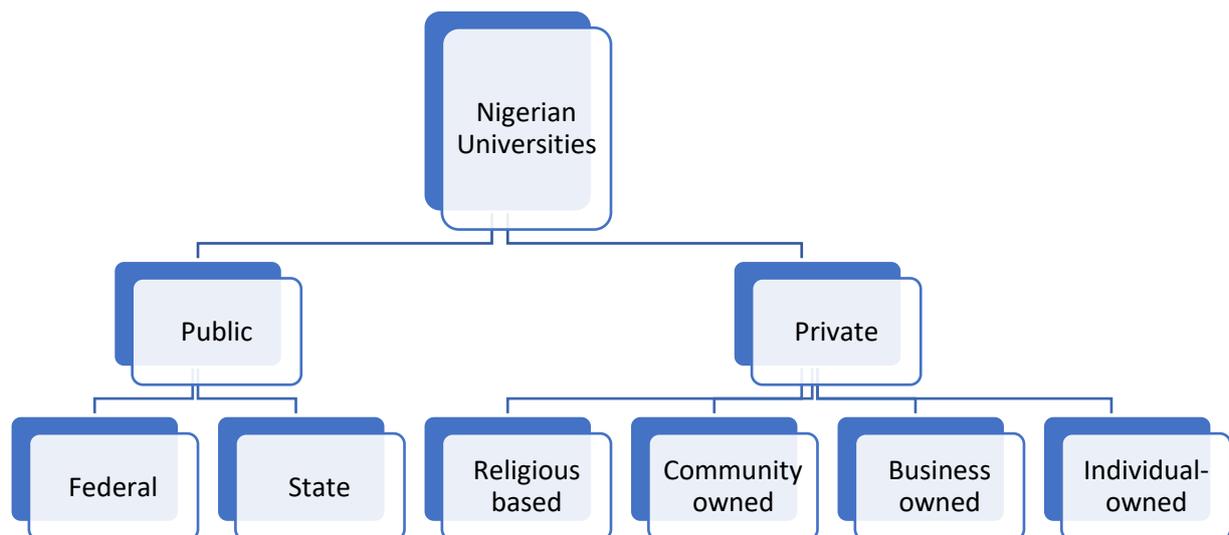
4. Ownership, Structure, Governance and Management of Private Universities in Nigeria

We cannot fully understand the relevance of Private Universities without situating them within the context of Nigeria's tertiary education architecture and regulatory environment. Two issues are critical. First is the fact that some of the criticisms against the private universities are inherited from the contradictions and inefficiencies immanent in the TE architecture and the regulatory constraint. Second, we need to look at the history and evolution of the system, the ownership structure and the implications for the university culture. All private universities are licensed after rigorous physical planning and academic requirements are met. These requirements impose constraints on organizational, structural, management and operational flexibility. Thus, apart from program offering and institutional characteristics, as well as constraints imposed by accessibility to funding, the institutions are copies of themselves; much as the entire system is a copy of the first university.

Private universities are often classified into 3 types: sole proprietorship, i.e. established and controlled by an individual or a family e.g. Igbinedion University (owned by the Igbinedion family), Afe Babalola University (owned by Aare Afe Bablola), Adeleke University (owned by Chief Adeleke), Crescent University (Owned by Prince Bola Ajibola); Covenant and Landmark Universities jointly owned and sponsored by David Oyedepo etc.; mission or religious universities, i.e. universities founded and supervised by faith-based organizations, e.g. Redeemers University (owned by Redeemed Christian Church of God), Bowen University (owned by the Baptist Convention), Babcock University (owned by The Seventh Day Adventist Church), Ajayi Crowther University (owned by the Anglican Communion); Community University such as Kwararafa University in Jalingo. Private ownership can also be religious or secular.

In figure 1 below, we show the ownership pattern of universities in Nigeria.

Figure 1: Nigerian Universities by Ownership



(Adapted from Muhammad Muftahu 2021, International Journal of Higher Education, Vol. 10, No. 3; 2021, p179)

According to Abiodun-Oyebanji (2011), the internal management of a private university is represented by a simple organogram. The first is the chancellor, who is the titular head of the University who by law, in relation to the university, takes precedence before all other members of the university and when he is present, presides at all meetings of the convocation held for conferring degrees. At the apex of the management structure within each university is the Governing Council, headed by the pro-Chancellor which is in charge of administrative

functions such as setting of goals, formulation of policy, staff development, general discipline, and budget approval among others. In addition to this, there is the senate, headed by the Vice-Chancellor and the Registrar as the Secretary. The senate regulates the academic activities of the university following the general guidelines provided by the NUC.

