

## CHAPTER ONE

**The Nexus Between Higher Education Challenges and COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria: The Way Forward****Agnes, S. Ojile (Ph.D) & Okolo Igonoh Achenyo**

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**Abstract**

This paper assessed the nexus between higher education challenges and the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. The challenges posed on higher education as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic include disruption of academic calendar of higher institutions, cancellation of local and international conferences, teaching and learning gap, loss of workforce in the educational institutions and cut in budget of higher education. However, some of recommendations proffered to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on higher education include that Nigerian universities should partner with internet providers and governments to overcome this critical challenge, by negotiating zero-rated access to specific educational and information websites; the Federal government of Nigeria should place high premium on education by meeting up the recommended 26% educational spending prescribed by UNESCO, to help revitalize the higher education system, and enabling environment should be created for staff through improved conditions of service, provision of basic infrastructures, virtual libraries and information communication technologies as well as connectivity.

**Key Words:** Nexus, Higher Education, Challenges, COVID-19, Pandemic**Introduction**

Higher education also known as postsecondary or tertiary education is the education given after secondary education in colleges of education, monotechnics, polytechnics and universities and those institutions offering correspondence courses (Federal Ministry of Education 2004:30). Higher education has been recognized as a fundamental instrument for the construction of a knowledge economy and the development of human capitals all over the world (World Bank, 2009). According to Peretomode (2007), higher education is the facilitator, the bed rock, the powerhouse and the driving force for the strong socio-economic, political, cultural, healthier and industrial development of a nation, as higher education institutions are key mechanisms increasingly recognized as wealth and human capital producing industries. World Bank (2014) argued that higher education is fundamental to all developing countries if they are to prosper in a world economy where knowledge has become a vital area of advantage. Countries can achieve sustainable development by improving through training in higher level, the skills of their human capitals

The aims of higher education in Nigeria as outlined by the Federal Ministry of Education (2004) was to contribute to national development through high level manpower training, development and inculcation of proper values for the survival of the individual and the society, and development of the intellectual capabilities of the individual to understand as well as appreciate their local and

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external environment. Section 8 (60) of the Federal Ministry of Education also states that higher education in Nigeria should vigorously pursue these goals through: teaching, research, development, knowledge generation and dissemination, international cooperation, and dedicated services to the communities, through extra-mural and consultancy services. Nigeria has a teeming population of over 200 million people. A growing population necessitates the development of the higher education to accommodate the increasing number of students seeking a higher education degree, yet the potential of Nigerian higher education systems to fulfill this responsibility is frequently thwarted by problems of finance, efficiency, equity and quality (Combs, 2010).

At the tertiary level, the Nigerian educational system consists of a university sector and a non-university sector. The latter is composed of polytechnics, monotronics, and colleges of education. The tertiary sector as a whole offers opportunity for undergraduate, graduate, vocational and technical education. The academic year typically runs from September to July. Most universities use a semester system of 18 – 20 weeks. Others run from January to December, divided into 3 terms of 10 -12 weeks. As at 2020, the government umbrella overseeing the administration of higher education in Nigeria: the National University Commission (NUC), listed 40 federal universities, 44 state universities and 68 private universities as accredited degree-granting institutions on its website at 2020 (NUC, 2020). Many of these institutions are relatively new. In response to demographic pressures Nigeria's higher education sector expanded over a relatively short period.

The outbreak of the novel coronavirus pandemic in China became primetime news in Africa as the plight of its international students in Wuhan – where it began – took centre stage. At the time of the outbreak, Hubei, the province where Wuhan is located, hosted around 5,000 of the nearly 82,000 African students in China. Most of Africa's initial response focused on repatriating students stranded in Wuhan or providing assistance from afar. Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, as well as Algeria and its North African neighbours, succeeded in repatriating their students – an achievement that was much celebrated. Other countries lacking the readiness and the resources to do the same had to assume a low profile against public opinion, which favoured repatriation.

Nigeria has taken the coronavirus pandemic seriously only in the last few months, following the confirmation of its first cases. Initial responses included the closure of educational institutions beginning in mid-March. Increasingly, universities across the continent are setting up institution-wide task forces to mitigate the impact of the pandemic. Some are striving to participate in high-end research towards finding a cure for the virus. Many are attempting to upgrade to virtual learning through institutional, national, continental and international initiatives, but these initiatives have not been very effective due to lack of preparedness and adequate resources. This paper therefore addresses the impact of COVID-19 on higher learning in Nigeria.

**COVID-19: THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN NIGERIA****Impact of COVID-19 on the Higher Institution Development**

The following have been identified as the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on higher institutions:

1. disruption of academic calendar of higher institutions,
2. cancellation of local and international conferences, (except those on virtual platform like international forum of educational benchmark conference, University of Uyo)
3. teaching and learning gap,
4. loss of workforce in the educational institutions, and
5. cut in budget of higher education

**1. Disruption of Academic Calendar of Higher Institutions**

The Federal Ministry of Education has directed all tertiary institutions in Nigeria to shut down and allow students to go home. The Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Education, Sonny Echono, told reporters on 19 March that the directive was part of the country's overall strategy to curtail the spread of the virus. Nigeria joins the growing list of countries in Africa which have closed schools and universities. Before the official announcement by the permanent secretary, most universities had already sent their students to go home. The Academic calendar of higher institutions in Nigeria has been disrupted due to COVID-19. Ogunode (2020) observed that the closure of all educational institutions from primary schools to the higher institutions would affect the students' academic plans and programme because many of the higher institutions 'had commenced' their first semester exams. Simon & Hans (2020) observed that the global lockdown of education institutions is going to cause major (and likely unequal) interruption in students' learning; disruptions in internal assessments; and the cancellation of public assessments for qualifications or their replacement by an inferior alternative.

