

**AN ASSESSMENT OF COLONIAL POLICIES ON UNIVERSITY EDUCATION  
IN NIGERIA: THE STUDY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF IBADAN (1948-1960)**

**Anare Daniel Ikkisemjie, PhD Student**

Department of History and Strategic Studies, University of Lagos, Lagos State,

**Professor Irene N. Osemeka**

Department of History and Strategic Studies, University of Lagos, Lagos State

and

**Dr. Friday Aworawo (Associate Prof.)**

Department of History and Strategic Studies, University of Lagos, Lagos State.

**Abstract**

This article explores British colonial policies on university education in Nigeria, with focus on the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. The paper adopts historical and analytical method of research, through the utilization of primary and secondary sources. British colonial policies were formulated with the objective of producing a skilled administrative class through rigorous academic training, stringent external examination, strict admission-carrying capacity and a special relationship between the University of Ibadan and the University of London. The paper therefore, argues for the need to integrate aspects of British colonial university policies with the Nigerian government initiatives for university reform. The efforts should reflect contemporary national development needs, ensuring labour market alignment, inclusive access, consistent stakeholder engagement and sustainable funding.

**Keywords:** University, Education, Policies, Colonial Period, University of Ibadan

**Introduction**

University education is considered an essential stimulant for modernization and national development, either in the developed or developing societies of the world. It was partly this realization that propelled educated West Africans to demand the establishment of universities from the British colonial government. The establishment of University College Ibadan, Nigeria, in 1948 was in response to such agitation, and its emergence marked a significant milestone in the development of higher education in Nigeria. (Amaele, 2004, 5-6). Its emergence and those of other universities in West Africa owe much to the efforts of nationalists such as Edward Bynden, Africanus Horton, Nnamdi Azikiwe, among others. (Ocitti, 1973) On the part of the British colonial government, the process towards the establishment of

universities was based on the adoption of specific policies that served as a blueprint for their founding and operations.

### **A Brief History of Indigenous/Traditional Education in Nigeria**

It is important to state that indigenous forms of education (IFE) existed in Africa before colonialism. The existence of well-organized ancient kingdoms, empires and city-states such as those of the Nok people and culture in the present Plateau area of Northern Nigeria; the Old city states of Oyo, Benin and Kanuri empires; the Bonny and Itsekiri kingdoms and the Nupe, is evidence of established forms of education before the coming of Europeans. (Fafunwa, 1974, 2-10) It simply refers to the people's way of thinking, beliefs, feelings and doing things. It varied from one place, time and people to another, and neither was it a static process but was constantly evolving. (Fafunwa, 1974). primarily focused on adaptation to the immediate environment, acquisition of practical skills in all spheres of human endeavor and the understanding of cultural values. (Fafunwa, 1974, 10). In terms of approach, indigenous education was mainly informal and existed in oral forms.

### **Contextual Framework**

Education policies are central to the operations of schools at all levels, including universities, technical colleges and polytechnics. The implementation of policies is equally important to determine the overall performance of the target institution. It is in light of this that the study adopts the Human Capital Theory (HCT) and the Social Capital Theory to explain the interlocking relationship between university education policy and national development. HCT, as posited by its proponents- Theodore Schultz and Gary Baker treats education as a form of capital that can be harnessed to generate income. (Gillies, 2025). The theorists suggest that education is an 'investment' in an individual's life, enhancing one's knowledge and skills and thereby increasing their productivity and earning potential in the workforce. (Gillies, 2025) In other words, higher education has a dual advantage; it is as profitable to the individual as it is to the nation. However, critics argue that proponents of the HCT oversimplify the relationship between education and higher productivity outcomes. (Gillies, 2025) For instance, HCT theorists minimize the fact that the path to productivity is also dependent on social class, status and background. Given such an omission, it can be argued that educational systems and the acquisition of formal skills do not necessarily determine productivity. It is therefore important to consider the role that one's social background and social network play in determining