5. ARE PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES IN NIGERIA COMPETITIVE?

The idea that private universities are inferior to public ones is not borne out by quality data. Their performance in global and local ranking of universities, staff characteristics, funding and employers' assessment of their graduates, comparative evaluation of student satisfaction and employability of graduates present a picture different from the projected narratives. Of course, student enrolment figures may be useful if free tuition in public universities is not shown to be a dominant factor in enrolment. The first ranking of universities done by the National Universities Commission revealed that private universities, despite their relatively recent establishment, performed better than many of the public and old universities. (Abiodun-Oyebanji 2011). The NUC exercise of accrediting universities is a system for ensuring quality assurance and that programmes meet minimum academic standards. The 2007 exercise evaluated 872 programmes in 49 universities. Ten (2.6%) of 380 programmes in 20 federal universities were denied accreditation. Nine (6.7%) of 135 programmes in 11 private universities received denied accreditation status. Of 357 programmes evaluated in 18 state universities, seven (2.0%) were denied accreditation (Tomori 2014).

Top 10 universities in Nigeria has Covenant University as second only to University of Ibadan. Out of top 100 universities in Nigeria, 26 are private universities (daily post, Aug 23, 2021). In terms of program offering, service quality, learner support services, relevance and adaptability, technology uptake, pedagogical, mobilization of stakeholder funding and investment, collaboration and partnership with other sectors, scholarship schemes and efficiency parameters, Private Universities appear to be ahead of public ones. On employability and entrepreneurship, there are some outstanding private universities.

The point here is that the alarm over the negative effect of private universities on quality education is not borne out by data. Of course, just as there are high and poor performing public universities, there are equally some in the private category. The growing reputation of private universities notwithstanding, the enrolment is not growing as fast as one would have loved. This mainly due to the dynamics of the Nigerian economy and funding model of tertiary education by government. Secondly, the rapidity at which universities have been created has led to the spread of students across too many the new universities. Similarly, staff are spread thin because we are moving too fast for the available capacity in the system. More importantly, the strict regulatory requirements have meant that expansion is not allowed to proceed with strict compliance with quality criteria. We are making haste slowly.

Table 1: Comparative Impressionistic Assessment Based on Performance Parameters

Operational	Public Institutions	Private Institutions	Remarks
Management	x	✓	Old/new logic
Governance	x	x	Poor

Teaching/learning environment	x	✓	
Infrastructure	x	✓	
Delivery	x	✓	
Teacher quality	✓	x	
Teaching presence	x	✓	
Stable calendar	x	✓	
Program granularity	x	✓	
Micro credentialling	x	x	
Student-teacher ratio	x	✓	
Student support	x	✓	
Diversity	✓	x	
Inclusivity	x	x	
Equity	x	x	
Funding	xx	x	
Value framing	x	✓	
Relevance of institutions	x	✓	
Employability of graduates	x	✓	
Program diversity	x	✓	
Access	✓	x	
Partnerships	x	x	
Staff development	x	✓	
Conditions of service	x	x	
Environment	x	✓	
Internet access	x	✓	
Quality outcomes	?	?	On institution by institution basis

6. Are there too many Private Universities in Nigeria?

Please note that the opposition to the creation of private universities are well situated ideologically. The narratives are many, there are diverse stories and challenging truths which I believe make the debate interesting. It is necessary for us however to see the present the facts and the logic. There have been suggestions that the establishment of private universities is an attempt to replace education as a public good. The idea of education as a public good by a commodity logic driven by applying the market as a resource-allocative mechanism to the sector. There are others who essentially believe in a conspiracy (or a sell-out) between governments and Brettonwoods institutions. They believe that government has succumbed to postcolonialism and is simply implementing the dictates of Brettonwood institutions, a clever way of avoiding funding of higher education. The extreme opinion is that government is correspondingly trying to kill public universities in order to enforce the shift to private once and ultimately sell off its own universities to private interests which represent politically

exposed persons. The activities of government may have created this disposition. However, the reality is that there is a crisis of access to higher education in Nigeria. Higher education participation rate in Africa is less than 45%. Sub-Saharan Africa has a rate of 2%. There is an education hunger in Nigeria judging by the annual application for higher education institutions. Total quota for all tertiary institutions is 1,123,514; total used quota is 612, 557; total unused vacancy 510,957 (JAMB 2020 cf. Egbokhare 2020 p. 468. 31% of all applicants (JAMB Statistics 2019). There is 56% deficit between carrying capacity and actual admission and 55% deficit between carrying capacity and actual admission.

