Growth Without Development: Structural and Functional Disparities in Nigeria's University System, 1999-2026

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Abstract

Between 1999 and 2026 Nigeria's university system grew from fewer than fifty institutions to more than three hundred, yet this numerical expansion has not been matched by a comparable improvement in funding, staffing, infrastructure, or graduate outcomes (TheCable, 2026). This article argues that Nigerian higher education has undergone a form of growth without development: institutional proliferation driven by political demand for access and by the licensing of private universities has outpaced the financial and regulatory capacity needed to sustain quality. Drawing on massification theory (Trow, 1973) and resource dependence theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978), together with recent policy reporting and labour-market research, the article traces how chronic underfunding (allAfrica, 2025; Businessday NG, 2026), academic staff emigration (Akinwale et al., 2023; Federal Ministry of Information and National Orientation, 2026), and a persistent mismatch between curricula and labour-market needs (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024; Pitan & Adedeji, 2012) combine to erode the developmental capacity of an expanding system. The article concludes with policy recommendations centered on licensing restraint, performance-linked funding, staff retention, and stronger industry linkages.

Keywords: *University, Institutions, Funding, Growth, Development, Higher Education*

1. Introduction

Since the return to civilian rule in 1999, Nigeria's university sector has expanded at a pace with few parallels on the continent. The National Universities Commission (NUC) approved thirty-three new universities in 2025 alone, taking the national total to 309 institutions, of which 168 are privately owned, 74 are federal, and 67 are state-owned

(TheCable, 2026). On the surface this looks like straightforward progress: more institutions ought to mean wider access, more graduates, and a stronger base of human capital. In practice, however, the capacity of the system to teach, house, and equip the students it now enrols has not kept pace with the rate at which new institutions have been licensed. Investigative reporting on the 2026 budget cycle found that even as new universities were being approved, existing federal universities were struggling to complete laboratory and lecture-hall projects that the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund) had approved more than a decade earlier (FIJ, 2026).

This article examines that gap between numerical growth and institutional development. It argues that Nigeria has expanded access to university education faster than it has expanded the funding, staffing, and regulatory systems required to sustain quality at that scale, and that this mismatch has concrete costs: overcrowded classrooms, unfinished capital projects, a sustained outflow of academic staff, and a growing population of graduates whose skills do not match what employers are looking for (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024; Pitan & Adedeji, 2012).

2. Conceptual Framework

Two complementary frameworks structure the analysis that follows. The first is Martin Trow's (1973) theory of massification, which describes how higher-education systems change character as they move from serving a small elite to serving a mass population, and eventually a near-universal one. Trow's central insight is that this transition is not simply a matter of adding seats; it requires a corresponding transformation in financing, governance, and quality assurance. Where that transformation does not occur, the pressure of rising enrolment falls instead on standards, on staff workloads, and on the physical infrastructure of existing institutions.

The second framework is resource dependence theory, developed by Pfeffer and Salancik (1978), which holds that organisations depend on external actors, in this case governments, tuition-paying households, regulators, and donors, for the resources they need to operate, and that this dependence shapes organisational behaviour. Universities that cannot rely on predictable government subvention are pushed toward strategies that ensure short-term survival, expanding enrolment, multiplying fee-paying programmes, or pursuing prestige-driven growth, even where staffing and infrastructure are not ready to support that growth. Read together, these two frameworks suggest that Nigeria's growth-without-development pattern is not an accident of poor administration in any single institution, but a predictable outcome of a system that has expanded access under conditions of chronic resource uncertainty.

2.1 The Scale of Expansion

Nigeria's university sector has grown from a small number of federal institutions at independence to a system of more than three hundred universities by 2026 (TheCable, 2026). Private universities have driven most of the recent growth: of the thirty-three institutions approved in 2025, twenty were privately owned, seven were established by the federal government, and six by state governments (TheCable, 2026). This growth reflects genuine and continuing demand. More than two million candidates register annually for the Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination, and available university places have historically fallen well short of that demand, creating sustained political pressure for further licensing.

The difficulty is that licensing a new university is comparatively inexpensive for the state, while building the laboratories, libraries, staff housing, and academic departments that make a university functional is not. Reporting on the 2025 and 2026 federal budgets found that while the government continued to approve new institutions, many existing public universities were still waiting on capital projects approved years earlier, and that even where funds were budgeted, disbursement delays regularly forced universities to abandon or indefinitely postpone construction (FIJ, 2026).

