

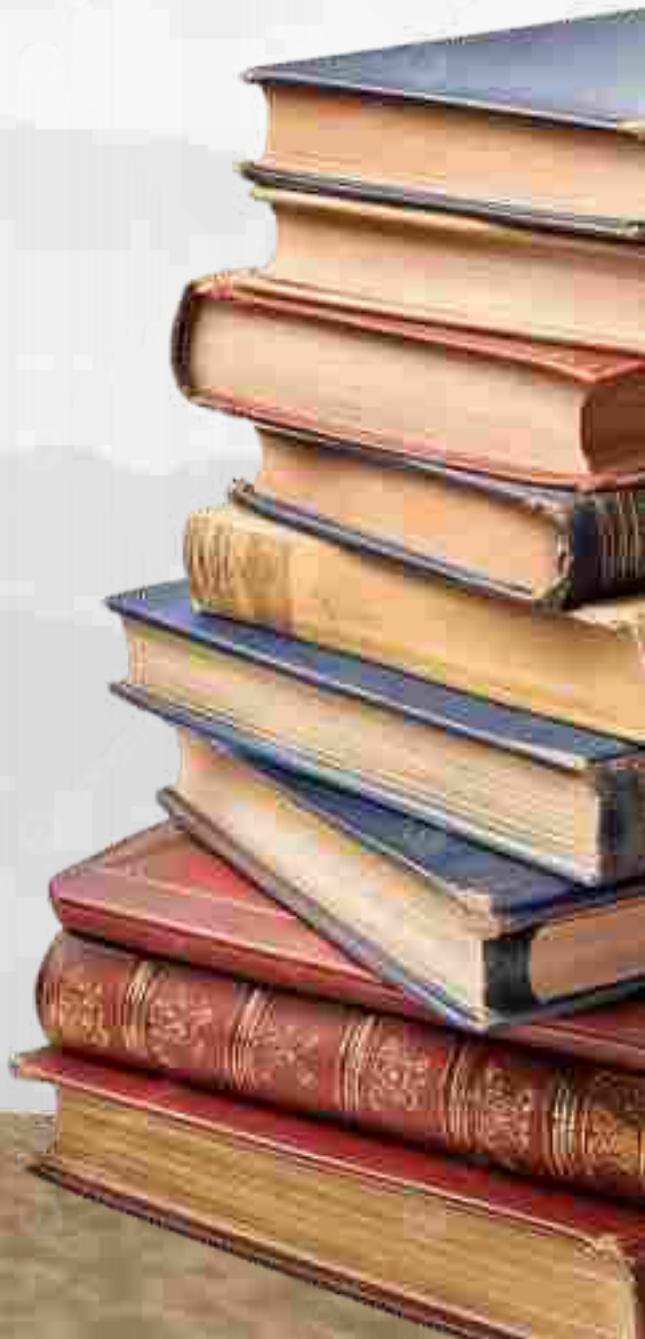


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# PERSPECTIVE ON EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

VOLUME TWO



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**BOOK CHAPTER**

# **PERSPECTIVE ON EDUCATION IN NIGERIA**

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## CHAPTER ONE

# AN ASSESSMENT OF THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF WEST AFRICA TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF WEST AFRICA COUNTRIES

By

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### ABSTRACT

Tertiary education in West Africa plays a central role in national and regional development through the production of skilled human capital, promotion of research and innovation, support for social mobility, and strengthening of democratic participation. This chapter provides a situational assessment of tertiary institutions across West Africa, highlighting their major contributions as well as persistent challenges — overcrowding, inadequate funding, brain drain, curricular mismatch, limited research capacity, and inequitable access. The chapter concludes with practical recommendations for revitalizing the sector, including increased investment, curriculum reform aligned with labour-market needs, targeted equity measures, retention strategies for academic talent, and stronger research support and governance. These reforms aim to enable tertiary institutions in West Africa to better fulfil their role as engines of development.

**Keywords:** Tertiary Education, Higher Education, Human Capital Development, Innovation, Brain Drain, Curriculum Reform, Governance, West Africa.

### 1.0. Introduction

Tertiary education in West Africa stands at a crucial crossroads. Over the past few decades, universities, polytechnics, and colleges across the region have played a significant role in shaping societies—producing leaders, driving innovation, and contributing to social and economic development. From bustling campuses in Accra and Lagos to quieter institutions in Freetown and Banjul, higher education has become a beacon of hope for many young West Africans seeking a better future.



Yet, the journey has not been without obstacles. The sector faces persistent challenges: limited funding, overcrowded classrooms, brain drain, outdated curricula, and an urgent need for reform. These issues are not just bureaucratic problems—they affect real people, real futures, and the long-term potential of the region.

This chapter explores both the contributions and the challenges of tertiary education in West Africa. It examines how institutions have helped shape national development while also shedding light on the structural and systemic issues that continue to hinder their progress. In doing so, it offers a balanced perspective—one that acknowledges the achievements while calling attention to the pressing need for transformation.

