

ADVANCING NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY EDUCATION SECTOR TO WORLD-CLASS THROUGH ADEQUATE FUNDING FOR QUALITY ACADEMIC STANDARD

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Abstract

The Nigerian education sector is still suffering from neglect and chronic under-funding, which results in low academic standards. With the little budgetary allocations to education, there is still glaring disconnect between the budget contents and actual projects on the ground. Every sector in education is therefore affected by corruption that undermines its performance for academic excellent. The gross underfunding of education is clearly reflected in the Nigeria's budgetary allocations and exposed as the biggest challenge leading to numerous problems of brain drain, corrupt practices, lecturers' growing nonchalant attitudes, and outbound mobility of Nigerian students to foreign universities at a rapid pace among others. Against this background, this paper discussed the development of university education in Nigeria, objectives of higher education, underfunding and Nigerian universities, and implications of underfunding to the Nigerian universities, Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) struggles for funding of Nigerian university education among others. The latter part of the paper contained recommendation that centers on the philanthropies, private organizations and other stakeholders that need to be encouraged in funding the Nigerian university education system to ensure quality and overall academic standard.

Keywords: Academic-standard, Education, University, Underfunding, Quality-education

Introduction

The Hussey reform of 1929 led to the establishment of the Yaba Higher College in 1932 and was officially opened in 1934. The initial purpose was to provide tertiary education that will train middle man-power to assist in government departments. The Nigerian nationalists saw the aims and programmes of the college as being very narrow and the college

suffered severe criticisms. The pressure by the nationalists led to the establishment of the university college at Ibadan. The students of the Yaba college were transferred to form the nucleus of the university college, Ibadan in 1948 (Osokoya in Akpan, 2015). However, it was the university college that set the pace for the development of higher education in Nigeria.

Development of University Education in Nigeria

The development of university education in Nigeria started with the inauguration of Elliot Commission of 1943, the report that led to the establishment of University College, Ibadan (UCI) as an affiliate of the University of London in 1948. In April 1959, the colonial Government set up the Sir Eric Ashby Commission to advise it on the higher education needs of the country for the first two decades. Before the submission of the report, the Eastern Region Government established its own university, University of Nigeria, Nsukka in 1960. The implementation of the Ashby report led to the establishment of the regional universities in the Western and the Northern Regions: University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University), Ile-Ife and Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria as well as the University of Lagos all in 1962. The University College, Ibadan became a full-fledged University in 1963. In 1970, the Midwestern Region (carved out of the Western Region) established the University of Benin. These six universities are referred to as first generation universities and are independent of one another; which later brought to light the need for university autonomy (WES, 2017).

It was also based on the Ashby recommendation that a National Universities Commission (NUC) as an administrative unit in the Cabinet Office of the Federal Government was established in 1962 and became a statutory body in 1974. This commission was charged with the responsibility of monitoring and controlling the affairs of the universities. Since its establishment, the NUC has been working hard in planning for university education in Nigeria in areas of quality control, accreditation, funding and establishment of new universities. Through its functions NUC is aptly described by Federal Government as a regulatory body for university education in Nigeria (Osokoya in Akpan 2015).

During the third National Development Plan (1975-1980) and owing to strident demands for more universities in the wake of the geo-political restructuring of Nigeria into twelve States, the Federal Government took over all the regional universities and established seven more universities located in: Calabar, Ilorin, Jos, Sokoto, Maiduguri, Port-Harcourt and Kano - the second-generation universities. The Federal Government established specialized Universities of Technology between 1980 and early 1991 in: Owerri, Makurdi, Yola, Akure, Bauchi and a University of Agriculture in Abeokuta. During this period, some of the States also established universities, as in Rivers, Anambra, Lagos, Osun, Imo, Cross-River and Ondo States. The Federal Government also took over some State universities as new states were carved out of existing ones and these involved the Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka and University of Uyo while the defunct Open University in Abuja became the University of Abuja with a Centre for Distance Learning and another University of Agriculture established in Umudike. The universities established during this period are the third-generation universities (WES, 2017).

The inclusion of education on the concurrent list in the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria means participation of the States governments, the private sector and individuals in the delivery of education to the public was made possible by Decree No. 9 of 1993. The public was invited to participate in offering university education in 1983, but the in-orderly manner in which all the 31 universities were established led to their closure. However, the Federal Government suspended the closure order when Decree No. 9 of 1993 was promulgated. This led to the orderly establishment of private universities in Nigeria; the first three having been licensed in 1999 were established to be citadels of learning and development (WES, 2017).

