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## Higher Education and Knowledge Management: A Prerequisite for Sustainable Knowledge Transfer in Nigerian Public Service

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### **Abstract**

*This paper considers how universities may adapt themselves to the exigencies of a world facing environmental, cultural, organisational and knowledge management crisis, first by integrating the teaching of sustainability into their educational programs and objectives, and then by implementing the principles of sustainability in all aspects of their operations, including their business practices and the management of knowledge, their physical structure and personnel. A third means of contributing to the search for sustainable solutions is community/government engagement: to involve faculty and students more closely in the fabric of the society they wish to serve, through exchange and consultation, collaborative research and participation in projects that bring the community/government and the academy into a new and fruitful working relationship. The university, in other words, must be ready to move beyond its walls and apply its research and teaching expertise to the problems faced by our generation in Africa with particular reference to Nigeria. Specifically, this paper examines the effects of bureaucratic culture on knowledge transfer in Nigerian public service. The functions of the public service amongst others, is to provide social services to the populace, in course of doing this therefore, the need to manage the available knowledge in the*

*organization becomes imperative. This is more so as sharing knowledge among staff and departments that are in charge of performing duties geared towards the solving of problems, will not only avail them of the opportunity to be equipped with the requisite knowledge, but also to deal with any eventuality that may arise in course of carrying out such duties. In addition, the sharing process will also make the provision of such knowledge available in case there is the need for its re-use in future.*

**Key words:** knowledge management, knowledge transfer, Nigerian public service, sustainable university education

There is a paradox in the field of higher education, in this context, in Africa. As economic growth moves forward, there is increasing demand for higher education in all African countries, which is unparalleled in many African societies in recent history. But that demand is exclusively linked to labour market requirements of trained manpower to fuel the economic growth that is taking place. As a result, there is increasing commercialization of higher education and increasing vocationalisation of higher education. Higher education is linked to producing trained, ready-made, quickly adaptable manpower for the labour market. This growing commercialization and growing link between higher education and labour market requirements have also marketised, in our view, both the contents and pedagogy of higher education. Content has become vocationalised, skill-oriented; pedagogy has become short term, rote learning, mastery of a few skills; the pedagogy has become a historical, it does situate education and learning in a historical perspective; and pedagogy has become de-contextualized. This leads to some vital questions such as: ‘is higher education a public social good or is it a private good’? Can the ‘private good’ approach of higher education – that is, higher education left entirely to market forces and to its commercial nexus – be expected to focus on sustainability? Our view is that this is a contradiction; that higher education viewed exclusively and largely as a ‘private good’ and not a ‘public social good’ is likely to contribute to non-sustainability.

Historically, higher education has served the twin purposes of research and teaching. In its knowledge production function, higher education institutions have been the centers of innovation and creators of new knowledge in diverse fields of human activity. The knowledge production function is based on academic rigour and the intellectual apparatus within higher education institutions. Over decades, such an intellectual apparatus has contributed to the establishment of orthodoxy around the meaning and epistemology of knowledge. This orthodoxy has been associated with the privileging of intellectual activity within higher education institutions over any such activity in society itself. As a result, it has been assumed that knowledge production in communities produce experiences, not knowledge. This elitist view of knowledge has been challenged over human history.

Thirty years ago, participatory research began in the context of such orthodoxy. It challenged the hegemonic nature of knowledge and its underlying epistemology, as well as its super-structure of higher education institutions, by espousing the relevance and contribution of popular knowledge and innovations in practice. The movement of participatory research also highlighted the negative human and societal consequences of monopolistic approaches to knowledge production. It thus began to be acknowledged that knowledge-in-action and knowledge-for-action were important for finding solutions to the problems of societies and communities. Numerous studies (Tandon, 2008, 2002) and reports highlighted this world view of research for, with and by, the people themselves, with the support and partnership of ‘experts’.

In their teaching function, higher education institutions have focused largely on the learning of theories in the classrooms. Students are discouraged from ‘engaged’ learning in real settings, and much of that arises from the orthodox meaning of teaching and education. Alternative approaches to learning are being attempted, largely at the margins of academia. The perspective of participatory research can thus be utilized not merely in the research function but also in the teaching function of higher education institutions.