### **1.1. Clarification of Concepts**

#### **1.2. Concept of Tertiary Education**

The word tertiary, simply means of the third rank or order, and tertiary level of education in Nigeria, based on the aforementioned meaning, implies that tertiary education in Nigeria is the third order of education which can also be referred to as higher education. Tertiary education is synonymous with higher education in Nigeria. This is the aspect of education that is in charge of producing the output required by the society for national development (Okai, & Botimi –Slaboh 2019)). Tertiary education is a front liner amongst the tiers of education and is considered as the icon for national development and transformation, implying that every skill, knowledge and information gained through this means is the vehicle for productivity, wealth creation, prosperity, good health and healthy living, competitiveness, communication, expansion, scientific and technological advancement (Ofojebe & Chukwuma,2015). Tertiary education is an educational system designed to solve local, national and international pressing problems (Ogunode & Musa 2024).

Tertiary education also called post-secondary education, is any level of education pursued beyond high school, including undergraduate and graduate credentials. These credentials encompass certificates, diplomas or academic degrees. Tertiary education is specialized education in a specific field, taken on after finishing high school. Tertiary education is non-compulsory and provided in a specialist institution, usually a college, polytechnic or university. This form of education may be delivered virtually or at a distance (Top hat, 2021) Tertiary education refers to all *formal* post-secondary education, including public and private universities, colleges, technical training institutes, and vocational schools. Tertiary education is instrumental in fostering growth, reducing poverty, and boosting shared prosperity. A highly skilled workforce, with lifelong access to a solid post-secondary education, is a prerequisite for innovation and growth: well-educated people are more employable and productive, earn higher wages, and cope with economic shocks better (World-bank, 2020). Tertiary education can be defined as the planned and organized system of learning designed for the total development of individuals and the total transformation of the



society through the utilization of teaching, research and provision of community service (Ogunode, Edinoh & Okolie 2023).

### **1.3. Contributions of Tertiary Education to the Development of West African Countries**

Contributions of tertiary education to the development of West African countries. This version emphasizes real-world impact, making the points more relatable and grounded in the lived experiences of individuals and societies in the region:

#### **i. Building Skilled Human Capital**

At the heart of any nation's progress are its people. Tertiary education in West Africa has helped nurture doctors, engineers, teachers, scientists, entrepreneurs, and countless other professionals who are vital to the region's development. These are the individuals who staff our hospitals, design our roads, teach our children, and launch businesses that create jobs. Each graduate represents more than a certificate—they carry the potential to lift families out of poverty and strengthen entire communities. Graduates from universities and colleges provide the professional workforce—teachers, doctors, engineers, and administrators—needed for effective public and private sector operations (Ofojebe & Chukwuma, 2015).

#### **ii. Driving Innovation and Research**

Across West African universities and research centers, there are countless examples of groundbreaking work being done in agriculture, health, technology, and climate resilience. From innovations in drought-resistant crops to locally produced medical equipment, tertiary institutions have become incubators of solutions tailored to local problems. These innovations don't just stay in laboratories—they often find their way into farms, clinics, and start-ups, improving lives in tangible ways. (Teferra & Altbach, 2003).

#### **iii. Promoting Social Mobility and Inclusion**

For many young people across West Africa—especially those from rural or low-income backgrounds—tertiary education represents one of the few viable paths to a better life. A degree can mean the difference between a life of struggle and one of opportunity. Access to higher education enables individuals from low-income or rural backgrounds to improve their socio-economic status and contribute productively to society (World Bank, 2020).

#### **iv. Strengthening Democratic Participation**

Tertiary institutions are not just centers of learning; they are spaces where ideas are tested, debated, and refined. Through civic education, political science programs, and student activism, universities help shape politically conscious citizens who are more likely to vote, question injustice, and demand accountability. A more educated population is often a more engaged and empowered



one—crucial for building stronger democratic institutions in the region. Universities serve as spaces for debate, critical thinking, and civic participation, helping to produce informed citizens and accountable leaders (Altbach & Salmi, 2011).

#### **v. Supporting Economic Growth and Development**

Education and economic development go hand-in-hand. Tertiary education supports economic growth by providing the workforce with specialized skills that meet the demands of evolving economies. It supplies the labour market with specialized skills, tertiary education enhances productivity and competitiveness in sectors such as finance, energy, and health (World Bank, 2020). Whether it's training accountants for the finance sector or technicians for renewable energy projects, higher education institutions contribute directly to the productivity and competitiveness of West African countries in the global market.

#### **vi. Fostering Regional Integration and Collaboration**

Tertiary education has also played a quiet but powerful role in fostering unity across West African borders. Through regional exchange programs, academic conferences, and collaborative research, students and academics from different countries are building networks that transcend nationality. This intellectual cross-pollination strengthens regional solidarity and contributes to the shared goal of a more integrated and prosperous West Africa. Exchange programs and joint research initiatives promote integration and knowledge sharing among West African countries (Knight, 2018).

