

Challenges and Prospects of Establishing a Muslim University in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria is currently witnessing an unprecedented proliferation of universities owing to the active involvement of the private sector in university education in the country. This development has culminated in an incredible increase in the number of religious organizations that are granted licences to establish and operate private universities in the country. However, the Nigerian Muslims have remained at a receiving end owing to the pervasive pessimism among them over the likelihood of their failure in any attempt or move towards seeking to own a university of their own. Their pessimism itself is a product of the general perception that the establishment of a university in Nigeria is capital intensive as they wonder whether there are prospects for such a venture. The purpose of this paper is to articulate the challenge and prospects of founding a Muslim university in contemporary Nigeria. Relying on data from the ongoing developments concerning the participation of the private sector in the provision of university education, this paper provides a rationale for such an endeavour among Muslims and enumerates the immense benefits and opportunities that will be brought about by such Muslim venture.

Keywords: Muslim universities, private universities in Nigeria, challenges and prospects, Islamic education in Nigeria, Muslim participation in education.

THE EVOLUTION OF UNIVERSITIES IN NIGERIA

Nigeria at this point in time; about half a century ago, was far behind in its education and its socio-economic status was very low. The effect of education in empowering Nigerians socially and economically has been significant. The Ashby commission was specifically requested to conduct an investigation into Nigeria's needs in post school certificate and Higher Education Sector right up to 1980. The membership of the commission consisted of equal number of persons from Britain, the United States of America and Nigeria. It is not surprising therefore, that their recommendations were essentially geared towards massive and expensive educational development with the focus on tertiary education. The Yaba Higher College was the first founded in 1934, followed by the University College, Ibadan in 1948.

At present, (i.e. February ,2011) there are 27 Federal Universities, (including a University of Education, 36 State Universities, and 41 Private Universities, all of which amount to a total of 104 Universities (National Universities Commission, 2010). It should be pointed out at this juncture that it was the incursion of the private sector into the provision of university education that marked the genesis of the active involvement of religious bodies in providing such education. The following section

of this paper discusses the evolution of private universities in Nigeria, which invariably provides the rationale for Muslims' clamour for a university that they can associate themselves with.

THE EMERGENCE OF PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES IN NIGERIA

The Federal Government of Nigeria in 1993 provides opportunities for the establishment of private universities (*Education National Minimum Standard and Establishment of Institutions Amendment Decree 9 of 1993*). Consequently, the National Universities Commission (NUC) granted operational license to four private universities in 1999. They are: Babcock University, Ilishan Remo, Ogun State; Madonna University, Okija, Anambra State; Igbinedion University, Okada, Edo State and Bowen University, Iwo, Osun State. The number has since increased. It is remarkable that out of a total of 41 private universities only 17 are secular in outlook and orientation whereas the remainder of 24 universities are owned by religious bodies and institutions. Out of this total of 24 Private Universities, only three are owned by Muslim Organizations. First, Al-Hikmah University, Ilorin, founded in 2005 by a group of Muslim personalities with support from the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY), in Saudi Arabia. Second, Crescent University also founded in 2005 by the Islamic Movement for Africa (IMA), Abeokuta and promoted by a former Attorney-General and Federal Minister of Justice in Nigeria, who incidentally is a Muslim, Prime Abdul-Jabbar Bola Ajibola. Third, Fountain University, Osogbo, founded in 2007 by Nasrullah al-Fatih Society of Nigeria (NASFAT), a Muslim-Organization with the largest membership in contemporary Nigeria. It is obvious from the foregoing that the three Muslim universities account for only 12.5% of the total of 24 universities owned by religious bodies. It is interesting to highlight the factors that propelled the three Muslim settings into the action that culminated in the founding of these universities. This is discussed in the next section.