As at 2020 there were 888 tertiary institutions in Nigeria. If we prorate number of applications, we end up with 2,241 candidates per institution. To accommodate this deficit, we will need to create 2000 or 658 institutions depending on which figure we decide to use. If we consider the fact that we have a youth budge and are projected to double our current population to become the fourth most populous nation in the world by 2050, you will understand that we have to act fast and creatively.

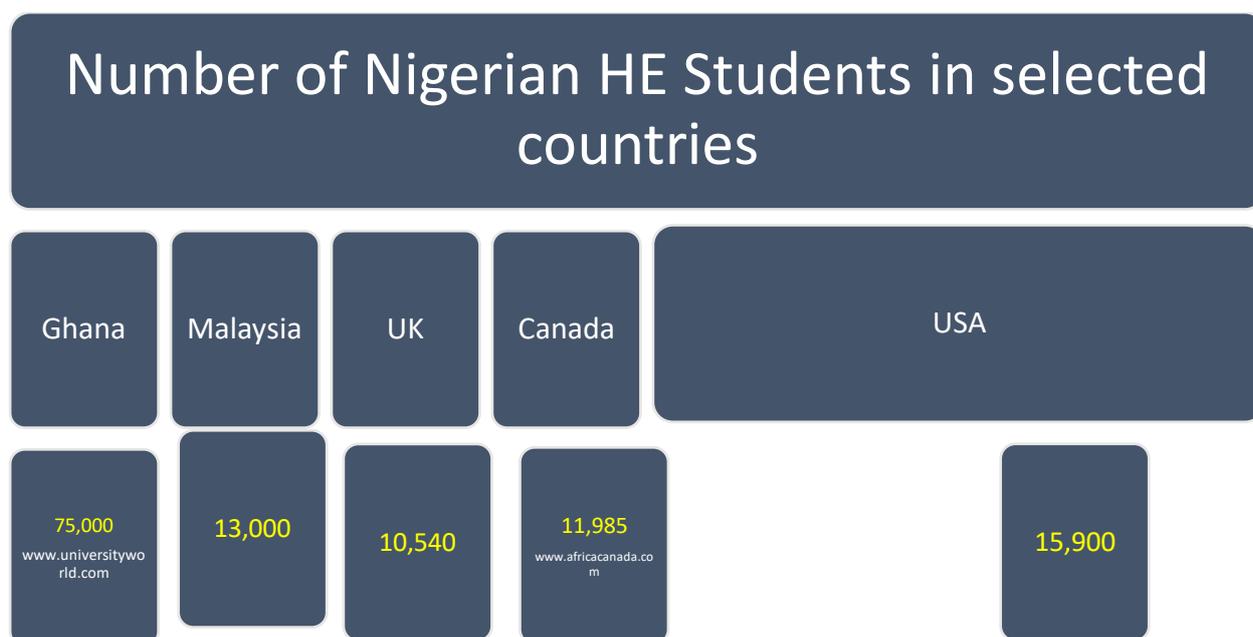
I agree with those who argue that there are challenges with the rapidity with which universities are created. However, I disagree that the way to correct it is by imposing artificial constraints on investors. I also agree that we could develop a better adapted model that can balance between access and quality without interfering with free enterprise.

The history, legal foundations and rigor of the administrative process leading to the establishing of private universities in Nigeria is often not fully told. As a result, undue criticisms visit the actions of government in the licensing of Private Universities. The context of higher education in Nigeria, the aspirations of national development and global movement in the direction of knowledge driven economies underscore the support for the creation of more private universities in Nigeria. It is perhaps necessary to assert that given the fact that after over 30 years of the existence of private universities, only one mortality has been registered???, it should be clear that the process of licensing is as rigorous as can be in any clime. Moreover, it is too early in the day to dismiss private universities with such flippant finality as some are in the habit of doing, especially since relative to age of the oldest public ones that predate them, there are objective evidence that they are thriving and contributing meaningfully to national development, notwithstanding the challenging context of education in modern Nigeria.