professional success. A fusion of elements of the Social Capital Theory (SCT) and HCT is therefore suggested to guide the analysis. Pierre Bourdieu, James Coleman and Robert Putnam are among the prominent SCT proponents. (Paula, 3-8, 2018) With emphasis on different dimensions, they posit that shared norms, relationships, and social networks constitute a form of ‘capital’ comparable to university degrees and skills and can yield benefits like academic achievements, increase access to resources and improve one’s wellbeing. (Paula, 2018, 2-10). Thus, productivity and professional success are also determined by relationships and social networks rather than human capital alone. In other words, translating education to higher productivity and ensuring it contributes meaningfully to national development requires blending between ‘what you know’ and ‘who you know’, especially how the knowledge acquired is used to produce tangible economic outcomes. (Paula, 2018). This entails taking cognizance of the socio-cultural context.

### **The Advent of Western Education in Nigeria**

Christian Missionaries from Sierra-Leone and Britain began activities in Nigeria in 1842. (Taiwo, 1980, 4-6). The focus of the early missionaries was evangelism, which necessitated the establishment of early mission schools that served as avenues for conversion through the provision of Western education. The entry of Christian missionaries into Nigeria from 1842 was the continuation of a process that can be traced further back in time to 1472, when Portuguese merchants began to visit Lagos and Benin. (Taiwo, 1980, 5). By 1485, the Portuguese had started trading with the people of Benin. Consequently, by 1515, the Catholic Missionaries, through the influence of Portuguese traders, had established a primary school in the Oba’s palace for the children of the Oba and his chiefs. (Taiwo, 1980). It was during this period that Christianity was first introduced to the palace. The Catholic missionary activities also extended to Brass, Akassa, Warri, where churches and schools were established, but the catholic influence was almost wiped out by the slave trade, which ravaged West Africa for nearly three hundred years. The aim of educating Africans in this part of the continent was to enable them to participate effectively in commerce. To buttress the view, Fafunwa noted “The Portuguese were mainly interested in commerce, but they nevertheless realized that if Africans were to be good customers, they must have some rudiments of education and accept Christianity”(Obidi, 2005,5-10,).

Other Christian missions became active in the promotion of Christianity in West Africa, with Sierra Leone serving as a base from which missionaries spread to other parts of West Africa. On 24th September, 1842, the Wesleyan Methodist Society sent Rev. Thomas Birch Freeman, the then superintendent of the Wesleyan Methodist Society in Cape Coast, to Badagry. (Obidi, 2005, 11-12). This was in response to a formal invitation by the Yoruba emigrants from Sierra Leone who had settled in Badagry. Freeman (a son of a Negro father and an English mother) was accompanied by Mr. and Mrs. William de Graft, who later established primary schools in Badagry. (Obidi, 2005). They later moved to Abeokuta in 1846 where they founded two schools: one for boys and the other for girls. (Obidi, 2005, 11- 12).

Other missionaries that were active in spreading western education and Christianity during this period were: The Presbyterian Mission fared at Calabar and established a station there in 1846, the Southern Baptist Convention opened a primary school at Ijaye in 1857, another at Ogbomoso and Lagos in 1955. (obidi, 2005). Similarly, the Christian Mission Society established the first mission grammar school in 1859 in Lagos, followed by Gregory College in 1876. There was also the Methodist Boys and the Methodist Girls School in 1878 and 1879, respectively and many others. (Fafunwa, 1971, 34-37). The establishment of primary and secondary education by the missionaries produced manpower needed in churches, and schools as teachers, interpreters, Catechists, as commercial assistants and clerks in colonial government and private firms.

It is important to point out that the British colonial government began to regulate primary and secondary schools established by the missionaries in Nigeria from the 1880s. The regulation of the education system was to standardize curricula, achieve regional uniformity and ensure quality, among others. To achieve this, the British colonial government adopted education policies in the form of codes, Ordinances, through Grants in Aids. Such policies were the 1882 Education and 1887 Education Ordinances, among several others. Collectively, this set of policies provided a long-term, structured education plan at the primary and secondary school levels in Nigeria. (Fafunwa, 1979, 37-42).

