

RETHINKING THE CURRICULUM OF NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY EDUCATION: FUNCTIONALITY CHALLENGES

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Abstract

The founders of Nigerian university education aimed at providing the requirements of industry, commerce and society and at the relevance of university graduates to the social and economic needs and day-to-day life of the people of Nigeria. These aspirations were met in the early years of the universities, but not today. The quality of university graduates and research outputs of today, in relation to the expectations of local employers of labour and the organisations that should commercialise research findings, are far from fulfilling the noble visions of the founding fathers of Nigerian university education system. This paper examines the imperative need for an urgent rethink on the curriculum of Nigerian university education system in order to keep pace with the visions of the founding fathers of the system. The first indigenous university in Nigeria, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, is the focus.

Keywords: *University education system. Vision of founding fathers of African universities. Functionality of Nigerian university graduates in the 21st century.*

Introduction

From all indications and available history, the intents and purposes of the Nigerian university education are to securely lay the foundation for Nigerian leadership, to the end that this country shall cease to imitate the excrescences of a civilisation which is not rooted in African life. The Nigerian university education should not only be cultural, according to the concepts of universities, but it should also be vocational in its objective and Nigerian in its content.

In discussing higher education in Nigeria, the Report of the International Bank Mission on the Economic Development of Nigeria, which was released in 1954, stated that the establishment of the University College, Ibadan, was an important step forward but that Nigeria needed many times more college graduates than even the most optimistic plans can provide, adding that there should be variety of courses than existed at the time.

The philosophy of the first indigenous university in Nigeria, the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, included providing the requirements of industry, commerce and society; providing cultural and vocational courses for community service; and updating knowledge and adapting to the changing circumstances of contemporary Nigerian society.

These objectives were set in the second half of the 1950s. Time has changed greatly, necessitating a rethinking the curriculum of Nigerian university education system, which obviously were predicated on the vision of the founding fathers of the system, proved functional for a time, and may have fallen out of tune in the present dispensation.

This paper, therefore, examines the visions of the founding fathers of Nigerian university education, the functionality of the curriculum of the system, and the need to rethink it for re-alignment with the founders' vision. After this brief introduction, the rest of the paper is structured thus: the vision for Nigerian university education, functionality Challenges of the Nigerian University Education System, and conclusion.

The Vision for Nigerian University Education

The vision of the founding fathers of Nigerian university education can most truthfully be sought from the founding father of the first indigenous university, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. According to the great Zik of Africa, Rt. Hon. Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe (1963: 6-9),

A major stimulus to the founding of the University of Nigeria was the Report of the International Bank Mission on the Economic Development of Nigeria, which was released in 1954. This Report, in discussing higher education in Nigeria, stated that the establishment of the University College, Ibadan, was an important step forward but that Nigeria needed many times more college graduates than even the most optimistic plans could provide. It also suggested that there should be greater variety of courses than existed at the time.

In *Renascent Africa*, Nnamdi Azikiwe (1937) had regretted that:

Throughout the continent of Africa there is not an indigenous university sustained through African initiatives ... have had their curricula filled with important divisions of knowledge which could have hastened their intellectual emancipation.

As the Premier of the then Eastern Region of Nigeria, Nnamdi Azikiwe headed an Economic Mission to Europe and America. According to Azikiwe and Ojukwu (1955), among the objectives of the Mission were:

To seek the cooperation of Europe and America in the training and recruitment of technicians, and to make arrangements for the training of Nigerians in vocational higher education.

The Mission wanted to attract investors to accelerate the economic development of the Eastern Region of Nigeria. Efforts to accelerate economic development would be thwarted if the Region could not produce regularly the needed qualified indigenous manpower. In his nationalist struggles, Nnamdi Azikiwe had felt strongly that what he had dubbed the “colonial mentality” was only possible because the colonial education imprisoned the African intellectual potentialities and denied them avenues for meaningful expression. In order to free the African intellect, a university had to emerge to answer to the calls of the Africans.

During the debate in the Eastern House of Assembly, on 8th May 1955, on the second reading of a bill entitled “A Law to establish a university in the Eastern Region and to provide for the governance thereof and for matters incidental thereto,” the then Premier of the Eastern Nigeria, Rt. Hon. Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, quoted verbatim from section 146 of the Report on the Economic Rehabilitation, as follows:

In order that the foundation of Nigerian leadership shall be securely laid, to the end that this country shall cease to imitate the excrescences of a civilisation which is not rooted in Africa, a full fledged university should be established in this Region without further delay. Such a higher institution of learning should not only be cultural, according to the classical concept of universities, but it should also be vocational in its objective and cultural in its content.

