EDUCATION. Education is the process that provides the young with the knowledge, skills and values that a society believes are necessary. In Nigeria there are various forms of education. Traditional education is usually informal. The child learns from his parents and elders the importance of tradition, religion and respect for elders and other people. As the child grows up, he or she learns about the customs and ways of life of his or her people.

Formal education takes place in schools, colleges and universities. Here the child is taught such knowledge and skills that will help him or her secure a job and live in other societies and environments. Nigeria's present economic, social and political development has depended very much on the quality of these schools, colleges, and universities.

The foundation of education in Nigeria was laid by the European missionaries who came to Nigeria in the 19th century. Even though the aim of the missionaries was to save souls by making converts, they saw that they had to teach the people how to read and write, thus opening up opportunities for young men and women to enter schools. Prominent among the missionary groups that led in this field were Wesleyan Methodist missionaries who visited Badagry (q.v.) and Abeokuta (q.v.) in 1841, the Church Missionary Society (CMS) (q.v.) who landed at Badagry in 1842, the Presbyterians who began work in Calabar (q.v.), Eastern Nigeria (q.v.), in 1846, the Baptist and Catholic (q.v.) missionaries. Even when the need of expatriate commercial firms and the government for literate people to staff their agencies, departments and companies became felt, government still considered it cheaper to subsidise mission schools rather than set up its own schools. Thus, until 1898, all education in Nigeria was under the direct control of missionaries, and, as late as 1942, missionaries controlled more than 90 percent of the schools.

But while the south readily accepted the education that missionaries brought, the Muslim north appeared to identify that education with the Christian religion and so were reluctant to accept it. In 1903 Lord Lugard (q.v.), realizing how sensitive the issue was, promised the Emir (q.v.) of Sokoto (q.v.) that government would not interfere with the Muslim religion and the colonial government kept out missionaries from most of the Muslim north. This explains why the north, even today, lags behind the south in modernized
education. Many of the states in the north are still officially regarded as educationally backward states.

While missionaries led in the field of primary and secondary education, the government has had a virtual monopoly in postsecondary education. Beginning in 1934 with the establishment of the Yaba Higher College (q.v.), government went on in 1947 to set up the University College of Ibadan (q.v.) in association with London University, with Yaba Higher College becoming a nucleus of the new University College. Later on, regional governments stepped into founding universities. In the east was the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (q.v.), founded in 1960, in the west was the University of Ife (q.v.), founded in 1961 and in the north was Ahmadu Bello University (q.v.), founded in 1962. The Federal Government (q.v.) in 1962 set up another university, the University of Lagos while making the University College, Ibadan an autonomous university. Today there are 32 universities in the country—most federally owned and financed with many technical colleges and teacher-training colleges.

Education today has a high priority in the country's development plan. There has been free primary education in the Western Region (q.v.) since 1955. The Federal Government launched its Universal Primary Education (UPE) Program in 1976. This effort was unsuccessful because many young children, who for one reason or another, did not attend school, and Nigeria soon became one of the few countries in the world where illiteracy is high.

In recent years, the Nigerian educational system has suffered a serious setback because of the political instability and economic downturn that have afflicted the country. Schools, colleges and universities have deteriorated physically and educationally. Buildings are rundown and equipment has broken down without any hope of replacement. Since 1992, elementary and secondary schools have suffered from constant strikes because the government has failed to pay the teachers or for some other reasons. Universities are closed down for weeks and months as a result of strikes by the academic, administrative or technical staff. Pay was very low; for example, between 1993 and 1996, a full professor earned the equivalent of $100 a month. The "brain drain" began first among medical doctors and other personnel and has engulfed all academic disciplines. Highly skilled Nigerians are scattered all over Europe, the United States, Canada, the Middle East and Asia, leaving the educational system in Nigeria in a very perilous state.