2.2 Chronic Underfunding

Nigeria's education budget has never approached the 15 to 26 percent of national expenditure that UNESCO has, at various points, recommended for developing countries (Businessday NG, 2026). Federal education allocations rose in naira terms from roughly 1.83 trillion in 2023 to a proposed 3.59 trillion in 2026, but the sector's share of the overall national budget actually fell over the same period, from 7.82 percent in 2025 to 6.15 percent in 2026, as debt-service obligations consumed an increasing share of available revenue (Businessday NG, 2026). A coalition of civil-society organisations described the resulting shortfall as a driver of poor infrastructure, teacher and lecturer shortages, weak learning outcomes, and rising youth unemployment.

TETFund has partly absorbed the resulting gap: its own budget grew from roughly 320 billion naira in 2023 to 1.6 trillion naira in 2025 (FIJ, 2026). Yet TETFund is an intervention fund rather than a substitute for recurrent government funding, and its capital projects depend on timely disbursement that does not always occur. The result, as documented across several federal universities in 2025 and 2026, is a pattern of laboratories, lecture theatres, and administrative buildings approved and even partially built, but left incomplete for years at a stretch (FIJ, 2026). Underfunding of this kind interacts directly with the massification dynamic described by Trow (1973): enrolment keeps rising even as the physical and financial base meant to support it does not.

2.3 Staffing and the Japa Phenomenon

A second and closely related strain on the system is the sustained emigration of academic staff, popularly termed the 'japa' phenomenon in Nigerian public discourse. Empirical work modelling the dynamics of this emigration found that Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) strike activity, poor conditions of service, and limited research funding function as persistent push factors driving lecturers out of the Nigerian system and, in many cases, out of the country altogether (Akinwale et al., 2023). Nigerian news coverage through 2025 and 2026 consistently described universities struggling to retain experienced staff in engineering, medicine, and the sciences, disciplines in which Nigerian-trained academics are in high demand abroad (Blueprint Newspapers, 2025).

The federal government has acknowledged the scale of the problem. In early 2026 it approved a 40 percent salary increase for university lecturers, effective January 2026, alongside a new diaspora engagement platform intended to connect Nigerian academics abroad with local universities for research collaboration rather than permanent return (Federal Ministry of Information and National Orientation, 2026). Whether a single salary adjustment is sufficient to reverse a pattern driven by a combination of pay, research infrastructure, and career opportunity abroad remains an open question, but the intervention itself is an implicit acknowledgment that staffing losses have become a first-order threat to the functioning of the system, not a peripheral concern.

The consequences of sustained staff loss are cumulative rather than immediate. Experienced lecturers are not easily or quickly replaced, and their departure weakens mentorship for early-career academics, disrupts research continuity, and, over time, affects the global visibility and ranking of Nigerian institutions (Blueprint Newspapers, 2025). In resource-dependence terms, universities responding to staff shortages by increasing class sizes or relying more heavily on part-time and contract instructors are engaging in exactly the kind of short-term survival strategy that Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) describe as characteristic of organisations facing unstable external resource flows.

2.4 Graduate Employability and the Skills Mismatch

The final strand of the growth-without-development pattern concerns what happens to students once they graduate. Official labour-force data for the first quarter of 2024 placed Nigeria's overall unemployment rate at 5.3 percent, but recorded a higher rate, 9.0 percent, among people with post-secondary education, indicating that a university credential no longer functions as reliable protection against unemployment (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024). Earlier academic research had already identified the underlying mechanism: Pitan and Adedeji (2012) found a persistent mismatch between the skills Nigerian university graduates possess and the skills employers actually require, a finding that more recent commentary continues to echo in discussions of digital literacy, practical training, and curricula that remain heavily theoretical (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024).

This mismatch is not simply a matter of individual graduates lacking motivation or ability. It reflects a structural feature of a rapidly expanded system in which many new programmes, and in some cases entire new universities, have been approved without a corresponding investment in industry linkages, practical laboratories, internship pipelines, or curriculum review processes capable of keeping pace with a changing labour market. Where massification theory explains why quality comes under pressure as a system expands, the employability evidence shows one of the clearest downstream effects of that pressure: graduates who hold a credential without holding the skills that credential is assumed to certify.

