

CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN NIGERIAN THEOLOGICAL INSTITUTIONS: A CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Theological education in Nigeria has been shaped largely by Western missionary models, and this made it difficult to properly adapt research to local realities. This research paper examines the key challenges and emerging prospects of academic research within Nigerian theological institutions. Academic research needs to reflect the experiences of the society in which it is produced, especially in a place like Nigeria where culture and religion are closely connected. Some of the major challenges include poor infrastructure, such as poorly equipped libraries, limited access to digital resources, a shortage of qualified supervisors, and serious funding constraints, stemming from limited access to formal grants and over-reliance on church funding, which directly impacts research productivity. These challenges make it difficult for Nigerian scholars to actively contribute to wider scholarly discussion beyond their locality. Even with these challenges, there are clear opportunities for clear, such as developing indigenous theological frameworks and diversifying funding sources. Nigerian theological institutions can be seen as spaces where future ministers are formed and prepared for leadership with integrity and honour, are uniquely positioned to develop contextual and indigenous theology that provides ethical frameworks for addressing pressing societal issues like poverty, corruption, and inter-religious and communal conflicts. This can be achieved through intentional development of such theology that is locally relevant, improvement of research infrastructures to enhance access to information and diversification of funding sources by theological institutions to reduce over-reliance on church funding. The research used a qualitative approach to examine the state and perspectives of scholars in theological institutions. It concludes with recommendations that theological institutions, researchers and government bodies should increase investment in research infrastructure, funding and faculty training to foster a vibrant research culture that is not only academically rigorous but also socially relevant and transformative for Nigeria.

Keywords: Theological research, indigenous theology, challenges, secularism, infrastructure, research funding.

Introduction

The development of theological education in Nigeria cannot be understood apart from the influence of early Christian missionary activity in the nineteenth century, as theological education broadly involves the formal training of clergy and scholars within structured doctrinal and academic frameworks. Missionary bodies, particularly the Scottish missions, played a decisive role in establishing some of the earliest seminaries in the 1850s (Obinna, 2023). These institutions were mainly established to train African clergy using theological patterns developed in Europe. As a result, their content and teaching methods reflected Western traditions, with little attention was given to the social and cultural realities of the local context. While this missionary influence laid an important foundation for formal theological training in Nigeria, it also introduced a pattern of education that often overlooked indigenous worldviews and religious experiences. As a result, theological education in Nigeria still struggles to properly relate its teachings to

local realities, a concern that has long been emphasized in ecumenical discussions on making theology relevant to local contexts (Pobee, 1997). This is significant as it seeks to engage African cultural, social, and religious realities in ways that are both theologically sound and locally relevant.

One way this problem shows itself is in how theological studies often feel abstract and disconnected from everyday life of Nigerian and African Christians. Limitations like these mentioned have been observed because African theological scholarship requires a clear and distinct voice and approach that focuses on African experiences, spirituality, and socio-political contexts. Pokol (2020) pointed out that the Nigerian church has had to grapple with threats posed by postmodern culture and its resultant challenges to Christian faith and theological integrity; this underscores the continuing necessity for theological education to remain relevant to contemporary societal changes. It has been found that some theological institutions in Nigeria are facing deep crises in their theological education systems and this is attributed to deteriorating academic and infrastructural standards. Consequently, impeding the proper contextualization and quality of theological training (Mbamalu, 2014).

For instance, in Hugh Goldie Theological Institution, Arochukwu and Essien Ukpabio Presbyterian Theological College, Itu (theological institutions in Nigeria), research and academic outputs are not even and often restricted in scope. These theological institutions commonly struggle with limitations that deeply affect strong research engagement, including a shortage of funds, a number of qualified researchers and poor infrastructure. In light of this, Njuguna and Itegi (2013) postulated that the connection between theological studies and efficiency in research is poorly developed; theological training lays more emphasis on teaching doctrines and spiritual development than thorough academic inquiry. Consequently, there is a low volume of theological scholarship suitable for publication from theological institutions in Nigeria.

