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The Paradox of Lost Ivory Towers: A Critical Analysis of Extractive University Education in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper examines the paradoxical transformation of Nigerian public universities from protected spaces of knowledge creation—metaphorical "ivory towers"—into extractive institutions that systematically deplete human capital and national potential. Drawing on institutional theory and empirical data from government reports, scholarly literature, and media investigations, the study analyses four primary extractive mechanisms: chronic under-funding and financial predation on students, recurrent academic staff strikes resulting in over 1,500 lost academic days since 1999, pervasive "sorting" (bribery) culture that commodifies grades and accelerating brain drain as academics seek opportunities abroad. The analysis reveals that Nigeria allocates approximately 7-8% of its national budget to education, significantly below UNESCO's 15-20% benchmark, while producing 1.7 million graduates annually for an economy unable to absorb them. The paper proposes a multi-dimensional reform pathway comprising funding restructuring, anti-corruption mechanisms, curriculum overhaul aligned with labour market demands, and faculty retention strategies. The findings contribute to the literature on higher education governance in developing economies and offer actionable recommendations for policymakers, university administrators, and development partners.

Keywords: Nigerian Universities, Extractive Education, Brain Drain, Academic Corruption, Higher Education Funding, Asuu Strikes, Sustainable Development Goal 4

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1. Introduction

The university as a social institution has historically been conceptualised as an "ivory tower", a protected space where knowledge is pursued for its own sake, insulated from immediate economic pressures and political exigencies (Barnett, 2011). In post-independence Nigeria, universities such as Ibadan, Zaria, and Nsukka approximated this ideal, producing high-calibre graduates, groundbreaking research and public intellectuals who shaped the nation's developmental trajectory (Fafunwa, 1971). However, decades of military interregnum, economic decline, policy abandonment and systemic corruption have fundamentally altered the character of Nigerian higher education.

Today, Nigerian public universities exhibit a paradoxical condition: rather than serving as engines of social mobility and national development, they have become extractive institutions that systematically deplete the financial resources, time and human potential of students, faculty and the broader society. This "lost ivory tower" paradox; the transformation of a developmental institution into a predatory one constitutes the central challenge of this paper.

The extractive university manifests through multiple interrelated mechanisms: chronic underfunding that shifts financial burdens onto students and parents, recurrent academic strikes that waste academic years, institutionalised bribery that devalues credentials and faculty emigration due to poor condition of service that drains intellectual capital. Each mechanism operates within a broader political economy of patronage, fiscal constraint and weak accountability that characterises the Nigerian state (Joseph, 2014).

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What empirical evidence substantiates the characterization of Nigerian public universities as "extractive"?
2. How do funding deficits, industrial actions, corruption, and brain drain interact to produce educational outcomes?
3. What reform pathways can reverse extractive dynamics and restore developmental functionality?

The paper makes three contributions. First, it synthesises disparate data sources—government statistics, scholarly research, investigative journalism—to construct a comprehensive evidence base for the extractive university thesis. Second, it applies institutional theory (North, 1990; Scott, 1995) to analyze how formal and informal rules shape institutional behaviour. Third, it proposes context-sensitive reform pathways anchored in the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) framework.

2. Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed by this research can be stated as a paradox: Nigerian universities, which should be primary vehicles for human capital development and poverty reduction, instead operate as extractive institutions that exacerbate the very conditions they are meant to ameliorate. This paradox has reached crisis proportions with demonstrable consequences for national development.

The scale of the crisis is reflected in several indicators. Nigeria has approximately 20 million out-of-school children, ranking third globally for educational exclusion (Evaluation of Federal Government Funding, 2024). Among those who access tertiary education, 94% attend public universities that face severe funding shortages (Evaluation of Federal Government Funding, 2024). Approximately 1.7 million graduates leave Nigerian universities and polytechnics annually, yet the economy lacks capacity to absorb them into formal employment (State of the Nigerian Youth Report, 2025). Nearly 80 million Nigerian youth are unemployed, representing a crisis of wasted potential (Premium Times, 2025).

