

Demographic Growth and Institutional Trajectories of West Africa's Premier Universities: A Comparative Analysis of the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, and the University of Ghana, Legon, 1948–2025

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Abstract

This study compares resource utilization and enrolment differences between the University of Ibadan and the University of Ghana in response to the quadrupling of student populations during the colonial period. Based on historical methods, available materials, and data analysis, it reveals that while student enrollment at the University of Ibadan has outpaced infrastructural capacity, the University of Ghana has maintained lower student-to-lecturer ratios. Despite differences in funding mechanisms and demographic growth rates, findings show no significant differences in resource availability when adjusting for institution size. The study adopts Situation Learning theory to explain the interlocking relationship between government policies and the demographic development of the university system, focusing on the University of Ibadan, Nigeria and the University of Ghana, Legon. The study underscores the necessity for targeted government funding to improve university infrastructure and recommends enhanced accreditation processes to ensure educational quality in both institutions.

Keywords: Education, Ghana, Government Policies, Nigeria, University

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Introduction

The development of university education in British West Africa was borne out of the desire to train a high-level workforce to occupy various positions in the colonial administration, enhance skilled workforces in the civil service and the private sector to accelerate the Europeans' imperial goals, and prepare the inhabitants for future responsibilities in their various countries.

In their efforts by the British Colonial authorities to achieve their objectives and ensure that Africans acquire high-level skills to enhance societal advancement, the Colonial authority therefore set up the Eric Asquith and Water Elliot Commissions in 1943 to consider the development of University education in West Africa territories, among which were Nigeria and the Gold Coast (Ghana). Their 1945 report led to the establishment of both University College Ibadan and the University College Gold Coast in 1948. (Tamuno, 1973, 22-23). These first Universities pioneered academic activities in both countries, starting with 104 and 90 students, respectively, in the University Colleges of Ibadan and Legon, to produce the workforce needed and address their national socio-economic gaps. (Tamuno, 1973, 23).

The British government heeded the advice of the Justice Cyril Asquith Commission that the new West African universities should be supervised by the experienced University of London in Britain, and that the Inter-University Council should guide policy implementation to attain standards, ensure effective management, and provide quality service to the people. Thus, the institutions were affiliated with the University of London. The Inter-University Council, established in 1947, helped guide the new University Colleges in areas such as staff recruitment, facilities and infrastructure, and in implementing budgets for running the institutions and in general management to enhance quality standards, like those in Britain, and was constantly in tune with new institutions. (Agbodeka, 1998, 20-22). Consequently, the influence and experiences of the IUC and the University of London helped maintain the University Colleges' high academic standards. They spurred the British government to support the institutions by funding them through the Government Pulse for over a decade (13/14 years). Suffice to say that University Colleges Ibadan and Ghana looked to two separate institutions in Great Britain: the Inter-University Council for guidance on its broad policy, and the University of London, with the Power to award degrees.

The principals (Vice Chancellors) of the University of Ghana were Dr. Mowbray Balm, who was the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Professor of Classics at the University of London, while at the University College, Ibadan, was Dr. Kenneth Melanby. (Agbodeka, 1998, 22). Both were appointed in 1947 with a mandate to build a university with a sound foundation of academic excellence, a source of pride to both countries and the people of West Africa at large. (Agbodeka, 1998). With their experience, they ensured they recruited the best-qualified professionals who would support them in driving the vision in the new assignment before them, and years later, both universities have been well recognized and ranked among the best institutions in their countries, the continent, and the world at large.

However, the demographic growth of the first two universities and their impact on enrolment, resources (human and material), and infrastructure attracted the attention of scholars from higher institutions. Bernard Binga et al. (2016) examined the evolution of university governance in Ghana and its implications for education policy and practice, but never mentioned demographic growth or its impact on the university. In the same vein, Adu-Gyamfi and others (2016) equally examined educational reforms in Ghana from a historical perspective. On his part, Dr. Melanby (1958) provides an account of the establishment of the first University College of Ibadan, including the first principal (Vice-Chancellor) appointed in 1947, the ground-up administration, and the challenges. At the same time, Folayan Ojo (1978) traced the development of Nigerian universities and the higher-level workforce. Nduka Okafor (1971) discussed the development of universities in Nigeria and clearly examined the influence of political and other factors on university development in Nigeria from 1868 to 1967. In all the work reviewed above, none paid adequate attention to an important aspect of university education growth. It is against this background that this paper examines the demographic

growth and the development of the premier universities in British West Africa during the colonial period.

