

# FUNDING PATTERN, FINANCIAL AUTONOMY AND THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION IN NIGERIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

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## **Abstract**

*The political and economic history of postcolonial Nigeria is characterized by elite corruption which is a vital component of the ruling class culture. The Academic Staff Union of Nigerian Universities claimed explicitly that within the last decade, the government had misused public funds meant for the educational sector. The decline in the Nigerian educational system is thus seen as one part of a wider social phenomenon. ASUU members have on various occasions accused the government of malpractices and fraud in the implementation of finance related programs for the educational sector such as the Educational Tax Fund, the Stabilization Fund and the NUC grants, amongst other sources of funds. The union has also expressed displeasure with the way the NUC handles their funds, and have called into question NUC's accountability and integrity. It claimed that the Federal Government has refused to put the NUC under the same scrutiny that universities are subjected to. This development questions specifically the extent to which the provisions of the Universities Act of 2003 (which, among other things, assert the autonomy of Nigerian universities) have been implemented, and raise questions more generally about the future of students in Nigeria. While ASUU wants to be academically and administratively autonomous, it*

*wants the government to continue to fund the universities in such a way that their autonomous operation is protected. This question, of course, relates to the quality and effectiveness of service in the Nigerian public service. In this case the union has sought to prevent universities from being turned into a business in the market place, and to this end it continues to ask for state support financially or with regard to funding. The paper assesses the funding pattern of Nigerian educational sector specifically emphasizing on the federal universities. This was done by examining ASUU publications and Federal government policies in relation to funding of the educational sector.*

## **Introduction**

The magnitude of the problem of funding and wage grievances in Nigeria's education sector has led to series of strikes by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (Ajetomobi and Ayanwale, 2009:8). Hence, this disrupts the learning process which further damages the educational system. Students are the most affected of all stakeholders as they are the direct victims of these incessant strike actions by ASUU. The university calendar

has been constantly disrupted due to these industrial actions. This makes learning and research difficult for students.

Parents are also indirect victims of these conflicts. This is because ASUU's frequent strikes have increased the length of time during which their children or wards stay at home, leading to wastage of resources and placing further burdens on household economies which are already often overstretched. Some parents, especially those from low income families, though dissatisfied with the situation, are unable to send their children to private universities. Nevertheless, the rate of enrolment in private universities has been on the increase during the past few years (Sylvester, 2012). Apart from students and their parents, the crisis also affected the *quality of graduates* produced by the universities. This has been revealed by the employers of labour on several occasions. There is a huge mismatch between the output of university trained graduates and the demands of the labour market there by reducing the employment prospects of the average Nigerian undergraduate (Abayomi, 2013). While it can be argued that unemployment in Nigeria is partly attributable to the existence of a larger pool of graduates produced by the university system than the economy can absorb, there are numerous questions surrounding the quality of skilled labour. Even when some graduates are able to find a job, most employers have reservation about the quality of their education. Employers have expressed serious worries about two of the skill areas, namely 'communication' and 'technical skills'. (Dabaleni and Oni, 2000:22). Many graduates lack proficiency in written and spoken English, which is evident from their inability to formulate correct sentences, or even prepare a simple report. In technical fields such as engineering and production, the story is the same. While employers can confirm that graduates are able to demonstrate considerable depth of knowledge in technical concepts, they are hardly able to apply this knowledge or skills in solving problems that enhance productivity. The major reason for this is that, because they are devoid of resources, universities tend to concentrate on theoretical teaching with little or no practical training.

Consequently the average Nigerian graduate is unfamiliar with the tools or processes involved in the work place however conventional such equipment or processes are. Suffice to say that the combination of massive graduate unemployment and low productivity among the few employed graduates represent a poor social return on public investment.