For Adedibu (2021), theological curricula that follows the rigid Western frameworks most times are in disagreement with contemporary methods which combine views that not only cut across different disciplines, but are also contextually relevant. This obvious contrast affects the progressiveness of theological research that takes the lived experiences of the Africans into consideration and responds concretely to modern day universal theological discourses.

While existing studies often emphasize structural challenges such as funding and infrastructure, this paper argues that the deeper limitation lies in the way theological research is conceptualized and conducted. Without a shift toward context-sensitive and methodologically robust approaches, improvements in resources alone may not significantly transform research output in Nigerian theological institutions.

The Significance of Theological Research for Nigeria

The importance of theological research in Nigeria is clear. Theological institutions in Nigeria have contributed to research that shapes social, cultural, ethical and religious life of the people. Theological research helps shape ethical thinking and moral values in society; guiding individuals and communities in various aspects of life, including governance, social justice, and interpersonal relations. Adedibu (2021) pointed out that this research productivity also considers the experiences and spirituality of Africans. This happens when scholars engage closely with indigenous cultural values and respond to concerns such as identity, community life and social change.

Kessler and Kretschmar (2015) also argued that theological scholarship plays an important role in developing church leadership, which equips church leaders with a deep understanding of both Scripture and current societal issues. The emphasis on these two areas leads to having a church leadership that is well equipped to face the peculiar challenges of the Nigerian society of today, which involves reacting to the pressures from the secular world and advancing community development among Christians. By responding to these issues, theological research connects academic work and practical Christian life particularly through public theology, which seeks to engage faith with real social contexts (de Beer & Swart, 2014). By this means, the impact of the church on the society will be improved.

Challenges of Theological Scholarship in Nigerian Society

1. Inadequate Research Funding

Lack of funding remains one of the biggest challenges facing theological research in Nigeria. Unlike other disciplines in secular universities and in some parts of the world, some theological institutions and seminaries in Nigeria find it hard to benefit from research grants. For instance, in Hugh Goldie Theological Institution, scholars and theologians who are very interested in research rely on individual funds, contributions from the Church and occasional support from philanthropists. This situation affects how much research scholars are able to carry out. Baro, Bosah, and Obi (2017) maintained that the absence of established funding mechanisms creates barriers not only to initiating research projects but also to sustaining longitudinal studies that are critical for advancing theological knowledge. Lack of funding directly affects the quality of research, since researchers are unable to access materials, attend conferences, or carry out fieldwork. Igiri, et al. (2021) asserted that the direct link between funding limitations and research productivity is apparent in Nigerian theological institutions.

As a result of the inadequate funding, the theological researchers in Nigeria publish fewer works, leading to weak motivation among faculty members, who frequently have to balance heavy teaching responsibilities and additional clerical duties, often without adequate research support. The high expectation placed on scholars to produce publishable work, despite limited support, often leads to burnout and reduced motivation for research. More so, theological institutions, on account of this challenge experiences low reputation in the educational sector. It has been observed that graduates of theology from most of the theological institutions in Nigeria find it hard to further their degree in a secular university with the degrees they have obtained from theological institutions. This has brought discouragement to so many graduates of theology from furthering their studies. All these prove that the absence of adequate funds for research to theological institutions in Nigeria lead to their struggle to be relevant in a fast-changing world of today.

Despite these impediments, partnerships with national and international religious organizations offer potential for transformation in the funding for theological research in Nigeria. Adogame (2016) explained that partnerships with national and international religious organizations will go a long way to offer additional avenues for funds and improve academic cooperation. These partnerships can facilitate access to grants and enhance research capacity. In relation to this, academics can invest in cultivating grant-writing skills, improving healthy competition for global research funds, and harnessing resources through innovative fundraising methods.

It is noteworthy that while inadequate funding is a major concern, it does not fully explain the weak research culture in many theological institutions in Nigeria. Even in contexts where limited resources are available, the absence of strong research orientation and methodological training often limits meaningful scholarly output.