### **The Nigerian Public Service**

The public service in Nigeria, also referred to as the civil service, and, like most formal organizations, is characterized by a high degree of bureaucracy (Babura, 2003). This is intertwined in its hierarchical strata, constituting a substantial part of its modus-operandi. The bureaucratic culture in the Nigerian public service is manifested in laid down procedures, rules, norms and values as well as acceptable behavior (Pepple, 2009). Details of these are contained in formal documents such as the public service rules, financial instructions, scheme of service, guides to administrative procedures and establishment circulars. These rules are imbibed and strictly adhered to as a matter of right, just as public servants perform their day to day tasks. There is no distancing of the Nigerian public service from bureaucracy as the rules that guide its conduct are tailored along the lines of absolute recourse to seniority, nomenclature and hierarchy at all times (Arowolo, 2010). These vital aspects of bureaucratic culture account for the reason why the Nigerian public service is termed public bureaucracy, which is, ‘the administrative machinery, personnel of government at the federal, state and local levels and the corpus of rules and regulations that govern their behaviour’ (Okafor, 2005 p.67).

The way the Nigerian public service is structured is tripartite in nature; this consists of the federal, state and local governments’ public service, depicting the Nigerian federal system of government (Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999). The functions of the public service amongst others, is to provide social

services to the populace, in course of doing this therefore, the need to manage the available knowledge in the organization becomes imperative. This is more so as sharing knowledge amongst staff and departments that are in charge of performing duties geared towards the solving of problems, will not only avail them of the opportunity to be equipped with the requisite knowledge, but also to deal with any eventuality that may arise in course of carrying out such duties. In addition, the sharing process will also make the provision of such knowledge available in case there is the need for its re-use in future.

### **Data, Information and Knowledge**

Research studies (Corner, McQueen and Kock, 1997; Harmaakorpi and Melkas, 2008) show a growing concern about the misconceptions held on the use of the terms; data, information and knowledge, which makes the understanding of knowledge management difficult to comprehend this confusion arises from the mistaking of data either to mean information or knowledge. Hence, the need to explain where they converge as well diverges in relation to knowledge management. The term data, information and knowledge are used interchangeably in most literature (Harmaakorpi and Melkas, 2008). This interchange of one concept to mean the other is necessitated by the thin line that separates them, owing to the fact that, data, information and knowledge form a continuum that originates from data through information and then knowledge (Baumard, 1999). Data on its own is meaningless; it only becomes meaningful when an agent interprets its constituents. Johannesen, Olaisen and Olsen (2002, p. 1105) notes that ‘data can be regarded as bites of potential information, which on its own does not provide any meaning...’ What this connotes is that data cannot elicit concrete meaning which is useful without going through the lens of understanding. For data to become useful and relevant in understanding of events, the prior knowledge of an agent is a very important factor. This is because data is eventually transformed to information as soon as understanding is imputed to its message. Data is therefore unable to become information that is beneficial if interpretation is not given to it.

Information on the other hand is regarded as being akin to data (Lueg, 2001) in the sense that, it is a necessary component in the composition of knowledge. So much so that, as data is received and interpreted, what ensures is a transformation from data to information eventually resulting in knowledge. The similarity between data and information therefore, makes a distinction between them difficult. This is due to the fact that, data is a necessary precursor for information, as information is to knowledge also, what makes the transformation possible, is the interpretation that the receiver gives to it (Corner et al., 1997).

Knowledge is a very vital resource in an organization. Of all the factors of production, labour ranks highest amongst them because it facilitates the other factors (Spender, 1996). This is made possible by the application of knowledge by labour in administering the other factors. 'Knowledge is systematizing and structuring of information for one or more purposes' (Johannesen et al., 2002, p.1110). Boisot (1998, p.12) sees 'knowledge as building on information that is extracted from data. Whereas data can be characterized as a property of things, knowledge is a property of agents predisposing them to act in particular circumstances...' Knowledge can also be viewed from the angle of decision-making, where a person is able to take certain meaningful informed actions based on information received.

The importance of knowledge in an organization cannot be over emphasized, this is because if it is properly harnessed, will help in aligning the organizational processes and invariably better the manpower. This is possible if knowledge is made readily available to all within the organization in one form or the other. Davenport and Prusak (1998, p.5) defines knowledge as:

A fluid mix of framed experience, values, contextual information, and expert insight that provide a framework for the evaluating and incorporating new experiences and information; it originates and is applied in the minds of knower. In organisations, it often becomes embedded not only in documents or repositories but also in organizational routines, processes, practices and norms.