The quality of graduates, arguably, is a reflection of the quality of academic staff, the dearth of learning facilities such as libraries, laboratories, classrooms and so on, as well as inadequate financing. Perhaps, the most critical factor is the problem of deterioration in staff quality. In fact, a direct consequence of the poor emolument and working conditions of university employees is the phenomenon of *brain drain* from Nigerian Universities. The phrase 'brain drain' is a term used by the union members to reflect the loss of intellectual capacity from the Nigerian universities and other professions. Pemedede (2007:361) notes:

Without an internationally competitive remuneration for university teachers in Nigeria, the mass migration of academics to both African and non-African countries where the conditions of service and facilities of academic study are much more attractive would be inevitable

Evidently, there are huge inequalities in the remunerations of university lecturers when compared with those of their colleagues in some other African universities, let alone when compared with academic staff salaries in developed countries. Similarly, prior to the 1970s, the salaries of a professor and the Chief Judge of the federation were at par. Now, the gap is very wide. ASUU has particularly focused on the fact that this wide disparity in wages of lecturers across sectors and across countries has led to significant rates of staff attrition from Nigerian universities in favor of greener pastures overseas or in the private sector. Even those students who graduate with first-class degrees are likely to refuse offers to become graduate assistants because of the poor career prospects.

This so-called 'brain drain' is also fuelled by the underfunding of infrastructural facilities, which further exacerbates the frustration of the Nigerian academics in their teaching and research efforts. It is worthy of note that the Nigerian government is willing to expend huge sums of money on high-profile public projects, whilst neglecting the educational sector. This has serious implications for the retention of a body of key academic staff. The adverse impact of these policies can be better appreciated when one considers what has happened to the health sector in Nigeria, where most of the medical academic staffs in charge of the University Teaching hospitals have gone overseas, because they are relatively underpaid. In the same vein, many African governments, including that of Nigeria, prefer to pay huge sums of money (in foreign currency) to hire expatriates as consultants, while the local intellectuals are devalued and under-appreciated. For example, taking a wider African perspective, Emeagwali (2008:1) notes that it is a contradiction that Africa "spends four billion dollars annually to recruit and pay 100,000 expatriates to work in Africa but fails to spend a proportional amount to recruit the 250,000 African professionals now working outside Africa" In addition, African professionals working in Africa are paid considerably less than similarly qualified expatriates.

The attrition of academic staff from the Nigerian university system can be seen more clearly when the ratio of staff to students is considered. According to statistics from the Federal Government of Nigeria (2008) there were a total of 18,328 academic staff to cater for 433,871 students in Nigerian universities in the year 2000. But by NUC staffing norms, a total of 33,951 staff members ought to be in the system, indicating a shortfall of 15,718 or 46%. A comparison across other African countries also reveals a shortfall with UNESCO standards (Sylvester, 2012)

Yesufu, (1996:207) captures the situation in the Nigerian university as follows:

The student-teacher ratios are worsening in virtually all disciplines. Laboratories are either non-existent or

completely denuded of essential equipment and experimental consumables. Libraries cry out for updating with current books, periodicals and research findings. Teachers are grossly underpaid and many have had to resort to migration to other countries to seek how to keep body and soul together, and further their intellectual development. Many others have abandoned academics to the greener pastures of the private industry, the banks and consultancies. Part time jobs and moonlighting have become the rule rather than exception

This is especially the case in critical fields such as Medicine, Pharmacy, Engineering and Computer Science. The implication of this for development is that as these professionals emigrate, intellectual capital leaves with them, exacerbating the problems of underdevelopment. Even when students enroll for graduate courses in some of these critical disciplines, they usually have no teachers to guide their studies. Consequently, the so-called intellectual capacity required for the future cannot be built.

Awuzie (2009) a former president of ASUU said in a press conference:

Our Country has lost a very significant portion of its academics to the United States of America, Europe and Africa, especially South Africa. The exodus of our young Ph.D holders and academics of other cadres to Southern Africa has intensified in the last seven years. The need to make the conditions of service, salary and non-salary, attractive enough for Nigerian scholars to stay at home even though they are not doing as well as they would do if they were in Europe and America, was the major reason the negotiating committee agreed and even insisted that Nigerian academics should be paid the African average, i.e. the level of remuneration close to what obtains in the African

countries to which Nigerian academics emigrate...The Agreement which ASUU has signed with Government does not address the brain drain in a way that will significantly reduce this threat to the development of Nigeria.

All of these details are provided because they make clearer how these issues affect the quality of the educational sector in Nigeria specifically the Nigerian universities.