2.5 The Regulatory Capacity of the National Universities Commission

The National Universities Commission (NUC) is the statutory body responsible for approving new universities, accrediting academic programmes, and enforcing minimum academic standards across the sector, and its own structure and performance offer one of the clearest illustrations of the mismatch between expansion and capacity documented elsewhere in this study.

2.5.1 Structure and Statutory Mandate

The NUC was established in 1962 as an advisory unit within the Cabinet Office, following recommendations of the Ashby Commission, and acquired full statutory authority in 1974 under enabling legislation that transformed it from an advisory body into an enforcement agency. It now operates as a parastatal under the Federal Ministry of Education, governed by a two-tier leadership structure: a Governing Council or Board, currently chaired by Professor Oluwatoyin Temitayo Ogundipe, a former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Lagos, Lagos Nigeria appointed in June 2026 after his predecessor resigned less than a year into the role, and an Executive Secretary, the Commission's chief executive, a position held by Professor Yusufu Abdullahi Ribadu since December 2024.

Below this leadership layer, the Commission's operations are organised into thirteen directorates, each headed by a Director: Academic Planning; Inspection and Monitoring; Human Resources; the Establishment of Private Universities; Students; Research, Innovations and Information Technology; Finance and Accounts; Accreditation; Open, Distance and e-Learning; Skills Development and Entrepreneurship; Public Affairs; Special Projects; and the Executive Secretary's Office. Two statutory instruments, the National Universities Commission Act and the Education (National Minimum Standards and Establishment of Institutions) Act, empower the Commission to prescribe minimum academic standards, approve new institutions and programmes, conduct accreditation, and advise government on university development (Ezeaku, 2026). Since 1989 those standards have gone through three major revisions, from the original Minimum Academic Standards, to the outcome-based Benchmark Minimum Academic Standards of 2007, to the Core Curriculum and Minimum Academic Standards adopted in 2023, which universities must satisfy at a threshold of 70 percent across Academic Matters, Staffing, Physical Facilities, and Library provision to obtain full accreditation (Ezeaku, 2026).

Image: Image of the Headquarters of the Nigerian Universities Commission (NUC) building, Abuja, Nigeria.

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2.5.2 Faults in Regulatory Capacity Relative to Sector Growth

In practice, several documented faults connect directly to the growth-without-development pattern examined in this study. First, the Commission continues to license new universities at a pace that its own accreditation and monitoring apparatus cannot match. The NUC approved thirty-three new universities in 2025 alone, bringing the national total past 309, even as existing federal universities were still waiting on TETFund capital projects approved years earlier. Ezeaku (2026) documents that university numbers rose from roughly 75 institutions in 2007 to around 300 by 2025, with more than 130 of those approved between 2015 and 2023 alone, a rate of institutional proliferation that a University of Abuja professor publicly described as bordering on recklessness given the accompanying decline in standards.

Second, enforcement of the Commission's own accreditation standards has proven inconsistent. Analysts have argued that the continued accreditation of universities that visibly lack essential infrastructure suggests the NUC may not be able to fully enforce the benchmarks it sets, a pattern one 2024 analysis characterised as the Commission losing its grip on varsity regulation. Ezeaku (2026) reports specific cases in which universities used improper means, including alleged bribery, to expedite certification and bypass quality checks without facing visible sanction, and notes that accreditation panels have on occasion discovered institutions borrowing equipment or hastily refurbishing facilities specifically to create a misleading impression of readiness during inspection visits.

Third, the Commission's jurisdiction increasingly overlaps and conflicts with that of professional regulatory bodies. In 2025 the NUC publicly clashed with professional councils over the accreditation of specific programmes, most visibly the dental programme at the University of Calabar, with the Commission's own Executive Secretary describing the resulting duplication of roles as a source of confusion and institutional tension within the university system (Guardian Nigeria, 2025).

Fourth, oversight gaps have at times surfaced only after considerable damage had already been done. A November 2025 internal NUC investigation uncovered thirty-two institutions, including unaccredited foreign universities and non-degree-awarding professional bodies, operating as honorary-doctorate mills, a practice the Commission moved to formally regulate only in February 2026 (Guardian Nigeria, 2026b).