2. Poor Infrastructure and Limited Resources

Many institutions operate with weak facilities, poorly maintained libraries and limited access to current materials (Mbamalu, 2014). In Nigeria, seminaries are affiliated with secular universities, and these affiliated seminaries, such as Hugh Goldie Theological Institution, Arochukwu, and Essien Ukpabio Presbyterian Theological College, Itu, in particular, experience a decline in both academic and infrastructural standards, which impedes the provision of a conducive environment for research and academic growth. Poorly maintained libraries, insufficient classroom technology, and the absence of modern research amenities all contribute to a stagnating academic atmosphere. Also, the problem experienced in trying to incorporate Information and Communication Technology (ICT) into theological scholarship has worsened the issue of poor infrastructure, as ICT is very useful for gaining access to repositories, journals, and enabling collective research (Akoma, 2020).

In addition, the lack of modern research tools makes the situation even worse for Nigerian theological researchers. Musa, Kashim, and Adakawa (2021), contrasting the realities of Nigerian higher institutions and other institutions around the world, noted that several institutions around the world are well equipped with electronic databases and digital journal subscriptions. However, in Nigeria, researchers face difficulties in

having constant access to such resources, leading to their inability to be actively involved in contemporary theological research. This limitation also affects e-learning and e-supervision, particularly in postgraduate studies. Although there have been efforts towards embracing Information and Communication Technology (ICT) within theological scholarship, poor electricity, inadequate infrastructure, and low literacy levels among students hinder this effort. For instance, Hugh Goldie Theological Training Institution Arochukwu has a computer centre where Jambites write their Computer-Based Test (CBT), but the students of the theological institutions themselves cannot use the facility because most of the students are not proficient in handling computers.

Despite these challenges, there are numerous opportunities for theological scholarship in Nigeria. Recent advances in digital technologies allow for overcoming infrastructural and resource constraints by enabling remote access to global theological materials through open-access platforms and online repositories. The integration of blended learning models and e-supervision modalities has the potential to elevate research training and broaden participation beyond geographical boundaries (Berger, 2021). Similarly, the increasing use of digital tools for sharing research is very important for theological research in Nigeria. When researchers publish their work online through open-access journals, repositories, and other academic websites, their work becomes easier to access by a wider audience, enabling them to gain recognition globally.

3. Limitations in Staffing and Intellectual Academic Capacity

One major challenge facing theological institutions in Nigeria is the shortage of well-trained academic staff. This problem is more evident at the postgraduate level, where students often struggle to find experienced supervisors. As Fassi, Awodiji, and Adewale (2018) observe, when faculty members lack strong research backgrounds, the quality of guidance available to students is often weakened, with direct implications for the standard of postgraduate research. The issue is not only the shortage of staff, but also the quality of research training and mentorship available.

Scholars such as Akoma (2020) link this situation to a number of structural issues, including limited access to advanced training opportunities, the migration of skilled academics to better-resourced institutions abroad, and the absence of sustained professional development programmes within the country. Beyond affecting research output, this also affects the long-term development of theological education. Without consistent mentorship, emerging scholars are left without the intellectual formation and support necessary to grow into confident researchers and teachers, thereby slowing the overall development of the discipline.

Another aspect by which the challenge of limited human resources manifests is in the limited research capacity and methodological training among most scholars in Nigerian theological institutions. Kessler and Kretzschmar (2015) note that many scholars have limited exposure to newer research approaches, especially interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary methods. As a result, their ability to address complex issues through careful, critical, and reflective research methods is often limited. Sakupapa (2018) emphasizes the ongoing difficulties in integrating lived experiences and decolonial perspectives into established research frameworks.