### **Historical Perspectives of Education Funding Problems in Nigeria**

The question of wider levels of funding for the Nigerian Higher education sector has to be seen in a longer historical context. The history of ASUU's protest against the underfunding of universities dates back to the 1970s (Pemedede, 2007:361). Prior to this time, the first generation of universities were heavily funded by the government, with supplementary funds and donations from corporate bodies and institutes. For example, the University of Ibadan (UI), which was established in 1948 as the first university in Nigeria was initially funded from two main sources: the Nigerian government provided 70% of the funding, while the remaining 30% was supplied by the United Kingdom. Moreover, the United African Company (UAC) made donations to the school for the construction of the Trenchard Hall. In October 1960, when the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN) was established as the country's first regional university, the government of what was then Eastern Nigeria was responsible for the institution's funding. Supplementary funds also came from the Eastern Nigerian Marketing Board (Onyeonoru, 2006: 05). In the case of Ahmadu Bello University (ABU), Zaria, Ukeje (2002) noticed that:

From the beginning in 1962 to 1975, there was no substantive difference each year between the amount requested by the university and the amount received from the Regional Government. In fact it was reported that there were years in which the amount received was slightly more than the amount requested.

According to an ASUU (2012) adequate funding meant that Nigerian Universities met international standards and could compete globally. This was evident in the fact that Nigerian graduates easily got admission into post-graduate courses in reputable universities abroad. However, the union stated that in 1975, the Federal Government decided to establish seven more universities at Sokoto, Ilorin, Jos, Calabar, Maiduguri, Kano and Port Harcourt and, moreover, went on to take control of the four existing regional universities. Hence, while the establishment of the pre-1975 universities was based on justifiable considerations connected to need, the post-1975 universities were established more or less by military command. "The year 1975 thus marked the beginning of the problem of university funding in Nigeria" (Onyeonoru, 2006:05). After the 1975/76 session, according to a former ASUU president from University of Lagos, universities witnessed a shortfall for the first time in government funding. Since then, the funding of Nigerian universities has been on the decline. This event was followed in 1978 by the federal government's eradication of tuition fees for undergraduate studies in all universities in Nigeria. Between 1979 and 1983, the third generation of universities (both federal and state-owned) came into being through the agency of Second Republic politicians. The government thought it necessary to create more universities, especially in regions that had not been represented in the first or second tranche of university building. The union was of the view that this expansion was motivated by political factors, affected directly by the regionalism in Nigerian politics which is itself a legacy of colonial rule (as cited in Sylvester, 2012), and went unsupported by new funding resources. Thus there was a worsening of the pool of funds available to higher education across the country. From that time onwards, universities could no longer maintain their normal standards of operation in terms of teaching and research facilities.

The federal government reached an agreement with the Union on a number of these issues in 1992 (ASUU, 2001). Based on the agreement, the federal government acknowledged the need to take

bold policy initiatives to address the issue of decline in the university system and revitalize the educational sector. The agreement was to allocate a reasonable budget allocation to the educational sector on a systematic basis. The main issues addressed by the agreement were the creation of a higher education tax fund, provision of funds for library development, more teaching classrooms, health care facilities for staff and students, water supply and laboratory equipment. Although the government has largely failed to fulfill its part of the above agreement, there have been some improvements over time in the provision of funds for some facilities in universities. In June 2001, ASUU and FGN negotiating team reached another consensus. This time the federal government agreed to implement the UNESCO recommendation of 26%, and that the sharing formula for these funds would be 50% to primary and secondary schools and 50% for higher education. This has not been implemented.

ASUU (2012) elaborate on the issue thus;

For the past two and half years, the FGN and ASUU have been engaging in unproductive dialogues, lobbying and negotiations. Anytime the matter is presented before the government, it is either abandoned or killed or unduly delayed. It is time for us to transform our education sector... We will no longer keep quiet and listen to the government tell us that the process and timing of the strike is unacceptable... If we must realize our goal of joining the league of the G20 by 2020, adequate funding of education is inevitable. UNESCO's recommendation for education is 26% of the annual budget. Nigeria has never attained 10%, yet we want to join the world's richest countries by 2020. We must be day dreaming! Let us stop deceiving ourselves and face reality-