### **1.4. Challenges facing tertiary education in West Africa.**

Tertiary education in West Africa holds immense promise—but it also carries a heavy weight. Beneath the stories of ambition and academic achievement are deep-rooted challenges that continue to affect the quality, accessibility, and relevance of higher education across the region. These challenges aren't just statistics in reports—they impact real students who struggle to stay enrolled, real lecturers working without proper resources, and real communities waiting on the next generation of problem-solvers. Here are some of the most pressing issues:

#### *i. Overcrowded Institutions and Limited Infrastructure*

Many universities and colleges in West Africa are bursting at the seams. Lecture halls meant for 200 students are filled with 600. Libraries often lack enough books and computers, and hostels are overcrowded and under-resourced. For students, this means long hours standing during lectures, competing for space in the library, and studying in less-than-ideal conditions. For lecturers, it means overwork and a lack of time for meaningful student engagement (Okai & Botimi-Slaboh, 2019).



*ii. Inadequate Funding*

Government funding for tertiary education in many West African countries is often stretched thin. Institutions struggle to pay staff, maintain facilities, or invest in modern technology. The result is a system that sometimes feels like it's running on survival mode. Lecturers may go unpaid for months. Laboratories lack basic equipment. Promising research is shelved due to lack of grants. These funding gaps create an environment where both teaching and learning are compromised (Ogunode et al., 2023).

*iii. Brain Drain of Academic Talent*

Talented lecturers and researchers often leave West Africa in search of better opportunities abroad. Many do so reluctantly, driven by low salaries, poor working conditions, and limited career growth. This "brain drain" leaves universities short-staffed and limits the quality of education students receive. It's a painful loss—not just of skills, but of role models and mentors who could have shaped future generations (Teferra & Altbach, 2003).

*iv. Mismatch Between Curriculum and Job Market*

Far too many graduates leave university only to discover that their degrees don't match the needs of the job market. While economies in West Africa are changing—embracing technology, renewable energy, and entrepreneurship—many curricula remain outdated, theoretical, and disconnected from real-world challenges. This leaves students frustrated and unemployed, despite their years of study and sacrifice (Altbach & Salmi, 2011).

*v. Access and Equity Gaps*

Higher education is still out of reach for many young people, especially those in rural areas, women, and students from low-income families. While some countries have made progress in improving enrollment rates, deep inequalities persist. The cost of tuition, travel, accommodation, and study materials remains a significant barrier. For every student who gains admission, there are many more who never get the chance (World Bank, 2020).

*vi. Political Instability and Disruptions*

Tertiary education in some West African countries is frequently disrupted by political crises, strikes, or security issues. Universities may be forced to shut down during protests, election periods, or due to conflicts with academic staff unions over unpaid salaries or poor working conditions. These disruptions delay academic calendars, extend graduation timelines, and chip away at student motivation and morale (Ogunode et al., 2023).



### *vii. Limited Support for Research and Innovation*

Research is the engine of development, but in West Africa, it's often underfunded and undervalued. Many institutions lack research grants, partnerships, or platforms to share findings. This stifles innovation and limits the contribution of universities to solving local and regional challenges—be it in healthcare, agriculture, education, or governance (Teferra & Altbach, 2003).

### **1.5. Conclusion**

Tertiary education in West Africa is a story of both promise and pressure. Across the region, students rise early and travel long distances to attend crowded lectures. Lecturers teach under challenging conditions, driven more by passion than by pay. Parents make huge sacrifices—often going without—to ensure their children can access higher education. Despite all the hurdles, the determination to learn, to grow, and to succeed remains unshaken.

The challenges facing tertiary education—ranging from underfunding and overcrowding to outdated curricula and brain drain—are deep and complex. These issues not only slow down national development but also dim the dreams of countless young people whose futures hang in the balance. Unless these problems are urgently addressed, the region risks falling further behind in a world that is rapidly changing and increasingly driven by knowledge and innovation.

### **1.6. Recommendations**

To breathe new life into tertiary education in West Africa, solutions must be bold, inclusive, and sustainable. Here are key recommendations:

#### **i. Increase and Prioritize Funding**

Governments must treat education as a national investment, not an expense. Allocating more funds to improve infrastructure, pay academic staff, and support research will go a long way in revitalizing the system.

#### **ii. Modernize Curricula**

Courses should be regularly reviewed and updated in consultation with industry players to ensure they reflect the needs of today's job market—especially in technology, entrepreneurship, health, and green energy sectors.

#### **iii. Promote Equity and Access**

More scholarships and support programs are needed to help students from disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly girls and rural youth, to not only access but also complete higher education.



#### iv. Retain and Support Academic Talent

Better working conditions, fair salaries, and opportunities for professional development can help retain the region's best minds and reduce the exodus of talent abroad.

#### v. Strengthen Research and Innovation Capacity

Governments, private sector, and international partners should invest in research grants and innovation hubs, encouraging universities to become engines of homegrown solutions.

#### vi. Improve Governance and Stability

Transparent leadership, accountability, and dialogue between governments, university management, and academic unions can reduce disruptions and keep the academic calendar running smoothly.

### Revise Questions References

- 1) What is tertiary institutions?
- 2) Highlights five Contributions of Tertiary Education to the Development of West African Countries
- 3) Discuss five challenges facing Tertiary Education in West African Countries.

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