

# Public Higher Education Governance and Nigeria's Development Agenda: The 12 'aces' Paradox

by

Dr. Iliyasu Biu Mohammed  
biuiliyasu2010@yahoo.com  
Department of Public Administration  
Federal University Wukari,  
Taraba State, Nigeria

## Abstract

Higher education stands out as the ultimate piece in the pedagogy-learning construct anywhere in the world, the apex being universities, connected with other forms of education institutions as polytechnics, colleges of education, health schools, research institutes, etc. in order to attain their statutory mandates towards national development and transforming lives in global and local context. This paper interrogates and seeks to deepen the debate that African and specifically Nigerian institutions of higher education need to reinvent themselves for the type of long-term development required. Further, it opines that the twelve (12) newly established Nigerian universities in the era of 5<sup>th</sup> generation universities in 2011 may follow the path of "others". The study uses narratives and seeing analogy to buttress apparent inherent inconsistency (paradox) that may retard Africa's and Nigeria's continued development driven by democracy as most universities remain developmental rather than entrepreneurial in nature since inception. It argues that the linkages necessary to foster the expectations for 'total' education and development in long view rest with "out of the box" reinvention located in the administration/management, staff and students matrix.

**Keywords:** higher education, governance, 12 aces and democracy

## Introduction

Higher education stands out as the ultimate piece in the pedagogy-learning construct anywhere in the world, the apex being universities, connected with other forms of education institutions as polytechnics, colleges of education, health schools, research institutes, etc. in order to attain their statutory mandates towards national development and transforming lives in global and local context. Though in Nigeria, universities have one goal establishing them: their unique autonomy allows for diverse intents connected to the core goal. Anyanwu et al (1997:599) outline the goals and objectives of universities in Nigeria thus:

- a. Encouragement of the advancement of learning in diverse disciplines;
- b. The development of high level “people power” to meet the identified needs of the economy;
- c. Generation and dissemination of knowledge;
- d. Research relevant to the national and local development problems of the country;
- e. The maintenance and transformation of the cultural heritage of the country through the preservation and adaptation of local traditions and value; and
- f. Public service.

These goals are not too different from other branches of higher education, as they all lead to one path, ‘national interest’. When the purpose of these higher education goals within the axis of national development seem to be on the decline, the obvious is to seek reinvention. Recent demand and supply push factors in Nigeria have seen public and private universities on the rise but with subsisting quality issues in the face of run-down infrastructures, laboratories, libraries in addition to poor information communication technology synergy and hostel accommodation, as well as distorted value systems among staff and students.

Aside these operative factors, the systemic diseased political and socio-economic character of the Nigerian state suggests a trickle-down effect as public education through all spheres of primary, secondary and tertiary/higher education keeps declining at the rate of private education contrastingly gaining grounds. Anyebe (2015:3) argues that the developmentalist function of Nigeria universities ought to move to the entrepreneurial phase in its objective pursuit of being able to fulfil academic eminence amidst contemporary African universities that deliver quality teaching, research and public service. This may remain *déjà vu* as the older generation universities decline in phases of their perceived ‘glory’ and the younger universities following in same reverse order.

## Objectives of Study

This study seeks to attain the following primary intent:

- To deepen the debate that African and specifically Nigerian higher education needs to reinvent themselves for the type of long-term development required
- To demonstrate that the twelve (12) newly established Nigerian universities since 2011 may follow the path of “others”
- Use analogy and narratives to buttress apparent inherent inconsistency (paradox) that may retard Africa’s and Nigeria’s continued development driven by democracy
- To put forward the linkages necessary to foster the expectations for ‘total’ education and development in long view.