The Nigerian education sectors have grown phenomenally, especially since the early 2000s, when it was widely opened up for private sector investment and participation, there are now 277 universities in Nigeria, of which 149 were private, 65 federal and 63 state-owned as of 2024 (Muhammad & Okunade, 2025). Also, Jega (2023) stated that the greatest change has been in the explosion in student population and the number of aspirants seeking university admission. The total students' enrolment in all Nigerian universities grew from just over 2000 in 1962 to about 1.9 million in July 2017 and to over 2.1 million as of 2022. Over two million candidates have registered to take the Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME) in March 2018 and to 1,595,779 in 2023 as stated by Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB)

According to WES (2017) the rapid expansion of the nation's higher education sector in recent decades has failed to accommodate the overwhelming demand of the substantial number of would-be college and university students who turned away from the system. Nigeria is number one country of origin for international students from Africa that sends the substantial number of students overseas for studies, in which the outbound mobility numbers are rising at a rapid pace.

According to data from the UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS), the number of Nigerian students abroad increased by 164 percentage in the decade between 2005 and 2015 alone—from 26,997 to 71,351. Nigeria remains a dynamic growth market for international students, because its higher education sector has been overburdened by strong population growth.

Objectives of Higher Education

Section 8(59) of the National Policy on Education (2014) outlined the aims of higher education, which is the contribution to national development through high level manpower training. It is also the development of the intellectual capabilities of the individual to understand and appreciate their local and external environment, acquisition of both physical and intellectual skills, which enables the individual to be self-reliant and useful member of the society, promotion and encouragement of scholarship and community services for national unity and the promotion of national cohesion, understanding and integration.

Also, section 8(60) of the National Policy on Education (2014) stated that higher education in Nigeria should vigorously pursue these goals through: teaching and learning, research and development, as well as knowledge generation and dissemination, international cooperation, dedicated service to the communities through extra-mural and consultancy

service. In spite of the laudable goals of higher education, the Nigerian tertiary (higher) education sub-sector suffers from certain challenges that have undermined its quality.

These include inadequate funding, paucity of academic staff, inadequate and deteriorating infrastructural and instructional facilities, as well as inadequate admission slots in the universities, on the other hand low patronage of the polytechnics and colleges of education that requires immediate address with the seriousness they deserve.

Funding and the State of Nigerian Universities

Muhammad and Okunade (2025) stated that funding is the biggest problem of Nigeria right from basic education sector to tertiary education, the annual budgetary allocations channeled towards education generally, has never met the 26% benchmark set by UNESCO. Yet, from 1999 to 2025 the budget set aside for the whole education sector expenditures in Nigeria by the Federal Government is not meet the UNESCO standard as presented below.

Federal Allocation for Education Sector from 1999 to 2025

Year	Allocation in Billion	Percentage
1999	#23.047	11.2%
2000	#44.225	8.3%
2001	#39.885	7.0%
2002	#100.2	5.9%
2003	#64.76	11.8%
2004	#72.22	7.8%
2005	#92.59	8.3%
2006	#166.6	8.7%
2007	#137.48	6.07%
2008	#210.00	13%
2009	#183.36	13%
2010	#249.08	12%
2011	#356.51	7.24%
2012	#400.15	8.43%
2013	#427.52	8.7%
2014	#493.45	10.21%
2015	#492	10.63%

2016	#483	7.92%
2017	#455	7.41%
2018	#496	7.04%
2019	#512	7.1%
2020	#541	6.9%
2021	#65.3	5.6%
2022	#87.5	5.7%
2023	#1.54 Trillion	5.3%
2024	#1.08 Trillion	5.98%
2025	#3.52 Trillion	6.4%

Sources: Adapted from Eme and Ike, 2017 with update by authors.

Table 1 indicates that the Federal allocation to education sector will not be enough to provide the facilities and human resources needed for the whole education. Also in his analysis, Tilde (2024) maintained that the resources at our hand cannot sufficiently train our children to compete at the global stage. Nigerian universities are struggling with chronic underfunding by the government. Over the years, the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) has sought to compel the government through strikes to fund universities properly, but the issues remain unresolved.

In 2009, the federal government agreed to invest N1.5 trillion in university funding following negotiations with ASUU. However, despite several rounds of negotiations, the government has consistently reneged on the agreement, and since then, the number of federally-owned universities has increased significantly, but the budgetary allocation for education has remained meager, often covering only personnel costs. Federal government expenditures on education are usually below 10% of its total expenditures, infrastructure development largely relies on the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFUND) (Majeed, 2025).