Brief Administrative History of University College, Ibadan

To ensure that modalities were put in place for the smooth take-off of the pioneer universities in the colonies, the Secretary of State for the Colonies officially announced the key actors who would effectively use their expertise to pioneer the academic activities of the institutions. Thus, in May 1947, the principal-designate of the new University College in Ibadan, Dr. Kenneth Mellanby, was appointed. He arrived in Nigeria from the United Kingdom in July 1947 and began making preliminary arrangements for the new institution. (Fafunwa, 1971, 72-73). At the time of his arrival, there was no college, no building, no student body, no staff, no governing body. The first step taken by Dr. Kenneth Melanby was to transfer the old Yaba Higher College students to Ibadan to serve as the nucleus of the new university college. (Fafunwa, 1971, 73). In the meantime, the Nigerians made arrangements to house the college on a temporary site in Ibadan, in old army barracks that had been used as an army hospital during World War II.

However, in November, 1947, the first entrance examination for students' admission to the University College was held at Ibadan to consider the takeoff academic programme at the institution. (Fafunwa, 1971). On January 18, 1948, former Yaba Higher College students were admitted as the first undergraduate students of the University College, Ibadan; with about 104 students and 13 instructors, the nucleus of the new college. (National Achieve, 1-2). On November 17th, 1948, Arthur Creech Jones, a member of parliament and former Secretary of State for the Colonies, performed the ceremony of transferring the permanent site of the University College to its own keeping and turning the sod for the new buildings before a large assembly, which included representatives from all parts of Nigeria. (National Achieve, 2).

The University began its second year in October 1948 with 210 students, including new students admitted as a result of the entrance examination held in November of the previous year. Of the total students' intake, 176 were undergraduates, and twenty-five were attending special courses leading to diplomas. From its humble beginnings, the University College grew to become one of the most referred higher institutions of learning in Africa and the Commonwealth of Nations in general. (National Achieve).

The Brief Administrative History of the University College, Gold Coast (Ghana)

The University College of the Gold Coast (Ghana) was established by the Ordinance on August 11th, 1948, "for the purpose of providing for and promoting university education, learning and research". (Agbodeka, 1978, 20-22). Its first Principal was Mr. David Mowbray Balme, and the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Professor of Classics at the University of London. (Agbodeka, 1978, 21). With his appointment as the Principal-Designate of the University College, he visited the Gold Coast in September, Legon Hill, where the permanent site will be, and Achimota College, which was designed for the temporary take-off. His visit to

Ghana in preparation for the new task helped him to familiarize himself with the people and the environment before he resumed his official assignment. It ensured a solid foundation for the university education system, as in the United Kingdom and European countries. (Agbodeka, 1978, 22).

Mr. Balm was far-sighted, Courageous and dedicated to an ideal of scholarship. By his vision, industry and single-mindedness of purpose, despite the limited resources at his disposal, he built a college. He laid the foundations for a sound University, which is now a source of pride to the people of Ghana, the African continent, and the world at large. In his ten years' leadership as the principal, he created an institution whose keynote was orderly living with dignity in a community of scholars. As earlier stated, the Gold Coast University College began at the Achimota College grounds with about 90 students from Achimota Higher College, who formed the institution's pioneer students in 1948. The University later moved to its permanent site at the Legon campus in 1952.

Between 1961 and 1962, respectively, the University College, Ghana, and the University College, Ibadan, became autonomous of the University of London, expanded in size and scope, and provided human capital resources in both countries and their neighbors in West African states, as well as in other continents. For instance, as the University of Ibadan, which started with 104 students with three (3) faculties of Arts, Science and Medicine, divided into 13 Departments and later grew into over 23 Faculties as of 2020, the University of Ghana also started with 90 students with three faculties at inception in 1949 and 1961/62 academic session. They were referred to as the Faculty of Arts, with six departments: English, Classics, Geography, History, Mathematics, and the School of African Studies. Also, the Faculty of Commerce has three departments: Economics and Statistics, Economic History, and Accounting. While the last, which is the Faculty of Science, had four departments. These are Botany, Zoology, Chemistry and Physics. They were later divided into schools, colleges and faculties. The University later proved to be one of the most referred-to higher institutions of learning on the continent and in the Commonwealth of Nations at large.