THE MUSLIM CLAMOUR FOR MUSLIM UNIVERSITIES

A former national president of the MSSN, Ishaq Oloyede who rose to become a professor of Islamic Studies and later, Vice Chancellor of the University of Ilorin in Nigeria, wrote that the first half of the twentieth century witnessed an unprecedented rise in Nigerian Muslim awareness of their sad plight particularly in the Southwestern part of the country 'which resulted in the formation of a number of organizations (Oloyede, 1987). . Education was central to the objectives of these various organizations which were committed to the integration of Islamic and Western education for the proper upbringing of Muslim children. This position was articulated by the pioneer leader of the Isabatudeen Women Society of Ibadan, Alhaja Humuani Alaga who noted that "she found it difficult to get her daughters into mission schools because girls in mission schools changed their names and religion" (Oloyede, 1987: 381). According to Professor Oloyede, it was such a concern as expressed by the leader of Muslim women in Ibadan, that stimulated "the resolve to provide a high standard of education for Muslims and to create an environment for the reinforcement of their Islamic identity" (p. 383). The implication of this is that the formation of the MSSN was a response by Muslims to the unpalatable treatment they received from the Christians especially with regards to religious persecution through the instrumentality of education. The dominant thinking among Muslims is that the Christian ownership of Private Universities may later be employed as a tool for religious persecution against Muslims, who may later be denied admission into those universities.

What informed such a thinking was that the first four private universities ever granted operational licenses by the NUC in 1999, (namely, Babcock, Madonna, Igbinedion and Bowen Universities)

as noted earlier, are owned by Christians and two of them namely Babcock and Bowen Universities, are even owned by Churches. This development gave conscious and sensitive Muslims some discomfort. Yet they could not quickly organize themselves and their resources for any action in this regard. In 2002, two more universities were granted operational licenses. Again, they are both of Christian ownership namely, Covenant and Ben Idahosa Universities, the latter being a project of the Winners' Chapel International. This development awakened the Muslims to the danger ahead, which was why they began decisively to mobilize themselves for a quick and systematic action.

By the time another set of university operational licenses were granted on the 7th of January 2005, a Muslim university, Al-Hikmah University, Ilorin, featured among the eight new recipients. Two of the seven other recipients of licenses were secular or conventional universities while the other five were Christian universities. With their fruitful effort in that regard, Nigerian Muslims continued steadily and by the time another set of licenses were granted on the 1st of June, 2005, they were able to secure one of the six openings for themselves with the emergence of Crescent University, Abeokuta, while three of the remaining five were secured by Christian bodies, with the other two as secular or conventional universities. In 2007, the NUC approved operational licenses for another set of universities, numbering a total of ten (see the appendix for details) and the Muslims were able to earn themselves one granted Fountain University which, as noted earlier, is owned by NASFAT, a leading Muslim organization in Nigeria. Notwithstanding that the Muslims have not done enough in this regard, there has since not been any addition to these three Muslim universities.

It should be pointed out however that while Nigerian Christian organizations have successfully founded in this regard, universities that are ideologically independent and truly of Christian orientation, their Muslim counterparts have only founded through their modest efforts and limited resources, universities for the establishment of which Muslims can take credit. This explains why none of such universities is grounded in the Islamic philosophical foundations or ideological orientations. They are merely universities in the conventional sense as they offer nothing new or different and do not fit into the Islamic concept of a university. Accordingly, such institutions may, to an extent, be regarded as Muslim universities for Muslims are their founders, promoters and sponsors. However, what is currently needed by Nigerians Muslims is not a university in the sense of the above enumerated, but a university in a truly Islamic sense. Unfortunately, most of the operators and administrators of the three existing Muslim universities erroneously perceive them as Islamic in nature. Such a misconception calls for an explanation of what makes a university truly Islamic. A Muslim or Islamic university is one that is capable of offering the Muslim world a unified system of education grounded in Islamic principles as is the case with some of the universities discussed in the following section.

THE EVOLUTION OF CONTEMPORARY ISLAMIC UNIVERSITIES

Among the notable Islamic universities or institutions of higher learning in the contemporary Muslim world are Al-Azhar University in Egypt, *Institut Agama Islam Negeri* or State Institute for Higher Islamic Education (IAIN) in Indonesia and the International Islamic University, Malaysia (IIUM). It is noteworthy that Al-Azhar, which is situated in the Arab world, is the contemporary representation of the tradition of scholarship among Muslims, while IAIN is the modern characterization of Al-Azhar system outside the Arab world. In fact, IAIN, a metamorphosis of the Sekolah Tinggi Islam which started with four faculties i.e. Law, Religion, Economic and

Education, adopted and has maintained the curriculum of al-Azhar from the onset (Zakaria, 2007). This is attributed to the fact that the pioneer staff and administrators of the Institute were graduates of Al-Azhar which is why the curriculum is a “carbon-copy of faculties in Al-Azhar” (Hasan and Che Noraini, 2008).

