

# Role of Government in the Internationalization of Tertiary Education in Nigeria

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**Abstract-** *In today's age of global knowledge and technology, interconnected network and global awareness are increasingly viewed as major and sought-after assets. With the current labour market requiring graduates to have international, foreign language and intercultural skills to be able to interact in a global setting, governments and institutions are placing more importance on internationalisation. The number of students' enrolment in tertiary education outside their country of citizenship is practically increasing and this trend is likely to continue by the day. This paper seeks to examine the role of government in the internationalisation of tertiary education in Nigeria. It considers extensively, the concepts of internationalisation, tertiary education and thereafter dwelled deeply on the role of the Nigerian government in promoting and supporting internationalisation of tertiary education. It recommends that the Nigerian government should be proactive in steering internationalisation policy, making higher education attractive and internationally competitive, optimising internationalisation strategies and lots more.*

**Indexed Terms-** *globalization, government, internationalization, policy, tertiary education.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, internationalization has emerged as one of the defining issues of higher education globally. Internationalisation is of growing significance worldwide, with economic, political and social changes driving an increasingly global knowledge economy. Internationalisation in tertiary education continues to develop apace as institutions move from equating international strategy with international student recruitment to developing mature

internationalisation agendas that incorporate recruitment, research collaborations, and capacity-building.

Internationalisation of tertiary education is not new. Many of the earliest scholars travelled widely in Europe, but in the early modern era the focus on national development and internationalisation became marginalised. Nonetheless, initiatives such as the Fulbright Scholars Program in the United States and the Erasmus Mundus Programme in Europe have aimed to promote mutual understanding and encourage collaboration among higher education institutions. Today, however, the accelerating rate of globalisation has focussed attention once again on student mobility, international research collaboration and education as an export industry (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2012).

Country-specific objectives of internationalising higher education may include attracting skilled workers, generating revenue, fostering exchange and co-operation, and providing cost-effective alternatives to domestic education opportunities (OECD, 2008). Internationalisation can also serve the mission of higher education institutions by promoting multiculturalism and cross-cultural awareness. Therefore, the impact of internationalisation offers new study and research opportunities and benefits that are no longer limited by national boundaries. Governments are increasingly recognising these benefits as the key ways to develop intercultural understanding and an international workforce (Fielden, 2011). While many governments support country-wide strategies to meet the above-listed expected benefits, not all are aware of them or might feel reluctant to support higher education tackling these issues.

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In this paper therefore, the concepts of internationalisation and tertiary education are examined, thereafter, the role of the Nigerian government in promoting and supporting internationalisation of tertiary education is emphasized.

## II. UNDERSTANDING INTERNATIONALIZATION

Scholars are not agreed on the meaning of internationalization because of the diversity and complexity of its rationales, activities, stakeholders, and providers at the national, sectoral, and institutional levels. In fact, other terms are used interchangeably with internationalization including transnational education, borderless education, offshore education, and cross-border education. Perhaps the most succinct and nuanced definition is that provided by Knight (2004), who sees internationalization as the "process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education."

Equally contested are the forces that have given rise to the internationalization of tertiary education. Emphasis is variously placed on the labour needs of globalizing and liberalizing economies and the development of knowledge societies; the rise of new information and communication technologies; and the massive demand for higher education. These forces have given rise to unprecedented mobility of students, academics and programs, greater diversification of providers, the privatization and marketization of institutions of higher education, and the emergence of new forms of transnational knowledge production (Zezeza, 2012).

The education industry is one of the fastest developing sector worldwide, generating large scale revenues and employment. With the effect of globalisation, competition and emergence of knowledge economy, the demand for better education has increased, largely through increased private participation, commoditisation and internationalisation of higher education. In the higher education context, globalisation has been defined by Knight (2005) as an internationalisation of higher education, thus the process of integrating international dimension into the teaching, research and service functions of higher education institutions. Beyond, the three missions of higher education, the process of internationalisation of higher education has also impacted both on management of higher education systems and institution as well as curricula issues. Social pressures and the specific requirements of the labour market have resulted in an extraordinary diversification in universities and in programmes of study.

