

## EDITORIAL COMMENT

### Call on Federal Government to Support Private Universities

We call on the federal government of Nigeria to come to the aid of Nigerian students and the staff of universities. Similar calls for government support for private tertiary institutions have been made by individuals and in newspaper editorial comments over the last twenty years. A notable comment and appeal in this regard was made by Professor Nurudeen Olorunimbe Adedipe, pioneer Vice-Chancellor of Federal University of Agriculture Abeokuta, a former Chairman of the National Universities Commission Standing Committee on Private Universities. He cried out that he was “...aware of the enormous resources that proprietors of private universities pump into the establishment of their respective universities.” He rightly observed that private university promoters are “... unique members of the proprietorial stakeholdership (sic)” who “...need to be recognized for such facilities as Take-Off Grants and access to Educational Trust Fund (ETF) facilities, among others”. He concluded by asserting that “The case of ETF support should, in fact, be taken for granted since the fund is an accrual of income-related taxes that are no respecter of whatever an institution is federal, state or private.”

ETF has since been replaced by TETFUND. The Tertiary Education Trust Fund Act 2011 repealed the Education Tax Act Cap. E54 Laws of the Federation of Nigeria 2004, and Education Tax Fund Act No. 17, 2003, to establish the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFUND) charged with the responsibility of imposing, managing, and disbursing the tax to public tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Section 7 of TETFUND Act 2011 mandates TETFUND “To administer and disburse the amount in the fund to Federal and State Tertiary Institutions” We advise that Section 7 of TETFUND Act should be amended to remove the restriction by deleting “Federal and State” and adding at the end “...including private universities” leaving the new Section 7 as “To administer and disburse the amount in fund to Tertiary Institutions including private universities.”

The second Fund available for infrastructural and staff development in tertiary institutions is the Petroleum Technology Development Fund (PTDF). Section 2 of the Petroleum Technology Development Fund Act 2004 which mandates funding of graduates, professional, technicians and craftsmen in the field of petroleum and solid mineral industry in Nigeria does not restrict the PTDF to only public tertiary institution. However, since its inception, only public tertiary institutions have consistently benefitted from the PTDF despite the fact that assistance to both private and public universities fall within its aegis.

Any funding or development assistance rendered to the private universities will be for the benefit of Nigerian students who are admitted into the private universities as citizens of Nigeria, just like other students who are lucky to gain admission into public universities. Private university students deserve fair and equal treatment like students in public universities. Their parents and guardians pay taxes just like the parents of students in public universities. So, there should be no distinction or dichotomy.

Both TETFUND and PTDF should also reserve some funds for research by researchers in private universities, academic staff training and development, in form of scholarships for postgraduate studies, and other forms of sponsorships including overseas conferences. Such staff or human capital development programmes will be for the overall benefit of the students and the nation. Development assistance to private universities should not be seen as assistance to proprietors of private universities. The focus should be on the benefit of such intervention to the students, staff, the Nigerian economy, and society.

There are 99 private universities, 54 state government universities and 49 federal government owned universities in Nigeria as of 1<sup>st</sup> day of November 2021. There is no doubt that private universities are making tremendous contributions towards the educational development of the nation. In assisting the private institutions with both infrastructural and staff development like public tertiary institutions, the government will be fulfilling the Educational Objectives provided in section 18 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 which states *inter alia* that “Government shall direct its policy towards ensuring that there are equal and adequate educational opportunities at all levels” Section 18 (3) (C) provides that government shall as and when practicable provide free university education. While government is striving to do that in public tertiary institutions, parents of students in private institutions are left to bear the burden even as taxpayers. Some form of assistance should therefore come to private institutions and their staff.

We call on the National Assembly to amend the Tertiary Education Trust Fund Act 2011 as suggested herein and, prevail on the President of the federation to issue the necessary Executive Order to ensure that TETFUND and PTDF embark on infrastructural development assistance to private universities, and also, extend research grants and postgraduate scholarships to staff of private universities.

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