The quality crisis extends beyond employment metrics. Academic corruption, locally termed "sorting," has

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become endemic, with documented cases of lecturers demanding payments ranging from ₦10,000 to ₦20,000 for specific grades (Vanguard investigation, 2024). The Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) has engaged in strikes resulting in over 1,500 cumulative lost academic days since 1999—equivalent to approximately four academic years (Leadership, 2025; ThisDay, 2025). These disruptions have normalized educational discontinuity, creating what one observer terms "a lost generation of students under-trained, unmotivated, and out of sync with global academic standards" (Leadership, 2025).

The problem is fundamentally paradoxical because extraction occurs within an institutional form designed for development. Unlike explicitly extractive institutions (e.g., predatory lending, human trafficking), universities retain the rhetoric and partial structure of developmental institutions while operating according to extractive logics. This paradox complicates reform efforts, as surface-level interventions may fail to address underlying institutional dynamics.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Theoretical Framework: Institutional Theory

This study adopts institutional theory as its primary analytical lens. Following North (1990), institutions are understood as "the humanly devised constraints that structure political, economic, and social interaction," comprising both formal rules (constitutions, laws, regulations) and informal constraints (norms, conventions, codes of conduct). Scott (1995) extends this framework by identifying three pillars of institutions: regulative (rules and sanctions), normative (values and expectations), and cultural-cognitive (shared beliefs and frameworks).

Institutional theory illuminates the Nigerian university paradox by revealing how formal and informal rules may operate in contradiction. Formally, Nigerian universities are governed by regulations that prohibit bribery, mandate academic standards, and prescribe funding mechanisms. Informally, norms of "sorting," ethnic patronage in hiring, and acceptance of strikes as bargaining tools have become institutionalized. The extractive outcome emerges from the divergence between formal rules (which remain on paper) and operative informal practices (which govern daily behaviour).

The theory also explains institutional persistence. Once extractive practices become taken-for-granted assumptions about "how things are done," they achieve cognitive legitimacy that resists change (Scott, 1995). A student who pays for a grade, a lecturer who expects payment, and an administrator who looks away each act according to institutionalized scripts that reproduce extraction across generations.

3.2 The Developmental University in Post-Colonial Africa

The developmental role of universities in post-colonial Africa has been extensively theorized. Mamdani (2007) argues that the African university has oscillated between "developmental" and "extractive" modes, with the former dominant in the immediate post-independence era and the latter ascendant under structural adjustment. Cloete et al. (2006) document how reduced state funding across sub-Saharan Africa forced universities to adopt cost-recovery measures that disproportionately burdened students from low-income households.

The Nigerian case exhibits distinctive features. Unlike some African countries that experienced prolonged civil conflicts (Liberia, Sierra Leone) or state collapse (Somalia), Nigeria maintained continuous university operations while experiencing gradual institutional decay. This gradual decline has been attributed to what Adesina (2012) terms "developmental patrimonialism"—a system where state resources are distributed through patronage networks while maintaining developmental rhetoric.

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3.3 Conceptualising Extractive Education

The concept of "extraction" in education has been explored through multiple lenses. On a macro level, Hickel (2017) documents how global economic structures extract value from African economies through unequal exchange, debt mechanisms, and intellectual property regimes. At the institutional level, Mkandawire (2015) describes how some African universities have become "gatekeeping" institutions that confer credentials while imparting minimal skills, serving primarily to reproduce class hierarchies.

This paper proposes a specific conceptualization: extractive education occurs when an educational institution systematically transfers more value from students, faculty, and society than it creates in human capital, knowledge, or social mobility. Extraction can be financial (fees exceeding educational value), temporal (wasted time exceeding productive learning), cognitive (skills imparted below labour market requirements), or aspirational (hope generated exceeding realistic outcomes). The extractive university is distinguished from merely "low-quality" education by the presence of systematic mechanisms that actively deplete rather than merely fail to develop.