According to the Human Development Report (2012), the Global education industry is the second-largest industry after healthcare. It had a market size of ~US\$ 3.0 trillion in 2012. In terms of geography, the Universities in the World now generate a large amount for the Global economy. In 2012, more than 3.5 million students enrolled in higher educational institutions outside their home origin, indicating an 8.2% increase of 233,400 students over 2006. The students in tertiary education grew five-fold from 28.6 million in 1970 to 152.5 million in 2007, in contrast to a growth which doubled every 15 years. In contrast the share of tertiary students studying in North America and Western Europe declined from almost 50% in 1970 to 20% in 2007. This indicates the growing popularity of tertiary education in other regions such as Africa, the Arab world and Asia. A UNESCO GED Report, (2009) indicates that substantial progress has been made, smaller economies, such as Bangladesh, Chile, Ghana, Mauritius, Rwanda and Tunisia among a few to mention and this has contributed significantly to the growth of global higher education enrolments. This implies that cross-border education reflected in outbound and inbound mobility has now become a significant aspect of internationalisation of higher education this has been fuelled by Online and Distance Learning (ODL) schemes.

### III. INTERNATIONALIZATION AND TERTIARY EDUCATION

The internationalization of tertiary education is of course not new. Indeed, the ancient universities of Africa, Asia, and Europe were designed and served as regional communities of learning and scholarship. But the bulk of the world's universities were established in the 20th century—three quarters since 1900 and half since 1945—and were largely national in scope and nationalist in orientation (Scott, 2000).

Tertiary education in Nigeria has a significant role to play in Africa's development including the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Over the years, most Nigerian and African universities have responded to this role, including through research and innovations, but under several constraints. Through its varied activities, the international dimension of higher education in Nigeria is an important link in this endeavour. International agencies helped shape the development of higher education in Africa. UNESCO sponsored the first Africa-wide conference on higher education in Tananarive in 1962 which paved the way for the creation of the Association of African Universities. The heads of universities who participated in the Tananarive conference met in Khartoum to form AAU, which was formally inaugurated in Rabat, Morocco, in 1967 (OECD 2012).

The World Bank remained the single largest source of external funding for higher education in Africa. Many private foundations made substantial contributions to developing institutional capacity to carry out research and training in Africa. The Rockefeller Foundation concentrated its efforts in certain selected universities and also provided fellowships and grants for study abroad programmes, especially for the Master's and doctoral level, appointed visiting staff, and provided research grants to promote local research. The Carnegie Corporation, the Kellogg Foundation, and the Ford Foundation, etc., were other notable private agencies (OECD 2012).

With expansion of the knowledge economy, the knowledge produced by the higher education system and the skills possessed by its graduates are becoming deciding factors in promoting economic progress and

social welfare. Research evidence indicates that knowledge has been the single-most important engine of growth and the driving force of economic performance in OECD countries over the past decades. Therefore, it is recognized now, more than ever before, that the universities and research organizations influence the economic competitiveness of individual economies in the context of globalisation. The countries which have an expanded system of higher education with higher levels of investment in research and development (R&D) activities have higher potential to grow faster in a globalized knowledge economy (OECD, 2012).

Similarly, higher education in Nigeria and other African nations has been identified and recognised as a significant player in facilitating Africa's development process (NEPAD, 2005). It has however persistently faced several challenges, particularly with growing societal demands. With few resources, inadequate capacity and a history of neglect, the sector has been struggling over the years to respond to these increasing demands, leading to on-going capacity gaps. The sector has also suffered from inadequate funding, weak governance and leadership, low quality of academic programmes, and stifled academic freedom (Sawyerr, 2004). These challenges require urgent intervention if the sector is to play a meaningful role.

In recent years, tertiary education in Nigeria and Africa at large has undergone unprecedented transformation, including phenomenal expansion of the sector in terms of numbers and diversity of institutions and academic programmes, rapid growth in enrolments, development of quality assurance frameworks, and enhancement of institutional governance, among other things. These transformations are a consequence of many new developments, both local and global, which have allowed the sector to start regaining its key position in terms of Africa's development. Internationalisation is one of the major forces shaping Africa's higher education sector in the 21st century (OECD, 2012), whose impacts include several opportunities for African universities and societies and even some potential risks.

#### IV. INTERNATIONALISATION AND ORGANISATION OF TERTIARY EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

The globalisation of higher education brings together learners and teachers from different systems, creating a heterogeneous and diverse environment. Yet many higher education institutions typically expect foreign students to adapt to their new higher education environments (Kelly and Moogan, 2012). Recruitment practices have become increasingly business-like within the globalised education marketplace as international education has become a “tradable commodity” (Skilbeck and Connell, in Wang, 2006). The growth in the number of international students has led to a series of new challenges for both the students and for academic staff teaching and assessing them. Mismatches and misunderstandings in their respective expectations and needs/requirements can create a fundamental gap between students and academic staff (Ryan, 2005), a gap which needs to be addressed in the creation of a successful teaching and learning environment. All institutions claim to be willing to become an international organisation, participating in the globalised knowledge creation and transfer. Yet many have designed student mobility policies that are disconnected from any strategic thinking regarding the objectives and added value for the institution’s missions and student achievements.

