

Strategic Position of Rivers State University within the Higher Education Sector: A Micro and Macro External Environmental Analysis

Alolote Amadi^{1*}, Amieye Dapiriteye²

Abstract

Rivers State University (RSU) is the oldest University of Science and Technology (ST) in Nigeria, established by the Rivers State Government to promote science, technology, and the development of the Niger Delta Region. This study appraises its current operating environment and strategic position within the Higher Education Sector. An analysis of factors micro externally exerting influence on RSU as a business is carried out, via the adoption of the prescriptive view of strategic management which subscribes to the school of thought that, despite varying degrees of uncertainties, the operating environment of a business can be reasonably and usefully analysed/predicted to inform a future course of action. Five-forces analysis is carried out to evaluate the state of competitive rivalry within the Nigerian (HE) sector/market, relative to the bargaining power of buyers/suppliers and the threat of new entrants/substitutes. Further to this, macro analysis is carried out to identify the overarching political, environmental, social, technological economic, and legal drivers of change in the Higher Education (HE) sector and more specifically in RSU as a business entity. The study reveals that the interplay of the dynamic of forces (demand/supply/pricing) positions the public HE sector at the undergraduate (UG) level in Nigeria as being mostly non-competitive. Despite the seemingly non-competitive UG market, there are underlying intricately interwoven threats to RSU's market share via technological/economic/COVID-19 related megatrends and localized political/socio-cultural factors which paradoxically present business opportunities to RSU.

Keywords: Business strategy, environmental analysis, external assessment, higher education, Rivers State University

INTRODUCTION

Evaluating the strategic position of a business entity is a precursor for strategic change [1]. The first

step towards successful strategic change is carrying out an environmental analysis [2]. External environmental analysis entails scanning an organisation's external environment for opportunities to be capitalised on and threats to be watched/mitigated and potential external linkages, relevant for support [3]. The micro-external environment is the lower layer of the external environment, comprising organizations producing the same types of products [4]. The macro-external environment encapsulates the wider societal factors which impact business, irrespective of the nature of products. They entail the overarching political, environmental, social, technological economic, and legal factors, that impact the industry and the

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organization [5]. This study carries out a micro and macro environmental assessment of RSU as a business entity with a view to evaluating its strategic position.

MICRO-EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS

Five-forces analysis is carried out to further evaluate the state of competitive rivalry within the Nigerian (HE) sector/market, relative to the bargaining power of buyers/suppliers and the threat of new entrants/substitutes (Table 1). This is against the backdrop that the Higher Education (HE) sector evidences strong global competitiveness [6]. Michael Porter's Five-forces model [7] presents a useful medium for assessing industry peculiarities/factors which pose threats/reinforce the need for change [8].

Table 1. Five forces analysis.