### **Knowledge Management (KM)**

Knowledge Management (KM) means different things to different people. One central theme of KM is the assertion that the knowledge found in an organization has to be identified and accessible. The reason for this is for such knowledge to be transferred easily for reuse by others in solving problems within and outside the organization. KM has as its crux the rendering of knowledge to the end user in the organization as and when it is required. Knowledge that is available for use can be in various forms. This can be in documents, held by individuals or subsumed in procedures and rules. A process of conversion takes place whereby the personal tacit knowledge (knowledge not written down, experiential or head knowledge) is converted into explicit organizational knowledge (knowledge written down in manual or other documents) which is then used by all. The entire process of this conversion and the resultant knowledge thereof culminates in KM.

One vital aspect of KM is that it simplifies processes thereby reducing the waste of time (Kwan and Balasubramanian, 2003). This factor is important because for public organizations that provide services like the Nigerian Public Service, any time saved in rendering service to one person is crucial in providing for another. To

accomplish the task of saving time; Hicks, Dattero and Galup (2006 p.6) defined KM as ‘...a method for simplifying and improving the process of sharing, distributing, creating and understanding company knowledge’. The simplification of processes that result from KM which is contained in the sharing of knowledge, otherwise known as knowledge transfer, can lead to the improvement of services in an organization. This places knowledge transfer within the KM processes as an inevitable companion for the achievement of organizational goals.

KM is about flattening the organization to make people share knowledge, thereby assisting the organization to gain competitive advantage. The way this is achievable is by first and foremost identifying and leveraging the available collective knowledge, this is to help the organization compete. Another aim of identifying the available knowledge is based on the fact that, of all the factors of production that a firm can lay hold to, knowledge is very important (Spender, 1996), hence the need to manage it properly. This is owing to the fact that, in the service economy, it determines the success and competitiveness of organizations. Gamble and Blackwell (2001, p.16), state in this regard that; ‘managing knowledge requires a different perspective to managing land or capital. It is concerned with managing how people reason and how they make their expertise accessible’.

Knowledge not land, labour and capital is now the lifeblood of a corporation. KM, if properly implemented and made an integral part of an organization, can help in saving valuable time wasted in seeking answers to problems. This is because the required knowledge to solve the said problem is made readily available by the KM process. Guzman (2009, p.87) corroborates this by stating that:

KM can thus be characterized as being a method of organizing and structuring know-how and professional knowledge from individuals and organizations so that it becomes visible and available for others.

The availability of knowledge to all within the organization (public service) to solve problems therefore, becomes the panacea to the waste of valuable time.

### **Knowledge Transfer**

In managing knowledge, there is the need for whatever knowledge (tacit or explicit knowledge) that exists within and outside the organization to be properly channeled to those who need it. The process of moving knowledge from one place to the other using various techniques, be it technology driven or face to face (personal contact) is referred to as knowledge transfer. Knowledge transfer is one process that ensures that whatever knowledge has been created collected and stored get to the user. Furthermore, knowledge transfer commands so much importance in KM parlance because; knowledge cannot be of any relevance unless it is transferred so that its

benefits can be utilized by the individual and organization. Experiencing the knowledge that is being transferred and the experience of the staff are issues that are vital as far as knowledge transfer is concerned. For the Nigerian public service, when knowledge is thought of what is actually referred to is experience of a staff (Pepple, 2009).

In the literature on knowledge transfer two words are used interchangeably to refer to the concept of knowledge transfer. These are knowledge exchange and knowledge sharing (Hedgebeth, 2007; Renzl, 2008). Knowledge exchange has to do with sharing of knowledge mutually, that is, a two-way traffic from the sender to the receiver and vice – versa, it is also technology (IT) based. Whilst, knowledge sharing refers to the mutual interaction that can take place for knowledge to move from one point to the other; it occurs when an individual is willing to assist as well as to learn from others in the development of new competencies. The assistance referred here, is in the area of collaboration either within or outside the organization. Unlike knowledge exchange where the exchangers know what is been exchanged and by whom, in the case of sharing it is different. The sharers may not necessarily know the initiators of the knowledge or the process that takes place. A vivid example is knowledge repositories, where those concerned with the stored knowledge can go into the database and retrieve, modify and add to the database without the others knowing who did the addition or modification as the case may be. But rather access the knowledge as modified.

