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# TOWARDS TRANSFORMATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN NIGERIA: THE PRACTICAL REALITY

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By

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The urge to speak on this subject is informed by my experience as a teacher in the University. My experience in teaching and research has put me in direct encounter with the need for urgent improvement in our human capacity development through deliberate transformational policy. These experiences at various points of my engagement as a teacher and researcher brought me closer to a point where I noticed that many products of our educational system (particularly our case study) are either unemployed, under employed or unemployable as a result of human capacity issues, occasioned by deficiencies in our higher educational institutions.

Many lack the ability to defend the certificates they have acquired from these schools. This is the problem which this conference is seeking solutions for.

Let me as a student recall with nostalgia how our lecturers at University of Nigeria, Nsukka used to tell us with pride how parents and students then preferred Nigeria's higher educational system because the standard was quite high, the facilities readily available and the students willing to learn. These basic facts made it possible for the quality of our graduates in terms of human capacity to be comparable with global standards. Besides, the quality of both the academic and non-academic staff managing our educational system was equally of world class rating. Our universities compared favourably in world ranking.

In a public lecture delivered by Prof. Dorah Akunyili on 5<sup>th</sup> April, 2010 titled: Re-branding Nigeria. She recalled how spacious and comfortable their classrooms were, how manageable the number they were in each class, how she had a microscope to herself in a laboratory, a weighing balance, a kymograph and many other facilities, that students in pharmacy programmes required. Their libraries were then places, where any relevant books or journals in pharmacy could be accessed, with knowledgeable librarians always at the beck and call of students. She went further to say that in their hostel, they were only two or three in a room, with big beds, their meals were comparable to what one can be served in a standard hotel today in most cities. What about the school environment and the harmonious relationships between students and the teachers? What she was saying was that our higher educational system at the time under reference provided an environment which was conducive for learning, character,

human capacity development required to breed future leaders. This was why students in those years were in a position to engage government of the day on policy issues through debate, dialogue and informed criticisms. The lecturers were respected as lords because best cars in town were driven by them. It was easy to learn, plan and grow because the school rules and regulations were clear and strictly enforced including the school calendar. No one between the teachers and students were in doubt who is to do what, why, when, where and how. There was little or no motivation for cheating or internal corruption.

The writer is quite sad that the glorious days Dora spoke about are no more. All over Nigeria's higher institutions especially public schools the challenges are all over for even the blind to see and the dumb to condemn. What do we have today? Rich and average students, and indeed any student whose family can afford it, sleep in embassies to secure visa to travel abroad for qualitative education. Those that cannot afford the fees for Europe or USA now opt for neighbouring Ghana in search of better education. Again, there are mass exodus of lecturers to other professions. This situation is more worrisome than we can imagine because it means that children of policy makers who are supposed to join hands and fix our educational system are not in the country.

Children of lecturers who can afford the fees of foreign universities are also in drove. How can policy makers and these lecturers address these wrought when they don't have any stake since their children are not here.

Today, lecturers do not have the same stakes as the lecturers of those glorious days who have their own children in their classes. The implications emanating from these are obvious which are many but not limited to poor human capital development, frustration, production of ill-prepared, poorly equipped students who are in no position to face the challenges of a new world driven by globalization, information and communication.

It is quite worrisome that fifty six years after political independence Nigeria continues to grapple with the challenges of transformation and development. Whereas other countries in its league have overcome the initial problems of transforming their socio-economic and political environment for sustainable development, the Nigeria state appears to be failing by each day.

As a teacher, the writer is that an ideal university system comprises of university community and the intangible elements of scholarship and administration. The same is applicable to polytechnics and colleges of education. Such a system must be well positioned to produce leaders that can contribute actively to national development. Higher education must be able to undertake the training and development of the skilled manpower relevant to our national development. The graduates of higher institutions must also be made to imbibe some sense of decency, integrity and high moral standards

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in the course of training. Higher education questions the status quo all the time through research, logic and reasons with a view to pushing the boundaries of knowledge for the good of humanity. For any higher education to achieve these, there must be sustained incremental policies built on solid strategic plan implemented as a culture of growth and development. A few steps must also be taken as critical success factors and this is where the transformation we are talking about is focusing.