Thus, according to the union, the level of funding to universities remains a major outstanding issue in ASUU's conflict and negotiation with the

government as of 2009. Although recent budget allocations to the educational sector have been on the increase in monetary terms, in percentage terms, it has been erratic and far from the UNESCO target (Sylvester 2012). It is crucial, from the union's perspective, that this target is maintained if Nigeria is serious about national development. The union also stated that in early 2008, there was a controversial negotiation between ASUU and the FGN, in which the government delegation dragged out negotiations over funding agreements for almost one full year, pointing to the "global meltdown" as a reason for their repudiation of agreements reached. But the union argues that even in United States, which was badly hit by the crisis, the approach is different. President Obama has increased the budget allocation to education, expanded scholarship opportunities, and increased employment prospects. The same government is also committed to health reforms and defense, and has bailed out corporations. This according to the union goes to show that there is no acceptable excuse for not funding the educational sector. What emerges here is that, the dispute touches not just on questions of resourcing for the sector, but is seen – or presented – as one in which wider issues of national development are at stake. It is, in this context, not surprising that apart from strictly economic factors such as budgetary allocation and inflation, there are other political factors that have adversely affected the level of university funding. These include a lack of accountability, the misappropriation of public funds, wasteful spending, corruption, and the misplacement of priorities by the ruling (military) classes and university administrators in Nigeria (Onyeonoru, 2006:06). These factors have militated against the growth and development of the educational sector over the years. However, ASUU members have increasingly used its industrial relations tools in order to fight against corruption in an increasingly explicit political fashion. An ASUU publication in 2005, for example, explicitly argues that ruling class corruption has destroyed the fabric of the Nigerian society. According to the union, the political and economic history of postcolonial Nigeria is characterized by elite corruption and that corruption is a vital component of the ruling class culture. The union claimed explicitly that within

the last decade, the government had misused public funds meant for the educational sector. The decline in the Nigerian educational system is thus seen as one part of a wider social phenomenon. ASUU members have on various occasions accused the government of malpractices and fraud in the implementation of finance related programs for the educational sector such as the Educational Tax Fund, the Stabilization Fund and the NUC grants, amongst other sources of funds. For example, in 2001 ASUU discovered that 600 Million Naira had been taken from the Stabilization Fund but not disbursed to the Universities for the purposes to which it was intended according to the 2001 FGN-Agreement. The union members have also expressed displeasure with the way the NUC handles their funds, and have called into question NUC's accountability and integrity. They claim that the Federal Government has refused to put the NUC under the same scrutiny that universities are subjected to. The same ASUU publication noted that the public were still awaiting a response from the government regarding several scandals and issues of accountability, misappropriation and corruption such as the corrupt practices of former military rulers since 1996: how the funds allocated for the refurbishment of the country's oil refineries were used, given that the refineries are still not able to function to optimal capacity; the origin of money bags passed around the National Assembly (frequently called 'Ghana must go bags' or 'banana peels') and, perhaps the most significant of all, the alleged looting of about \$12 Billion worth of windfalls from the sale of oil during the Gulf War in the early 1990s by the Babangida administration. ASUU (2012) summed the discussion thus:

The anomalies that exist in this nation have to be corrected. When you have corrupt leaders, there will always be problems. What is earmarked for education is not enough. What we need is to overhaul the entire system. - ASUU Member 2012

The key point here, then, is that the way in which the union has come to present the dispute over budget allocation to the higher education sector has deliberately raised wider political questions about

the role and position of the Nigerian ruling elite. In this sense, one can safely say that the disputes have gone beyond economic matters to become a much more politicized dispute concerned with the wider issue of Nigerian national development, of corruption and of the misappropriation of tax payers' funds by the political elite.

However, beyond the problem of poor wages, ASUU members are also struggling for an increase in the budgetary allocation to the educational sector more generally in order to improve facilities and create a comfortable environment for teaching and learning. Budget allocation has, however, been affected by rising student enrolment and inflationary pressures which increase the funding requirements of universities. When compared to other African countries such as South Africa, Egypt, Botswana and Kenya, Nigeria invests less in higher education and this, according to the union, reveals the seeming lack of value the Nigerian ruling class has placed on higher education. Other factors that have caused the problem of under funding include misplacement of priorities by the ruling class, corruption and misappropriation by political office holders. We can thus say that it is not easy to separate out economic and political aspects in this dispute. This is because the decline in academic wages has seen academics lose their social position in such a way that they have become increasingly positioned as part of a wider working class in Nigeria. The politicization of the dispute can also be explained in that the question of economic remuneration for academics has been shaped by other political factors (such as the intervention of the military, the effects of structural adjustment, etc). In another sense, the wider question of funding for higher education sector in the country is seen as being an issue not just about jobs and security, but also about national development

