Nigerian Higher Education Research and the Challenges of Sustainable Development

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ABSTRACT

This is a review paper focusing on research in Nigerian higher education and the impacts on the sustainability of Nigeria as a nation. This article considered research as critical to the development of any country. However, research in Nigerian universities is not encouraging because of some challenges: inadequate facilities, funds, and corruption. Research facilities in universities are not adequate for research and postgraduate studies. The little available funds in universities for research are mismanaged due to corruption. Postgraduate supervision in Nigerian universities is marred with corruption, laziness, and the attrition rate is high. It was argued that the difficulties impact the sustainable development of the country. The paper concludes with suggestions of ways forward; among these is the overhauling of Nigerian universities' postgraduate programs. The university doctoral studies must be reformed to ensure that the supervision of students follows international standards. The university management should not leave doctoral students at the mercy of the supervisor. There should be a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the supervisor and supervisee monitored by university management. Violators, students, or lecturers of the MoU agreement should be adequately sanctioned.

Keywords: Research, Sustainable development, Corruption, postgraduate, Higher education. Memorandum of understanding.

Highlights of this paper
- This is a review paper focusing on research in Nigerian higher education and the impacts on the sustainability of Nigeria as a nation.
- This article considered research as critical to the development of any country. However, research in Nigerian universities is not encouraging because of some challenges: inadequate facilities, funds, and corruption.

1. INTRODUCTION

Research is the bedrock of any sustainable development worldwide (Fayomi, Okokpujie, & Mfon, 2018). The critical position of research in sustainable development is a significant reason for collaboration between researchers of different countries (FONA, 2009). According to Bachiorri (2016), achieving sustainable development in the world requires knowledge through good research. Research and education bring solutions to challenges nations face in their sustainability (Ibrahim, 2017). The research function of academia remains a prime source of knowledge (Kearney, 2008). Research is critical to sustainable development in education (Lemon, Lambrechts, Fleming, & Lee, 2016). Research in higher institutions is essential for many reasons: to enhance the institution's image and reputation and contribute to the knowledge base (Mafenya, 2014). Research remains a critical function of the higher institution globally (Nwakpa, 2015). Research is undoubtedly considered significant academic tasks; it is viewed as a vital area of the academic system of career advancement (Turk & Ledić, 2016). Despite this, countries worldwide are confronted with increased demand to grow their research and knowledge production (Kearney, 2008).

However, research in Nigeria's higher education is still in the same position as developed and developing countries. Quality and relevance have been the challenges of research globally (Kearney, 2008) including in Nigeria. The quality and relevance of research studies in Nigerian institutions to the needs of society is a challenge. Conducting adequate research that would be relevant to the needs of the 21st century require fund. Research is expensive and often includes some unseen financial burdens for higher education institutions (Meek & Teichler, 2009). There is increasing recognition of the significance of research in a global knowledge-based economy in all nations of the world (Meek & Teichler, 2009). Research capacity is vital for all countries because of their economies and the requirements of effective management and sound policy-making in their governments (Johnstone & Marcucci, 2007).

This review paper will be considered under the following headings: challenges of conducting sound research in Nigerian Universities, sustainable development in Nigeria, the ways forward, and conclusion.

2. CHALLENGES OF RESEARCH IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES

Mogaji (2019) observed that there are one hundred and seventy-four (174) universities in Nigeria. The author gave this figure based on the information obtained at the NUC website in August 2019. The total number comprises both public and private universities. Several documented reports show that conducting adequate research in any of these universities faces challenges (Yusuf, 2012). Studies revealed that the standard of research in Nigerian universities is low compared with universities in developed countries (Desmennu & Owoaje, 2017; Nwakpa, 2015) due to some challenges. Many of these challenges are peculiar to Nigeria as a nation, while some are global issues.

Talebloo and Baki (2013) identified the challenges facing postgraduate students in Malaysia's university as facilities, social environment, and the academic system. The universities in Nigeria may not be different from this, as Nigeria's research facilities are also appalling. Supporting this, Anifowose and Lawal (2013) lamented the inadequacy of physical facilities in Nigerian universities, emphasizing the Federal University of Technology Minna. The facilities to conduct world-class research are inadequate in most Nigerian universities (Nwakpa, 2015), which

has hindered research activities in these institutions. The challenges postgraduate students often encounter in most universities are inadequate research facilities (Desmennu & Owoaje, 2017).