7. Private Universities in the context of Brain Drain

There are many serious implications for the crisis of access. The undersupply of university places in developing countries has made these countries become exporters of learners and importers of foreign education products. Developing countries are encouraging foreign Universities to come to them by building their campuses in their country. Where the citizens have the resources to invest in qualitative education, shouldn't they be encouraged to do so? Part of the reasons driving education migration by youths is the limited program offering in public universities and their very slow adaptation because of entrenched traditions and staff characteristics. The establishment of private universities has helped to catalyze the requisite change in the system and introduce innovations in management practices.

Figure 2: Brain Drain and Capital Flight



7. Capital Flight through Education Tourism and Migration

Nigeria has become an exporter of high-quality learners, thereby limiting opportunities for these learners to participate in National development. The economic implications of this through capital flight and brain drain cannot be overestimated. In fact, when you consider the net amount paid by Nigerians as fees in foreign countries, you will understand the enormity of the problem. If Nigerians studying in Ghana spend as much as \$1bn annually, while the annual budget of all federal Universities is in the range of \$751m, you can understand that some of the debates and narratives on funding of education can be reviewed.

Table 2: Estimated Amount Spent as Tuition by Nigerian Students in Some Foreign Universities

USA	N190bn	www.vanguardngr.com 2019-20220 (28 April, 2021)
GHANA	N300bn	punchng.com(2017)
UK	N152bn	Guardian.ng 29 June, 2020
Canada	Figure unavailable	
Australia	Figure unavailable	
Eastern and Central European Countries	Figure unavailable	
MALAYSIA	Information unavailable	
Benin Republic	Figure unavailable	90% of students are Nigerians

		Premiumtimesng.com (July 9, 2017)
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All over the world, education is treated as a business. Education sector is regarded as an industry with potentials to contribute to economic growth and GDP. This notwithstanding the fact of education being a social good. If education is a business or an industry, it therefore requires that we open it to investment by private individuals. In this respect, it sounds odd to one when it is suggested that government should place embargo on the creation of new private universities, notwithstanding the readiness of the private investors to pump in funds into the sector. We have 99 private Universities to date. These amount to trillions of naira in investment in the sector and over... new employment of staff across diverse cadres. In terms of investment in the Nigerian economy and employment generation, private universities have been a positive force. In the future, we hope that they will drive the education tourism sector by first, redirecting migrant Nigerians in search of the golden fleece abroad back home and, second helping to make Nigeria an education destination.

8. SUMMING UP: PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

There are essentially two aspects to this. The contribution to the conceptualization and practice of education and development of the education industry. According to Osokoya (2007) privatization of higher education is fast rising in Nigeria. He postulated a number of reasons which are: first, the inability of the public sector to satisfy the growing social demand for higher education which in essence created the need for private sectors to expand students' access to higher education. Secondly, the deregulation policy of the federal government on the provision of education is giving adequate opportunities for private participation in education. Thirdly, the demand in many African countries for employment-oriented courses and subjects of study had changed and public universities seem unable to respond adequately to this phenomenon. Fourthly, in most African countries, public education is criticized for inefficiency while the private sector is increasingly promoted for its efficiency in operation.

a. Socio-economic development - The role and positive impact private universities had on the education and socio-economic development of Nigeria can-not be overemphasized. (Isibor 2011; Osho 2012). Because of the incessant strike characterized with public institutions, there arose a need for private involvement in providing educational opportunities for people in developing countries, particularly in Nigeria, to ensure that all categories of the citizens have access to university education (Olawore and Ajayi, 2016).

b. Increased access to quality higher education - Ajadi (2010) hints that private universities have reduced admission pressure on public universities. Though access to university education is still low, private universities have afforded Nigerians the opportunity to seek admission alternatives (Olawore and Ajayi, 2016).

c. Stability of academic calendar - The emergence of private universities has brought stability into the irregular education system (Abiodun-Oyebanji, 2011). Before now, there

were incidences of strike actions in the government-owned or public universities, no regular academic calendar and a programme that should last for just four years could end up causing a student six or seven years of extra stay. In fact, students then could only know the year of admission, they could not predict their year of convocation (Olawore and Ajayi, 2016).

d. Raising of academic and moral standards - Private universities have also raised academic standard and moral values in the nation's ivory towers; it has equally improved quality delivery of education, they have restored sanity and discipline into the system and have reduced industrial action drastically in the system (Olawore and Ajayi, 2016). Muzali (1999) argues further that the establishment of private universities in Nigeria has boosted healthy competition and enhanced standardization between the public and private universities. This competition, in the words of Robinson and Nwaham (2007) is based mostly in areas of research, teaching, infrastructural and manpower development.