Despite these limitations, initiatives such as collaborations with international institutions and interdisciplinary research are promising steps towards improving theological scholarship in Nigeria. For instance, in recent years, some of the theological institutions in Nigeria have begun to collaborate with other institutions within and outside the country, especially through their affiliations to secular universities. Hugh Goldie Theological Institution has a strong relationship with the University of Nigeria Nsukka, Abia State University Uturu and Stellenbosch University South Africa. While Essien Ukpabio Presbyterian Theological College enjoys a good relationship with the University of Calabar.

Working with scholars from within the country and outside creates opportunities to share ideas, learn from each other, and thus build strong research skills. Clear systems for research training and guidance foster an environment where good research is taken seriously and constantly improved (Kessler & Kretzschmar, 2015). Also, encouraging scholars from these theological institutions to draw from other fields of study, such as the social sciences, ethics and context-based theology can broaden their thinking. This, in turn makes research more practical, better informed and more useful in addressing real-life issues.

4. Secular Approaches to Nigerian Education Policies

The increasing influence of secular education policies in Nigerian also creates challenges for theological institutions. The secular polices lead to marginalizing theological institutions, reducing their academic recognition, and limiting their resources. For instance, theological institutions are not recognized fully as tertiary institutions; they must be affiliated with a secular institution if they wish to award degrees. At other times, degrees and diplomas obtained from theological institutions are not valued enough by secular institutions. It is rare to find a theological institution in the National University Commission (NUC) list of tertiary institutions.

In Nigeria, theological studies struggle to maintain their disciplinary identity amidst secular academic paradigms that prioritize empirical and scientific knowledge over faith-based inquiry. This, according to Pokol (2020) limits the level of support these institutions receive and curtails influence within the broader academic environment. Theological institutions face the delicate task of sustaining identity and relevance in environments shaped by secularism.

Nwosu (2021) argues that secularism shapes both society and culture in complex ways, particularly in a religiously plural context such as Nigeria. In such settings, the expression and interpretation of religious truth are often negotiated within a space shared by multiple faith traditions. This situation makes it difficult for people to express their beliefs freely without creating tension with others.

For theological researchers, this tension raises important methodological and ethical questions. There is a need to remain faithful to Christian doctrinal commitments while also engaging other religious traditions with sensitivity and respect. This task becomes even more demanding in an increasingly interconnected and religiously diverse world, where theological reflection must speak meaningfully to everyday lived experience.

Closely related to this is the challenge of syncretism; that is, the blending of elements from different religious traditions, which continues to shape religious practice in many African contexts (Sarfo, 2023). As Nwosu (2021) notes, Christian theologians must carefully discern how to respond to such realities, holding together doctrinal integrity and cultural awareness. In this regard, the interaction between tradition and modernity calls for critical yet constructive reflection, one that takes culture seriously without allowing it to override foundational theological convictions. This requires a research approach that is both grounded in theology and sensitive to local realities.

Conversely, the challenge of secularism should not be seen only as a threat but also as an opportunity for theological research to redefine its relevance within a plural and intellectually diverse society. The secularism experienced by theological institutions in Nigeria has prompted some scholars to explore new research areas, such as integrating African epistemologies and addressing post-colonial theological challenges. As Sakupapa (2018) believed, these movements aim to bring back African ways of knowing and understanding, while also addressing the lasting effects of colonial influence on theology in Africa. Adogame (2016) maintained that there are real opportunities for theological research in Nigeria to speak into public life. By engaging with social concerns, such as human rights and governance, theology can demonstrate its relevance within the church and the necessity for the secular world (Adogame, 2016). Also, when researchers open up to interfaith and intercultural dialogue. Additionally, when researchers open up to interfaith and intercultural dialogue, it encourages meaningful discussions across different religions and cultural groups. This helps expand the focus of theological study and makes it more responsive to the real-life challenges of the people. In this way, theological research can become a strong and meaningful voice in Nigerian society, confidently engaging religious and secular matters of concern.