Demographic Growth of Pioneer Universities in West Africa (Nigeria and Ghana)

During the pre-independence and independence periods, the governments of Ghana and Nigeria prioritized policy reforms at the pre-tertiary and tertiary levels to address the inadequacies of the policies bequeathed to African states by the imperialists and to reshape the tertiary education system. For instance, the Accelerated Development Plan of Education initiated by Dr. Kwemeh Nkrumah in 1951 as a Prime Minister and the implementation of the Universal Free Education policy declared by the Western and later Eastern Regional governments in Nigeria between 1954-1956 respectively led to the expansion of secondary schools and an increase in students' enrollment into the University Colleges in the 1960s. (Amoako, 2015, 153-154). Similarly, the continued support for pre-tertiary and higher education by the post-independence government since the early 1970s and 80s has made the necessary facilities available. The

establishment of more institutions led to a rapid expansion policy and an increase in the number of secondary school attendants, which in turn increased the number of student applications to both the University of Ibadan and the University of Ghana. (Amoako, 2015,153-154).

The rapid increase in the students' population was triggered as a result of the autonomy the British colonial authority granted the University Colleges in both Ghana and Nigeria which made the government to expand the schools in sizes and scope, reviewed their curriculum and introduced new Faculties and departments such as the institute of African Studies, African Political and Economic History to accommodate more students and address issues of African development. Consequently, the number of secondary schools rose geometrically, as well as the quest for university education. For instance, from 30,000 to 60,000 between 1960 and 1980 in Nigeria, while in Ghana, from 500 in 1960, it soared to 10,000, with government policy reforms playing a major role in this development. The increase in secondary schools led to an increase in student enrollment at the universities, stretching the staff strength, infrastructure, and facilities to merely contain the increased student population. (Emakoe, 2021, 25).

Thus, between 1961 and 1985, enrollment at the University of Ghana increased from 350 students to over 10,000, including undergraduates, postgraduates, and diploma students. While the University of Ibadan also experienced a rapid increase from over 18,000 students in the 1984-1985 session, the same period at Legon saw a similar increase.²⁰ The rise in the number of students also led to an increase in staff strength both at the academic and the non-academic levels. Thus, the academic staff at Ibadan rose from 13 in 1948 to 81 in 1953 and to about 200 in 1960. (Emakoe, 2021).

In addition, further expansion in its faculties, leading to a rise in staff numbers to meet growing students' population and increase demand for access to tertiary education, the University of Ibadan experienced a significant rise in its academic staff numbers, which also led to the establishment of four more universities nationwide, raising the number of enrolments in the country. For instance, from 1,395 in 1960 to roughly 25,000 by 1974, as a result of the additional 4 Universities established between 1962 and 1975, the number of academic staff, from assistant lecturers, senior lecturers and to the level of Professors at the Universities in Nigeria increased rapidly, while Ibadan rose from 150 in 1960 to over 1,066 by 1980. (Azenabor, 2005,10-11).

Consequently, it was observed that at inception in 1948, with 104 students at the University College Ibadan, student enrollment in the 1948/49 session rose to 210 students, and the figure rose to 23,000 in 1962, when universities in Nigeria became six. However, by 1996, students' enrolment rose to 234,581, with over 90 universities in the country, and by March 2002, enrolments had soared to 526,780 despite the economic meltdown. (Azenabor, 2005).

Meanwhile, in Ghana, statistics showed that enrolment rose further from 10,000 in the 1970s to 31,000 in 1998/1999, owing to the government's liberalization policy in the tertiary education sector, which allowed private participation. (Peil, 2025). Thus, between 2000 and 2021, Public

university enrollment grew from 10,000 in the 1980s to over 110,000 in 2008/2009. By the 2014/2015 session, the total number of students at Universities in Ghana had soared to over 157,626 seeking university degrees. (Peil, 2025) As of 2021, the University of Ghana alone had 60,875 students despite economic challenges, prompting the government to introduce a cost-sharing policy and require payment of tuition fees. (Ghana Education 2025).