| <p>Threat of New Entrants Decree 9 of 1993 provided for the establishment of private universities expanding the Nigerian university education system, who are able to offer better quality <i>teaching</i> and learning services in better-equipped settings. https://www.nuc.edu.ng/nigerian-universities/private-univeristies/</p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th colspan="2">Institutional Growth in Nigeria's University Sector</th> </tr> <tr> <th>YEAR</th> <th>NUMBER OF UNIVERSITIES</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>2005</td> <td>51</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2008</td> <td>94</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2011</td> <td>117</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2012</td> <td>122</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2013</td> <td>128</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2017</td> <td>152</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <p><small>Source: National Universities Commission</small></p> <p>Furthermore, within the region, one of the existing colleges was recently converted to a university, with the additional setting up of a wide range of highly competitive post graduate programs. This has significantly impacted on the viability of post graduate programs in RSU. https://iauoee.edu.ng</p> <p>Beyond Rivers State, more public universities have been recently approved to be established by federal and state governments.</p> <p>Federal Ministry of Education https://education.gov.ng</p> <p>Meeting up the NUC accreditation requirements in terms of equipment, classrooms, staff offices, studio space, student ratio represents an active barrier to entry which must be overcome to sustain any academic program in Nigeria (NUC, 2020). As such whereby academic programs fail accreditation, due to the inadequacy of human resources and physical facilities occasioned by funding shortages, potential applicants are forced to actively seek alternative admission for preferred choice of programs: https://www.nuc.edu.ng</p> <p><i>150 courses unaccredited in Nigerian universities</i> https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/208331-exclusive-150-courses-unaccredited-nigerian-universities-full-list.html</p> <p>The requirement for physical infrastructure is particularly weighty as RSU is primarily science and technology oriented. https://www.rsu.edu.ng.</p> | Institutional Growth in Nigeria's University Sector | | YEAR | NUMBER OF UNIVERSITIES | 2005 | 51 | 2008 | 94 | 2011 | 117 | 2012 | 122 | 2013 | 128 | 2017 | 152 | <p>Bargaining power of buyers Within the immediate locality, there two other public universities offering similar or close variants of RSU's undergraduate (UG) Programs Beyond Rivers State, there are currently about 83 other public universities in Nigeria (39 federal and 43 state-owned).</p> <p>Market demand for higher education remains beyond the capacity of institutions of higher education, despite the growing number of universities, polytechnics and colleges, due to the disproportionate increase in the number of high school leavers seeking admission to institutions of higher learning. <i>Fewer than 40% of university applicants are regularly admitted to Nigerian universities, leaving an estimated one million students without any university placement</i> https://www.jamb.org.ng</p> <p>The bargaining power of students at the UG) level is minimal, despite the presence of other public universities. Furthermore, the emergence of private universities has had been minimal impact on the demand for admission into public universities, due to the significant disparity in tuition.</p> <div style="text-align: center;"> <table border="1"> <caption>Proportion of enrolment at three types of universities (FME, 2016)</caption> <thead> <tr> <th>University Type</th> <th>Percentage</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Federal Universities</td> <td>62%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>State Universities</td> <td>32%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Private Universities</td> <td>5%</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> </div> <p>: The proportion of enrolment at the three types of universities (FME, 2016).</p> <p>The bargaining power of students is however not static across all undergraduate academic programs. There are programs which consistently attract lower number of applicants than available slots.</p> <p>https://www.nuc.edu.ng https://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/1105/Nigeria-HIGHER-EDUCATION.html#ixzz6SiVuTIL6</p> | University Type | Percentage | Federal Universities | 62% | State Universities | 32% | Private Universities | 5% |
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| <p>Threat of substitutes Higher National Diplomas obtainable from polytechnics and colleges may be considered close substitutes for university degrees, yet, they are burdened by similar political and funding dynamics that play out in Nigerian universities. (Federal Ministry of Education (FME), https://education.gov.ng)</p> | <p>Bargaining power of suppliers Suppliers of learning materials and equipment have limited bargaining power, as such goods and services are not rare, giving RSU the bargaining power. However, highly skilled IT consultants are not in abundance. RSU's IT partnership with its IT consultant is the cornerstone to its renewed drive to reconfigure its internal operations and external linkages, towards optimal efficiency. Other public and private organizations in the region also deploy the services of the available few, which gives its IT consultant strong bargaining power. https://www.rsu.edu.ng, https://www.cinfores.com</p> |
| <p>The market dynamic at the post-graduate (PG) level is however different. This is because post graduate programmes are internally setup and run by universities in line with market demand. The demand is also much lower than at the UG level. With the setting up of additional and similar post graduate courses by other universities in the state, post graduate students are beginning to possess considerable bargaining power. The market is relatively mature, with new entrants creating strong competitive rivalry for RSU in the region. This poses a threat for cutting down RSU's current market share.</p> | |

Threat of New Entrants and Substitutes

Decree 9 of 1993 provided for the establishment of private universities, expanding the Nigerian university education system, that offer quality teaching and learning services in better-equipped settings. Furthermore, within the region, one of the existing colleges was recently converted to a university, with the additional setting up of a wide range of highly competitive post-graduate programs. This has significantly impacted the viability of postgraduate programs at RSU. Beyond Rivers State, more public universities have been recently approved to be established by federal and state governments. Meeting up the NUC accreditation requirements in terms of equipment, classrooms, staff offices, studio space, and student ratio represents an active barrier to entry that must be overcome to sustain any academic program in Nigeria. As such whereby academic programs fail accreditation, due to the inadequacy of human resources and physical facilities occasioned by funding shortages, potential applicants are forced to actively seek alternative admission for their preferred choice of programs. The requirement for physical infrastructure is particularly weighty as RSU is primarily science and technology-oriented. Higher National Diplomas obtainable from polytechnics and colleges may be considered close substitutes for university degrees, yet they are burdened by similar political and funding dynamics that play out in Nigerian universities.