## The Twelve New Public Universities in Nigeria

In more specific terms, the twelve new universities established in 2011 by the Goodluck Jonathan administration is of keen interest herein. These 12 public universities were expected to hold the aces of ‘brilliance’, ‘excellence’ and ‘first-rate’ academic scholarship required to push back the mediocrity trailing earlier existing public universities in all ramifications. Outlining the framework of this concept via its objectives demands congruence with narratives that unveil the reality confronting Nigeria. Wilmot (2005:54) aptly captures this picture thus:

Despite record-breaking oil prices Nigeria, one of the world’s largest exporters, remains near the bottom of the poverty and human development ladders. After earning \$300 billion over the past 35 years, the country is poorer today than it was at the beginning of the oil boom. Yet the individuals who administered this failure refuse to die...the corrupt and mediocre live because they can afford expensive medical care...Pa. Michael Imouda, Prof. Ishaya Audu, Hajiya Gambo Sawaba, Comrade Alao Aka-Bashorun, Dr. Bala Usman, Chima Ubani and Tunji Oyeleru have passed on, because their country did not invest in social and physical infrastructure.

This graphic picture affirms the effort to reinvent Nigeria’s Universities mostly through private participation that many African countries pursue. This comes from Ranasinghe’s (2012:92) affirmation that a positive relationship must exist between economic growth and education. He argues that a better education system will increase allocative efficiency and thereby stimulate growth. He cites examples with countries like India, China, Malaysia, Russia and Bangladesh that are heavily engaged in education business in recent times, as foreign students and locals are taught using conventional and distance learning methods.

However, there is more to this attempt than quantitative expansion of universities for economic reasons. In the Nigeria case, government attempts to balance university spread in the six geopolitical zones and 36 states of Nigeria saw the emergence of 12 new universities with a seeming out of the box concept.

The universities created include Federal University Dutse, Jigawa State (North West Zone), Federal University Dustsin-Ma, Katsina State (North West Zone), Federal University Kashere, Gombe State (North East Zone), Federal University Lokoja, Kogi State (North Central Zone), Federal University Lafia, Nassarawa State (North Central Zone), Federal University Birnin Kebbi, Kebbi State (North West Zone), Federal University Gusau, Zamfara State (North West Zone), Federal University Gashua, Yobe State (North Zone), Federal University Ndufu-Alike, Ebonyi State (South East Zone), Federal University Otuoke, Bayelsa (South South Zone), Federal University of Oye Ekiti, Ekiti State (South West Zone) and Federal University of Wukari, Taraba State (North East Zone). This is an attempt to increase access to university education, especially in a knowledge driven economy which ‘favors’ universities over Polytechnics and Colleges of Education amongst others.

The federal government concept about the 12 new universities are summarized as the following:

- a. Increasing access through admission of more candidates earlier facing exclusion
- b. Break the stereotype of Vice Chancellors appointed outside their locality towards building universities with global context
- c. Increase quality education with these ‘12’ new universities attempting to change the existing paradigm

Furthermore, Olupoju (2014:1) argues that certain schools of thought posit that “the Jonathan administration should have put in more to upgrade the existing universities instead of establishing new ones”. However, the politics of expediency prevails over national interest most times in Nigeria as the demand for higher education puts pressure on the political class amongst other competing demands.

This suggests that the 40 Federal Universities, 44 State-owned Universities and 74 private Universities approved by the National Universities Commission (NUC) as at 2017 are yet to meet the population demand of Nigeria, a nation of nearly 200 million people. The National Universities Commission is the agency statutorily mandated to regulate and act as a catalyst for positive change and innovation for the delivery of quality university education in Nigeria (<https://nigeriafinder.com>). In more specific lens, the Executive Secretary, National Universities Commission (NUC), Professor Abubakar A. Rasheed (2018) at a workshop on Proposed Higher

Education Reform and Africa Centres of Excellence (ACE) painted the graphic picture depicting Higher Education in Nigeria as reflecting poor performance, an unstable academic calendar, curricula inadequate to meet the needs of industry, inadequate deployment of ICT in teaching, learning and research, lack of attention to Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), corruption and plagiarism by some students and academics, among others (<https://nuc.edu.ng>).

Put forthrightly, the NUC Executive Secretary states that:

Our higher education system is in dire need of reforms. The challenges confronting the higher education system in Nigeria are alarming and these challenges have over time, watered down the quality of our Higher Education.

