

Covenant University, Ota, Nigeria

5th Convocation  
Distinguished Lecture

**The Role of the Private University in Driving Social  
and Economic Change: Challenges and Opportunities**

**By**

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## Citation

Tade Akin Aina studied sociology at the University of Lagos, Nigeria, the London School of Economics, and the University of Sussex. He has served as Consultant for many agencies, among which are UNDP, UNICEF, UN-HABITAT, the United Nations University and the World Bank on a wide range of development issues such as urban poverty, higher education reform, governance, environment and development. He was a founding member and member of Board of Trustees of the Nigerian Environmental Study Team (NEST) and founder of the Lagos Group for the Study of Human Settlements. He has served on various boards of national and international organizations amongst, which are the Council of Management of the African Books Collective, UK, the Habitat International Coalition Council and the Governing Board of the Canadian University Overseas (CUSO). Tade was a full Professor, Department of Sociology at the University of Lagos, Nigeria and Deputy Executive Secretary (publications) at the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), Dakar, Senegal from 1993 to 1998. He was employed from 1998 to 2008 by the Ford Foundation in the Nairobi office and served as acting Representative for a short period of time in the Cairo Office. He was the Representative, Office for Eastern Africa between 2003 and September 2008. He had served on the Program Advisory Committee of the Ford Foundation's International Fellowships Program (IFP) and the Steering Committee of the Ford Foundation's Special Initiative in Africa (SIA). He is currently the Program Director for Higher Education and Libraries in Africa for the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Tade Aina is widely published with over 50 articles and chapters in learned journals and books. He has also written, edited and co-edited 10 monographs and books. Tade Aina gave the MKO Abiola lecture at the African Studies Association Meeting at New Orleans, USA, in November 2009. He was Editor of Africa Development between 1993 and 1998 and an Editorial Advisory Board Member of the International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, London. He is currently one of the Editors of Environment and Urbanization: the journal of the International Institute for Environment and Development, London, International Sociology, the Journal of the International Sociological Association and the Africa Review of Books, CODESRIA, Dakar. His publications include *Health, Habitat and Underdevelopment* (London: IIED, 1986), *The Challenge of Sustainable Development in Nigeria*, co-edited with Ademola Salau (Ibadan: NEST, 1990), *Child Development and Nutrition in Nigeria*, co-edited with M.F. Zeitlin and F.E. Etta (Lagos: UNICEF, 1992), *The Experience of Migration in Africa*, co-edited with Jonathan Baker (Uppsala: The Nordic African Institute), *Globalization and Social Policy in Africa: Research Directions and Issues* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 1997); *Globalization and Social Policy in Africa* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 2004) co-edited with CSL Chachage and Elisabeth Anna-Yao; *Beyond Benign Neglect: Early Childhood Care, Development and Nutrition in Metropolitan Lagos, Nigeria* (Lagos: Malthouse Press, 2008) co-edited with Ibinabo Agiobu-Kemmer, Florence Ebam Etta, Marian Zeitlin and Kelebogile Setilone.

## COVENANT UNIVERSITY ANTHEM

We're a Covenant Generation  
Pursuing excellence  
Redeemed to reign  
Learning to lead

We are bound by an oath  
Obeying rules to rule  
Making Kings of youth  
Flying high on covenant wings

Wisdom's call for change Inspired on fire  
With courage  
Marching on in grace

God's own arrow Shot for glory.

Covenant generation arise  
Light and knowledge to shine  
Glorious foundation stone  
Leadership skills to show

Departing from knowledge  
To empowerment Legalism  
To realism

Wisdom's call for change  
Inspired, on fire  
With Courage Marching on in grace

God's own arrow  
Shot for glory.



## **Introduction**

The Chancellor and Chairman, Board of Regents, Dr. David Oyedepo, Members of the Board of Regents, Professor Aize Obanya, Vice Chancellor, The Registrar, Deans, Members of the University Academic Community, other staff members, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, the Graduating Class of 2010 : Greetings.

I mentioned you, the Graduating Class of 2010, last not because you are the least important here but because today is your day. So I begin with sending you my special greetings and most sincere congratulations. We are all here today because of you, the Graduating Class of 2010. This is because Convocation is a special occasion. It is a people summoned to assemble, in this case the members of a University community, the Church and the public for the formal award of degrees, diplomas and certificates that attest to your faithful and diligent completion of a process of study and exercise of the acquisition of knowledge, professions, skills and values. Today, therefore, is a moment of celebration of your achievements.

My thanks and congratulations also go to the Chancellor, Dr. David Oyedepo, the Vice Chancellor, Professor Aize Obayan, and the entire management and staff of the University that have provided the conducive and nurturing environment that gave you the opportunities for acquiring the knowledge and skills that have led to your achievements. I also salute you, parents and guardians, and the families and friends of the graduands gathered here for the support, attention and encouragement that you have provided these members of the Graduating Class of 2010.