Bargaining Power of Buyers and Suppliers

Within the immediate locality, two other public universities are offering similar or close variants of RSU's undergraduate (UG) Programs Beyond Rivers State; there are currently about 83 other public universities in Nigeria (39 federal and 43 state-owned). Market demand for higher education remains beyond the capacity of institutions of higher education, despite the growing number of universities, polytechnics, and colleges, due to the disproportionate increase in the number of high school leavers seeking admission to institutions of higher learning. Fewer than 40% of university applicants are regularly admitted to Nigerian universities, leaving an estimated one million students without any university placement. The bargaining power of students at the UG level is minimal, despite the presence of other public universities. Furthermore, the emergence of private universities has had minimal impact on the demand for admission into public universities, due to the significant disparity in tuition. The bargaining power of students is however not static across all undergraduate academic programs. There are programs that consistently attract a lower number of applicants than available slots.

MACRO-EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Macro-external assessment is carried out to scan for overarching political, environmental, social, technological economic, and legal factors, that impact the industry and the organization, necessary to identify key drivers for change. A number of macro-environmental factors have impacted RSU as an organization, which have implications for its operations as a business entity.

Constitutional Provisions/Governance

Under the constitutional provisions, government has the power to appoint university leadership. Public universities cannot decide what to charge as tuition, without due consultation with the government. Staff salaries are determined and paid by the government. Public universities however maintain the freedom to internally generate and allocate funds as well as recruit staff following government approval. The constitutional provisions diminish RSU's autonomy and academic freedom. There are currently no pointers to possible reforms in the short term. This may be likely in the long term, given the return to democratic government in Nigeria. With constitutional reforms, a major strategic repositioning and overhaul by RSU will be required. RSU will be better positioned to competitively price tuition and explore more cooperate abilities relative to market dynamics. Otherwise, RSU will continue to operate within the reduced constitutional powers granted, while strategically seeking alternative avenues to strengthen its internal capabilities. RSU's current leadership was internally sought and appointed by the state government. This has created a relatively lesser level of internal unrest and a better public perception of its academic stability. This will likely remain so for the tenure duration. This is relative to its immediate competitors, which in recent times have been embroiled in strikes and tensions, over disagreements with the federal government.

Government Relations with Academic Labour Union

Federal Government's relations with universities have been historically poor, evidenced by repeated failure to enforce its bilateral agreements with the Academic Staff Union of Universities. This impacts academic stability in Nigeria's HE via Frequent internal labour strikes and university closures, Academic programs are often disrupted for lengthy periods and have negatively impacted students' performance as well as staff morale. Lack of predictability of the actual durations of academic programs in public universities may deter potential students from seeking admissions. However, RSU currently has a better relationship with the government at the state level, which will likely continue in the midterm, which makes RSU a more attractive option for students seeking admissions [9].

High Direct State Involvement

Government facilitates the provision of infrastructure and funds for setting up targeted academic programs and promoting research in line with their priorities. There had been repeated disruption and fragmentation of politically backed university project initiatives. This induces a heightened need for political correctness, lobbying, and seeking political favours to sustain the currently high political interest. Capital projects may however be stalled as political power and interest shift. The government has awarded a series of contracts for capital projects in RSU, which are currently ongoing. Current high political interest may remain until after the next general elections. This presents a short-term opportunity for the expansion of existing programs and the research base of RSU. However, given the anticipated change in the political power structure, there remains a threat. This poses difficulties in setting and achieving goals within long-term project planning projections.

Poor Staff Welfare

Poor remuneration and academic staff welfare in public universities heightened during the era of military dictatorship and has continued to date, resulting in increasing levels of brain drain from the Nigerian university system. There have been several instances of RSU academic staff leaving for foreign universities upon the conclusion of sponsored scholarships abroad. There may be an increase in academic staff turnover unless steps are taken to address and prioritize staff welfare in public universities. The increasing level of brain drain poses a serious threat to the overall quality of teaching staff via the loss of highly qualified staff to private or foreign universities.