#### **Funding Pattern of Nigerian Universities**

Matters of interest here relate to that of budget allocation to the education sector as well as relatively basic issues of maintenance, teaching and research facilities, transport and accommodation. These can be usefully reviewed and scrutinized comparatively. Firstly, the budget

allocation to the educational sector is considered below.

**I. Budget Allocation to Education**

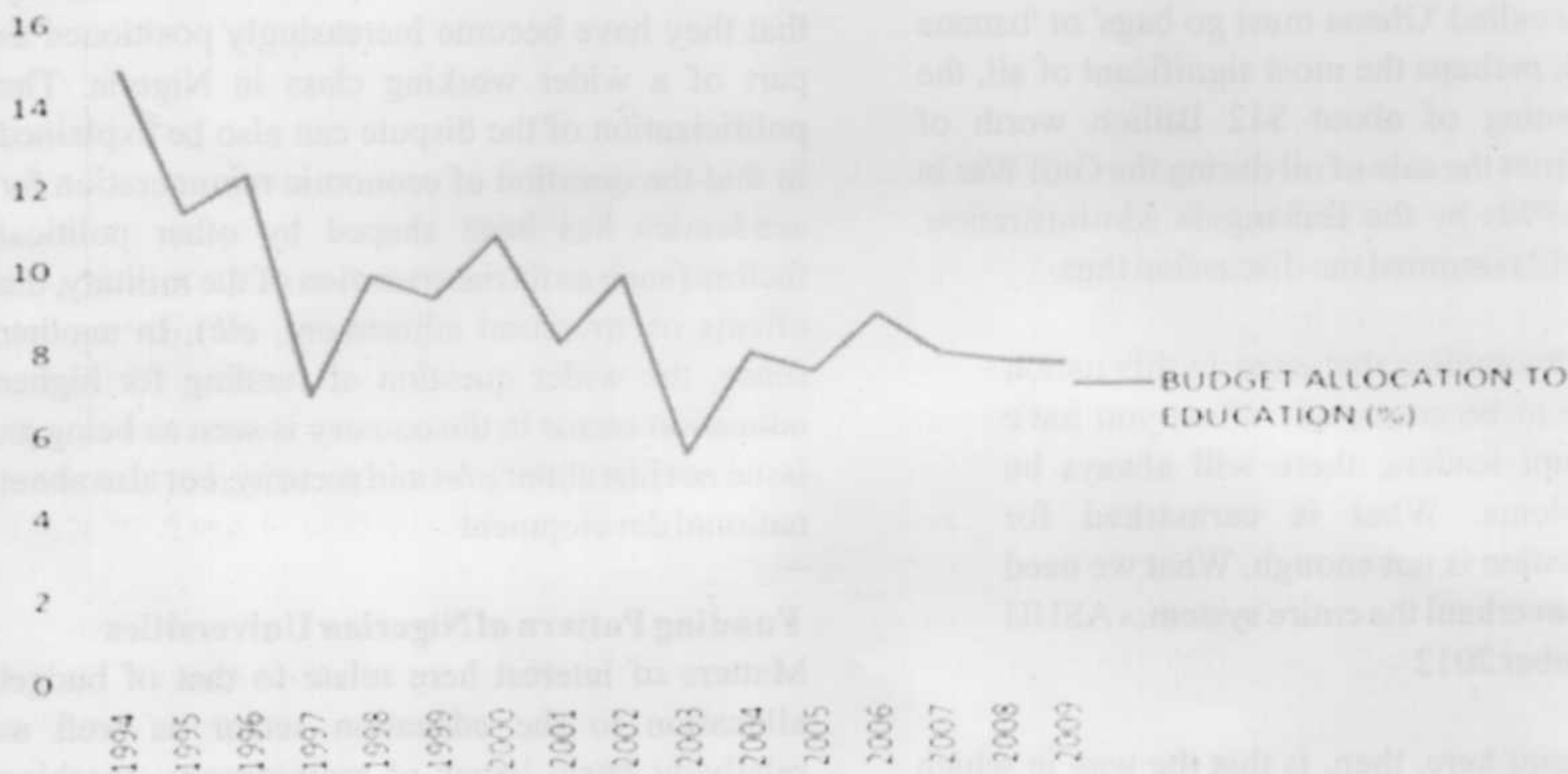
UNESCO guidelines on educational funding suggest that for the educational sector in a developing country like Nigeria to become internationally competitive and yield the desired dividends in terms of national development, both the federal and state governments should devote at least 26% of the annual budget to funding all levels of education. However, at present, the funds allocated to the educational sector in Nigeria do not approach this level. Available statistics reveal that between 1994 and 2009, Nigeria spent, on average, 9.1% of its budget on education (see chart below) When expressed as a percentage of the GDP, the federal government's spending on education over the same period amounts to an average of less than 2%. Nigeria does not fare well in this matter when compared with other African countries for similar periods. For example Ghana spends 3.6 % of its GDP on education; Kenya spends 6.2%, and Zimbabwe, 9.5% (Arikewuyo, 2004:17). Countries like South Africa, Egypt and Kenya spend a high