Besides, funding is critical to research activities in all universities of the world. Mafenya (2014) observed that funding is one of the challenges facing higher education research in South African universities. The financing of research in Sub-Saharan Africa universities has been challenging for both government-aided and private universities because of financial constraints (Kyaligonza, Kimoga, & Nabayego, 2015). Research funding in most developed countries and a few developing countries are allocated to universities and individual researchers (Bloch & Sørensen, 2015). There are financial challenges everywhere, including the industrialized nations; however, this challenge is more remarkable in Africa (Teferra, 2013).

Research activities in Nigerian institutions have not received the proper attention it deserves due to insufficient funding (Baro, Bosah, & Obi, 2017). Making funding available to lecturers for research in Nigerian universities is inadequate, and the conditions for accessing the fund where available are stringent (Akpan, Archibong, & Undie, 2010).

Nigerian universities lack prestige and underperform in research (Mba, 2019). The author cited the Time Higher Education world university rankings that only the Covenant University and University of Ibadan were among the world's top one thousand in 2019. The author cited that Nigerian universities produce only 44% of the scholarly output of South Africa and 32% of Egypt, even with more universities in Nigeria than these countries. This might not be unconnected with inadequate facilities and funding. Research funding should not be left only to the government as it is done in most Western countries. A country like South Africa has robust research grant opportunities compare to Nigeria for lecturers and students in various universities. According to Luruli and Mouton (2016), South African universities annually receive funding amounts calculated based on students, staff, and infrastructure. These grants are not only from the government but from different agencies. The Nigerian government's commitment to research development is primarily from the TETFund, which is highly commendable (Ibrahim, 2017; Oraka, Ogbodo, & Ezejiofor, 2017). However, much is yet to be realized through this government agency because of corruption.

Corruption is one of the enemies of research development in Nigeria's higher education. The TETFund would have made the same impart the National Research Foundation of South Africa made in funding research if not for corruption. Most heads of Nigerian institutions collaborate with lecturers to divert research funds. Many lecturers collect money for conferences but fail to attend such meetings. Institution-Based Research (IBR) does not thrive well in most institutions because it fails to utilize research funds after collecting the capital. Some Provosts and Rectors do not adequately release the funds to the researchers who submitted the proposal to the TETFund after approval.

Some students collect money for doctoral studies but abandon the program. There are situations where the institutions' management fails to release funds to many postgraduate students to run the program smoothly. A good number of these students abandoned their studies when funds are not released for the program. In Nigeria, the participation of private agencies in financing doctoral programs is inadequate. Private agencies' involvement in financing postgraduate studies in many countries through a Public-Private Partnership (PPP) is commendable and impacts their doctorates' quality.

The low quality of doctoral degrees in Nigerian universities is problematic. Postgraduate studies worldwide are facing challenges because of many factors (Lin & Scherz, 2014). Postgraduate education today is confronting multiple challenges in terms of quality and demand (Kearney, 2008). Critical in doctoral studies in any university is

supervision. According to Holtman and Mukwada (2014), the quality of academic research supervision is one of the significant determinants of time-to-degree and throughput rates (p.179).

The untimely completion of the doctoral program has been a significant problem for postgraduate students in Nigeria, which many have attributed to inadequate supervision and other reasons (Desmennu & Owoaje, 2017). It is common in Nigerian universities that most postgraduate supervisors delayed their students (Oni, Onyenania, & Momoh, 2017) for the best-known reasons. However, Holtman and Mukwada (2014) opined that some students' supervisors lack experience supervising postgraduate students.

The case of postgraduate supervision in Nigerian universities is a fundamental issue requiring every stakeholder's education attention. Many doctoral students have been frustrated out of the program because of their supervisors. The corruption in Nigerian politics has found its way to academics through students' supervisors and lazy students. Most Nigerian students are not serious about a postgraduate study, even the doctorate: these students induced some supervisors with gifts to have their ways. Unfortunately, students who could not afford such assistance suffer severe setbacks in their studies. Many doctoral students in Nigerian universities spent more than five years only on the proposal, which is very bad. Some supervisors have no time for their students and delayed the innocent students unnecessarily. The relationship between student and supervisor in Nigerian universities likes to that of a slave and master. Many supervisors in Nigerian universities count it to be an offense for a doctoral student or a supervisee to make a phone call to them on issues related to their studies. This attitude of the supervisors in the Nigerian universities is adversely impacting research in higher education.