3.4 Empirical Studies of Nigerian Higher Education

A substantial literature documents specific challenges in Nigerian universities. Regarding funding, multiple studies confirm chronic under-funding relative to UNESCO benchmarks, with education allocation fluctuating between 6.7% and 10.7% of the federal budget from 2011 to 2023 (Evaluation of Federal Government Funding, 2024). The Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund) has warned that Nigeria's approximately 7% allocation is "grossly inadequate for a country seeking to prepare its youths for a rapidly evolving global workforce" (TETFund, 2025).

On academic corruption, Okunade (2018) documents the institutionalization of "sorting" across Nigerian universities, finding that over 60% of surveyed students reported paying for grades. Amundsen (2019) identifies "quiet corruption"—the failure of public servants to deliver services for which they are paid—as pervasive in the education sector.

The brain drain literature has expanded significantly. Akinwale et al. (2024) examine push factors for physician emigration, identifying poor remuneration (cited by 87% of respondents), inadequate infrastructure (76%), and restricted career opportunities (68%) as primary drivers. The concept of "obligatory return migration" has been proposed to describe situations where scholars feel compelled to emigrate due to structural constraints, even when they would prefer to remain (Nigerian Commonwealth Scholars study, 2025).

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative secondary data analysis with qualitative document analysis. The design is appropriate for examining multi-faceted phenomena where diverse data sources must be triangulated to establish evidentiary adequacy (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

4.2 Data Sources

Data were drawn from four categories of sources:

- Government and official statistics: National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) Labour Force Survey reports (2024), Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund) official communications (2025), and federal budget documents (2023-2025).
- Scholarly literature: Peer-reviewed articles indexed in Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, identified through searches combining terms including "Nigerian universities," "higher

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education funding," "brain drain Nigeria," "academic corruption," and "ASUU strikes."

- Media investigations: Reports from Premium Times, Leadership, ThisDay, BusinessDay, and Vanguard containing investigative findings on corruption and strikes.
- Policy documents: UNESCO SDG 4 framework documents, Nigerian Education Sector Analysis reports, and ASUU-FGN agreement documents.

4.3 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (percentages, trends, comparisons with benchmarks). Qualitative data from media reports and policy documents were analyzed using thematic analysis, with themes derived deductively from the extraction framework and inductively from source content (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Triangulation across sources was employed to verify factual claims.

4.4 Limitations

Several limitations merit acknowledgement. Official statistics on unemployment and underemployment may under-count informal sector activity and discouraged workers. Media investigations, while providing granular detail, may reflect selection bias toward dramatic cases. The absence of primary data collection (surveys, interviews) limits the study's ability to capture lived experiences of students and faculty.

5. Findings and Analysis

5.1 Financial Extraction: The Funding Crisis and Student Burden

The first mechanism of extraction operates through finance. Nigeria consistently under-funds education relative to international benchmarks. UNESCO recommends that countries allocate 15-20% of national budgets to education (UNESCO, 2023). Nigeria allocated approximately 7% in 2024-2025, with the 2025 budget allocating ₦683 billion for infrastructure across federal tertiary institutions (TETFund, 2025; ThisDay, 2025). As the TETFund Executive Secretary warned, this level "is grossly inadequate for a country seeking to prepare its youths for a rapidly evolving global workforce" (TETFund, 2025).

Table 1: Education Funding in Nigeria vs. UNESCO Benchmarks

Indicator	Nigeria	UNESCO Benchmark	Comparator: Rwanda	Comparator: Kenya
Education share of budget	~7-8% (2023-2025)	15-20%	18% (2021)	16% (2021)
Public university student share	94% of enrollment	N/A	N/A	N/A
Budget allocation trend Fluctuating	6.7-10.7% (2011-2023)	Stable >15%	N/A	N/A

Sources: TETFund (2025); Evaluation of Federal Government Funding (2024); UNESCO (2023)

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Under-funding shifts costs to students and their families through multiple channels. Public universities charge fees that, while nominally subsidized, remain prohibitive for low-income households. Beyond official fees, students face "acceptance fees," accommodation levies, departmental charges, and miscellaneous "development fees" that can double or triple the cost of attendance (Evaluation of Federal Government Funding, 2024).