- Investments and Innovations in teaching and research
- Recruitment and retention of staff
- Staff and student welfare
- Physical and technological infrastructure
- Financial probity and accountability
- Sexual harassment and gender mainstreaming policy
- Internationalization of academic programmes
- Town-gown relations and Community development
- Leadership and Succession planning

9. A RESPONSE TO UNDER THE GRID, OUTSIDE THE GRID EDUCATION AND FAKE UNIVERSITIES

706,189 illegal admissions were implemented by tertiary institutions between 2017 and 2020. This together with 67 Fake universities and numerous consultancy units of tertiary institutions running certificates and degree programs account for the under the grid and out of the grid education. In addition, there are online degree mills and overseas recruitment agencies, phenomenon of satellite campuses, mass migration of Nigerian students to schools in Europe, America and other African Countries. These have implications for quality. Without private universities [providing options, we would be witnessing bad money chasing good money out in the education system.

10. CONCLUSION

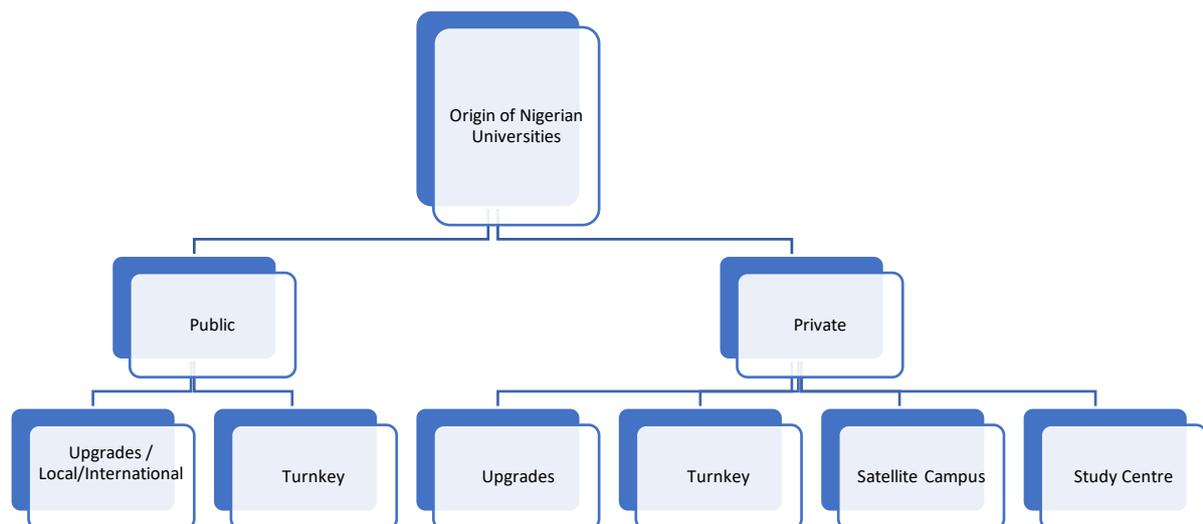
The new realities are here. By their share number, the private universities are influencing the direction of HE education in the country. Rather that antagonize them and exclude them from

resource sharing, we need to build networks between private and public universities, experiment on new ownership structures, develop program twinning and joint degrees, share facilities and undertake joint researches. We need a new funding strategy based on the need to drive student mobility. Students should be allowed to study anywhere and be funded in their universities of choice.

Final point here is that we should assess each university on its own performance. The temptation is always there to generalize a behaviour to the group. There are great and poor universities. It doesn't matter what we call them or who owns them.

One thing we need to point to is the burden of history. The origins of a university plays a role in determining how it turns out. Some have evolved as study centers and satellite campuses, others have been upgraded from colleges and basic schools, while some have been created as turnkey institutions. The nature of beginnings have effect on quality and organizational culture.

Figure 3



This refers to the unique characteristics of a state that are relevant for sustainable planning and development. Among other things, it includes: the HDI, the socioeconomic dynamics, resource situation, fundamental principles of culture, assets and liabilities, aspirations of state and individuals, demographics, level of infrastructural provision. For education, simply put, it includes the infrastructural assets, opportunities, gaps and liabilities that must be factored in, integrated for resource use efficiency and for cost effective and equitable development. For instance, teaching and learning traditions, culturally based economic models, educational practices, sustainable technologies, public and private infrastructure are relevant. A more elaborate picture shall be provided later.

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