Amoka (2023) maintains that federal and state governments are happy to establish new universities for TETFund to fund their infrastructure and in return list such universities among their visible achievements in the education sector. And when they realized that the administration cost of their newly established universities became burden on them; they end up compromising their quality standards and reducing them to more of honorary degrees awardees, and a platform for the professorial attainment of their friends and families. WES (2017) added that Federal Government is responsible for sustaining public universities, has over the past decade not significantly increased the share of its budget dedicated to education, despite exploding student numbers and its newly established universities. More so, education is a non-profit making venture to governments but it is profit making venture to individuals and private organizations that leads to the proliferation of private tertiary institutions

nationwide, most of which lack infrastructural facilities of the tertiary institution, talk less of quality education, and they do compromise the standard among others.

Implications of Underfunding to Nigerian Universities

The consequences of underfunding are enormous ranging from poor quality of universities, deterioration of basic infrastructure, dried-up scholarship funds, lacks of skilled and experience lecturers, fraud, overcrowd classes and lecture halls, outmoded teaching and learning processes, examination malpractice, deprived technology, inadequate resources, faulty and non-quality projects, compromising standards, bribery and corruption, etc. Underfunding also endangered lecturers to untold hardship and hazards for using the archaic resources, dilapidated structures, deprived infrastructure etc., apart from intense physical and mental pressures attached to their workload and other community services or national assignment they are rendering.

Research Gate (2025) stated that underfunding university education in Nigeria has severe consequences which include: deficiency in manpower training and development that affects the quality of education that led to poorly trained graduates, limited research capacity that hinders research conduct which is essential for national development and innovation, poor infrastructures, such as lack of well-equipped libraries and ICT facilities that makes it difficult for students to access quality resources. It is important to note that sub-quality of education that undermines the overall quality of education, often lead to graduates who are not well-prepared for the workforce. Strike actions and university closures are often resulted in disrupting the academic calendar and affecting students' learning experience.

WES (2017) added that over the past decade, strikes have become an almost ritual occurrence at Nigerian public universities, disrupting lectures, delayed graduations, the loss income for university staff, and further eroding the already low trust in the education system. Yes, under former President Buhari, public universities were paralyzed by strikes of 1 month in 2017, 3 months in 2018, 9 months in 2020 and 8 months in 2022, over demands for funding increment and better employment benefits for university staff.

However, WES (2017) states that while efforts at increasing capacity by building new universities have generally been positive for access in absolute terms, they have also created issues related to instructional quality. A large proportion of lecturers at universities are assistant professors without doctoral degrees: Reports from 2012 suggested that only 43 percent of Nigeria's teaching staff held Ph.D. degrees, and that Nigeria had one of the worst lecturer-to-student ratios in the world. The University of Abuja and Lagos State University, for example, reportedly had lecturer to student ratios as high as 1:122 and 1:114 respectively.

World universities rankings are means of accessing the best university in terms of quality teaching, research environment, research quality, industry engagement and international outlook. They do provide the best relative guide available. It's thus worth noting that, in 2025 only one of Nigeria's universities is currently listed among the top 1,000 in the International Times Higher Education Ranking: Covenant University (private) ranked 801 out of 1000, followed by Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria (public), Landmark University (private), University of Ibadan (public), and University of Lagos (public) ranked 1001 respectively. Nigerian public universities fall within the top 1000 best universities globally. But in Africa, five of South African universities ranked top: University

of Cape Town and University of Witwatersrand 201 respectively, Stellenbosch University 251, University of Pretoria and University of KwaZulu Natal 451 respectively (Times Higher Education Ranking, 2025).

Nonetheless, Nigerian university education sector is not immune from siphoning funds intended for development projects into private uses; there exist widespread corruption and opacity in the procurement processes, irregularities in the contract awards, higher scale theft, nonchalant attitudes and embezzlement of public properties. Corruption from within education and the wider public sector are enormous, its compounded impacts weaken national capacity for development. For example, Majeed (2025) stated that in 2023, Premium Times Newspaper reported that Nigerian lawmakers demanded N5 million from universities to pass their 2024 budget. The paper uncovered how a committee of the House established an extortion scheme targeting universities, colleges of education, and polytechnics. The investigation eventually led to an ICPC probe, but not much has been heard about the exercise.

Also in 2024, the paper reports that lawmakers are using intimidation and threats to force the heads of universities to pay N8 million each to approve their allocations in the 2025 budgets.

This newspaper's investigation revealed that the extortion scheme involves senators and members of the House of Representatives. The lawmakers, operating through the Senate Committee on Tertiary Education and TETFund (Tertiary Education Trust Fund) and the House Committee on University Education, are demanding money from universities to approve their budgets. Using an elaborate and complex system created by the lawmakers, 60 federal university vice-chancellors are required to pay N8 million each (N4 million each to Senate and House Committees).