The present outlook of the programme objectives and learning experiences in these Islamic institutions of higher learning are a product of various attempts made towards changing the status of Muslim education system (Amanullah, 2004). For instance, the curriculum of Al-Azhar University was modified and improved in the sixties, with the establishment of science-based faculties as a result of which graduates of natural sciences were required to study some religious courses alongside courses of natural sciences (Amanullah, 2004: 28). Yet, the curriculum for religious studies remained essentially unchanged, as it maintained its conservative approach to religious scholarship. The IAIN of Indonesia which represents another attempt to modify Muslim Education system is similar to Al-Azhar University only to the extent that it is “religious by definition, outlook, and curriculum” (Gillet, 1999) and is different from Al-Azhar in its political nature as well as in its enforcement of the National social policy of Modern development especially as it offers general education within the Islamic framework and prepares professional teachers for the lower Islamic schools, instructors for the IAINs themselves, administrators for the department of Religious Affairs... personal counsellors in Government departments and the community at large, chaplains within the military forces, as well as officials for the Islamic courts” (p.30).

FACING THE CHALLENGE

From the list of the private universities in Nigeria presented earlier, it is apparent that only three, which represents 13% could be called Muslim universities. These are Katsina University, Al-Hikmah University and Crescent University. This is not commensurate with the activities of the Islamic Organizations who have been agitating for the establishment of Muslim university for the past 50 years. It has been argued by development economists that at the minimum, 30% of 18 to 30 years old should have an opportunity of university education. The major plank on which this argument rests is the desire for a respectable quantity of high-level man-power for the social and productive sector of the growing economy. This agrees in large part with the University Education Participation Rate (UEPR) ranging between 25% and 45% documented in UNESCO Education World Reports of 2001 to 2004 for fast developing countries. University Education Participation Rate (UEPR) is the percentage of a population cohort of 18-30 years old in a country that enrolled in the universities. This indicator measures the commitment of both society and individuals to improving human capital by improving the skills and abilities of young people through university education. Current UEPR for Finland is 71.2%, Australia 59%, United Kingdom 41.8%, Italy 45.2%, Sweden 67.2% USA 43.5% (NUC, 2005: 2). Regrettably, Nigeria hopes to achieve 30% rate by 2015. What is worrisome is the fact that the enrolment rate of Muslim children at university level is only 18%. This constitutes a challenge to the Muslim community in its clamour for the establishment of private universities owing to the low enrolment of Muslim students for university education.

The Challenge of Gender Imbalance in Education

It has been observed that gender balance in education is yet to be achieved in Nigeria because of cultural and economic barriers. In the Nigerian context, there is a growing impression that education is capable of making a woman to be independent and able to make decisions concerning her

life, take better care of herself and her family, protect the environment and support her children's education. This imbalance in education in Nigeria has probably resulted partly in Muslim women being attended to by male doctors, which is condemnable in Islam.

The Challenge of Preparation

Coupled with the above points is the production of a comprehensive Academic Brief as the foundation for the successful steps of Physical Brief, Masterplan production, construction, appointments of staff, student admission and commencement of programmes. Academic Brief is a vital document on which hinges directly the academic activities and encompasses the philosophy, aims as well as future growth / development of the university. Therefore, it must be ensured that the programmes of the emerging Muslim universities are not carbon copy of the established universities. Each university should develop centre of excellence in specific areas. In other words, there is the need for thoughts on the special needs of carving a niche for Muslim universities.

The Challenge of Quality Assurance

This is a serious challenge that many universities of the world including long established and famous universities have to contend with. The pertinent question is "what is the choice for the university system?" Is it quantity we desire for or the quality of the graduates produced? The aim, reasoned NUC (2005) is to strive for this balance between quantity and quality. Nevertheless, education without a check on the quality of education is actually a wasted investment.

The quality of education in many of the higher institutions of learning will determine the quality of our policy makers as well as personnel for civil service and private sectors. What has occurred is that many Nigerian university graduates cannot compete with their peers internationally. This point was succinctly put by a former President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo at the 20th Committee of Vice-Chancellors' Seminar in May, 2005 (p. 3). He said that,

Some of the challenges facing Nigerian University system today includes poor quality graduates, graduates with little or no skills, frequent closure due to unrest by students or staff or both, cult activities, poor infrastructures and learning environments, exodus of the best staff outside our shores or their exit to other sectors of the economy, inadequate staffing as well as examination malpractices. Others are: inability of the universities to compete with similar institutions elsewhere in the globalized world and poor access to Information and Communication Technology. (ICT).