Azikiwe (1937) had asserted,

Universities have been responsible for shaping the destinies of races and nations and individuals ...The Universities of Europe and America have been responsible for the great movements in the national history of these continents.

Why should African youth depend upon Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, Yale, Sorbonne, or Heidelberg for intellectual growth? These universities are mirrors which reflect their particular sociological idiosyncrasies. An African graduate of these universities, unless he has developed his individuality, is nothing short of a megaphone, yea a carboncopy of these societies. Hence I say he is miseducated.

Nnamdi Azikiwe recalled that,

The Report on the Economic Rehabilitation of Eastern Nigeria (1955) brought additional impulse into the origin of the University. This impulse drew from the important idea that the aim of education in Africa is to develop the youth of the Continent and prepare them for service to the people. The University should produce a generation that would be 'reliable, useful, and intelligent in the rapidly changing life and circumstances of (the African) people.'

With these and similar ideals, the Eastern House of Assembly, exercising great courage and faith, enacted the University of Nigeria Law, even at a time of low funds and uncertain promise. Similarly, four other

autonomous universities were established in quick succession in Lagos, Ile-Ife, Ibadan, and Zaria in the 1960s in Nigeria. Eight other universities came on board in the 1970s in Benin, Jos, Maiduguri, Ilorin, Sokoto, Port Harcourt, Calabar and Kano. More universities (of Agriculture and of Science/Technology) were established in the 1980s by the federal and state governments (ACU, 2004). Today, the federal government owns 28 universities in Nigeria, the state governments own 19 of them, while the private operators own more than 22 (Mbanefoh, 2003; FRCN, 2005).

The University of Nigeria, Nsukka was set up as a full-fledged university, which should reflect the cultural values of the nation. The philosophy of the University, as embodied in the Alma Mater Pledge, is

*To Seek the Truth
To Teach the Truth
To Preserve the Truth, and thereby
To Restore the Dignity of Man*

An aspect of the philosophy of the University of Nigeria is captured by Babs Fafunwa (1971) in his reply to the critics of the University:

The immediate problem that confronts Nigeria today is that of relating her educational system to her own environment. No university outside Nigeria can help accomplish this; it must be done by a university located within Nigeria and not tied to the apron strings of a foreign institution.

Fafunwa went on to recommend that greater emphasis should be placed on native culture. In his own rebuttal of the critics of the University of Nigeria, Onyerisara Ukeje (cited in Ijoma, 1985: 8) advised:

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Any educational institution, no matter its level, to be functional and of high quality must be an integral part of the society.

Ijoma (1985: 9) further submitted that such a university must reflect the aspirations of the people and the changing circumstances of the time. The sins of Oxford and Cambridge were that they were blind to the signs of new times. An indigenous African university would provide opportunities for Africans to study in an African environment and preserve in the students a sense of African nationality and dignity. The University of Nigeria would be a centre where thought and healthy ideas of Nigeria would be collected and disseminated to other parts of the world. It would be a centre where foreigners would learn about Nigerian customs, religious ideas, secret cults and use of Nigerian herbs. It would serve the needs of Nigerians. In order to do this, it must create a kind of nationalism that has Nigeria as its centre piece.

According to Ijoma, self-realisation is a powerful symbol of assessing the adequacy of educational objectives. Therefore, the education envisaged at the University of Nigeria must be such as would espouse the truth of self-realisation. Self-realisation was impossible in a colonial country where the African had lost his identity and aped the whiteman in order to be accepted. This was a need of the hour when Nigerians, even with Nigeria's imminent independence (in 1960), lacked national consciousness, national culture and identifiable African or Nigerian personality. No amount of Western education in Europe or America can vividly present to the African the truth of his existence. The University of Nigeria was established to seek the truth about our cultural identity, to explore our environment and, by studying our own past, expose to the outside world the truth of our existence.

Addressing the Alma Mater Night of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, the Vice-Chancellor, Dr. George M. Johnson (1963) agreed that:

... distinctively, African universities could help Africa become overnight a continent of light.

That was what the University of Nigeria was founded to achieve.

Addressing the meeting on March 3, 1960 of the Provisional Council of the University of Nigeria, the Chairman outlined the philosophy of the University as follows:

- ◆ The University should have nationalist content so that it could preserve the dignity of the African as expressed by the National Congress of British West Africa when the struggle for national self-determination was at its earliest beginning.
- ◆ The University should provide the requirements of industry, commerce and society.
- ◆ It should provide cultural and vocational courses for community service.
- ◆ It should blend the “land-grant college” idea with the classical concept of universities and adapt both to the changing circumstances of contemporary Nigerian society.