The lawmakers are expecting N480 million from the extortion, and they have assigned two vice-chancellors from the North-central and North-west geopolitical zones to coordinate the payments to avoid detection. However, the current demand of N8 million appears to have further strained the vice-chancellors (Majeed, 2025).

ASUU Struggles versus Funding of the Nigerian University Education

ASUU shall remain a household name and an element in the struggle to ensure proper funding of education, quality university education and better working conditions for staff of the universities among others. ASUU was formed in 1978 from the National Association of University Teachers (NAUT) and it never relented in its strong resistance to authoritarian and harsh policies against university education among others struggles despite all the harassment and intimidation the union and its members faced as a consequence.

One of the greatest achievements of ASUU on the tussle in funding university education is the formation of Education Trust Fund (ETF) now TETFUND. The 1992 ASUU strike that led to the proscription of the Union and the traumatization of its members during the military regime led to the establishment of the ETF. The 1992 strike was the first time that the weapon of hunger was deployed by the government through the stoppage of salaries in order to break the members. The failure of such a brutal approach forced the government to negotiate with ASUU after 3 months. This led to the 1992 ASUU-FG Agreement that gave rise to a new package of the condition of service, university autonomy, and arrangement on

funding through ETF on 3rd September 1992. ASUU developed the framework of ETF. In January 1993, the Education Tax Act No7 of 1993 was promulgated alongside other education-related Decrees (Amoka, 2023).

The funding issue continued as Obasanjo's government came to overstretch ETF and tertiary institutions were not getting the required intervention. ASUU, as usual, continued to draw the attention of the government to that. It was only during the 2009 ASUU strike that the mandate of ETF was refocused. In 2011, the Education Tax Act was repealed and replaced by the Tertiary Education Trust Fund Act. The irony is that after realizing that ETF was a brilliant idea, FG never apologized to ASUU for the ill-treatment of the Union. And for the struggle for TETFund to be what it is today, nobody bothers about the history to give credit to the initiator of the idea (Amoka, 2023).

For example, during the last 2022 strike action embarked upon by ASUU, in which Federal Government apply *no work no pay rule*, Legit (2022) reported that 21 senior lecturers, including professors, have died at the Federal University of Calabar in Cross Rivers State. The report added that the development is the same across universities in the country.

According to Vanguard, in Legit, the academics died due to the prolong 2022 industrial actions embarked upon by ASUU, and the death toll increases every day in different universities across the country. ASUU has recorded unexpected casualties because many lecturers lost their lives due to unavailable funds to care for their immediate needs, particularly health challenges. The ASUU's demands then include payment of earned allowances and salaries for lecturers, improved funding and maintenance for tertiary institutions, the renegotiation of ASUU and Federal Government 2009 agreement among others. Yes Amoka (2023) submits that many University lecturers were punished through starvation for being too patriotic and daring to protest the strangulation of the public universities by an insensitive government. It will surely take some years for the universities to recover from such damages.

Abdelmalik (2022) stated that no one will see the lifestyle of the political class and believe that Nigeria is poor; one cannot be too poor to fund university but rich enough to be establishing new ones' as constituency projects. He strongly believes that at the level of Nigeria, education at all levels should be properly funded. The funding should not be a problem if Nigeria properly defines its priorities. He further added that when you watch the luxury lifestyle of the political class and their family, it gets more difficult to convince someone that Nigeria cannot afford quality education for its citizens.

Public University education is not a business venture and is not registered as one. It is an institution to train a skilled workforce for the nation and create new ideas and knowledge. But universities have been urged to improve on their IGR (Internally Generated Revenue) from the students. No doubt that university education became high-priced for the sons and daughters of a common man. Corroborating this, WES (2017) expatiated that many students in public universities in 2016 experienced tuition fee increases amidst deterioration of basic infrastructure, including shortages of electricity and water supplies. The crisis also dried up scholarship funds for foreign study, placing constraints on international students' flows from Nigeria.

However, amidst the 2022 strike, there was a viral video of former President's Wife, celebrating her daughter's graduation from foreign university, while Nigerian students were

at home for eight months due to the negligence of her husband. The move to jeopardize the ASUU by the then Labor Minister, Dr. Ngige (who took the ASUU-Federal Government issue as a personal fight between him and ASUU president), who through NUC (National Universities Commission) ordered all federal Vice-chancellors to open the universities, register another trade unions for university lecturers (Congress of Nigerian University Academics (CONUA) and Nigerian Association of Medical and Dental Academics (NAMDA)), and the shortlisting of the then Education Minister, Malam Adamu Adamu among the recipients of National Honor Award.