5. Gaps in Theory and Research Methods

In the past, theological research in Nigeria focused mainly on doctrines and traditional teachings. However, in recent years, there has been a shift in approach. Theological scholars are beginning to bring ideas from ethics, sociology and human relationships to theological studies. This newer approach which has moved beyond traditional methods positions theology as a relevant field in addressing issues in society. Sakupapa (2018)

agreed that African postcolonial and decolonial perspectives have played an important role by challenging the longstanding dominance of Western theology and help highlight the cultural values of Africa and ways of understanding knowledge, while also placing theological scholarship in Nigeria within global discussion. These paradigms encourage scholars to revisit biblical and doctrinal materials through lenses that foreground African experiences and advocate for theological self-determination.

However, many scholars still find it hard to adopt these newer methods. They still find it hard to move away from older, rigid ways of doing theology. They are still stuck with the dogmatic way, thereby making them to struggle in using more practical and people-centered methods like interviews, fieldwork and critical analysis that can better reflect local realities.

That said, there are however signs of progress. New approaches are beginning to connect theology with real-life issues like social justice, human dignity and even environmental concerns. These methods give scholars more freedom to ask deeper questions and deal with problems people face in the society. This approach has been adopted by Hugh Goldie Theological Training Institution by introducing courses like Public Theology, Human Value, and Theology and Development into their curricula. These courses have really helped to shape the minds of the students towards doing researches that do not only concern the church but that are relevant in addressing societal issues.

Looking forward, theological research in Nigeria can grow by combining its strong traditional roots with present-day social and political realities. There should be more focus on practical research, especially in areas like public theology, social justice and community life. When theological studies work very closely with other fields, it will not only be academically sound but also societally useful.

Way Forward

1. Need to Strengthen Academic and Institutional Collaboration

In Nigeria and across West Africa, theological associations play an important role in bringing scholars together. Through conferences, seminars, and smaller academic gatherings, these bodies create spaces where ideas can be tested, refined, and debated. However, their impact is reduced by practical challenges, such as poor communication and limited access to resources, especially digital materials. These constraints tend to restrict participation and, in some cases, weaken sustained scholarly engagement.

Even so, the potential of such networks should not be underestimated. When properly supported, they can significantly enhance research output and contribute to a stronger sense of academic community among theologians in the region. In particular, more consistent interaction among scholars can encourage collaborative research and deepen conversations around shared theological concerns within the Nigerian context.

Beyond regional engagement, international collaboration remains a vital component of theological scholarship today. Partnerships with institutions outside Nigeria expose scholars to diverse intellectual traditions and research methodologies. Opportunities such as joint research initiatives, academic exchange programmes, and participation in international conferences not only broaden perspectives but also increase the global visibility of Nigerian scholarship.

At the institutional level, there is a growing need to create more practical and sustainable channels for collaboration. Digital technology provides one possible solution. Virtual conferences, themed webinars, and online research clusters can help bridge geographical distances and reduce the cost of participation. In addition, interdisciplinary engagement, as well as dialogue across denominational and faith boundaries, can enrich theological reflection by bringing multiple perspectives into conversation. As Bulus (2017) observes, digital tools, when effectively utilized, can mitigate the limitations imposed by distance and inadequate infrastructure, enabling scholars to share their work more widely and remain connected within the global academic community.

2. Use of Technology and Digital Tools in Research

Digital tools now play important role in research, particularly in theological education where ICT is gradually reshaping methods of teaching and learning (Bulus, 2017). They help researchers gather information, analyze data and share their work more easily. It is noted in this research that in Nigerian theological institutions, the use of ICT tools for research is still developing and not yet consistent across all institutions, however, where they are being used, they are making research easier. Fasasi, et al. (2018) wrote that E-learning platforms and electronic supervision methods have been introduced in some secular institutions to expand access and improve student engagement.

For instance, National Open University, Nigeria (NOUN) is deeply engaged in the use of e-learning for giving lectures, and sometimes in writing semester examinations. This can be replicated in theological institutions in Nigeria. The proprietors of theological institutions should ensure that their institutions improve on their use of ICT, which will make learning more flexible and affordable to students.