Declining Oil Prices

Due to declining oil prices, the Nigerian government cut down the 2020 budget by 40%. The significance of the declining oil prices is particularly weighty for public universities, which are directly and indirectly funded by the government. The issue of declining oil prices constitutes a key issue for

RSU, which affects the adequacy of internal resources view of its impact on the availability of funding at the state and federal levels. The state government is responsible for the payment of staff salaries and funding of university projects. At the Federal level, the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFUND) was set up by the federal government via the Promulgation of an Education Tax Decree, which mandatorily collects 2% of profits from registered companies. Access to this funding pool is however competitive and made accessible to all federal and state universities. RSU heavily relies on and complements these sources of funds, which are tied to government revenue from oil exports. If whereby economic downturn is prolonged, it will further exacerbate prevailing funding shortages and create significant gaps for RSU. Although the specific impacts are not yet well established, in the midterm with the economic downturn, there is likely to be a reduction in local and international scholarships, reduced access to research grants, reduced participation in local and international learned society activities, and reduced funding for university intervention projects and infrastructure.

Changing Fiscal and Monetary Priorities

The depreciating value of the Nigerian local currency (Naira) and increasing foreign exchange scarcity, along with COVID-19-induced aversion to travel, have led to lower patronage of foreign universities and higher pressure on local institutions. Restrictions were therefore placed on access to foreign exchange for payment of tuition to foreign institutions of higher learning. *This situation is likely to stabilize or reverse in the long run* and may imply rising short-term demand for admission into RSU.

Industrial Activity

Industrial activity is high where RSU is located because Nigeria's crude oil deposits, principally lie within the Niger Delta region. Several endowed professorial chairs have been conferred by key industries in the region. As a result of the continued demand for oil, hydrocarbon exploration, and processing, there will be a high likelihood of the continued presence of multinational corporations in the region. This provides a sustainable basis for promoting research. The continued presence of several multinational corporations in the region, provide opportunities for further strategic partnerships and funding.

Rising Poverty and Unemployment Levels

The high level of unemployment and poverty indices in the region is further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. This has significant implications for corporate social responsibility and the expectations of organizations by local communities. This may indicate that RSU employment policies and community relations need to be realigned and strengthened. The high level of unemployment and poverty indices has also increased demands for funding, employment, and empowerment by the local community where RSU is located. Security threats may be posed by an increasingly disenfranchised local community.

Demographics

An increasing number of high school leavers, actively seeking admission into Nigerian public universities has created a steady increase in demand for admission into RSU. There is a minimal likelihood of change in this regard, due to the limited capacity of other public universities. From a business perspective, this is an opportunity for the expansion of academic programs.

Insecurity/Cultism

Cultism is a societal menace that has pervaded the higher education sector in Nigeria. It is often characterized by a high level of violence and poses a high level of security threat. There is a minimal likelihood of change, due to the trickle-down effect of wider socioeconomic factors and societal values. This has heightened the level of security consciousness within the university community. On several occasions in the past, these factors have truncated academic activities at RSU, as they posed an active security threat to lives and property. Insecurity in the region may prevent international presence and restrict international collaboration.

Information Technology

The rapidly evolving and changing IT/technological frontier has significant implications for redefining the adequacy of the current mode of teaching, learning, and research in Nigeria's higher education sector. This is evidenced by RSU's renewed IT drive whereby teaching, learning, and operational platforms have gone digital. It will further have long-term implications for RSU. The heightened need to keep up with new and evolving modes of teaching and learning has created more pressure on IT skills. Also, more rapidly shifting technological thresholds will continuously define the adequacy of RSU's curricula content and modes of teaching and learning. This may be due to the accelerated obsolescence of existing IT and technology infrastructure. It may also create increasing financial pressure to regularly update IT and technological resources.

The rapidly evolving and changing IT/technological frontier has also increased access to educational resources and increased the demand and leaning of Nigerians towards online/distance learning degrees. There is thus a leaning towards foreign online degrees in Nigeria. Nigeria has the highest number of outbound international students from Africa. Outbound mobility numbers are growing rapidly with technological evolution and increased by 164% between 2005 and 2015. This creates a market for distance learning at RSU. This can be inferred from the National Open University of Nigeria (strictly distance learning) market share, with more than 250,000 students, and is looking to increase capacity in response to demand.

Perception of Science and Technology

Poor public perception and apathy for some science and technology (ST) programs in Nigeria, has led to a gross imbalance in the aggregate demand for science and technology programs such as agriculture relative to academic programs such as Law, humanities, and Management Sciences. Typically, there is low patronage of Agricultural programs. This threatens the financial viability of RSU's programs which are mostly science and technology-based. However, recent fiscal initiatives by the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) such as the Agric support scheme/fund and the Commercial Agriculture Credit Scheme, as well as food shortages triggered by the coronavirus pandemic have triggered a renewed national interest in Agriculture, which might present opportunities for increased student numbers.