proportion of their country's earnings on education. "If South Africa can spend reasonable percentage of its government revenue on education, I see no reason why Nigeria should not spend more on education in Nigeria" – ASUU Official (2012). Thus, ASUU (2013) opined that the amount of money allocated to higher education in relation to the available resources reveals a lot about the value the government attaches to the sector.

The plain economic facts are thus evidence of a wider disregard for education among the Nigerian elite. Making reference to a quote by Nelson Mandela, the former President of South Africa on the importance of education. He said (in paraphrase): the only way to keep the people of a nation out of poverty is to give them knowledge, which means to give priority to investing in education. However, if Nigeria is to make any significant progress as a nation, the government will have to increase the value it places on education. In short, what was at stake here was not simply the question of working conditions in the abstract but a wider one of national development more generally.

**ii. Percentage Budget Allocation to Education 1994 to 2009**

**BUDGET ALLOCATION TO EDUCATION (%)**



Source: Figures were sourced from the Federal Ministry of Education (various years), Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) Statistical Bulletin (2009), and Budget Office of the Federation (various years).

These issues, of course, are shaped also by other factors is the question of the budget allocation to education has also been affected by the rising levels of student enrolment which increases the pressure on universities.

### Financial autonomy

Prior to 1975, the government had no business with the determination of fees and charges for universities. Students were either financed by government scholarships or by their own sponsors. The abolishing of tuition fees in 1975 by the federal military government marked a significant loss of revenue for education. While the government, on the one hand, wants the universities to find alternative funding sources and become financially autonomous the universities through their union, on the other hand, argue that the government has the resources to finance the universities and should continue to take full responsibility. The latter also want education to be free. In general, the government has been the sole source of University funding in Nigeria, making universities almost wholly dependent on the fiscal fortunes of the state. For example, available estimates from the NUC (2001) reveal that 98% of the recurrent expenditure of universities is financed through grants by the federal government. The NUC is the body vested to disburse money to universities in the country. A major part of the functions of the NUC are financial in nature: (1) advising the government and making enquiry into the financial needs, both recurrent and capital of university education in Nigeria; (2) receiving block grants from the Federal Government and allocating them to federal universities; (3) taking into account, in advising the Federal and State governments on university finances, such grants as may be made to the universities by State Governments and by persons and institutions in and outside Nigeria. For the union, the NUC is seen as a conduit of government control over University operations and this increased central control over funding questions is thus also, according to the union, detrimental to institutional autonomy.

### Conclusions

The significance of funding is to satisfy the growing student population in Nigerian

universities yet, the university is expanding everyday both numerically and curriculum-wise, but funding has not increased to meet up with this growth. At the same time, there is has been no commensurate increase in the level of funding to meet up the demand of the public universities in Nigeria. The increase in enrolment levels has placed substantial pressures on available infrastructure and facilities across various campuses, further depleting scarce amenities which fundamentally impact on the quality of teaching and research in the Nigerian public universities.

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