Nigerian postgraduate students are still using the 'hard copy method' to submit research manuscripts to their supervisors in this global internet connectivity era. In advanced countries, supervision is by the electronic method: this is the best method. It helps the supervisor attend to students' submissions anywhere without hindrance, and the entire supervision process is seamless. The challenge to this is because many of the supervisors cannot operate computers adequately. This issue must be addressed in our universities because, according to Van Rensburg, Mayers, and Roets (2016), research outputs depend much on the production of Master and doctoral graduates. In addition, many supervisors delayed giving feedback to their students, which most time resulted in the changing of titles. According to Grant, Hackney, and Edgar (2014) it is one of the supervisor's roles to promptly advise the student of unsatisfactory progress concerning any aspect of their candidature (p.4). Ismail, Abiddin, and Hassan (2011) often complain of erratic contact with supervisors attributed to busy administrative and teaching schedules or the supervisor's absence. Consequently, there is a low research output in Nigeria compared with some African countries, as shown in Table 1.

Table-1. Research Output of Kenya and Comparator Countries (2010 and 2018).

Country	Citable documents per 1 million inhabitants (2010)	Citable documents per 1 million inhabitants (2018)	H-Index (2018)
Ethiopia	9.2	181.6	125
Ghana	30.4	516.4	129
Kenya	36.3	565.1	216
Nigeria	31.6	366.2	166
Rwanda	12.8	173.9	70
Senegal	29.8	546.9	111
South Africa	229.2	4,233.5	391
Tanzania	17.8	248.3	145
Uganda	25.6	323.3	156
Zimbabwe	24.6	561.2	119

Source: Charo et al. (2019).

The position of Nigeria in Table 1 among the countries selected based on the research output is unfortunate as a giant of Africa. The H-Index of Kenya and South Africa was higher than that of Nigeria in 2018. However, this paper does not have the output of 2019 to know the current position. The quality of publications from Nigerian tertiary institutions is equally a concern that speaks volumes about our research output. Figure 1 shows that Nigeria is behind Ghana, Kenya, Senegal, South Africa, and Zimbabwe in Citable publications per 1 Million inhabitants in 2018. It might not be a surprise, as it has been observed that most Nigerian scholars have challenges in writing internationally acceptable grant proposals (Baro et al., 2017). These challenges have a critical impact on the sustainability of the country.
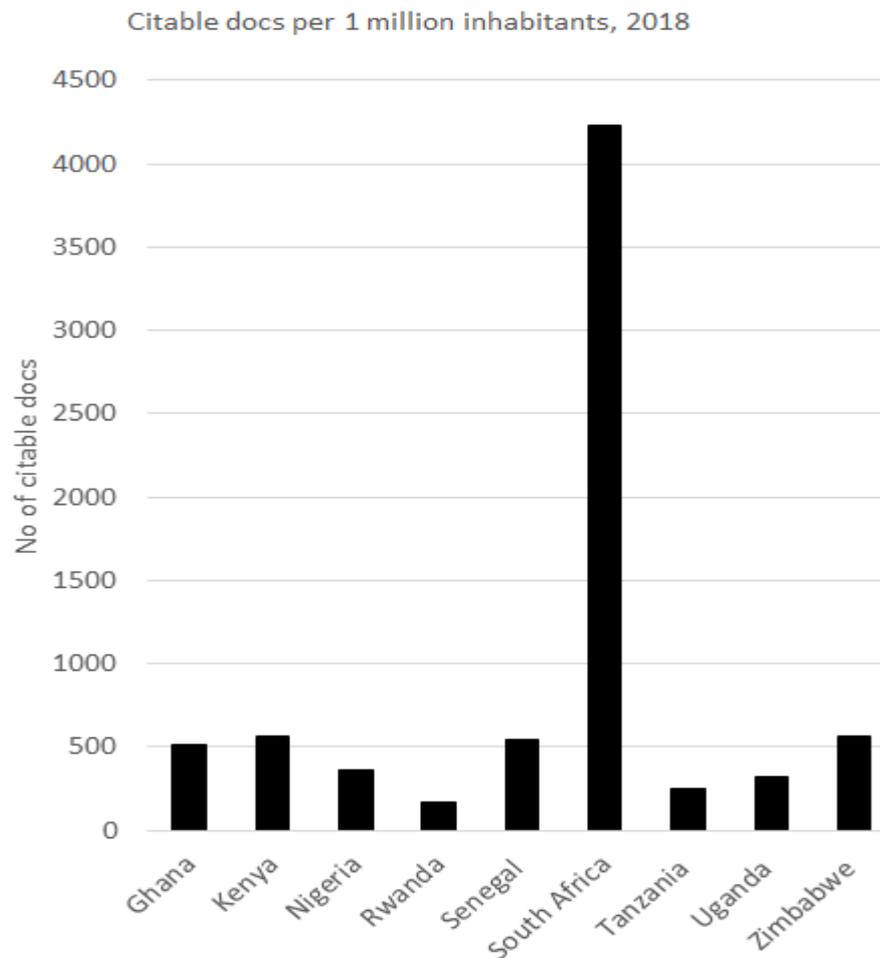

Figure-1. Citable docs per 1 million inhabitant.