**2. Cancellation of Local and International Conferences**

Several conferences on different programme that were planned for the first and second quarter of 2020 had been cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. New findings in the educational sectors for this period have been reduced because many higher institutions in Nigeria have not fully integrated ICT into teaching and learning programme across the country. According to James (2020) the 2019–20 coronavirus pandemic has affected educational systems worldwide, leading to the widespread closures of schools and universities. As of 3 April 2020, over 421 million learners were out of school due to school closures in response to COVID-19. According to UNESCO (2020), over 200 countries have implemented nationwide closures, impacting about 98% of the world's student population.

**3. Teaching and Learning Gap**

Teaching and learning in all Nigerian higher institutions and across the world have been put to hold because of the COVID-19 virus. The implication of this is that many Nigerian students will not be in schools for a more than three months or even more implying that they will be idle.

#### **4. Loss of Workforce in the Educational Institutions**

A big challenge to the attainment of quality higher education in Nigeria is the lack of academic staff. According to Coombs (2010), teachers are the hub of any educational system. Teachers determine the quality of education because they transmit educational policies into practice and action. As rightly pointed out by Ukeje, (2016) without adequate number of inspiring, well-informed teachers, fully prepared to meet their responsibilities in our schools, we cannot have good education and without good education, we cannot hope for long to meet successfully, the challenges of a changing world.

Despite the importance of teachers in the attainment of good education, institutions of higher learning in Nigeria are short of lecturers to adequately handle teaching and learning activities. With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, it became worse as many of the teaching manpower died and are still dying amidst the pandemic. The higher institutions in Nigeria and across the world have lost many staff, lecturers and great researchers to COVID-19 pandemic. This loses will affect the growth and development of the educational sectors especially the higher institutions.

#### **5. Cut in Budget of Higher Education:**

Inadequate funding is the most critical challenge that has threatened the attainment of good quality higher education in Nigeria. The problem of inadequate funding of education has been a bane to educational development in the country and with the advent of COVID-19 pandemic, it may become worse. Many institutions of higher learning in Nigeria may not be able to build lecture halls, students' hostels, equip laboratories and workshops and payment of staff coming days. In addressing these daunting economic challenges, the current considerations to revise the budget downward are inevitable.

Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) has faulted a proposal by the Federal Government to slash 50.76 billion from the 111.78 billion budgeted for Universal Basic Education Commission. The academic union also stated that the same proposal being planned for the healthcare would be an ill wind that would further destroy the sector. According to Ogonode (2020), a serious and progressive government will not allocate funds for any rehabilitation of government buildings or purchase of buses at the expense of critical sectors like Health and Education. ASUU, therefore, warned President Muhammad Buhari against cutting down the budget of Health and Education sectors in the proposed 2020 revised budget. The implication of revising the budget downward will directly affect the education budget of the country. Many infrastructural facilities and school expansion programme planned for this year would be removed from the budget due to the budget cut down.

Damtew (2020) observed that Africa's growth performance, which stood at 3.4% in 2019, was expected to climb to 3.9% in 2020. This may now remain a dream as the global economic depression is likely to devastate its economy and also its institutions, including higher education. The effect on higher education may likely be most felt on two grounds: firstly, a precipitous decline in government subventions to higher education due to weak revenue and income; and secondly, a comparable drop in commitments from development partners, largely to research, upon which

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African higher education has been unduly and disproportionately dependent. There is the impending danger that higher education may once again be sidelined as a luxury that African countries can least afford when it should continue to garner support on a priority basis to help overcome challenges like COVID-19 – and many other human-made problems and natural disasters.

**Conclusion**

Nigeria's meagre institutional and national capacities, weak healthcare systems and gregarious way of life may prove catastrophic should the virus continue to spread at the same rate and intensity as in other critically affected countries. The impact of such a calamitous scenario is easy to imagine and frightening to predict. The effects of the pandemic on Nigeria's higher education institutions cannot be overemphasised. If the crisis persists, it may seriously impact the commitment of governments toward higher education in the face of competing demands from the healthcare, business and other priority sectors serving vulnerable segments of society. Furthermore, global support to higher education, research collaborations and partnership schemes, most often directed at critical areas such as strengthening Ph.D. programmes, could be massively scaled back. African higher education institutions are expected to do more in the months ahead while concurrently battling across many fronts. This includes addressing the more immediate challenges of the threat of COVID-19, seeking improved mechanisms for online delivery and planning to address the long-term effects of the pandemic on institutional capacity. In the aftermath of the pandemic, cost recovery through financial contribution from beneficiaries in the form of fees or loan repayments will not be easy, since economies will have seriously – if they indeed survive a total collapse. The expansion of public universities will be abruptly frozen. Private providers, which are dependent on tuition and other fees, will also be hard hit, with many facing downsizing or even closure, as they receive little or no support from governments. However, on a positive note, this threat – and the approaches to overcome it – may be catalytic for long-lasting changes in Nigerian and even African higher education. Among others, diversified means of educational delivery, in particular a non-residential model, may become more mainstream, more acceptable and more respectable.

**Suggestions**

To address the challenges posed by COVID-19 on quality of higher education in Nigeria, the following were suggested:

1. Nigerian universities should partner with internet providers and governments to overcome the critical challenges posed by COVID-19 on education by negotiating zero-rated access to specific educational and information websites as in the case of Rwanda and South Africa.
2. Government of Nigeria should place high premium on education by meeting up the recommended 26% educational spending prescribed by UNESCO, to help revitalize the higher education system.
3. Enabling environment should be created by the government and school authorities for staff of public and private tertiary institutions through improved conditions of service, provision of basic infrastructures, virtual libraries and information communication ULD BE technologies and internet connectivity.

**COVID-19: THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN NIGERIA****References**

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