

Challenges and Prospects of Private Higher Education in Nigeria

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Abstract

The study's primary purpose was to explore the challenges and prospects of private higher education in Nigeria. Private Higher Education (PrHE) in Africa has grown significantly in recent years, and Nigeria has been at the forefront of this trend.

The desk research was used to gather information and data from sources such as books, journals, reports, databases, and online resources, including relevant websites. It is a cost-effective way to collect data relevant to the research topic, aims & objectives.

PrHE in Nigeria is an integral part of the African higher education landscape, proliferating in response to the increasing demand for higher education. As a result, PrHE in Nigeria has bright prospects to contribute significantly to the continent's development in terms of HE and economy.

However, PrHE in Nigeria faces several challenges: high tuition fees, limited funding, shortage of qualified and experienced academic staff, lack of government support, inadequate infrastructure and concerns about quality and accreditation. Of course, these challenges are not unique to Nigeria, but they are significant. They will need to be addressed if PrHE in Africa in general, particularly in Nigeria, is to continue to grow and thrive.

Keywords: Challenges, Prospects, Growth, Private Higher Education, Nigeria

Introduction

The demand for Higher Education (HE) has been growing phenomenally worldwide in recent years (Qureshi and Khawaja, 2021). As a result, HE markets proliferated (Komljenovic and Robertson, 2017) driven by a variety of factors, including globalisation, changing student demographics, changing demands of the labour market, advances in technology and the inability of the Public Higher Education (PuHE) sector to meet the rapidly increasing demand. As a result, by 2025, more than 262 million students are expected to be enrolled, up from 97 million in 2000 (Bjarnason, 2009). The public sector's lack of financial resources and inability to quickly increase its provision to meet demand has become even more evident as the demand for HE has expanded. As a result, the popularity of Private Higher Education (PrHE) has increased due to the massification of higher education (Qureshi and Khawaja, 2021).

Private Higher Education can be defined, according to Varghese (2004), as institutions of higher education organised as non-profit corporations authorised to grant academic degrees and which provide a level of education equivalent to the education provided by the State's public institutions of higher education. Many PrHEs function without awarding powers and offer public universities degrees as franchisees or partners. The ownership conventions in PrHE in Nigeria include, among others: diverse religions; organisations; private corporate bodies; and individuals/families. For example, religious bodies own 90 per cent of the existing PrHEs, while a private corporate body owns 10 per cent (Varghese, 2006). Thus, PrHEs are treated like any other corporate body operating for profit, though PrHEs do not want to disclose the attention of profit-seeking to students.

PrHEs in Nigeria must be registered with the Corporate Affairs Commission (CAC) as a company limited by guarantee. Private HEs are not allowed to charge higher tuition fees than those public universities, and they are required to provide scholarships and other forms of financial assistance to deserving students who cannot afford the tuition fees.

The state policy on private higher education in Nigeria is governed by the National Universities Commission (NUC), which is the regulatory body for all universities in the country, including private universities. The NUC is responsible for setting and enforcing minimum academic standards and quality assurance measures for all public or private universities.

Private HEIs in Nigeria must meet specific minimum standards before the NUC can approve them to operate. These standards include having adequate infrastructure and facilities, qualified and experienced academic staff, sound financial management, and an appropriate academic curriculum that meets the requirements of the NUC.

Private HEIs must also comply with the guidelines and regulations set by the NUC, which include the minimum duration of academic programs, the maximum student-teacher ratio, and the minimum entry requirements for students.

Global Growth of Private Higher Education

The global growth of PrHE has been a notable trend over the past few decades, and especially the last decade has seen significant growth of PrHE globally. The increasing demand worldwide is the primary driver of this growth. With more people seeking tertiary education to improve their employment prospects and gain new skills and knowledge, PrHEIs have emerged to meet this demand. In addition, PrHEIs often have more flexibility in programme offerings, course schedules, and admission requirements, making them attractive to students who may not meet the criteria for admission to PuHEIs. It is generally believed that the PrHE sector is much more efficient and productive than the public sector, as many PrHEIs have multiple intakes of up to six in a year (Qureshi & Khawaja, 2021).

Another factor driving the growth of PrHE is globalisation. Globalisation has influenced educational trends causing higher education to move forward and cope with changes in global development (Akindele, 2013). As more students look to study abroad, PrHEIs have capitalised on this trend by establishing campuses or partnerships in different countries. This has allowed PrHEIs, especially three big players, China, India and the USA to expand their reach and educate students worldwide. The big three players account for 38.0% of total global enrolment, but even a tick higher (40.1%) for a share of global private enrolment (Levy, 2018).