Contextual Framework

This study adopts the Situated Learning theory, as propounded by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger in 1991, to explain the interlocking relationship between tertiary education and national development. It explains the process and development of learning, where individuals have the opportunity to participate in a community of practice. (Schuman, 1998, 1-10). The Theory holds that effective education requires learning embedded in authentic contexts of practice, wherein students engage in increasingly complex tasks within social communities. (Shuman, 1998, 3-4). According to its proponents, learning occurs most effectively within communities through interactions that foster cooperation and problem-solving, thereby enhancing community members' well-being. (Schuman, 1998, 65-7). In a related study, Thomas Sergiovanni argued that learning is most effective when it takes place in communities, asserting that academic social outcomes will improve only when classrooms become learning communities and teaching becomes learner-centered. (Shuman, 1998, 8-9). On the whole, Sergiovanni submitted that communities of practice are not confined to schools but extend to broader settings, such as workplaces and organizations. (Schuman, 1998, 10).

The theory is relevant to this work because it underscores that education policy/system should be context- appropriate and reflect local realities. For instance, the first education policies implemented in the British colonial territories of Ghana and Nigeria were designed to serve the interests of British colonialists. Thus, the curriculum adopted in the two premier University Colleges in Nigeria and Ghana were replica of the University education system in Britain.

However, Dr. Kwame Nkrumah initiated new policy reforms that were implemented to fill the lacuna in the inherited curriculum and address Africa's socio-economic needs. For instance, Kwame Nkrumah's Accelerated Development Plan for Education Policy in 1951, and the Amissah Commission Report of 1963 prioritised Practical and Vocational skill education as the cornerstone of their education system. Similar steps were taken in Nigeria under General Yakubu Gowon's administration with the Dr. Udoji Committee in 1977. The report suggested, among other measures, the need to overhaul the education policy to reflect the indigenous context rather than relying solely on the Anglo-American system.

Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, in his work *'Renaissance African' in 1937* he questioned the existence of a university education system without African cultural values in its curriculum. He lamented thus: "When I consider the fact that throughout the continent of Africa, there is not an indigenous university sustained through African initiative. I am in a position to realize

how most of the problems of the African. The universities of Europe and America have been responsible for the great movements in the national history of these continents. Black Africa has no University. Black Africa is no intellectual centre where the raw materials of African humanity may be shaped into leaders in all fields of human endeavor". He added by asking, "Why should African youth depend upon Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, Yale, The Sorbonne, Berlin, are mirrors which reflect their particular societal idiosyncrasies... (Ejiogu, 1985). Give Renascent African a University and this continent becomes a continent of light". (Ejiogu,1985). Despite these submissions, the establishment of the University Colleges in Ghana and Ibadan were structure to epitomize the typical colonial system in Africa states.

However, the SLT has generated some criticism. Among these are the monocausal approach and the failure to acknowledge objectivity, both of which ignore the fact that people can learn through independent study and without social interaction. According to Ejike Mba, a major shortfall of the theory is that its proponents do not consider creative individuality, which requires thinking in ways that are new and not normal within a social group. In contrast, SLT emphasizes collaborative and problem-solving skills in real-world situations.

Impact of Demographic Growth of the Premier Universities in Nigeria and Ghana

The University of Ibadan and Ghana have contributed to the socio-cultural, political, and economic development of the states in both study areas by building the human capital base and providing the workforce needed across various disciplines that have functioned in both public and private corporations. Professional disciplines such as schoolteachers, Doctors and Nurses, Engineers, lawyers, Clergymen, accountants, Architects, and pilots, among others, have contributed to numerous areas at various times to advance the country. For instance, some of their products who have distinguished themselves include Professor Ade-Ajayi, Obaro Ikime, former Edo State Governor Godwin Obaseki, Professor Ayodele Olukoju, and Professor Funke Adeboye, to mention but a few. In comparison, Professor Alexander A. Kwapong, in addition to being an educator, rose to become the University's Vice-Chancellor. Dr. K.B. Asante, a pioneering female scientist, was the first Ghanaian woman to earn a degree in Zoology. These and several other products of the University of Ghana, like former presidents John Atta Mills, John Mahama, and Nana Akufo-Addo, have made their mark in their various fields and contributed to nation-building in Ghana.