Source: Charo et al. (2019).

3. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

Nigeria is now sixty years from the year of independence and still contending with the challenge of sustainability (Aina, 2020). Sustainable development has different meanings with different authors (Adejumo & Adejumo, 2014; Mensah, 2019). Achieving sustainability requires problem-solving, which is the fundamental function of any investigation. Sustainable development has to do with meeting the citizenry's present needs and not hindering or tamper with the posterity (Alamu, 2017). Research is an essential gradient of growth in any community of the world.

Nigeria has not met Nigerians' present need as a sovereign nation, not to talk of the next generation. The Nigeria education sector, which is the engine that drives all other sectors, is bedeviled with catalogs of challenges

due to inadequacies in our educational researches. Knowledge generated by research remains the hub of sustainable development worldwide. However, in Nigeria, many good research outcomes are not implemented by the government partly due to corruption, while some are not implementable. It implies the government fails to convert the research findings to products and services to use in society. Bornmann (2013) opined that it must be converted to benefits for any successful research findings useful for the community. Some research studies are poorly investigated, and the results are not implementable. Investment in research is a global issue because of its positive economic growth (Digital Science, 2016). Therefore, it must be appropriately investigated and produce an unambiguous outcome that could be implemented.

Nigeria's present situation is terrible because many research findings for solving security problems, economic, health, agriculture, education, and others were not utilized due to poor outcomes or government failure. For instance, Otto and Ukpere (2012); Comfort, Imhonopi, and Urim (2013) in their study, had recommended that Nigeria leaders should lead by example to curb corruption and insecurity. Sadly, the nation's situation is worst in corruption and security now than seven years back because our leaders are not exemplary. There are numerous successful research outcomes in education with excellent recommendations to make the Nigerian education system the same as developed countries that were not implemented. Examples are, Ngene, Quadri, Bamigboye, and Tenebe (2018) on the learning environment, Aina (2017) on the learning paradigm, and many others. The challenges of postgraduate studies in Nigerian universities remain because research studies are not implemented (Desmennu & Owoaje, 2017). The examples given are just a few: there are more in health, agriculture, judiciary, etc. In light of the above, there should be ways to move forward.

4. THE SOLUTIONS

There is no problem without at least a solution. Therefore, there are solutions to the challenges discussed in this paper. Of course, there may be more solutions than what this paper proffers; however, these are the few the article presents as the authors' significant contributions to the extant knowledge.

- There is a need to strengthen the Public-Private Partnership (PPP) in Nigeria to reposition Nigeria's research and development (Aina & Akintunde, 2013). This is how it is done in developed countries because government alone cannot adequately finance education.

- Collaboration is critical to research funding in higher education. There should be collaborations between universities and industries to know societal needs that require modern research to grow the national economy. This is the 21st century; it is not just research that will not meet the citizen's needs in this growing global knowledge economy.

- Nigerian universities should overhaul their postgraduate program to meet international standards. The student's supervisors should know their responsibilities and role in supervision and stop delaying their students unnecessarily. In most universities in South Africa, especially the University of Cape Town, students and supervisors sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) before supervision begins. It enables both the students and the supervisors to know their roles and strictly keep to them. This help student to finish their programs in a record time. The MoU is a document that any student can use to indict any supervisor deliberately trying to delay the student: it also indicts any unserious lazy student. The MoU contains both the expected supervisor and students' roles in the postgraduate program.

- Funding is critical to any successful research; therefore, the government should always make special funds available for research in the national budget apart from the TETFund.

- There should be severe sanctions for any institution and individual who tamper with the TETFund research money.

- Motivation is fundamental to a successful postgraduate program in Nigeria (Baro et al., 2017; Grant et al., 2014; Holtman & Mukwada, 2014; Ismail et al., 2011). Supervisors in Nigerian universities should change their orientation. They should understand their pastoral/guidance role . The dictatorial approach to supervision is not the norm in the developed countries and many developing nations. The Authentic Learning Model is the best way to motivate supervisees, supporting oversight through coaching and scaffolding, not enforcing undue authority over the learner. Most supervisors see their students as if they know nothing. Supervisees should be motivated by the supervisor by being accessible and friendly.

5. CONCLUSION

The article argued that knowledge generated by research remains the crux of sustainable development anywhere in the globe. However, the paper submits that there are challenges to conducting successful research studies in Nigerian universities, hindering the nation's sustainable development. The script concurred that there are solutions to these challenges and recommends some antidote as ways forward. Therefore, the ways ahead highlighted above serve as recommendations of the article.

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