The growth includes the number of PrHEIs and the growing number of students. The growth of PrHE has increased competition, and it has also established collaboration with public institutions. PrHE has over 50 million students, thus accounting for a third of the world's enrolment (PROPHE 2018). These are incredibly high figures given that most countries had no PrHE in the middle of the last century, and many still had little PrHE until late in the century or later still. Moreover, the private proportional surge has occurred, while public higher education has grown globally in absolute terms as never before.

The proliferation of PrHEIs across most parts of the world is widely believed to have begun in the 1990s. However, the first wave of PrHE growth occurred much earlier with the creation of religious institutions that accounted for most of the world's PrHEIs until the mid-twentieth century (Levy, 2002, 2003) and exist to this day, most of them Christian (Altbach, 2005).

Before 1985, Australia could have been depicted as having a higher education system dominated entirely by public provision, funding and regulation. However, since the rapid transformations of Australian higher education under the Hawke Labour Government, a number of PrHEIs have emerged (Stone, 1988). As a result, a peripheral private sector of a much larger scale than that in Britain is developing in Australia. To a degree, PrHEIs have been encouraged by state governments, although such support has fallen short of financial assistance. State government support has not been surprising given the financial constraints of PuHEIs and the difficulties they have had in keeping pace with student demand and government dictates of economic relevance. However, the entry of PrHEIs into HE would never have been possible without changes to the overseas student policy in 1985-86 (Watts, 1987). The new export policy was the catalyst that made PrHE feasible. As a consequence, a peripheral private sector is becoming established in Australia.

As demand for higher education grows, it is frequently the case that demand is beginning to outstrip supply, especially in emerging markets where the growth in students has accelerated rapidly. One key market where this trend is particularly evident in India is where public education providers struggle to keep pace with the surprisingly increasing number of students. For example, the University of Mumbai received 37,000 applications for 800 places at the junior college level in 2011 (Marcucci, 2013). In order to meet demand, there has been a rise in the number of PrHEIs stepping in to provide HE courses. In order to help the problem, the Indian government passed the Foreign Educational Institutions (Regulation of Entry and Operations) Bill in 2010 to permit more foreign universities to set up teaching institutions in India (Marcucci, 2013). Williams (2016) argues that over the last quarter of a century in the Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) region, as well as in China and much of the English-speaking world, governments' treatment of higher education has shifted from "public service" to "private commodity," subject to the laws of supply and demand.

Growth of Private Higher Education in Africa

In the past three decades, the continent's private higher education institutions have exhibited different growth trajectories. Variations are also evident in their policies and the quality of their offerings. In general, PrHEIs have been a valuable addition to the African higher education landscape by extending access and offering alternatives to the public sector. Many countries would have found it challenging to respond to ever-growing higher education demand without the involvement of PrHEIs. PrHEIs have complemented PuHEIs by running their programmes as affiliates (Mabizela, 2006; Levy, 2013) and enabling access for students who could not obtain places at under-resourced PuHEIs.

For instance, from 1978/79 to 1999/2000, Nigerian public universities could only admit 25 per cent of applicants (Akpotu and Akpochofo, 2009). The percentage of applicants admitted to Ghanaian universities between 1996/97 and 2003/04 ranged from 25-40 per cent (Effah, 2006), and in Zimbabwe, only 36 per cent of applicants secured a place for undergraduate studies from 1990- 1994. Between 2010 and 2011, about 46,000 and 59,000 qualified Kenyan applicants were turned down due to public universities' lack of space. Furthermore, the number of private HE institutions in East Africa is more than double the number of public institutions. Kenya hosts most private HE institutions, followed by Uganda and Tanzania (Wameru, 2013).

Nigerian Private Higher Education in African Context

PrHE in Nigeria is an integral part of the African higher education landscape, and it is worth considering in the broader context of PrHE in Africa. PrHE in Africa has grown significantly in recent decades, and Nigeria has been at the forefront of this trend. In Nigeria, the history and the growth of PrHE started about more than 20 years ago with the establishment of Igbinedion University in Okada, Edo State, in 1999, followed by two other universities; Babcock University, Ilesha Remo, Ogun State, and Madonna University, Okija, Anambra State in the same year all in the southern part of the country. Since 2000, Nigeria has been one of the countries in Africa where PrHE has grown the fastest. About 41 private universities are currently operating in the country, with the NUC reportedly considering applications of another 292 applicants (Obu, 2014). However, supply is insufficient, and unable to meet the increasing demand, 2 million student applicants for 750 K places in Nigeria has created severe crises (Parr, 2018). One of the key drivers of the growth of PrHE in Nigeria is the increasing demand for higher education, which PuHEIs have been unable to meet due to limited resources and a lack of capacity to accept students seeking admission to higher education institutions (Okoro & Okoro, 2014; Salihu & Hazri 2015).