Fifth, and most tellingly, the Commission has itself effectively acknowledged that licensing had outpaced quality assurance. Facing sustained criticism from the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and from academics over the physical and staffing inadequacy of many newly approved private universities, the NUC imposed a one-year moratorium on new private-university approvals beginning February 10, 2025, explicitly to allow time to review its pending application pipeline and update its own guidelines (Ezeaku, 2026).

Taken together, these faults show that the growth-without-development pattern in Nigerian higher education is not simply a matter of insufficient government funding reaching individual universities. It is compounded by a regulatory body whose statutory design, thirteen directorates overseeing a system that has roughly quadrupled in institutional count since 2007, has not been matched by a proportional increase in monitoring capacity, weakening the very check that was meant to prevent expansion from outrunning quality in the first place (Ezeaku, 2026).

3.1 Martin Trow's Massification Theory

Trow's (1973) framework, first developed for the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, describes higher-education systems as moving through three broad stages as the proportion of the relevant age cohort enrolled in tertiary education rises: an elite stage, in which access is restricted to a small proportion of the population and the system's purpose is to shape the mind and character of a ruling class; a mass stage, in which enrolment expands to serve a much larger share of the population and the system's purpose broadens to include the transmission of skills and preparation for a wider range of technical and leadership roles; and a universal stage, in which higher education becomes an expectation for nearly the entire age cohort and the system's purpose shifts again toward the adaptation of a whole population to rapid social and technological change. Trow's central and most frequently cited insight is that each transition is not simply a matter of enrolling more students. It requires parallel changes in governance, curriculum, modes of instruction, and, critically, in financing and quality assurance. Where enrolment growth outpaces these parallel adjustments, Trow argued, the character and quality of the system come under sustained strain.

This framework maps closely onto the pattern documented in Nigeria's university sector. The National Universities Commission approved thirty-three new universities in a single year, 2025, bringing the national total to 309 institutions (TheCable, 2026), a rate of institutional proliferation that reflects a system still expanding to absorb rising demand for access, consistent with a system moving further into Trow's mass and, in some respects, near-universal stage. Yet reporting on the same expansion period found that the financing and infrastructural adjustments Trow identifies as necessary companions to enrolment growth had not kept pace: several federal universities were still waiting on capital projects approved years earlier even as new institutions continued to be licensed (FIJ, 2026). This is precisely the dynamic Trow's theory predicts, expansion of access proceeding on a timetable set by political and social demand, while the financing and quality-assurance architecture that would allow that access to translate into genuine capacity lags behind.

Massification theory is therefore used in this study not simply to describe the fact of Nigeria's university expansion but to explain why that expansion has produced strain rather than proportional development. The theory predicts that in the absence of matching institutional reform, rising enrolment translates into larger class sizes, more strained laboratories and libraries, and greater reliance on part-time or overstretched academic staff, outcomes that are well documented in the funding and staffing evidence reviewed elsewhere in this study (allAfrica, 2025; Businessday NG, 2026).

3.2 Human Capital Theory as Supporting Theory

Where massification theory explains the internal dynamics of an expanding system, human capital theory explains the underlying motivation for expansion in the first place, why states, families, and individual students continue to treat university enrolment as a worthwhile investment even under conditions of strain. Schultz (1961) argued, against the conventional economic treatment of labour as an undifferentiated input, that skills and knowledge acquired through education and training constitute a genuine form of capital, one that individuals and societies invest in deliberately and that yields a measurable return in the form of higher productivity and higher earnings. Becker (1964) extended this argument into a fuller theoretical and empirical treatment, modelling education and on-the-job training as investment decisions comparable to investment in physical capital, decisions in which individuals weigh the immediate costs of schooling, including foregone earnings, against the expected future returns in the form of higher lifetime income.

Human capital theory has been applied directly to the Nigerian context. Olaniyan and Okemakinde (2008) argued that formal education functions as an instrument for improving a nation's productive capacity, and that an educated population is, in a direct economic sense, a more productive population, while also cautioning that a country confronted by underemployment, low absorptive capacity in the labour market, shortages of professionals in key sectors, and persistent brain drain will struggle to realise the expected returns on its educational investment even where enrolment continues to expand. This caveat is directly relevant to the present study. It supplies the theoretical explanation for why continued state and household investment in university education remains rational and expected, even as the empirical evidence on graduate outcomes complicates the simple picture of education as a guaranteed route to higher productivity and earnings.