Meanwhile, the National Universities Commission (NUC) has taken the first step towards determining the point of balance between quality and quantity by establishing the carrying capacity of every programme offered in the Nigerian Universities for the 2003/2004 baseline year. Carrying capacity is the maximum number of students that the human and material resources of the university can support for quality delivery of education in that programme. If the university enrolls just to the point of its carrying capacity (or less) for a programme, chances are that the quality of product from that programme will be assured. In NUC's view, the balance between quality and quantity is established through a policy of not exceeding enrollment carrying capacity (NUC, 2005: 2). The importance of conforming to the standard set by the NUC and other quality assurance agencies cannot be over emphasized. The operators of private universities should know that implementing an educational system with inadequate facilities and manpower will have no positive impact on development.

In addition, the quality of leadership and staffing constitute major challenges. University project is a big task that requires discipline, sincerity, transparency, commitment and consistency on the part of the operators. It is when these basic ingredients are available that there can be an assurance of success for the enterprise. Therefore, for any private university to face the challenges in the 21st century there must be a Vice-Chancellor who will organize human and material resources toward achieving the set objectives. The Vice-Chancellor is the Chief Academic and Administrative Officer of a university. He must be a distinguished scholar in his own right and an outstanding professor of local and international exposure. He should be able to attract highly qualified and experienced staff capable of carrying out the tripartite functions of teaching, research and community service. This will enable the university to produce entrepreneurial graduate who can be key players in driving the nation's socio-economic and technological development in the 21st century. Currently, the dearth of lecturers especially at the senior level is more pronounced in the new generation universities (Momodu, 2006: 6). It is needless to say that not many lecturers would be willing to leave their present job for private universities which may be seen as uncertainty. The problem becomes compounded when compare the statistics of Muslim serving in various universities. If the few ones are removed from the service of their present universities to Muslim universities, what would be the fate of the Muslim students and Islam in those universities. One is not advocating that only Muslim lecturers should be employed to man different posts in the Muslim universities, but they should be in overwhelming majority as to maintain the culture of Islam along with academic excellence.

The issue of funding also plays a crucial role in any private university. As pointed out by Akinkugbe (2003), "Adequate funding is central to the issue of quality of higher education, as lack of academic facilities leads to poor motivation and a general sense of unfulfilment". As widely and succinctly known, if we do not invest in education, we are inadvertently investing in ignorance, with the negative consequences, particularly the element of pervasive poverty and disease. Considerable sum of money has to be spent in meeting with the prescriptive, exploratory and inceptional demands of university projects. This in biological parlance is to sow the seed. The seed will not germinate until it is watered to initiate the biochemical activities of solubilizing complex compounds stored therein. "If it germinates, it cannot grow if there is no light and if there are no nutrients in the process called photosynthesis. If there is no photosynthesis, there is no plant, therefore no food, and no life since it is also recognized spiritually that *All Flesh is Grass*. By investing in education, we are investing in decent and sustainable life for generations yet unborn" (Adedipe, 2005:4).

The level of funding in public universities has continued to decline over the years, thereby incapacitating the universities in the efficient and effective performance of their vital functions of teaching, research and public services to the community. The direct consequences of these are inadequacy or lack of modern equipment in the science and engineering laboratories in the universities. The dearth of infrastructural facilities which have failed to expand proportionally with ever-growing rate of student admission and enrolment. (Omotola, 2005:5). For the wheel to come full circle, it should be pointed out that staffing and funding, which have formed an integral part of the discussion in this section, are central to quality assurance owing to the fact that the quality of staff as well as degree of funding are among the determinants of the quality of any educational setting.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There are a number of factors that are capable of aiding the realization of the noble objective of a Muslim university in Nigeria. Some of these factors are hereby offered as recommendations in

this section. One of them is that given that faith-based universities, Muslim universities inclusive, are emerging only from among private universities, the Federal Government of Nigeria should extend financial assistance to such universities. This recommendation could be based on the promise that any Nigerian educated whether in public or private university, is an asset to the nation as a whole. This will no doubt reduce tuition fee levels in private universities most of which are faith-based, Muslim universities inclusive. Such assistance as given by the Federal Government will also foster a sense of national belonging on the part of such universities.