### **The British Colonial Government and the Establishment of University Education in Nigeria**

The need to establish universities and other higher education institutions could be attributable to several factors. Firstly, there was the return of higher and middle-level colonial officers in

administrative positions to Britain, which needed to be filled by Nigerians with the requisite educational training. Secondly, the period witnessed growing agitation from African elites who demanded greater involvement in the social, political and economic developments of their homeland. One area they directed their agitation was the education sector because it was one avenue of acquiring the training needed to replace the British colonial personnel.

In response to the agitation of the British colonial government, the Yaba Higher College was established in 1932 in Yaba, Lagos colony in Nigeria. (Adewoye, 2000,7-19). It was a tertiary institution that provided education in vocational training in agriculture, forestry, medicine (the special medical school was at King's College), veterinary science, surveying and civil and mechanical engineering. The establishment of this college was conceived by E.R.J. Hussey, the Director of Education in Nigeria, in 1929. (Adewoye, 2000, 11-13). The main aim for its establishment was to train office assistants or lieutenants to work in colonial government departments and private firms. Its standard was low and offered limited diplomas. However, operations began on January 19, 1934, making it the first higher education institution in Nigeria. However, Nigerians felt the College did not provide a wide scope of courses, and this gave room for continued agitation. It was partly because of the restrictive policy on courses offered at the initial stages and the low ranking of the academic certificate from West Africa that many prospective candidates from many West African colonies who could afford higher education in universities chose to study in the United Kingdom and the United States of America. (Adewoye, 1974). The yearning for a higher quality of education sustained the agitation in Nigeria and the demand for universities and other institutions of higher learning where Nigerians could be trained and well-placed to compete with their European counterparts.

Another major force that mounted pressure towards demand for university education was the Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM), founded in 1936. (Nwauwa, 1993). It focused mainly on the issue of educational reforms by the colonial government. Indeed, it debated the issue of higher education, particularly as members were educated. This group's radical stance and that of radical nationalists who were dominated by those who had acquired higher education in Europe and America vehemently demanded the establishment of universities in Nigeria. (Nwauwa, 1993).

The Second World War was another major factor that fuelled agitation for and the establishment of universities in West Africa and, in particular, Nigeria. The Second World War,

which lasted from 1939 to 1945, involved the Allies and the Axis. (Uwauwa, 1993). Britain, France, the United States and Soviet Union, and the Allied powers, Germany, Italy, Japan and others were the Axis. Africans fought for their colonial masters, and their involvement shattered the myth of European invincibility and raised a new consciousness among war veterans and educated Africans. They began to lead political organisations and demand for independence and socio-economic reforms, including the establishment of tertiary education institutions. (Uwuawa, 1993).

Thus, the British colonial government's investment in education in the colonies after World War 11 was among other factors geared towards partnering with Western-educated Africans who were expected to fill positions in the bureaucracy and private businesses. Besides, establishing universities in the colonies allowed the British to instil values through control of the curriculum.

### **British Government Policies on University Education in Nigeria**

This section analyses colonial education policies, their design and how they shaped the tertiary education sector in Nigeria. The British colonial government began the development of tertiary education in Nigeria with the establishment of two Commissions set up in 1943. The Secretary of State for the British Colonies initiated this policy reform, having earlier in the year requested British Universities to assist Africa in the creation of “Colonial Universities” to train future leaders.

The Commission on Higher Education in Africa was headed by Mr. Justice Cyril Asquith and covered British Tropical African Colonies, to which Nigeria was a member. Their task also covered the West Indies. Its report was published on 19th June, 1945 with the following recommendations: The establishment of university colleges in colonies where they did not exist, university colleges should be residential, research-oriented and concentrate on liberal arts and science. Others are that the university colleges should have special relations with the University of London. There should be an Inter-University Council (IUC) for higher education in the colonies to supervise the colleges. The IUC would recruit staff for the Colleges and allocate funds to them, while the University of London would vet the syllabi, examination questions and scripts. Similarly, the second Commission was headed by Rt. Hon Walter Elliot. It was to describe the nature of the organisation and assess the existing facilities of higher education in British West Africa. It had three representatives each from Nigeria, Sierra Leone

and Ghana. These African members wanted Fourah Bay College, Sierra Leone, Achimota College, Ghana and Yaba Higher College, Nigeria, to become full-fledged University Colleges to be coordinated by a West African Council on Higher Education rather than from London. They also wanted Arts, Science and professional degrees to be offered by the university colleges.