Environmental Factors

Environmental factors such as pollution from hydrocarbon exploration, flood, and erosion are key issues in the Niger Delta region, and tackling them forms part of the core mission of RSU. Pollution has remained a continuing source of agitation amongst local communities in the Niger Delta, where RSU is located. Particularly due to the attendant health impacts associated with oil spillage, perennial gas flaring, black soot, and acid rain. Physical environmental degradation due to perpetual flooding and erosion, are twin hazards impacting life and property in the region, by virtue of its tropical wetland setting. As such, one of RSU's primary mission is environmental responsiveness to issues in the Niger Delta. For RSU, this has triggered institutional responses such as the setting up of the Institute of Pollution Studies (IPS), Environmental Management undergraduate and postgraduate degree programs, and the Institute of Geosciences with specialization in flood and erosion control. There is a heightened awareness of environmental issues. The environmental vulnerability and challenges of the Niger Delta imply sustained viability and highly sought career paths for environmental consultancy. It creates an opportunity for active university consultancy. There is also a high subscription for EM and geosciences programs at PG levels are pointers to the potential viability of an undergraduate equivalent [10].

COVID-19 Pandemic

New laws and procedures for social distancing within universities have been enacted. At the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Nigerian government ordered the closure of all schools including institutions of higher learning, which were directed to revert to the online mode of lectures and other distance learning modes. However, distance learning platforms and protocols are not well established

within the Nigerian public higher education system and are not supported by the basic infrastructure relevant to facilitate a smooth transition. The COVID-19 pandemic thus triggered resistance by staff and students who were not adequately equipped to cope with the change. It, however, served as the trigger for change, which expedited the training of staff and students on the use of online learning platforms. It also created a new mode of working with minimal face-to-face interaction amongst staff, although this was short-lived. The pandemic impact has currently passed its peak but has triggered proactive research centered around it, and heightened awareness and adherence to health and safety protocols on campus.

CONCLUSION

Within the micro business environment, the interplay of the dynamic of forces (demand/supply/pricing) positions the public HE-sector at the undergraduate (UG) level in Nigeria as being mostly non-competitive, despite the lowering of barriers to entry for private universities. However, there are still active obstacles to the survival of certain academic programmes because of NUC accreditation criteria, and public universities continue to show a lack of comparative advantages. Nonetheless, public universities retain a price advantage over new entrants (private universities). There is a growing market, with the predominantly minimal bargaining power of buyers due to the limited number/capacity of public universities relative to demand. Suppliers' bargaining power is mostly minimal as there is no supplier competition threat. Yet, highly skilled IT consultants constitute concentrated suppliers, with high switching costs, due to potentially disruptive effects. There is a low threat of substitutes, due to the similarity of demand, supply, pricing, and political/funding dynamics.

The market dynamic at the post-graduate (PG) level is however different. This is because post-graduate programs are internally set up and run by universities in line with market demand. The demand is also much lower than at the UG level. With the setting up of additional and similar postgraduate courses by other universities in the state, postgraduate students are beginning to possess considerable bargaining power. The market is relatively mature, with new entrants creating strong competitive rivalry for RSU in the region. This poses a threat with the potential to cut down RSU's current market share.

Despite the seemingly non-competitive UG market, there are underlying threats for RSU, in terms of the:

- Potential loss of revenue to other higher institutions from an increasing number of applicants seeking alternative admission to accredited programs.
- Potential loss of brand/status, which may better position other higher institutions.
- Possibility of not attracting high-performing ST-oriented students, who despite the costs may exercise a preference for private universities with more physical infrastructure.

Furthermore, the increasing number of new entrants implies:

- An increasing competition/more active lobbying for funds from the government, which have to cater to a wider demand for funding.
- A risk of lesser political interest from the State Government.
- Increasing competition for research grants and funding from the Federal government considering the limited/highly sought funds available via TETFUND.

The micro-business environment however exists within the wider macro-environment, which shows that there are numerous intricately interwoven technological/economic/COVID-19-related megatrends and localized political/socio-cultural factors which further present opportunities and pose threats to RSU. The key drivers for change thus identified include likely political power shifts; declining funding levels; public perception/societal preferences towards non-ST programs; high demand for HE; increasing security concerns/threats; fast-paced IT/technological evolution; availability of strategic partnership opportunities; and COVID-19 induced changes such as the emphasis on social distancing/heightened need for alternative modes of working/teaching.

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