However, PrHEIs in Nigeria have filled this gap, providing alternative educational opportunities for students who would otherwise have been unable to access higher education. The Nigerian government's inability to adequately fund PuHEIs, coupled with an increasing demand for higher education, has created a favourable environment for the growth of PrHEIs. This has resulted in a decline in the quality of education public universities provide, leading many students and their families to seek alternative options in the private sector. Finally, the desire of private investors to invest in the education sector has also contributed to the growth of PrHE in Nigeria. Private investors have recognised the potential profitability of the education sector and have established PrHEIs to cater to the growing demand for higher education in the country.

Generally, HE covers a wide range of higher learning institutions encompassing post-secondary or tertiary institutions such as universities, colleges and polytechnics (Alemu, 2018). There are over 70 PrHEIs in Nigeria, including universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education. Here are some of the notable private universities and polytechnics in Nigeria:

S.NO	University	Polytechnic
1	Covenant University	Lagos City Polytechnic
2	Baze University	Allover Central Polytechnic
3	Afe Babalola University	The Polytechnic, Ile-Ife
4	Bowen University	Heritage Polytechnic
5	Landmark University	Shaka Polytechnic
6	Caleb University	Calvary Polytechnic
7	Pan-Atlantic University	Lighthouse Polytechnic
8	Redeemer's University	Uyo City Polytechnic
9	American University of Nigeria	Dorben Polytechnic
10	Joseph Ayo Babalola University	Ronik Polytechnic
11	Lead City University	Kings Polytechnic
12	Igbinedion University	Ajayi Polytechnic
13	Ajayi Crowther University	Prime Polytechnic
14	Al-Hikmah University	Eastern Polytechnic
15	Bells University of Technology	Grace Polytechnic
16	Benson Idahosa University	Temple Gate Polytechnic
17	Elizade University	Bolmor Polytechnic
18	Nile University of Nigeria	Best Solution Polytechnic
19	Paul University	Al-Hikma Polytechnic
20	Madonna University	Eastern Polytechnic

Source: Author's selection

Note: This is not an exhaustive list; several other PrHEIs exist in Nigeria.

Challenges of Private Higher Education in Nigeria

Nigerian HE is characterised by many challenges (Ogunode & Musa (2020), and PrHE is no exception and faces several challenges (Ogunode, 2020, Okoli., Ogbondah, and Ewor, 2016). These challenges hinder its growth and development. Some of these challenges include:

High Tuition Fee: PrHEIs in Nigeria charge high tuition fees, often unaffordable for many students and their families, limiting access to higher education. Many PrHEIs were established for profit maximisation rather than service to the country; hence they charge high fees, which many Nigerians cannot afford. (Ajayi & Ekundayo, 2010; Adewole, 2011). The most expensive private university for undergraduate programs in Nigeria is the Nile University of Nigeria. In 2019, the average annual tuition fee for bachelor programs at this private institute was 2.4 million Naira, around 5.8 thousand U.S. dollars. Baze University followed with 2.3 million Naira, some 5.5 thousand U.S. dollars (Statista, 2023).

Limited Funding: PrHEIs in Nigeria often rely on tuition fees and donations from individuals and corporate organisations, which may not be enough to fund their operations and adequately provide quality education adequately. Udida et al. (2009) emphasise that the significant issue in educational development is a shortage of funds.

Shortage of Academic Staff: Ahaotu & Ogunode (2021) opined that another significant challenge facing all HEIs, including private institutions in Nigeria, is the problem of shortage of academic staff. Ogunode & Musa (2020) noted that inadequate lecturers are a severe problem facing all the HEIs in Nigeria. According to Abiodun-Oyebanji (2011), some of the required workforces are not readily available to some of these PrHEIs, and most of their staff, especially academic staff, are a bottom-heavy mix. Many higher institutions do not have qualified and experienced lecturers to deploy for teaching in the various institutions. The shortage of qualified and experienced academic staff is responsible for the poor quality of learning and teaching in most Nigerian higher institutions.

Lack of Government Support: The Nigerian government provides limited support to PrHEIs, compared to PuHEIs, which receive significant funding and subsidies from the government. The PrHE sector can flourish with the government's support, but the support for the sector is still debatable and controversial. The Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund) replaced the Education Tax Fund (ETF). Despite several debates and recommendations, PrHE has been excluded from the TETFund (Adesoji and Olaniyi, 2022).