#### V. ROLE OF GOVERNMENTS IN INTERNATIONALISATION

The Nigerian tertiary education system is currently going through a disturbing moment. The government’s nonchalance and its non-compliance to union agreements have made the entire system to be put on hold. Unions are incessantly striking because government is not living to its promises, students are negatively affected and this puts an ugly picture of the Nigerian educational system to the world. Internationalisation of tertiary education in Nigeria is not an easy deal. The government has the responsibility of taking the bull by the horn in order to make engender proper internationalisation of tertiary education.

Government policy might be motivated by the desire to attract skilled workers, to export education services,

to promote development or to exercise “soft-power”. Governments also know that the nation’s credibility will be affected if its higher education institutions are abusing their international trust.

The involvement of governments in internationalisation is therefore twofold: supporting the expansion of internationalisation and safeguarding its quality. At the same time, whilst institutions are gaining more autonomy, their expansion beyond national borders can be fostered or hampered by government policy. Thus, the synergies and inconsistencies of institutional strategies and national policies on internationalisation should be better understood. Investigating the interconnecting relationships between the various actors, first between institutions and their governments, is of utmost importance to grasp the complexity of internationalised higher education.

Government policy plays a key role as it can facilitate or hinder the internationalisation of higher education. National higher education internationalisation strategies can impact national competitiveness through attracting international research initiatives, corporate partnerships and facilitating the mobility of student and faculty talent. Governments can leverage the latent strengths dispersed across their own systems and local economies through facilitating international partnerships. Foreign students contribute financially, as often expected by governments, but are also likely to enrich the education provided by institutions. All partners to a national internationalisation strategy are likely to benefit by the articulation of clear and measurable outcomes. Countries have taken different approaches to internationalisation ranging from market reliance (higher education competition) to centralised intervention (binding government regulations). Countries often combine both approaches, gradually implicating governments in institutional strategies. Although internationalisation-related issues and policies vary among countries, typical issues include visas, security, employment opportunities for international students during and/or following their studies, as well as career opportunities. Some countries have well-established internationalisation policies while others have no national policies or frameworks, or are still at an early stage of policy development. Some higher education

institutions have developed their own internationalisation strategies regardless of government policies, often focussing on international student recruitment. As a result, mismatches can arise between national and institutional objectives, for example, national policies regarding visas and immigration may thwart institutional efforts to recruit international students. A distinction should be made between the national educational policies with an international dimension (e.g. regulations on joint degrees) and government policies that are not directly focused on the internationalisation of higher education, but nevertheless have a significant impact (e.g. visa regulations).

The Nigerian government and other governments of the world should be committed to the task of ensuring proactive approach to internationalisation of tertiary education. This is mostly important in many ways, including: increase in national and international visibility; leveraging institutional strengths through strategic partnerships; enlarging the academic community within which to benchmark their activities; mobilising internal intellectual resources; adding important, contemporary learning outcomes to student experience; developing stronger research groups. Similarly, Internationalisation enables governments to: develop national university systems within a broader, global framework; produce a skilled workforce with global awareness and multi-cultural competencies; use public higher education funds to promote national participation in the global knowledge economy and benefit from trade in education services.

### CONCLUSION

The pressures and imperatives of internationalization cannot be wished away. The question for African higher education institutions therefore is not whether to internationalize but how to internationalize most effectively, to pursue internationalization strategies that strengthen their internal institutional and intellectual capacities, qualities, reputations and competitiveness as well as their potential to contribution to the historic and humanistic agendas of the African nationalist project. To pursue this multi-layered agenda most effectively, it is essential to develop internationalization strategies that are

simultaneously realistic and ambitious, realistic in so far as they should be anchored in concrete contemporary conditions, and ambitious in recognizing and seizing opportunities in the rapidly changing landscapes of the global political economy and international education. Underlying any internationalization strategy must be renewed commitment at the institutional, national, regional and continental levels to the revitalization of African higher education systems by robustly defending, supporting, funding and reforming them.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

In ensuring that internationalisation of tertiary education is made functional, government should develop internationalisation across four areas as follows:

1. Steering internationalisation policy: develop a national strategy on internationalisation whereby all partners are identified as drivers and/or beneficiaries from internationalisation; make sure the national strategy for internationalisation is well-aligned with country-specific goals of human capital development; alleviate barriers to the internationalisation of higher education.
2. Making higher education attractive and internationally competitive: Support platforms for knowledge-sharing and networking on the strengths and weaknesses of the national higher education systems so all parties can gain a deep comprehension of the complexity of internationalisation.

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