### **Dynamic Curricula**

If it is dangerous not to educate a man, it is rather more dangerous to educate a man who cannot fit in into the world of work.

High quality education therefore require dynamic curricula which addresses the challenges of the millennium and focuses attention on practical skills, knowledge and competencies aimed at actualizing the growth needs of the nation. For our education system to become dynamic and functional, the struggle towards deemphasizing paper-qualification and eradication of all forms of examination -malpractices including falsification and forgery of certificates must be a joint effort of all and sundry. Odimegwu (2005) rightly pointed out that it should be emphasized that merely, turning out large numbers of graduates is not enough. Products of our educational institutions must be sufficiently skilled, empowered and supported by enabling policies and operating environments to be competent service providers and job and wealth creators.

One is of the strong opinion that our educational system seems to be deficient both in structure and in curricula development. Education that promotes productivity must be functional, well planned, well imparted with modern approaches and adequately utilized by beneficiaries for the overall growth of the economy. When new entrepreneurial skills and knowledge are adequately inculcated by qualified and erudite scholars, the positive link between human capital development and economic growth becomes obvious.

### **Lack of Moral Infrastructure in our Tertiary Education**

The Needs Assessment Report on Nigerian Public Universities produced by Professor Mahmood Yakubu Committee which covered 61 public universities (27 Federal and 34 States owned universities) is a must read for anyone involved in transformation of physical and moral infrastructure of tertiary education in Nigeria. The Report will remain the best organic document for the transformation of tertiary education in Nigeria and one of the best legacies of the Jonathan Presidency for education. The report showed that academic culture is dying fast, council/managers deliberately misinform or deceive regulatory agencies as to get accreditation of their programmes in councils/managers consciously hire mercenary staff and borrow equipment for the purpose of accreditation. These conditions, coupled with the general condition of the universities produce graduates that lack confidence and sometime even self-worth.

### **Examination Malpractice (Sorting)**

The concept of an examination is one that is originally tied to life itself. Simply put, it is the notion that one is allowed a period to learn, after which a test is administered on what one has learned. Whether we call it a test, exam, quiz, stocktaking, trial or examination is a gateway to promotion or stagnation; progress or redundancy. It is the only objective means of assessing knowledge and choosing between competitors. The sanctity of examination should therefore be at the root of our tertiary institution value system. This is because the integrity of the certificate or degree obtained at the institutions and that of the institution itself depends on it, but it has become a tradition in most higher institutions in Nigeria to sell grades as a mere commodity, where grades are now bargained for, this trend is more dangerous than acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS).

### **Law and Order**

One remarkable difference between developed and developing nations is adherence to sanctions and incentives. There must be clear sanctions for bad behaviour and encouraging incentives or reward for good conduct. Higher institutions must uphold law and order as enshrined in our national constitution. Cultism which has crept into our higher institutions, has steadily grown, and is rapidly destroying our youths. Cultists should be fished out and dealt with accordingly. Lecturers that support such activities should also be given even stiffer punishment. To re-build our higher institution, we must have zero tolerance for cultism and deviant behaviour. These problems are resistant to human capital development, which higher education is suppose to midwife.

### **Institutionalizing Merit and Excellence**

The educational system in Nigeria started off on a foundation of merit and excellence, devoid of the tribalism and nepotism that characterize the larger society. This made it possible for late Prof. Kenneth Dike to rise to prominence, outside his catchment area, to become the Vice Chancellor of the University of Ibadan. Similarly, Prof. Eni Njoku from the then East Central State was once the Vice Chancellor of UNILAG. However, this did not last, because the ills of the larger society crept in, and gradually eroded the culture of merit and excellence that our higher institutions were known for, just like their counterparts overseas. Today/when a Vice-Chancellor, Rector, Provost, is to be appointed, all sorts of pressure groups come up to insist that only a son or daughter of the soil should head the institution. This contraction is at conflict with the desire for inclusive and globalised thinking in the rest of the world. The reality of Obama presidency in the United States of America remains a living testimony to supremacy of merit over primordial sentiments. This does not however, mean that people should be excluded from leadership positions in the higher institutions because they are from the higher institutions catchment area. Tribalism and nepotism which have permeated all facets of our higher institution system, and are fast becoming institutionalized, will worsen their present state, if we do not make concrete efforts, to reverse this ugly trend. The culture of merit and nothing more must also strictly apply

in awarding students grading at final examinations. It is immoral to deny a student first class simply because of personal, tribal or other selfish considerations and vice versa.