But today is also a moment for reflections. For, as we celebrate let us not forget that the ceremony today marks only another beginning. We are here to usher our new graduates, a privileged and blessed group, into another phase of their journey in life. The Convocation ceremony is one of those events anthropologists call a rite of passage. It is indeed part of that life's journey for you all into a world that is increasingly complex, rapidly changing and filled with risks but also with opportunities and adventure. This last point-about your entry into a complex and difficult world filled with rapid and multiple transitions, one in which unlike the majority of the people around you, you are better equipped with the technical, intellectual, practical and moral resources to take its advantages, engage its challenges and turn its risks into opportunities-provides us today with the appropriate entry point for our Convocation Lecture topic.

With some guidance from your University authorities, I have elected to speak today on “The Role of the Private University in Driving Economic and Social Change: Challenges and Opportunities.”

It is, however, important that I begin with an engagement of the notion of the university and higher education and an understanding of what universities are for. Given the contested terrain that this notion constitutes in terms of definitions, position and understanding, our engagement

will consist of a brief review and a statement of our own understanding and position.

In the simplest sense of the term, a university is an institution organized and established for the purpose of providing knowledge and instruction to bodies of students and learners and promoting education at the higher levels in a context where subjects are studied and researched in depth and degrees are offered. The university is the heart of the higher education system of nations and societies. And, as I have pointed out in another context:

“... the university in Africa and higher education in general, remain a significant part of the overall social, economic and cultural constitution of societies and nations. Higher Education contributes to the formation and deployment of human capital, the cultural and social construction of values and meaning, the provision of the capacity for individual and collective emancipation from ignorance and domination, and to how the energies and products of science, technology and the improvement of material conditions are mobilized for the wellbeing of individuals and groups. It provides a people with the tools and capacities for their collective and individual self-definition, meaning-making, empowerment, and the interpretation of their relationships to themselves, to others, and to nature and their material and other environments. It provides the platform for the advanced study, analysis, codification, dissemination and utilization of knowledge and its products for the benefit of society and its constituents. In the modern world today, where nations and peoples seek to demonstrate a sense of collective self-confidence and competitive advantage in all spheres, the absence of internal capacities within specific nations and regions to responsibly think and act for themselves, in relation to humanity and others, often determine the extent of such a people's collective material and other well-being.”

And it is often and mainly in the universities that most of the key elements that we have referred to above locate and express themselves.

But as important as the modern university is, both to societies in Africa, and indeed all over the world, let us recognize that there is no one model of the university. There have been dominant models within different higher education traditions but never one monolithic model. This is an important point for all of us and for regulatory bodies such as the National Universities Commission (NUC) to recognize. For just as diversity is vital to the thriving of our natural ecosystems, so is it, to the growth and development of a robust and productive higher education system. Private universities are an essential part of the differentiation and plurality necessary for the productive and beneficial growth of higher education.

But more significantly, we need to recognize that private universities are “private” mainly in terms of the definition of their ownership, important aspects of their governance or the manner



in which they are constituted. As higher education institutions, they operate in the public sphere often not narrowly defined by the market as most other private sector organizations do. They are accountable and regulated by public authorities and a vast majority of them define their mission in terms of some public or social good.

Private universities also are not homogenous. There is no one model of the private university. They range from the secular not-for-profit institution, the community-funded and/or founded colleges, the faith-based institutions to the business-oriented for-profit ventures. They can also be classified in many other ways. There are the predominantly undergraduate degree-awarding teaching centered college types, the technical or specialized universities (for example universities of agriculture or technology), the professional schools that are degree awarding, the comprehensive universities and of course, the research universities modeled along the dreams of Alexander von Humboldt.

Perhaps, this is a good moment to point out that by private universities; I am not referring in this lecture to the increasingly large number of for-profit ventures set up mainly to make money without attention to quality or a social mission. Neither am I referring to the scandalous degree mills or fly by night institutions that increasingly attempt to crowd the higher education landscape. I am concerned here with that body of non-governmental and/or private sector educational institutions that for one reason or the other have the main aim of providing and promoting higher and advanced forms of knowledge, learning and skills. This is becoming an increasingly important part of the higher education landscape in Nigeria. By the last count early this year, there were 41 such institutions and they constitute almost forty percent of the total number of universities in Nigeria. Their enrollment figures might not be significant but their presence, growing contributions and promise are worthy of important consideration.

The motive for their formation may vary but the goal is primarily the search, advancement and transmission of knowledge and the provision of advanced training either in the disciplines or professions. The role and importance of private universities are also often defined and affected by the dominant higher education traditions in which they are found. Thus, while they play a significant role in the USA, they are often less important in the more government-driven systems and traditions of the United Kingdom and France.