Recent Nigerian data illustrate this complication. Official labour-force statistics for the first quarter of 2024 recorded a higher unemployment rate among people with post-secondary education, 9.0 percent, than the national average of 5.3 percent (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024), while earlier empirical work had already identified a persistent mismatch between the skills Nigerian graduates possess and the skills employers require (Pitan & Adedeji, 2012). Within a human capital framework, these findings suggest that the investment being made in university education, by the state through licensing and subvention, and by households through tuition and foregone income, is not yielding the productivity and earnings returns the theory would predict under conditions of well-functioning provision. Human capital theory therefore supplies the demand-side and outcome-side half of the explanation that massification theory, focused primarily on system-level structure and capacity, does not fully address on its own.

3.3 Synthesis: Massification and Human Capital Together

The two theories are complementary rather than competing. Human capital theory explains why Nigeria, like many developing economies, has treated the expansion of university access as a rational and necessary national investment, a means of building the skilled workforce that Schultz (1961) and Becker (1964) theorised education would produce. Massification theory explains why that same expansion, pursued without a proportional transformation of financing, staffing, and quality-assurance systems, has produced strain on the internal functioning of the sector rather than a straightforward multiplication of its developmental returns (Trow, 1973). Taken together, the two frameworks support the central argument of this study: Nigeria's university system has grown in a manner broadly consistent with the demand-driven logic of human capital theory, but it has done so without the accompanying structural adjustments that massification theory identifies as the precondition for that growth to translate into genuine development rather than growth without development.

4. Discussion

Taken together, the evidence on funding, staffing, and graduate outcomes points to a single underlying dynamic. Nigeria has treated the licensing of new universities as a policy solution to rising demand for access, without treating the financing, staffing, and quality-assurance of those universities as an equally urgent parallel problem. Massification theory predicts precisely this outcome: expansion without a corresponding transformation of the resource base places sustained pressure on quality rather than producing broad-based improvement (Trow, 1973). Resource dependence theory helps explain why individual institutions respond to this pressure the way they do, by continuing to expand enrolment and programme offerings even when existing capacity is already strained, because enrolment growth is often the most readily available lever for generating revenue in a system where predictable government funding cannot be assumed (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978).

The costs of this dynamic are distributed unevenly. Students experience larger classes and reduced access to functioning laboratories and libraries. Lecturers experience heavier workloads and weaker research support, conditions that the emigration literature identifies as a direct driver of further staff loss (Akinwale et al., 2023). Employers receive graduates whose formal qualifications do not reliably signal the skills they need (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024; Pitan & Adedeji, 2012). And the state, having gained the short-term political benefit of expanded access, absorbs the longer-term cost of a workforce that is credentialed but not always employable.

4.1 Policy Implications

Several concrete policy directions follow from this analysis. First, university licensing could be made more selective, with new approvals conditioned on demonstrated staffing, infrastructure, and financing readiness rather than on political or regional considerations alone. Second, funding mechanisms could shift further toward models that reward demonstrated capacity and performance rather than simple enrolment growth, reducing the incentive identified by resource dependence theory to expand access as a revenue strategy regardless of institutional readiness. Third, staff retention requires sustained investment beyond a single salary adjustment: predictable research funding, functioning laboratories, and credible career pathways are all identified in the emigration literature as material factors in academics' decisions to stay or leave (Akinwale et al., 2023; Federal Ministry of Information and National Orientation, 2026). Fourth, the National Universities Commission would need a corresponding increase in monitoring and enforcement capacity to keep pace with a sector that has nearly doubled in institutional count within a decade. Fifth, closer and more sustained collaboration between universities and industry, of the kind already recommended in the graduate-employability literature, could help narrow the gap between what curricula teach and what the labour market actually requires (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024; Pitan & Adedeji, 2012).

4.2 Conclusion

Nigeria's university system has grown rapidly since 1999, and that growth has been driven by real and legitimate demand for access to higher education. The evidence reviewed here suggests, however, that the country has not yet matched that growth with a comparable expansion of the funding, staffing, and regulatory capacity needed to sustain quality at scale. The result is a system that is larger in numerical terms than it was two decades ago, but whose developmental capacity, its ability to teach effectively, retain skilled staff, and produce employable graduates, has not grown in step. Bringing growth and development back into alignment will require treating institutional capacity, not simply institutional count, as the primary measure of progress in Nigerian higher-education policy.

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