The Elliot Commission report was also published on 19th June, 1945. The report had majority and minority versions. The majority report recommended the establishment or upgrading of the three existing higher education institutions in West Africa. The minority report, however, recommended the establishment of only one institution of higher education. These versions of the report generated a lot of controversy as to which version should be implemented. The Colonial Government and British West Africans were deeply involved in the arguments in favour of or against the development of higher education in British West Africa. Expectedly, the Africans favoured the establishment of three universities, while it was under pressure that Britain should eventually facilitate the establishment of two university colleges in the region. These were the University College Ibadan, Nigeria and the University College Gold Coast (Ghana) in 1948. (Uwauwa, 21,).

### **End of the Second World War and the Development of University Education Development**

With the end of the Second World War in 1945, the British colonial territories significantly benefited from funding for developmental efforts. This began with the passing of the 1945 Colonial Development and Welfare Act by the Coalition government. This increased funds for investment in British colonies to £120million (One hundred and twenty million pounds), spread over the next ten years. It is worthy to note that out of this sum, £4.5 million (Four million, five hundred thousand pounds) was allocated to the development of higher education. It has been observed that “such a colossal increase from the 1940 Act in the face of British wartime debt, the adverse balance of payments and domestic financial austerity was truly the turning point in British commitment to improving economic efficiency and production, and raising the standards of health, education and welfare in the colonies,” It has also been stressed that with the increased funds and the conducive political climate, the Colonial Office swiftly moved to implement the Asquith and Elliot schemes. (Uwauwa, 2013).

In addition, the Labour Party's victory in the British election in mid-1945 at the end of the Second World War provided a new stimulus for colonial reforms. The Labour Party indicated its intention for reforms in its manifesto, which read, "let us face the future." This indeed reflected the mood of the times in Britain. In fact, the Party promised the establishment of a socialist Commonwealth of Great Britain, freely democratic, efficient, progressive, and public-spirited, with its material resources. Such declarations came to manifestation especially under Arthur Creech Jones, a Labour politician and Secretary of State for Colonies (1946-1950). He was knowledgeable on colonial issues, especially Caribbean and African matters. He was a leading figure in the Fabian Colonial Bureau and regularly received detailed research reports and had frequent personal correspondence with a host of African and Caribbean leaders.

In 1945, the governments of the Gambia, Gold Coast, Nigeria and Sierra Leone received a dispatch from the Secretary of State, George Hall, indicating his decision to establish only one university for British West Africa, and this was the Minority Report recommendation. He wanted the university to be founded in Nigeria, but it should be governed by a Council "fully representative of the four British West African Territories. (Jeffreys, 1987, 10-19). Hall wanted his decision to be published so that public opinion and reactions on the issue would be ascertained. It was unusual to seek such public opinion over dispatches from the Colonial Government in the colonies. This exception was owed much to the new spirit of partnership that emerged and was part of the post-Second World War reforms, which provided the colonial peoples the opportunity to play an increasing role in deciding their future development. This was a great opportunity for the educated elite in British West Africa and the nationalists to shape the implementation of new policies on higher education.

Several memoranda from the British West Africa colonies were generated as a result of Hall's dispatch. For example, various groups, educational, political, and social organizations and interest groups reacted in the Gold Coast (Ghana). The Joint Provisional Council of Gold Coast Colony memorandum supported the Majority Report, and so did those of the Gold Coast Bar Association, the Old Bays Association of Achimota College and the Gold Coast Teachers Union. (Jeffreys, 1987, 14-17). From Sierra Leone, the Fourah Bay College Council rejected the Minority Report. The Sierra Leone Board of Education favoured the implementation of the Majority report. Gambia was the poorest and smallest of all the colonies in British West Africa, and so did not present any demands. (Jeffrey, 1987).