The students' population, which has a diverse mix of undergraduates and postgraduate students with significant international students and an effective academic and non-academic staff community, have continue to ensure that the effective running of both academic and administrative work is carried out to support governments in the provision of high-level human resources in shaping economic, social, political and cultural development of both study areas.

Statistically, the student population have grown from a small 90 students at inception to over 60,000 students across campuses as at 2021/2022

academic session in the 2021/2022 academic session alone, the University of Ghana admitted 16,387 students, while the University of Ibadan admitted about 4,261 from 63,792 who chose the University as their first choice in the same 2020/2021 academic session.

Despite the countries facing socio-economic instability, the institutions that pioneered University academic programmes have continued to make a positive impact on countries through their core duties in research, teaching, and community service, thereby enhancing national socio-economic development.

Another area of impact is the demographic increase in the establishment of other universities in the countries where these two pioneer institutions have helped mentor affiliates. This has further increased access and aided expansion, making it possible for the government to establish more institutions, such as the University of Lagos and the University of Nigeria. Accra Technical University and the University of Professional Studies are among the new universities established in Ghana. Apart from these, the first two Universities of Ghana and Ibadan have continue to experience growth in terms of facilities, infrastructures, staff strength and the increase in enrollment which have been witnessed over the years leading to more educated elites whose minds were transformed to decolonization of African societies, and help to cultivate an appreciation of their culture through writings books, lectures and symposia to debunk the impression created by the imperialist that African culture is inferior as postulated by the Eurocentric scholars.

The demographic development of the two premier Universities resulted in providing the needed African leaders who came to assume leadership positions from 1957 and 1960 onwards, when both states attained independence, to fill the vacuum that was created by the departing expatriate as senior civil servants as well as other senior posts in the military, health, finance, education and the economic sectors.

Lastly, the demographic growth of the premier universities in Nigeria and Ghana has, amongst other things, increased scientific advancement, knowledge, and information technology among many citizens of both nations, thus further increasing the number of skilled workforces in both countries. The use of computers and artificial intelligence to source information has enhanced research methodologies in universities, helped solve socio-political and economic challenges, and advanced national development in both countries.

Challenges of Demographic Growth of Premier University in Nigeria and Ghana

The universities of Ibadan and Ghana though expanded in sizes and scope in terms of the student's enrollment, staff strength, facilities, infrastructures and numerical improvements in faculties and course, however, there are also pressure from the governments and policy makers of both countries on how to manage the influx of students' that have outnumber the school facilities maintain standard the universities have attained at the beginning owing to economic downturn resulting in underfunding of the institutions by the government. These militating factors include.

Firstly, infrastructure overload has taken hold of the institution because the influx of students exceeds the capacity of lecture halls, laboratories, and accommodation, compromising the learning environment.

Secondly, students have been overburdened by limited facilities, reduced personal interaction, limited research opportunities, and lower-quality construction, which have affected the quality of graduates produced by these universities in both countries.

There is also the declining quality of education, forcing many lecturers to rely on a memorization-based assessment method rather than on interactive, quality teaching, because of the Mrs. Match in the budget allocated to the institution, despite the astronomical increase in student enrollment. For instance, the University of Ghana and Ibadan admitted between 5,000 and 7,000 students in 1975–1980, and the figure rose to 22,000–25,000 in 1995–2005.

Poor Staff welfare has also arisen from too many public universities, making it difficult for the government to fund as expected. This has also resulted in incessant staff strike actions, causing brain drain in the institutions. Despite this increase in the budget, the allocated amount did not improve as expected.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The demographic growth of Pioneer University at its inception in 1948 had significant ramifications across both countries, impacting skilled workforce growth and enhancing national development. However, the lack of proper funding, coupled with the continued increase in student intake, led to brain drain and staff shortages in institutions. Other compelling factors, such as inadequate facilities and poor working conditions, also led to a shortage of qualified faculty and academic talent, which diminishes research capacity. The study therefore recommends, among other measures, proper funding of the institutions to support digital infrastructure that will support a growing, tech-savvy student population, the recruitment of qualified and capable personnel to help manage the institutions effectively, and the alignment of student demographics with national development goals.

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