Private universities, because of the mixture of motives for their formation and their sometime location and relationship with market forces, are often not seen with the same altruistic and benign lenses as their public counterparts. Their claims to being a public good are therefore often contested. It is for these reasons that private universities in our own relatively young modern higher education tradition must continuously reinforce and assert their legitimacy, credibility and academic integrity through a rigorous adherence to self-motivated highest levels of quality assurance, a strict alignment with relevance to national needs and priorities and unassailable commitment to outstanding internal management and good governance practices that emphasize transparency, accountability and social inclusion. They must also

ensure that they respect the freedom of inquiry, thought and assembly and exercise tolerance for differences in creed, race, sex, colour, ethnic and political affiliation.

Depending on their mission and founding vision, some private universities express like the best traditions of modern philanthropy, strong elements of “private action for public good”. But private universities are not politically neutral institutions. Because, they carry certain values, creed and ideologies and are driven by specific visions and missions, they embody certain positions about the nature of society, economy, culture and ethics. They build their institutional character on these and as they engage society, they express the larger political elements of their world view even if they studiously struggle to be non-partisan in their political affiliation and proclamation. And they have a legitimate right to their beliefs, guiding principles and philosophy.

For, if you want to contribute to social, political and economic change, you must have a vision of the kind of society, economy, culture and politics that you want and by acting on your vision, you engage in the politics of change. As we struggle with both the development of the specific character of our different universities and debate their role in positive social and economic change, we need to recognize that there will be differences in ideas, directions and positions. But a university is only worth its name if it is able to provide the space for contestation of ideas and can accommodate differences. This is because creativity and innovation can best flower in an environment that supports independence and diversity of thinking, creative and critical perspectives and contestation of ideas.

In Nigeria and most parts of post-colonial Africa, the emergence of private universities is a recent occurrence, about ten years now in Nigeria with the emergence of the first set of private universities around 1999. These institutions have been created as a result of the erosion of the monopoly of governments, inherited from the colonial and nationalist era, as the sole providers of higher education. They have also emerged in large numbers in an age of demand for increased access to higher education. They therefore face immense challenges and carry with them tremendous opportunities particularly because they do not carry the baggage of the colonial and post-colonial states. A large number of them are the products of faith-based organizations and/or the result of the investments of successful entrepreneurs.

But private universities are beginning to manufacture their own baggage too. They must ensure that this baggage is filled with positive goods. But increasingly there are challenges and whether the impressions are true or manufactured, private universities must struggle to ensure that their growing image of being elitist and exclusionist(they cater only to those who can pay), the belief that they are doctrinaire and intolerant(they promote certain creeds and faiths) and that they are short on quality and investments in diversified areas and disciplines must be proven wrong through the emphasis on cultures of excellence and achievement and the striving for



outstanding performance and rigor in all that they do.

However private universities exist in specific national and global contexts and environments within which they have to operate and carry out their mission and mandates. What are the key elements of these contexts? Let us briefly examine these and the drivers of change before returning to the roles of private universities.

### **The National and Global Contexts for Private Universities Today**

The Private universities in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular, operate in social, economic and political contexts. According to the *Economic Report on Africa 2010* published by the African Union and the Economic Commission for Africa and I quote:

Of the several development challenges and issues facing Africa in 2009, the continent's continued marginalization in international and global affairs, its ability to mobilize resources (domestic and foreign) to finance development, issues of global climate change and its inability to generate high paying employment for the growing labour force stand out as major concerns. (ECA, ERA 2010, p9).

Our country, Nigeria, is not only affected by the concerns identified above but also by an array of other concerns that include the following:

- The unending crisis of good democratic governance, public accountability, transparency and committed leadership.
- The collapse and failure to rehabilitate and revitalize functional physical and social infrastructure, utilities and basic social services.
- The increasing state of insecurity and erosion of public safety.
- The endless pressure on the health systems and the threats to health posed by the prevalence of diseases such as HIV-AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria.

When one adds my latter four points to those put forward by the ECA Report for 2010, one can not help but salute the resilience, resourcefulness and inventiveness of the majority of Nigerians and important Nigerian institutions, such as the private universities that have not only survived but also thrived in the harrowing conditions that have been largely created by an insensitive, self-serving, inept, often myopic and plutocratic elite that has exploited the tolerance and abused the trust of the majority of the citizens of this fine nation. This is the national context, one in which the positive dynamics of creativity, innovation and struggles for transformation confront the above-stated issues and challenges that are relatively little resolved by those who govern the country.

Indeed, generations of Nigerian governments at all levels have over the past two or three decades failed both Nigerian universities and the people as a whole by not playing their own role in what effective democratic governance entails and appreciating the importance of knowledge in development. By failing to fulfill their role in development such as ensuring the

provision of energy and power, guaranteeing access to clean water and other basic services, providing minimal security of life and property and ensuring public safety and peace, they have significantly perverted the externalities necessary for the growth and development of knowledge institutions necessary for the human capital development that will lead sustained change and transformation.