The financial extraction is exacerbated by prolonged degree completion times. Due to recurrent strikes, a four-year degree program often requires five or six years to complete. Students and their families must therefore finance extended periods of study without corresponding income. Parents report "struggling to pay rent during a strike, only for it to expire and have to be renewed again" (Leadership, 2025).

5.2 Temporal Extraction: Strikes and Lost Academic Time

The second extractive mechanism operates through time. Since Nigeria's return to democracy in 1999, ASUU has engaged in strikes resulting in over 1,500 cumulative lost academic days—approximately four full academic years (Leadership, 2025). Each strike follows a predictable pattern: union declares action, government calls for dialogue, students wait at home. The cycle repeats without lasting resolution.

Table 2: Impact of ASUU Strikes on Nigerian University Education

Indicator	Magnitude
Cumulative lost academic days since 1999	1,500 days (~4 academic years)
Duration of major strikes (selected)	Up to 9 months in a single year
Student mental health impact	Widespread reports of frustration, hopelessness
Research disruption	Long-term experiments abandoned; postgraduate work rendered unusable

Sources: Leadership (2025); ThisDay (2025)

The temporal extraction has cascading consequences. Students' mental health suffers as they "grapple with frustration, boredom, and hopelessness" (Leadership, 2025). Final-year students lose job and scholarship opportunities due to unpredictable graduation timelines. Employers grow "increasingly sceptical of graduates from public universities whose timelines are unpredictable" (Leadership, 2025).

One student captured the psychological toll: "Each time the strike starts, you feel your brain freezing. You struggle to regain motivation when it's called off because you know it could happen again" (Leadership, 2025). Another, a 24-year-old economics undergraduate, reflected: "I still want to graduate, no matter how long it takes. But sometimes, I wonder if this system is designed to break us" (Leadership, 2025).

The economic cost extends beyond students. Parents who budgeted for tuition must sustain idle children at home. Small businesses around universities—food vendors, printers, transporters, hostel operators—bear the brunt of closures (Leadership, 2025). At the national level, prolonged disruptions reduce research

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output, slow innovation, and weaken graduate quality (ThisDay, 2025).

5.3 Cognitive Extraction: Academic Corruption and Credential Devaluation

The third mechanism which is cognitive extraction operates through the substitution of learning with payment. The practice of "sorting" (bribery for grades) has become institutionalized across Nigerian universities. An investigation in Cross River State universities documented systematic payment schedules: ₦20,000 for an 'A' grade, ₦15,000 for a 'B', ₦10,000 for a 'C' (Vanguard, 2024). The mechanics of sorting reveal institutionalized extraction. Lecturers facing meager wages and challenging conditions justify demands as compensation. Students who neglect academic responsibilities become targets. Some lecturers delegate collections to student "agents" who gather funds and deliver payments (Vanguard, 2024). Overcrowded classrooms—designed for 60 students but accommodating 300—facilitate exploitation as individualized oversight becomes impossible.

The cognitive extraction produces two related outcomes. First, credentials are devalued as employers cannot distinguish between earned and purchased grades. Second, the link between effort and reward is severed, normalizing shortcuts and undermining the meritocratic logic that legitimizes educational inequality. As one commentator observed, "The result is a monumental perversion of academic standards. The lazy ones get good grades... These empty students having sorted grades and classes are unleashed on the larger society. Employers find no value" (BusinessDay, 2014). However, not all lecturers participate. Exemplary educators who maintain integrity face attacks and threats from colleagues invested in extractive practices (Vanguard, 2024). Some vice-chancellors have taken proactive anti-corruption stances, though such efforts remain institutionally fragile.