Quality Assurance: There are concerns about the quality of education provided by some PrHEIs in Nigeria, as they may not have the same academic standards and rigorous quality assurance mechanisms as PuHEIs. Cost recovery plans of PrHEIs owners may affect the quality of service rendered, which could consequently affect the quality of graduates in the long run. (Abiodun-Oyebanji, 2011) Due to shortage of qualified and

experienced academic staff (Ahaotu & Ogunode 2021), it is very difficult to maintain high quality of learning and teaching.

Inadequate Infrastructure: PrHEIs in Nigeria may not have adequate infrastructure, including modern facilities, libraries, modern classrooms equipped with the latest audio-visual equipment and laboratories, which may affect the quality of education provided. In addition, infrastructural facilities support effective delivering academic and non-academic services in educational institutions. Salisu (2001) established the relationship between physical resources and students' academic performance; her study concludes that there is a significant difference in students' academic performance in institutions with adequate facilities and those with inadequate facilities.

Limited research output: PrHEIs in Nigeria may not have a strong research culture and may not have the resources to conduct ground-breaking research that can contribute to national development. The universities are supposed to engage in research not only to push out the frontiers of knowledge but to solve society's problems.

Limited employment opportunities: PrHEIs in Nigeria may not have the same level of reputation and recognition as PuHEIs, which may limit the employment opportunities available to their graduates.

Ranking System: There are several ranking systems for African universities, but most focus on public universities rather than private universities. This is because private universities in Africa are relatively new, and limited data on their performance is available.

Prospects of Private Higher Education in Nigeria

PrHE in Nigeria has significant prospects for growth and development in the future.

Some of the prospects of PrHE in Nigeria include:

Meeting the growing demand for higher education: PrHEIs in Nigeria have the potential to meet the growing demand for higher education in the country, as they provide an alternative to overcrowded and underfunded public universities.

Diversification of educational opportunities: PrHEIs in Nigeria offer a variety of courses and programmes that may not be available in PuHEIs, thereby diversifying educational opportunities and promoting innovation in the education sector.

Innovation and Entrepreneurship: Private HE in Africa has also been characterised by innovation and entrepreneurship. PrHEIs in Africa have been able to experiment with new educational models and technologies, such as online learning and blended learning, which have the potential to revolutionise the way education is delivered on the continent. However, Nigerian PrHEIs are still in the early stage of adopting the e-learning mode of study, though it became popular during Covid-19 Pandemic and many institutions promptly switched to online learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic (Qureshi, Khawaja and Zia, 2020).

Quality education: PrHEIs in Nigeria have the potential to pro-quality education that meets international standards, as they often have well-trained faculty, modern facilities, and rigorous quality assurance mechanisms.

Promotion of research and innovation: PrHEIs in Nigeria can contribute to the promotion of research and innovation in the country, as they have the resources to conduct ground-breaking research to contribute to national development.

Contribution to the economy: PrHEIs in Nigeria can contribute to the economy's growth, as they can generate employment opportunities and attract international students and investments.

Collaboration with industries: PrHEIs in Nigeria can collaborate with industries to provide practical training and research opportunities for students, enhancing their employability and contributing to the economy's growth.

Conclusion

The growth of private higher education in Nigeria can be attributed to several factors, including the increasing demand for higher education, the government's inability to adequately fund public universities, and the desire of private investors to invest in the education sector. Private HEIs are crucial in Nigeria as they meet the high demand for university education. As a result, PrHEIs have rapidly grown in the country, especially in the last few decades.

Despite the growth of private higher education in Nigeria, it is still largely inaccessible to many Nigerians due to the high tuition fees these institutions charge. This has led to concerns about the widening gap between the rich and poor accessing higher education. In conclusion, private higher education in Nigeria has experienced significant growth in recent years, but more needs to be done to make it accessible to a more significant portion of the population. The government and private institutions must work together to ensure that quality education is accessible to all Nigerians, regardless of their socio-economic status.

The sector has been facing several challenges such as limited funding, shortage of academic staff, lack of government support, Quality and standards, inadequate infrastructure, limited research output and ranking system, these challenges need to be addressed to ensure its sustainability and growth.

Private higher education in Nigeria has significant prospects for growth and development in the future, as it has the potential to meet the growing demand for higher education, diversify educational opportunities, provide quality education, promote research and innovation, contribute to the economy, and collaborate with industries.

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