To this end, the NUC constituted a Strategy Advisory Committee on the revitalization of the Nigeria University System (NUS) and repositioning the NUC itself to meet national needs and aspirations for global relevance and competitiveness. This attempt at Higher Education reforms in Nigeria is a common language in the public policy domain and the dynamics of agenda setting. However, the connection of this current reform venture connotes remedies that suggest this may transcend the “quick fix” face that essentially portrays the character of the Nigerian state. This is seen in NUC attempting a self-introspection as part of the reform with externalities of the World Bank within the matrix.

### **The Crux of the Matter**

Goshwe (2018) in apparent contrast argues that Nigerian Universities will remain local. He draws strength from the four pillars of world class universities in the following:

- a. International outlook of staff and students
- b. Quality Research
- c. Quality of Teaching
- d. Global Graduate employability

In typical deconstruction mode, Goshwe posits that almost all Federal, State and private universities in Nigeria have about 50% of the staffing from the state, 80% from the geographical zone and 99.9% are Nigerians, with nearly zero international staff and students. He further contrasts this with Wales where student cash supports 2.6 % of GDP and 35,000 jobs. This factor in Scotland counts towards 1.26 % of GDP and supports 109,000 jobs, while universities in UK contributed around £39.9 billion to GDP in 2011-2012 and accounted for 2.8 % of GDP (more than four times as much as agriculture) with Nigerian universities near zero to our GDP. In addition, International research collaborations are worth over £3.5 billion ([www.jostotheworld.com](http://www.jostotheworld.com)).

As a pioneer staff of the Federal University Wukari, Taraba State (one of the '12' aces) in North East Nigeria since 2012, I set forth additional narratives and lens to interrogate deeper the governance and development realities facing Nigerian universities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Earlier between 2007-2012 I had worked with Gombe State University, North East Nigeria. The recruitment for us to a newly established university was a call to sacrifice but not what we envisaged. Though the federal government budgetary provisions are there, everything in this university is always in short supply except gossips, lobbying and cronyism (i.e., classrooms, hostel facilities, laboratories, offices among things) in this highly rural setting.

Most probably the push back of high unemployment levels in Nigeria suggest the high recruitment of both academic and non-academic staff without recourse to 'due process' and student/staff ratio. Example, my department at a time had a student population of less than 100 students with about 32 academic staff. This contrasts with my earlier State-owned University in Gombe State, where I had worked earlier with more students and lesser number of staff. While the Vice chancellor in Wukari remains the university head, the external pressure from the community and politicians in "Abuja" and Jalingo, the Taraba state capital from where the state/province is govern can be better imagined.

The idea of the government transforming the apex (universities) of Higher Education in Nigeria via the inroads of newness is not just illusionary but paradoxical. Obviously houses are not built from roof downwards but foundation upwards. In 2014, I was privileged to proceed to the University of Colombo, Sri Lanka, South Asia for my PhD studies. This was under a study fellowship provided by Nigeria's Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFUND), a specialized agency responsible for addressing infrastructural, research, staff training and development challenges across all Nigeria's tertiary institutions.

I returned to Nigeria February 2018 after successful completion of the program. The expectations of a staff returnee trained abroad were met with disappointment as the rural setting remains unchanged. Outside the parameters of the university a huge water and electricity problem exists and most staff reside outside with some population of students.

Meanwhile, offices and learning space remain bigger uphill tasks as the university programs now all have students with the irony of almost all programs receiving full accreditation and commendation by the National Universities Commission visiting team.

Mazrui (2002:15) rightly highlights this apparent Nigerian universities misnomer in this question: “who killed democracy in Africa”? It states that:

The most fundamental goals of democracy are: to make rulers accountable and answerable for their actions and policies, make citizens effective participants in choosing those rulers and in regulating their actions, make society as open and the economy as transparent as possible and to make social order fundamentally just and equitable to the greatest number possible.