The Secretary of State (George Hall) and the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Arthur Creech Jones) preferred the implementation of the Minority Report because the Colonial Government did not have funds to simultaneously establish three universities. (Moteru et. al 2011). The problem of qualified academic staff, the supply of students, and the need to maintain high standards were other sources of concern. The decision to establish one university generated a lot of animosity as it failed to consider the problem posed by the geographical distance between the West African colonies. Again, the contrast between the colonies in social, economic and political development was hardly considered in taking such a decision. Added to this was that establishing a higher education institution in one territory to serve students from other colonies would hardly reflect the economic, social and political developments that would produce citizens who would have engendered their country's advancement.

There is also the American factor that must be added to the mix to explain the nature of British colonial reforms. Concerning higher education, colonial officials feared that the influence of Americans on educated Africans could be a major factor in the possible disintegration of the British Empire. Indeed, such influences partly explained why American-educated Africans opposed British rule and became "radical" and were conceived as "revolutionaries" and non-conformists. (Moteru et. al, 2011). Consequently, Africans in British colonies were to be moulded wisely to reinforce the thinking of the educated elite who were to implement and sustain the new British colonial reforms. Counteracting the American influence also served to persuade the British to establish universities in Africa. (Moteru, et. al, 2011).

The Majority Report of Elliot's Commission became a blueprint for the establishment of University Colleges in British West Africa in 1948. (Tamuno, 1971). Arthur Creech Jones, who had now become Secretary of State, yielded to the pressures from various groups and the demands of nationalists as he conceded two University Colleges. Arthur Creech Jones, in particular, preferred the intelligentsia to the chiefs in the administration of the colonies and eventual transfer of political power. (Tamuno, 1971). Consequently, the establishment of higher education institutions was imperative. In fact, the Labour Government's disposition was in favour of the educated elite rather than the conservation of power in chiefs, which necessitated the provision of higher education in British West Africa.

A major step towards the establishment of the university colleges in Nigeria was taken in 1947 when Late Mr. David Mowbray Balme and Dr. Kenneth Mellanby were appointed Principal

designate respectively for the two University Colleges in Nigeria and the Gold Coast by the Secretary of State (Creech Jones). (Tamuno 19 71). Mellanby from the University of London and Balme from Cambridge University, each influenced their university colleges in the tradition along the lines of their home university's experience and culture. The new university colleges therefore, maintained high standards of the British education system.

Nigeria, in the immediate post Second World War period, enjoyed a favorable trade balance from agricultural products such as groundnuts and cotton from the Northern region, palm products from the Eastern Region and cocoa from the Western Region, as Marketing Boards of each region regulated and controlled exports and accumulated surpluses. (Okojie, 2010, 9-14) It is not surprising, therefore, that the Nigerian Government bore the recurrent expenditure for the establishment of the University College, Ibadan, Nigeria. However, the larger part of the financial support for capital costs to the tune of £1,500,000 (one million, five hundred thousand pounds), only initially, was provided by the British Government from the CDWA fund allocation to Higher Education in the colonies as recommended by the Asquith Commission. (Okojie, 2010, 211-13).

### **Academic Administration of the University College - Ibadan**

University College Ibadan began lectures in January 1948 with 104 students who were originally students of Yaba Higher College. They completed their programmes in the new University College. It was in October 1948 that 148 new university students were admitted after a very competitive entrance examination. (Okojie,). The following degree courses were offered: Arts (Classics, English, History and Geography); Science (Mathematics, Botany, Chemistry, Physics and Zoology), Agriculture, which was introduced in 1949 and Medicine, which was limited to only preclinical courses (in the early years of the University College). They were a replica of courses also offered at the University of London to which University College Ibadan (ICU) was affiliated. Similarly, the academic, technical and administrative staff recruitment and job advancement were strictly based on British Standards. These actions were taken in accordance with the recommendations of both the Asquith and Elliot Commissions Reports that "the University Colleges should aspire from the outset to achieve academic standards equal to those of universities and university colleges in Britain." (Fafunwa, 1971, 73-74)