Two, Islamic countries should, as a matter of priority, support the Muslim universities morally and financially. It is recommended here that rather than giving out cash, equipment could be supplied and buildings erected at the site of the universities. The reason for this recommendation is to avoid any possibility of mismanagement or misappropriation of funds which may arise in the event of physical handling of cash.

Three, Muslim donor agencies as well as private individuals, should donate generously towards sustaining the universities. Part of Zakat funds may be expended on providing necessary facilities. This recommendation is grounded in the Qur'anic provision contained in chapter 9, verse 60, regarding the permissibility of using Zakat funds for an Islamic project.

Four, each university should identify its strength and collaborate with others in the weakness area to avoid duplication. The reason for this recommendation is that, some of such universities have their strengths where lie the weaknesses of others and collaboration among them will definitely bridge such gap.

Five, Muslim parents should be encouraged to patronize Muslims universities by enrolling their children therein. Such a patronage will keep the universities active with regards to student enrolment. Yet such parents should be encouraged to insist on quality education of their children in such universities. The importance of this recommendation lies in its potential for the maintenance of high standards in the universities.

Prospects

These are changes, especially expectations of success. It must be stated at this juncture that Muslim universities are not set up to compete with any religious group. Rather, they are set up in fulfillment of the Prophetic statement which says "search for knowledge from cradle to grave". Hence, for the first time in Nigeria, the universities will be able to produce all kinds of specialists and experts that are ethically different from those produced by the Nigerian conventional universities. Accountants, bankers, economists, engineers, information technologists, journalists that truly combined in them knowledge and characters, learning and discipline as well as holistic education would be produced (Lasisi, 2006: 4).

Muslim universities in Nigeria will also have significant role to play with regards to the enrolment of Muslim students. It is expected that such Muslim students will find Muslim universities attractive and therefore be encouraged to apply to study there. This will go a long way in combating the challenge of enrolment occasioned partly by the secular nature of university education in Nigeria which is why some Muslim parents and students are not favourably disposed to it. The fact that Muslim universities offer an integrated education makes them a worthy and credible alternative to the dominant university system in Nigeria.

There is a good prospect in the expected contribution of Muslim universities in addressing the challenge of gender imbalance in education. There is no gainsaying that there is a missing gap in the Muslim world and Nigeria in particular. For example, in Nigeria, (southern part especially), women are subjected to male doctors treatment, which is un-Islamic. Negative reports about Islam in print and electronic media cannot be over-emphasized. These are felt needs that the private universities can seriously address and bring sanity to the operation.

There also is a good prospect for Muslim universities in the area of quality assurance. The quality of graduates produced in such Muslim educational settings is expected to impact positively on the quality leadership in the country as well as the quality of governance. Ability to provide for quality teaching and non-teaching staff, quality learning environment, and quality graduates with quality character training, will make significant difference between Muslim universities and conventional universities that are dominant in Nigeria. Accordingly, Muslim universities will offer Nigerians a unique educational package that is distinct from what is offered by the conventional universities.

It is pertinent to call attention to another prospect of establishing a Muslim university in Nigeria by stating that such Muslim universities have the opportunity of networking, collaboration and cooperation with other International Islamic Universities in countries like Egypt, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Canada, etc. They can also get technological, economic and intellectual assistance from these universities in form of exchange programme. In addition, the universities will serve as means of employment generation, where people can earn their living. They can also consider the establishment of a farm settlement where *halal* foods can be processed and by so doing, get many people employed and empowered. Business related and technology education can also be given priority so as to meet up with already dominated business and technological world and to give necessary Islamic concept of entrepreneurship.

CONCLUSION

This paper has analyzed the challenges and prospects of establishing a Muslim university in Nigeria. The paper addressed the development of Muslim universities and discussed the characteristics and features that make a university Muslim and, therefore, different from conventional universities. The paper identified in specific terms and critically examined such challenges as could be faced by such an educational project in Nigeria. The challenges identified and examined by the paper include quality assurance, staffing, funding, students' enrolment, and gender imbalance. The analysis in the paper revealed that there are a lot of opportunities and potentials that Muslim or Islamic universities would be able to provide in terms of combining academic with morals, manpower development, employment generation / empowerment, as well as networking with well established institutions / organizations home and abroad. The paper also offered practical recommendations that are capable of facilitating success in such an educational venture in Nigeria.

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