These democracy fundamentals apply to the state and institutions that drive the society. The universities suffer from accountability issues where vice chancellors many times are not answerable enough for their action and policies to the staff, students and host community. Maybe the University of Ibadan, Nigeria’s first citadel of learning, remains the only one where intending vice chancellors come to a Town Hall meeting to explain their intent and what they will bring to the table. Aside this, presidents in Africa and regional governors and Local government politicians/administrators most times are unaccountable until there is a seeming revolt or the “hand of God”. Indeed, an open society aligning to the universities is in doubt as the supposed scholars, support staff and students look more as stragglers in global context.

## **Conclusion**

My optimism is mixed with shivering thoughts that though we are good at throwing money at problems in Nigeria, this works in the short term but fails to address fundamental issues of universities internal democracy predicated on organizational and research cultures that address societal problems. A classical reference comes from the ethno-religious violence experienced in Wukari town which hosts the university campus.

Logic demands that a multidisciplinary Peace and Conflict research centre ought to have been established in Federal University Wukari in collaboration with reputable ‘think tanks’ as the Sweden Peace and Conflict Centre Uppsala or Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies University of Jos. This is aside initiating policy reactions to the reoccurring Wukari violence, like massive housing within the university campus for staff and students. Rather, housing accommodation goes to the principal, his officers and ‘others’. In similar vein, Wukari being an agriculture food belt axis connected to Benue, Cross Rivers and the entire Taraba State should be tied to a food processing project on a large scale and in collaboration with high-ended research institutes in Nigeria or abroad.

Being in one of the twelve new universities (12 aces) the onerous question to ask is what has changed? As I and many staff colleagues sit under trees rather than offices, we daily ponder about the future in hush tones of – “let them not hear us”. I say, “Nothing much has changed”. I see abandoned building projects with staff seeing their jobs as mere ‘meal’ tickets and fulfilling the national employment ethnic quota and students seeing the university as another sheer pedestal to atone for years of searching for elusive ‘university admission’.

Already the twelve new universities as seen in the lens of Federal University Wukari reveal a paradoxical win-win situation for the forces of mediocrity as the status quo subsists. This paper suggests that a reputable human resource private firm be engaged to reposition the 12 universities urgently as a first option to defeat the subsisting status quo. This firm could use a consortium of scholars from Nigeria and International universities to do the unusual. For a second option, the new generation private universities as Covenant, Babcock and ABTI-America located in Ogun and Adamawa States which have excelled in academic and Higher education administration should be contacted to do a radical reform, ‘let’s call a spade a spade’. This paper further argues for the urgent need to move beyond exploratory research in this regard to decisive and affirmative action from ‘stakeholders and shareholders’. Unless this is done, most Nigerian and African universities will persist with less and less trickle-down ramifications seen as the norm rather than the exception currently.

## References

- Anyanwu, J.C., Oyefusi, A., Oaikhenan, H. & Dimowo, F.A. (1997). *The Structure of the Nigerian Economy (1960-1997)*. Onitsha: Joanee Educational Publishers Ltd.
- Anyebe, A.A. (2015). Nigerian University System and the Challenge of Transiting from Developmentalist phase to Entrepreneurial phase. *ILIMI Journal of Arts and Political Studies*, Gombe State University. Vol.1 No.1 pp.1-13.
- Goshwe, N.Y. (2018). “Why Nigerian Universities will Remain Local”. [www.jostotheworld.com](http://www.jostotheworld.com) accessed April, 27<sup>th</sup> 2018.
- Mazrui, A.A., (2002). “Who Killed Democracy in Africa”? Clues of the Past, Concerns of the Future. *Development Policy Management Network Bulletin*. Vol. IX, No.1 pp.5-23.
- National Universities Commission (2018). “Prof. Rasheed Tasks Participant to Proffer Solutions to Higher Education Challenges. <https://nuc.edu.ng> accessed April, 27<sup>th</sup> 2018.



Olapoju, K. (2014). President Jonathan has created nine new Federal Universities, but were they needed? November 21. [www.unaija.com](http://www.unaija.com).

Ranasinghe, A., (2012). Education and Economic growth. (Eds) in Bandara, H.M. Issues in Development. Pannipitiya: Stamford Lake. pp.92-104.

Wilmot, P. (2005). "The way they were". New Africa Magazine, November 30.