### **Funding**

Education in this country is inadequately funded which in many respects is responsible for most of other problems. Inadequate funding results in poor salaries and other emoluments, decayed and inadequate infrastructure and facilities, over-stretching of services, poorly maintained and sustained municipal services and poor funding of practical and research.

Whereas the UNESCO's recommendation for funding education was 26% or annual budgetary allocation, in Nigeria the budgetary allocation into education has never gone up to one third of UNESCO recommendation. This has always been the cause of the conflict between government and the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) resulting to incessant strike actions and keeping students at home perpetually and sometimes to come back towards the end of a semester for examination which they were not adequately prepared for, the consequence is usually the production of graduates with beautiful certificates but without adequate training and skills required for productivity.

### **Universal Faculty Policy**

The academic staff members of a higher institution must be universal in qualifications and orientation. This is because the name, 'higher institution itself refers to the universality of knowledge and learning. If one plus one is two, it should be so - all things being equal in all the higher education domiciled - in Enugu, Akwa Ibom, Kaduna, Uyo, Lagos, Kano, Sokoto, Edo, Cross River, Plateau etc. A universal faculty does not only refer to the mixture of people from different places, but, and more importantly, lecturers trained at different places. The growing culture of higher institutions filled with faculty of its alumni should be discouraged. A faculty made up of lecturers who had their undergraduate and post-graduate studies in the same higher institutions may not be capable of out-of-the-box thinking. The employment of expatriates is becoming a thing of the past in Nigerian Higher Institutions because of cost, but, among us, nothing says that lecturers from the University of Benin, for example, cannot come to University of Uyo even on sabbatical or on full time appointment and vice versa.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Without doubt, the role of higher education in the development of human resources cannot be overemphasized. Most economic scholars have through several empirical studies discovered that education is a major determinant of human resources development resulting in the emerging world economic order, they must improve their knowledge, stock and learning capabilities as education and training increasingly become significant. It is in line with this that human capital theorists agreed that "an

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educated population is a productive population". In view of the obvious fact that education and training are the fundamental investment in human resources, this paper suggests that a greater consideration be given to the development of dynamic higher education in Nigeria. To achieve this, the following recommendations are hereby posited.

Reliable infrastructure in our tertiary institution environment such as decent hostels, classrooms, functional libraries, laboratories, water, electricity, staff residential accommodations, good access road within and around the institution, recreational facilities, health care centres, security, etc are a must and not an option.

To ensure qualitative, functional and dynamic higher education, a concerted effort must be made by stakeholders in education particularly the NUC, NBTE, NCCE and other regulatory bodies to ensure that the minimum bench mark for accreditation of courses is strictly and religiously adhered to.

Cultism is a plague eating up a large proportion of Nigerian education system. Government at all levels, the police, all security agents, teachers, youths, should join hands to eradicate this monster in Nigerian education system.

There is no gain saying the fact that huge investment in education has a long run positive impact on the socio-economic and technological development of a nation. Some third world countries like Malaysia and Thailand have understood this and have excelled tremendously because of their huge investment in the development of their human resources base through education. There is therefore, the need for government to fund education as a matter of priority. Even if the UNESCO's recommendation of 26% of annual budget is currently not realistic effort should be made to raise the present percentage to a more realistic one. If this is done, strike actions, disruption of academic calendars and the brain drain syndrome will become minimal.

Issues relating to human resources development can as well be solved through a qualitative, functional and dynamic education system. Our present education system requires some reforms, which will bring about entrepreneurial skills, technological advancement and practical knowledge that can be effectively utilized in harnessing the nation's abundant rich physical capital for better productivity and lift this nation to greater heights.

Merit and excellence should be institutionalized - appointments of principal officers to man the higher institutions should go beyond tribal and primordial sentiments. Our higher educational institutions should be centre of excellence where best brains should cross fertilize ideas irrespective of their religion, cultural, ethnic and social leaning. This will discourage inbreeding and promote universality of knowledge.

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