5.4 Human Capital Extraction: Brain Drain and Faculty Emigration

The fourth extractive mechanism depletes the university's most essential resource: its faculty. Brain drain from Nigerian universities has reached crisis proportions, with scholars emigrating to the United Kingdom, United States, Canada, Australia, and Gulf states (Akinwale et al., 2024). They further identify multiple push factors driving physician emigration specifically, with findings that can be generalisable to academic staff. Poor remuneration and benefits constitute the predominant reason for emigration. Restricted opportunities and poor living standards provide additional impetus. Inadequate infrastructure and facilities emerge as dominant variables pushing professionals abroad. The authors describe "a toxic mix of several issues" creating "brain drain albatross" among Nigerian professionals.

Table 3: Push Factors for Nigerian Professional Emigration

Push Factor	Percentage
Poor remuneration and benefits	87%
Inadequate infrastructure/facilities	76%
Restricted career opportunities	68%
Poor standard of living	62%

Source: Akinwale et al. (2024)

The concept of "obligatory return migration" has been proposed to capture the constrained agency of Nigerian scholars (Nigerian Commonwealth Scholars study, 2025). Many would prefer to remain and

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contribute to national development but feel compelled to emigrate due to structural constraints. This framing moves beyond simple "push-pull" models to recognize that emigration often reflects institutional failure rather than individual preference. Faculty departure creates a vicious cycle: remaining faculty face increased workloads, reducing research productivity and teaching quality. Poor quality further incentivises emigration by remaining faculty, while also producing graduates ill-prepared for employment or further study.

5.5 Outcome: Graduate-Employment Mismatch

The cumulative effect of extractive mechanisms is a profound mismatch between graduate output and labour market demand. Approximately 1.7 million graduates leave Nigerian universities and polytechnics annually, yet the economy lacks capacity to absorb them (Premium Times, 2025). The National Bureau of Statistics reports that unemployment among post-secondary graduates reached 9.0% in Q1 2024, compared to 4.3% national average (NBS, 2024).

Underemployment—working fewer than 40 hours weekly while willing to work more—affects 10.9% of the workforce, with underemployment among women (12.5%) exceeding men (8.5%) (NBS, 2024). Informal employment remains extremely high at 93%, reflecting the precarious nature of most available jobs (Premium Times, 2025).

The TETFund Executive Secretary diagnosed the structural problem: "Despite the country producing thousands of graduates every year, youth unemployment continued to soar because the system was severely misaligned with global labour needs" (TETFund, 2025). He called for curriculum redesign integrating digital literacy, entrepreneurship, data science, artificial intelligence, renewable energy, and financial literacy.

Table 4: Labour Market Indicators for Nigerian Graduates

Indicator	Value
Annual graduates (universities + polytechnics)	~1.7 million
Unemployment rate - post-secondary graduates	9.0%
National unemployment rate (reference)	5.3%
Informal employment share	93%
Youth unemployment (under 35, estimated)	~80 million

Sources: NBS (2024); Premium Times (2025)

6. Discussion

6.1 The Extractive University as Institutional Pathology

The findings reveal that Nigerian public universities exhibit characteristics of institutional pathology: systems designed for one purpose (knowledge creation, human capital development) operate to produce systematically opposite outcomes (resource depletion, credential devaluation, aspiration destruction). This pathology is not attributable to any single factor but emerges from the interaction of funding deficits, governance failures, cultural norms, and political economy constraints.

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Applying institutional theory (North, 1990; Scott, 1995), the extractive university can be understood as an institution where formal rules have lost binding power while informal rules have gained pathological force. Formally, Nigerian university regulations prohibit "sorting," mandate timely academic calendars, and prescribe accountability mechanisms. Informally, bribery has become normalized, strikes have become ritualized, and accountability has become optional. The divergence between formal and informal institutions creates what DiMaggio and Powell (1983) term "decoupling"—the separation of organizational structure from operational practice.

Decoupling enables extractive practices to persist despite reform efforts. The government may announce funding increases or anti-corruption initiatives while operations continue unchanged. University administrators may condemn "sorting" publicly while failing to sanction known offenders. Students may affirm the importance of academic integrity while paying for grades to survive.