With the help of digital tools, theological scholars can now access free academic materials online which gives them enough information to work with. Online platforms, such as Whatsapp and Telegram make it easier for students and their supervisors to stay in touch and for researchers to work together and to share their works online which improves their academic recognition. However, Msoroka and Amundsen (2017) pointed out, there is still a clear gap in access to digital tools. This problem is more noticeable between urban and rural areas, and also among different institutions. As a result, not everyone has the same opportunity to benefit from online sources. There are also concerns about the quality of academic works shared online. It can be hard to ensure that standards remain high and that research is properly reviewed.

In respect to this challenge, there is need to balance the use of technology with traditional teaching methods. While the digital tools are useful, face-to-face academic mentoring is still important because it helps maintain the close guidance and personal interaction that theological training actually depends on.

3. Recognizing Sociocultural Perspectives in Nigerian Theological Research

Nigeria has a highly diverse religious and cultural setting. As a result of this, researchers must carefully engage with different faiths and the way they interact in society, since these relationships can shape both belief and community life. Nwosu (2021) recognized that local cultures and identities play an important role in how theology is understood and developed. This creates both opportunities and challenges for researchers. On the one hand, it helps theology to stay rooted in local realities. On the other hand, scholars must balance modern academic approaches with the need to preserve indigenous beliefs and spiritual practices.

Dube (2016) highlighted that African women theologians in Africa have contributed significantly to this field. Their work brings attention to issues such as gender inequality, patriarchy and the need for empowerment within the church and the society. In the same manner, discussions on masculinity help to question unhealthy cultural practices that affects women and encourage more fair and balanced perspectives.

At this time, public theology should be embraced by theological scholars in Nigeria, as it is important in addressing issues of peace, justice and social transformation. By drawing from the lived experiences of people in the society and including voices that are overlooked, theological research becomes more grounded and impactful. The idea here is for Nigeria theology to remain deeply aware of its cultural and social environment, while using this understanding to produce research that is both academically rigorous and socially relevant.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has shown that while theological research in Nigeria faces significant structural challenges such as inadequate funding, poor infrastructure, and limited staffing, these factors alone do not fully explain the current state of research output. Evidence from Hugh Goldie Theological training Institution Arochukwu and Essien Ukpabio Presbyterian Theological College Itu shows that many theological institutions in Nigeria are being greatly affected by these challenges examined. As a result of this struggles, the quality of academic output and overall standard of learning is affected. More fundamentally, the persistence of traditional research approaches and limited methodological engagement continues to restrict the development of robust and

contextually relevant scholarship.

Even with these challenges, there are clear signs that theological research in Nigeria can improve. One important development is the growing use of interdisciplinary approaches, helping scholars explore theological issues in more depth and from different angles. Digital tools are also making a real difference. They are improving the quality of research, making information easier to access, and helping research from Nigerian scholars to gain visibility beyond the country. At the same time, national and international partnerships are opening doors for shared knowledge, resources and stronger academic work.

To build on this development, it is recommended that:

- i. Theological institutions in Nigeria, together with churches and government bodies should pay more attention to the funding of research for theological scholars, because without support systems, research cannot reach its full potential.
- ii. Theological institutions should embrace stronger training in research methods, along with proper academic mentorship for the emerging scholars, in order to build a strong and skilled academic community.
- iii. Theological institutions and scholars should ensure that theological research remains rooted in local realities, by speaking to social issues and everyday experiences in order to stay relevant both with and outside Nigeria.
- iv. Theological scholars should appreciate the use of digital tools in their research, as this will enable them to have better access to global academic works and also be visible internationally.
- v. Researchers should take care not to separate the social and cultural contexts from their research. These contexts help to engage research in a way that makes it relevant both to the church and the wider society.
- vi. Theological institutions in Nigeria should consider the introduction of courses such as Public Theology that inform practical experiences and helps to address societal issues from the theological point of view.

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