Higher education institutions, especially universities, are responsible for research on sustainable knowledge transfer as well as the necessary knowledge and skills and also norms of behavior. Scientific and technological improvement for sustainable production and consumption of public service activities should be carried out by researchers in universities. The crucial role of higher education as the highly advanced and comprehensive knowledge provider is to find the best way to bring about harmony and synthesis among the three pillars of sustainable development: economic, environmental and social tasks and issues, which are often in conflict with each other. Institutions of higher education are not just simply providers of advanced knowledge and technology; they should be deliberating and searching for the holistic view and concept of sustainable development and the necessary strategy and action plan for implementation.

## **Conclusion**

The importance of unhindered flow of knowledge within an organization cannot be over emphasized and this flow of knowledge is referred to as knowledge transfer. If knowledge is left in the state that it is (i.e. after it has been created), its impact to an individual or organization will be very insignificant. If knowledge is just a repository of information in a database or in someone's private knowledge domain, then the organization cannot use it to learn. This is because mistakes and failures that

are made and merely documented, but not communicated to others, make the knowledge of them unknown and thereby impossible for others to learn from such mistakes in future. Proper communication (transfer) of whatever successes, failures or mistakes made in the workplace (i.e. lessons learnt) adds up to form a proper experience base for others to learn from.

Nigerian higher education incorporates institutions that train and produce manpower for the Nigerian public service. Quality public service delivery completely depends on the quality of manpower produced and sustainable knowledge transfer in the public service can be practiced only through manpower that have been trained and conscientised of the values and perspectives of sustainability. The UNESCO's position paper of 2002 presented at the third session of the Preparatory Committee of World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) emphasized that education for sustainable development should provide learners with skills, perspectives, values and knowledge to live sustainably in their communities and contribute sustainably to social and public development. Education for sustainable development is not a simple subject that can be learned only through knowledge transfer or textbooks, but rather through a course of interdisciplinary approaches to help familiarize learners with the complex problems of society and convince them of the necessary actions and involvement. Universities play a vital role not only in shaping the future by educating the professionals of tomorrow, but also by creating a research base for sustainability efforts, and providing outreach and service to communities, states and nations (Local government, State and Federal workforce) especially related to difficult sustainability issues.

### **Recommendations**

Regarding the present roles and functions of higher education for sustainable development, we will have to question frankly the structural and programmatic situation of universities as they are the representative and most influential institute of higher learning in the nation. If universities are concerned about their responsibility of education for sustainable knowledge transfer, they should think about ways to respond to that future graduates can deal with sustainability issues in their careers and lives. So, the implementation of effective education for sustainable developments in schools is difficult without the institutes of higher education – universities- being innovated and restructured. Universities should play the role of capacity builders, in terms of training of public servants and formulating the conceptual framework of appropriate education for a sustainable knowledge transfer. In order to meet this role and responsibility of higher education, the following are therefore recommended:

1. Programs of universities should be innovated and change to meet the needs of sustainable development and knowledge transfer. Since the concepts are very broad and comprehensive, and also evolving and expanding, the establishment of a specialized institute is recommended in order to study the holistic philosophy

and contextualized methods of education for sustainable knowledge transfer and management and to maintain access to information and global co-operative networks.

2. Other research institutes in public administration, technology, and management can be related to the themes of sustainable development and knowledge transfer, such as environment, climate change, poverty eradication, health, human right, peace and conflict, sustainable production and consumption.
3. As themes of knowledge management and knowledge transfer are multifaceted and multidimensional, the research approach on education for their sustainability should be interdisciplinary or trans-disciplinary through the formation of research clusters.
4. Educational programs of universities in terms of curriculum of general and professional education should be innovated and improved upon in order to conscientise and sensitize students of sustainable development. University courses and subjects are in general compartmentalized according to the diversification of academic principles and perspectives. But the goals and mission of education for sustainability are to bring learners to the comprehensive understanding and awareness of the needs of structural change to achieve sustainability. So, a special curriculum for separate space and time to deal with the challenges of sustainability is both sensible and recommendable.
5. University programs, whether research, education or outreach, should be innovated to develop partnerships with their communities, governments, industries and cultural institutes, so that the knowledge, skills and results can flow into society and also be challenged by the needs of the society.

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