6.2 Regional and International Comparisons

Nigeria's education challenges, while severe, are not unique. Several African countries have implemented successful reforms that offer comparative lessons.

Rwanda, which allocated 18% of its budget to education in 2021, has achieved remarkable improvements in learning outcomes through sustained investment, curriculum reform aligned with labour market needs, and emphasis on technology integration (TETFund, 2025). Kenya's 16% allocation has similarly produced measurable gains (TETFund, 2025).

Ghana's University of Ghana and Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology have successfully diversified funding through alumni engagement, endowment development, and research commercialization—models Nigerian universities could adapt (World Bank, 2020).

The German dual-training model and South Korean vocational education framework offer lessons for aligning tertiary education with industry needs (TETFund, 2025). These systems integrate classroom instruction with workplace training, ensuring that graduates possess both theoretical knowledge and practical skills.

6.3 Theoretical Contributions

This study makes several theoretical contributions. First, it extends institutional theory by specifying mechanisms through which extractive institutions maintain themselves: financial extraction (fee structures that transfer wealth upward), temporal extraction (strikes that waste time without producing value), cognitive extraction (bribery that substitutes payment for learning), and human capital extraction (emigration that depletes institutional capacity). These mechanisms operate synergistically, each reinforcing the others.

Second, the paper introduces the concept of extractive education as an analytical category distinct from low-quality education. Low-quality education fails to develop human capital; extractive education actively depletes it. The distinction is important for policy because extraction requires different interventions (anti-corruption, accountability) than quality improvement alone (curriculum reform, teacher training).

Third, the paper contributes to the migration-development nexus literature by documenting how extractive education functions as a push factor for emigration. When universities fail to provide value, ambitious students and faculty seek value elsewhere, accelerating brain drain. The "obligatory return migration" concept (Nigerian Commonwealth Scholars study, 2025) captures the constrained agency that characterizes these decisions.

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7. Recommendations and Pathways

7.1 Funding Reform

Pathway 1: Progressive attainment of UNESCO benchmarks. Nigeria should develop a phased plan to increase education funding from the current 7-8% to the UNESCO-recommended 15-20% over a five-to-seven-year period. The plan should include specific annual targets, budget line items, and legislative mechanisms to ensure compliance.

Pathway 2: Diversified funding sources. Universities should develop alternative revenue streams including alumni endowments, research commercialization, corporate partnerships, and education services. The success of Ghanaian universities in alumni engagement offers a replicable model. TETFund should provide matching grants to incentivise universities' internal revenue generation (Evaluation of Federal Government Funding, 2024).

Pathway 3: Performance-based funding allocation. A portion of government funding (e.g., 20%) should be allocated based on performance metrics including graduation rates, graduate employment outcomes, research output, and accreditation compliance. Performance-based funding creates accountability while preserving baseline support for institutional survival.

7.2 Governance and Anti-Corruption Mechanisms

Pathway 4: Anonymous reporting and enforcement. Each university should establish secure, anonymous reporting mechanisms for students and staff to report "sorting" and other corrupt practices. Independent ombudspersons with investigative authority and sanctioning power should process complaints. Whistleblower protections must be legally guaranteed and publicly communicated.

Pathway 5: Transparent financial management. University financial records, including fee structures, procurement contracts, and personnel compensation, should be published online in accessible formats. Regular external audits should be mandatory, with audit reports made public. Governing councils should include student and civil society representatives.

Pathway 6: Academic integrity certification. Graduates should receive not only degree certificates but also detailed transcripts documenting course grades, assessment methods, and class rankings. Employers should have access to verification systems that detect credential fraud. Universities participating in academic integrity certification programs should receive funding incentives.

7.3 Curriculum and Labour Market Alignment

Pathway 7: Mandatory industry partnerships. Every academic program should be required to maintain formal partnerships with relevant industries, including curriculum input, guest lectures, internship placements, and graduate tracking. Industry advisory boards should have veto power over program changes affecting graduate employability.