Hmm! This is Nigeria, once a British journalist described as a “*classless*” society, by which wealth, educational attainment, and social class are hardly reliable predictors of people’s attitudes and value systems. Regrettably despite the highest number of university dons served and serving Nigeria at different levels and capacities, the 32 years (1993-2025) of teaching professionalization in Nigeria, plus 47 years (1978-2025) of ASUU’s long-practice of mediation, and lobby, the ends results is deception, frozen salary, promotion denied, divide-and-rule, intimidation, authorities abuse of power through detention, torturing and brutalizing (educators’ products and their colleagues in the corridor of power), nothing has changed for better.

Nevertheless, public universities are not owned by ASUU but for all Nigerians, it however requires collective responsibility to reposition them and give them the best global outlook. Academics alone can no longer draining their blood to keep them alive, apart from the physical and mental pressures attached to their work load and other community services they are rendering. The viral ordeal of a professor from UsmanuDanfodio University, Sokoto seeking crowd-funding of ₦13 million for urgent medical treatment which could not realize, and he was later became bedridden, helpless and died. This is a clear testimony of unfolding catastrophe affecting university educators in Nigeria. Academics are patiently waiting to see what Nigerians can offer to save their universities from brain drain and collapse? This is a time to join hands and salvage the varsities from the Nigerian capitalists who have been freely benefited from the skewed system. The downfall of ASUU is the rise of capitalists via Private Universities and a loss to a common man in Nigeria.

Adequate University Funding for Quality Education

Quality is an accepted standard and the yardstick used in determining whether something is high or low in standard (Nandam in Gidado & Daramola, 2022). This implies that sustainability of standard describes an assurance of attainment of quality. In the same vein, Igbiniedion in Gidado and Daramola (2022) states that in education, quality assurance gives a guarantee that an output of the educational system can relatively exhibit all the skills expected of the level of education they successfully passed through.

Nigerian universities with its innovative, overzealous and dedicated academics have the potential of growing if they are grossly funded. They can stand out as the best to compete in the ever-changing complex world. The improvement in the growing presence of over 21 Nigerian universities featured in the Times Higher Rankings World University in 2025 testified it beyond doubt. Even with the severe underfunding, poor remunerations and other problems, Nigerian academics remain committed and are proud to serve under every pressure- a costly requirement for every success.

Similarly, Aluko and Bolanta in Gidado and Daramola, (2022) report that quality assurance is seen as a series of activities set up deliberately to make sure that an entity fulfills the requirement of quality that is needed by using standard process like funding, training and quality control. Quality therefore entails getting the right inputs (competent manpower, qualified students and material resources, such as classrooms and textbooks) which if well blended, would give the desired result. (Amoka, 2023) stated that the political class just needs to wear the cap of sincerity and give the universities the needed support to make them among the world's best universities

The quality of every society is largely predicted on the quality of its educational system, and no society grows above the quality of its education. Quality education relies among others on adequate funding which is deprived of by the Nigerian governments. Ensuring quality standard of the Nigerian university education save much for Nigeria as happen to be a leading African country with highest outflow of international students, contributing huge amount of money to foreign economy. Adequate funding of Nigerian university education shall undoubtedly enhance its quality standard to satisfy the educational needs of the society.

Conclusion

Sadly, Nigerians seems to have kept quiet about the traumas that some government's subjected university educators to in their struggles to safeguard the Nigerian university system from degeneration as what it encompasses in public primary and secondary education sector. Nigeria's contribution of billions of dollars to foreign nations economies via sponsoring youngsters to study abroad is growing at a rapid pace, the money devoted for that is enough to properly fund many universities to the standard as evidence and submitted by WES (2017). Also, UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS) presents the number of Nigerian students abroad as increased by 164 percent between 2005-2015 alone from 26,997 to 71,351; as in US (United States) alone there were 10,674 students as of 2015/2016 alone, which contributed to an estimated sum of US \$324 million to US economy in 2015/2016. However, it is through adequate funding of university education system, Nigeria can create a safe and supportive learning environment for all learners thereby competing in the world university ranking.

Recommendations

Based on what has been discussed, the paper offers the followings recommendations:

1. The Federal government should urgently ensure the implementation of the various negotiations and renegotiations committees' recommendations in the best interest of Nigerian university system and the country at large.
2. Philanthropies, private individuals and organizations and other stakeholders should be encouraged in funding the Nigerian university education system to ensure quality and overall academic standard.
3. The Federal government needs to prioritize education funding from its part and to ensure transparency and effective resource management in the university education sector by tackling reckless expenses and spending for better service delivery.

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