The University of Nigeria also articulated in prints its guiding spirit and philosophy. Of particular relevance is the part that projects the University as a mirror that reflects its environment, and therefore its courses must be related to the daily life of Nigeria, and must focus on the socio-economic needs of the country (Ijoma, 1985:10).

Functionality Challenges of the Nigerian University Education System

Be the vision of the founding fathers of Nigerian university education as sound and optimistic as it may, there were forces that deliberately or

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inadvertently pulled the strings from behind, challenging the dreams and undermining the idea. Firstly, the prejudice of those who had colonial education was strong and, for a long time, frustrated the emergence of a coherent Nigerian indigenous educational policy. As Abdu Moumouni (1968:42) observed, opposition to the new philosophy stemmed from:

a kink of panic because of the difficulties a profound change in the educational system would entail, and from conviction that the current system inherited from colonialism 'isn't that bad', it 'proved itself', 'it educated us', and so on.

Secondly, neo-colonial forces of Europe and America were actively at work, especially as the pioneer key administrators and staff were mainly Europeans, Americans or those they had trained in their countries.

Thus, while a university is anchored on and grows on the social, economic, political, ethical, and legal environment of its society, Nigerian universities have swallowed in its entirety the external standards of Europe and America (Umeh, 1985:120). The Nigerian university graduate, like the Nigerian graduate of the British university, is incapable of giving meaningful and productive leadership in his fields in Nigeria, whereas British university produces British leaders, who play major roles in shaping passions, ideologies and societal visions, in all fields of human endeavour in Britain. The difference is that education is in proper context in developed countries, but out of context in Nigeria.

African universities are alien institutions in their own land. Their curriculum is designed for white-collar jobs. The erstwhile Ghanaian President, Kwame Nkrumah, (cited in Hagan, 1993) had this to say,

We want the university college to cease being an alien institution and to take on the character of a Ghanaian University.

Nkrumah's statement echoed the question of African universities inheriting models from the metropolitan countries, in spite of vaunted autonomy. The then President of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mobutu Seseko, (cited in Yeikelo ya Ato and Ntumba, 1993:165) frayed up:

We need to emancipate the educational system in the Congo from the Western mode by going back to the Authenticity while paying due attention to scientific knowledge: I have always thought it inappropriate for us to train our youth as if they were Westerners. It would be more desirable to have an educational system which shapes the youth according to our requirements. That would make them authentically Congolese. Their ideas, reasoning and actions would be Congolese, and they would see the future in Congolese terms.

But, how could this dream be actualised when, according to Ali Mazrui (1993:119),

The African university was conceived primarily as a transmission belt for Western high culture, rather than a workshop for the transfer of Western high skills. African universities became nurseries for a Westernised black intellectual aristocracy. Graduates of Ibadan, Dakar, Makerere acquired Western social tastes more readily than Western organization skills. Those graduates became steeped in Western consumption patterns rather than

*Western productive techniques. We became wordsmiths –
and often despised blacksmiths!*

Mahmood Mamdani (1993:1,795) has articulated this concern thus:

In our single minded pursuit to create centres of learning and research of international standing, we had nurtured researchers and educators who had little capacity to work in surrounding communities but who could move to any institution in any industrialised country and serve any privileged community around the globe with comparative ease. In our failure to contextualise standards and excellence to the needs of our own people, to ground the very process and agenda of learning and research in our conditions, we ended up creating an intelligentsia with little stamina for the very process of development whose vanguard we claimed to be. Like birds who cross oceans when the weather turns adverse, we had little depth and grounding, but maximum reach and mobility. So that, when the going got rough, we got going across borders.

Mamdani (2005:23) observed that many African academics were willing to submit themselves to the exigencies of nationalism and the new state, which they viewed as ‘the custodian of the development process and the university as an institution that must train human resources for development. It then seemed natural to them that the state play a key role in managing the university.’ Noting the general consensus among policy-makers and intellectuals on the basic tasks of the new nations, Abdalla Bujra (1994:125) observed,

Unfortunately however it is not clear whether the knowledge produced by these institutions at the time had any direct or indirect contribution to the modest economic growth of most African countries during the 1960s ... These institutions were largely transmitters of metropolitan social science.

The colonialists claimed universalism to justify imposing their history on the universities of their erstwhile colonies to the disadvantage of indigenous history, culture, language and values. Thandika Mkandawire (2005:6) writes,

One-sidedness and racist historiography served the colonial ideological apparatus. Colonial historiography denied African agency and was essentially an account of the itineraries of explorers, trade merchants, missionaries and colonisers.

He further submits that the African that imbibed this history is ahistorical because it is all about a glorious past, and asocial because it fails to deal with the social contradictions that drive all social history.