Pathway 8: Entrepreneurship and technology integration. Core curricula should include mandatory courses in entrepreneurship, digital literacy, data science, artificial intelligence fundamentals, and financial literacy (TETFund, 2025). Practical projects should replace theoretical examinations where appropriate, with students producing portfolios rather than merely passing tests.

Pathway 9: Vocational and technical pathways. Nigeria should expand vocational education following the German dual-training model and South Korean examples (TETFund, 2025). Polytechnics and technical colleges should receive increased funding and recognition, with articulation pathways to university degrees for students who complete vocational programs.

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7.4 Faculty Retention and Development

Pathway 10: Competitive compensation and career paths. Faculty salaries should be increased to regionally competitive levels (comparable to Ghana, South Africa). Clear, transparent promotion criteria should be established and published. Research grants, sabbatical programs, and conference funding should be expanded through TETFund and other agencies.

Pathway 11: Diaspora engagement and return programs. The government should establish structured programs to engage Nigerian academics abroad, including visiting professorships, collaborative research grants, and return fellowships. The "obligatory return migration" constraint (Nigerian Commonwealth Scholars study, 2025) should be addressed through improved working conditions that make return voluntary rather than obligatory.

Pathway 12: Research infrastructure investment. Laboratories, libraries, and digital infrastructure should receive dedicated funding streams. Research productivity metrics should be linked to funding allocations. International research collaborations should be facilitated through reduced bureaucratic barriers.

7.5 Structural Reform: University Autonomy and Accountability

Pathway 13: Institutional autonomy with accountability. Public universities should receive genuine autonomy in personnel management, financial administration, and academic programming. In exchange, universities should face rigorous accountability mechanisms including regular accreditation reviews, public scorecards, and performance contracts for vice-chancellors.

Pathway 14: Permanent dispute resolution mechanism. To prevent recurrent strikes, Nigeria should establish a permanent tribunal for university funding and working condition disputes. The tribunal would hear cases, issue binding decisions, and monitor implementation—removing the need for strikes as a bargaining tool. Both the government and ASUU would commit to tribunal decisions.

Pathway 15: SDG 4 alignment and monitoring. All reforms should be explicitly aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 4 targets: equitable quality education, lifelong learning opportunities, and relevant skills for decent work (Evaluation of Federal Government Funding, 2024). An independent monitoring body should publish annual SDG 4 progress reports for Nigerian higher education.

8. Conclusion

This paper has attempted to analyse the paradox of Nigeria's "lost ivory towers"; the transformation of public universities from developmental institutions into extractive ones. Drawing on institutional theory and multiple data sources, the study identified four extractive mechanisms: financial extraction through under-funding and student fees, temporal extraction through recurrent strikes, cognitive extraction through academic corruption, and human capital extraction through faculty brain drain. These mechanisms operate synergistically to produce graduates who are numerous but ill-equipped for labour market demands, credentials that are purchased rather than earned, and institutions that deplete rather than develop national potential.

The paradox can be resolved but not easily. Reform requires addressing not only funding levels but also governance structures, cultural norms, and political economy constraints that enable extraction to persist. The pathways proposed in this paper which include funding reform, anti-corruption mechanisms, curriculum overhaul, faculty retention, and structural autonomy with accountability offer a comprehensive framework. However, pathways are not guaranteed. Implementation will require political will that has historically been lacking, sustained advocacy from civil society, and pressure from students, parents, and employers who bear the costs of extraction.

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The lost ivory tower is not beyond recovery, but recovery demands acknowledging a difficult truth: Nigeria's university system no longer merely reflects national poverty, it actively compounds it through extractive practices. Reversing extraction requires not just more funding, but structural transformation toward accountability, relevance, and genuine investment in human dignity. The stakes could not be higher. With nearly 80 million unemployed youth and 1.7 million graduates entering the labour market annually, Nigeria cannot afford universities that extract rather than develop. The future of Africa's most populous nation depends on reclaiming the ivory tower as a space of genuine learning, critical inquiry, and human possibility.

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