University College Ibadan was a prestigious institution in the then British Commonwealth largely because of its high-quality staff (academic, technical and administrative); an international academic staff component, as only a few inherited from Yaba Higher College were Nigerians; high-standard physical and other teaching facilities, as well as a manageable students' population for effective teaching. Although University College Ibadan was criticized for its highly competitive and elitist admission policy, it is a source of prestige too because only the best candidates were admitted. (Fafunwa, 1971, 74). Its graduates earned the University of London degrees, and its courses were also Arts and Science-based as those of the University of London to which it was affiliated. (Fafunwa, 1971.) The University of London gave final approval to its examinations because its students were awarded the University of London degrees.

The University College, by its nature, imported Western traditions and culture that were predominantly based on liberal arts and literary education, which imported contempt for practical subjects that had characterized the academic ethos of the West for centuries. However, it would be recalled that West Africans, most especially Nigeria, had not attained independence that would have allowed them to control their affairs and dictate the course of events. In the 1940s, at the time of the establishment of these higher institutions in West Africa, the British were fully in charge of affairs and called the tune. British colonial policy was to establish a local government whereby educated Africans would be expected to assume a leading role in governance. Africa was still to remain a major source of their economy and was to gradually attain self-development and ultimately independence.

The establishment of University Colleges was a major step towards the development of full-fledged universities and other forms of higher education in post-independent British colonies. The provision for founding higher education institutions was contained in the Eric Ashby Commission of 1959-A pre-independent year, set up to work out the modalities for the expansion and enhance assess to higher education in Nigeria.

### **The Eric Ashby Commission**

At the eve of independence, the Sir Eric Ashby Commission was created in April 1959, saddled with the responsibility of producing a new policy framework to reform the Nigerian university education following the expansion of various countries' economic sectors and administrative structures. The report of the commission was that the government should establish more

universities across Nigeria. This led to the establishment of the University of Nigeria in 1960, and three more universities were added to increase access and enhance socio-economic and national development and provide the needed manpower capable of taking leadership positions as the country marched into independence, which was the desire of the nationalists and those who demanded the government of their own.

Despite the wave of change in the development of tertiary education, the University of Ibadan held sway as the leading university educational institution in Nigeria. Given its advantageous position, the university had a huge impact on the supply of the manpower needed of the country in several disciplines at various levels of the country, thus enhancing socio-cultural, political and economic development of the country. Among the first set of the University of Ibadan graduates were Professor Wole Soyinka, Professor Chinua Achebe, King Saro-Wiwa, Pastor Williams Kumuyi and many great alumnae such as Chief Bola Ige and Governor Godwin Obaseki- a former Governor of Edo state, among many others who have distinguished themselves in their various disciplines in the country and beyond. The institution has been ranked one of the best universities in Nigeria, Africa and the Commonwealth of Nations.

### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

The development of university education in Nigeria was driven by specific policies adopted and implemented by the British colonial government, and to a large extent, the major objective of producing skilled manpower to man the bureaucracy, public and private business firms was achieved. University of Ibadan was a product of several colonial education policies, and in many ways the university fulfilled the objectives of the British colonial government and to some extent addressed the needs of Nigerians who yearned for higher education at the time. Accordingly, the University College produced human resources that were needed in the colonial and the pre-independent economy and continued to serve its purpose into the early years of Nigerian independence between 1960-62, when the Ashby report was adopted and implemented.

It is important to note that university education policies were constantly reviewed under the British colonial administrations in line with changing circumstances and available funding. However, while the British education policies were Eurocentric and essentially tools of economic and political control, they embodied valuable strategies and lessons for quality control that should be adapted in reforming universities in contemporary Nigeria. The study

therefore, recommends that aspects of the British colonial policies be retained in the search for reform of the university system. Such efforts should align with broader national development objectives, while constant review is suggested to reflect changing circumstances and above all, aim at preserving local customs to foster national identity and ethical integrity.

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