

Crackdown on illegal universities – Academics speak out

Tunde Fatunde 08 February 2019

As the Nigerian government announces its intention to crack down on illegal universities, questions are being raised by academics about how they were able to proliferate in the first place, the impact of their closure on thousands of desperate students, and what the government should be doing to improve quality across the entire sector.

On 27 January, Education Minister Malam Adamu Adamu announced at a **press conference** in Abuja that 68 illegal and unaccredited universities – both those with physical premises and those with online “affiliations” to substandard foreign institutions – would be shut down and demolished. Their owners would also be apprehended and prosecuted, he said.

“The proliferation of these institutions has made the job of regulatory agencies in the sector very difficult. Such institutions also default in taxes. They do not keep to the rules of the game. They have no admission quota, they run unaccredited courses with practically no standards, their products are half-baked and unemployable,” he was quoted as saying.

High demand for university places

Some academics are asking if closing down “illegal” universities is the answer, in view of the inability of Nigeria’s current legally-established universities to absorb the number of school leavers wanting places.

Over the past five years, secondary school leavers seeking admission into higher education have increased to reach almost two million annually. According to the National Universities Commission, there are 600,000 places in all public and private higher education institutions. Thus the numbers of applicants far outstrip the enrolment capacity of existing approved tertiary institutions.

According to Professor Alex Ekpeyong of the dentistry department at the University of Calabar, the closure of illegal institutions will mean that thousands of young people will be denied access to higher education – in violation of the country’s Constitution.

“One of the fundamental clauses of the Nigerian Constitution is the mandate that the state should provide education for all her citizens. All the political parties have pledged to respect this aspect of the Constitution. This issue is a test case for the political elite.”

State investment

For Ekpeyong a solution lies in increasing the state's investment in higher education.

“This year's current budget which allocates about 8% to education and vocational training needs to be reviewed upwards. Nigeria's annual budget on education and vocational training should gradually move to about 26% as prescribed by UNESCO to tackle these challenges. This paltry sum of 8% is, of course, inadequate to meet these challenges.”

Dr Usman Bagauda, based in the technology department at the University of Science and Technology, Minna, Niger State, said the curricula of the entire education system needed to be overhauled by experts.

“We are all transitioning to the fourth industrial revolution governed by information technology. Most Nigerian universities are yet to embrace this inevitable revolutionary transformation where the current traditional methods of teaching and research would give way to IT-driven methods. This method also incorporates vocational training education. From my experience, none of Nigeria's students in both illegal and legal higher education institutions have embraced this new mode.

'A wake-up call'

“This is a wake-up call to all and sundry,” said Bagauda.

Their increasing numbers, especially those who claim to have online “affiliations” with external universities, have become a source of worry to the state, galvanising the government to tackle the growing problem.

Blaming the state for not making adequate provision for the demands of its youth, Professor Anyim Emmanuel of the sociology department at Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma, told *University World News* that there was no justification for the entry of illegal institutions into the country.

Dr Yerima Dangua, of the geology department at the University of Maiduguri, also blamed the government. “There are fundamental questions to be asked for the sake of this country. The illegal tertiary institutions have existed for how long? Why the clampdown now? ... Who owns those institutions? Why are the owners not probed? We must put the blame squarely at the door of the government.”

Professor Adekunle Adelaide of the geography department at Obafemi Awolowo University, said he was worried about the implications for the labour market of graduates from illegal institutions.

“From the findings of my colleagues in the social sciences, these unauthorised institutions have been producing graduates who find themselves in the labour market. What are we going to do with these graduates from such institutions?”

“The issue of illegalities is beyond what we imagine because it is at the root of our collective national development,” he said.

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