Besides the issues of history lies the issue of language, culture and values which should give Africa its own modernity and development. Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986) argues that in order for Africa to advance it must rescue African memories from the clutches of the colonial past, whose vestiges still crowd out Africa's own memories and obstruct the vision of the future. African graduates need to reconnect to their societies. How does an African graduate, trained in languages of the erstwhile colonial masters, cease becoming one of the informed natives taking to the outside world, bearers of the memory of the colonisers, and become instrumental in turning African cultures into pillars of a self-confident Africa?

Cultural embeddedness is important for the vitality and originality of the African graduates' creativity. The inclination of African graduate is encumbered in content and dissemination by the weight of colonial languages in which he is groomed. Indigenous language is a vehicle for regaining Africa's memory, a crucial medium for harnessing human resources and grounding scientific knowledge in African realities. It is the only way science and technology can become part of the common sense and world-view of the wider African public and underpin the scientific and technological knowledge required for the development of the continent (Mkandawire, 2005:7).

Human resources are the linchpin of any development. In order for human resources to act as 'agents of change,' however, they must be transferred, through education, into knowledgeable and skilled actors. Education takes place as a result of effective communication through the medium of language. Hence the importance of the question of language to development.

Uprooting these adverse and inimical factors and placing Africans in the centre-stage in the history, culture, language and values of their continent is an urgent task in the construction of an intellectual arsenal for the liberation of the continent and the decolonisation of the mind.

The impact of Western curriculum, history, language, culture and values inherited from the West for the Nigerian university education system are far-reaching. If African intellectuals are to rise to the challenges, then they will have to address the historical language legacy, which has made African intellectuals outsiders in their own society.

African Diaspora continue to grow from strength to strength because they were miseducated in foreign languages, history, culture and values, and are, therefore, dysfunctional in their homelands, but at ease and at home in foreign lands based on their in training and orientation. Migration and globalisation have deepened the problem of brain-drain from Africa to the advantage of Europe and America. Zeleza (1998) cites

studies which indicate that in the 1980s an average of 23,000 qualified academic staff were emigrating from Africa each year. An estimate in 1995 gave the figure of 50,000. He observed that the contemporary academic Diaspora in the United States and elsewhere in the North is becoming a force to reckon with (Zezeza, 2003). So are other categories of emigrant graduates, school-leavers and artisans.

In Nigeria's public sector-led economy of the 1960s to mid-1980s, the graduates from Nigerian universities proved their worth in the public service of white-collar jobs. In today-Nigeria's private sector-led economy, Nigerian university graduates cannot meet employers needs. They cannot prove their mettle. The graduates are loafers, job seekers, as against graduate workers and job creators (Makinde, 2005:62). Many of them cannot make a correct sentence and cannot defend their certificates by competently handling the jobs imposed on them by their much-vaunted qualifications. Out of 130,000 graduates that pass out every year from Nigerian universities and higher institutions, only 13,000 (10%) of them are able to secure employment (Gyamfi, 2006:41). They cannot even engage selves and create jobs, but may remain jobless job seekers for many years to come. They are neither employable, nor enterprise-ready. It is as serious as this.

If Nigerian universities' products are mostly unemployable, it follows that the universities' research projects are mostly irrelevant to the private sector with which Nigerian universities could partner for revenue generation, commercialisation of universities' research findings and mutual growth of both sectors for national economic development. On account of current dysfunctionality of most Nigerian universities' graduates and research outputs, the Nigerian university education system fulfils only a little of the vision for their establishment. It does appear there is a death of the idea of the founding fathers (Nwakanma, 2006).

In the present dispensation, there is a yawning gap between the curriculum of Nigerian university education system and the roles its graduates are expected to play in the society in accordance with the vision

of the founding fathers of the system. It has, therefore, become imperative to rethink the curriculum of Nigerian university education system in the context of the visions of its founding fathers so as to improve the functionality of the system. The new curriculum should aim at making the Nigerian university graduates enterprise-ready for employment and self-reliance. The indigenous culture, history, language and values must take the centre stage of the new curriculum and must dominate the research projects in the system.

Conclusion

The founders of Nigerian university education aimed to relate the activities of the universities mainly to the social and economic needs and day-to-day life of the people of Nigeria, thereby providing the requirements of industry, commerce and society. If these aspirations were met in the early years of the universities, they are no longer met toady. Time has changed tremendously.

The quality of the universities' graduates and research outputs of toady, in relation to the expectations of local employers of labour and the organisations that should commercialise research findings, are far from fulfilling the noble visions of the founding fathers of Nigerian university education system. Therefore, an urgent rethink on the curriculum of Nigerian university education system in line with the visions of the founding fathers of the system and changing times, has become imperative.

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