But all is not lost, moments like today's that launch the careers and life journeys of our youth and some of the pockets of change and excellence that we witness around give us hope. But, we must move from a nation of exceptional individuals to a country of collective outstanding aspirations and accomplishments. This is one area where private universities, particularly those owned by Nigerians, must reclaim the Vision of the Greater Nigeria project first formulated by the founding fathers and mothers of this country.

But neither country nor our private universities are islands unto themselves. We all live in a larger world and universities, by their very nature, are part of the global flows of production, consumption, distribution and dissemination of knowledge, ideas and technologies. The world today is increasingly locked into a global system with interconnections and linkages that defy national and geographic boundaries and spaces, presenting us all with a proximity, contiguity and opportunities that combine immense potential for benefits with new vulnerabilities, polarities and various forms of exclusion. It is indeed a brave new world! The global context for our universities includes:

- New and unprecedented dimensions in global change and the transcending of borders by threats such as climate change, global terrorism and pandemics like HIV-AIDS, Tuberculosis, and new strains of diseases.
- New and unprecedented opportunities in financial and cultural flows, economic linkages and increased systemic vulnerabilities to global shocks and social and economic upheavals in one part of the world for the rest.
- Rapid growth and changes in new forms of technologies and the emergence of ICTs, biotechnology and advances in genetics, nuclear and space technologies.
- Significant transformation in modes, means, media and pace of communications revolutionizing the use, meaning and deployment of data and information.
- Transitions in the dominant modes and organization of knowledge, disciplines, institutions and knowledge production and management.

### **The Role of Private universities**

So, we live and operate at all levels in complex, stretched and stressed contexts and tremendously exciting times, with both immense opportunities and unprecedented challenges.

In the Nigerian context, these changes along with our crisis of governance present us with a truly transformational historic moment in which old, bankrupt and ineffective ideas, practices and institutions must be discarded and transcended with knowledge, approaches, values and

practices that will usher in a new beginning for the development and reclamation of the national integrity and pride of our countries. By the very nature of their formation, their size, clarity of their mission and their vision for Nigeria, the credible private universities have a unique advantage and foundation to build on as the carriers and leaders of the rebuilding of a New Nigeria. The private university, apart from reconstructing the mission of the university to include not only teaching, research and public service but also job creation and preparation for the job market, is strategically placed to re-define the current dominant negative values that promote graft, corruption, nepotism, ethnic divisions and exclusion.

Excellence in the preparation for the professions will not be enough if the norms, ethics and values of the professions in terms of service, competence, decency, tolerance and trust are not reclaimed. The strain towards reckless individualism and contemptuous impunity must stop and be replaced with the basic principles of respect for human dignity, integrity and other important virtues. Private universities can move us all forward and serve as realistic and practical models if they act as our fertile fields of industry and productivity, rich terrains of imagination, overflowing fountains of creativity and innovation, stable anchors of integrity and dignity and solid citadels of learning and tolerance.

This is the thrust of the role of the private university (and indeed all universities) today and the duty and obligations that you all as new graduates carry. If it looks daunting and frightening, my admonition is that be not afraid, for you have been well prepared and equipped at Covenant University with the resources and the moral fiber to fight this good fight for our dear country. It is on that note that I leave with you words that I heard as a young man from the broadcast of Queen Elizabeth II in her 1978 Christmas broadcast when she echoed the voice of King George VI in 1945 just after the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War. It reads:

Have faith in life at its best and bring to it your courage, your hope and your sense of humour. For merriment is the birthright of the young. But we can all keep it in our hearts as life goes on, if we hold fast by the spirit that refuses to admit defeat; by the faith that never falters; by the hope that cannot be quenched. Let us have no fear of the future but think of it as opportunity and adventure.

The Class of 2010, once again congratulations! May God bless your New Beginning! Mr. Chancellor Sir, thank you very much.

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i) Although statistics are hard to come by, the estimated enrollment for African universities is 5% and the total number of tertiary students in Sub-Saharan Africa is estimated at 3 million, although current rates of tertiary enrollment is doubling every five years. In a continent estimated as conservatively made up of 840 million people. Three million in universities is tiny minority/elite. See: "higher Education in Africa", <http://www.arp.harvard.edu/AfricaHigherEducation/Factoids.html>.

ii) Tade Akin Aina, "Beyond Reforms: The Politics of Higher Education Transformation in Africa", *African Studies Review*, Volume 53, Number 1, (April 2010), p.23.

iii) See the contributions in: Glenda Kruss and Andre Kraak, Editors, *a Contested Good? Understanding Private Higher Education in South Africa*, Centre for International Higher Education, Boston College, 2003.