

LEADERSHIP, HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE CHALLENGES OF DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Higher Education remains the essential foundation for any meaningful effort at national rebirth and regeneration in Nigeria. As pointed out by Arab proverb that said "in every head there is some wisdom", and "what comes from the lips reaches the ears, what comes from the heart reaches the heart", therefore the development of our higher education institutions would have a major impact on the cultural and socio-economic transformation of the nation. Infact the Sokoto Caliphate is predicated on the firm belief that knowledge constitutes a necessary ingredient for effective leadership and good governance. Leaders must not only be educated and knowledgeable but must also be guided by knowledge and understanding to manage, efficaciously, the affairs of the citizenry as Shaykh Uthman Ibn Fodio stated as far back as 1804:

A person without learning is like a country without inhabitants. The finest qualities in a governor, in particular and in people in general, are the love of learning, the desire to listen to it and holding the bearers of knowledge in great respect... on the other hand, if the governor is devoid of learning, he follows his whims and leads his people astray, like a riding beats with no halter, wandering off the path and perhaps spoiling what it passes on.

This presentation is set out to highlight key issues around leadership, higher education and the challenges of development in Nigeria. The presentation focusses on higher education and development, vision and consensus, science and technology, the imperative of adequate funding, character-building and leadership development.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is clear that the ruling classes have a greater need for association with scholars, for having friendship with the learned and the study of books of learning. A leader is in place to deal with people's problems, to settle their disputes and to undertake their government in case of political leaders. All these require outstanding learning, keen insight and extensive study. How would this leader discharge his/her responsibility effectively without adequate preparations?

The energy and industry exhibited by our university lecturers and administrators in the face of dwindling resources and decaying infrastructure, is admirable. So also is the resourcefulness and resilience of our students despite the meager resources at their disposal and other daunting problems. However, there also exist leadership challenges at both national and institutional levels, the policy inconsistencies and reversals; and the crisis of confidence which refocused attention on more immediate matters including the tripartite issues of *leaderships, higher education the challenges development in Nigeria.*

2. HIGHER EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT

Transformational leaders, wherever they happen to be, are invariably the greatest patrons of Higher Education. Societal transformation subsists on human resources development and transformational leaders are ever conscious of the strategic role higher education institutions play in human capital formation. The role of these institutions becomes all the more important in a globalized and highly competitive world, where the wealth of nations lie more with the knowledge and professional expertise of their citizenry than with their natural resource endowments. It is perhaps for this Abdallah Ahmad Al-Badawi, in his address to the Association of Commonwealth Universities in 2006, was blunt enough to declare: I do believe that it is necessary to stress that for most countries today, human resource development and human capital formation are either extremely important, absolutely vital or a matter of life and death. In the case of Malaysia... it is a matter of life or death.

But besides human capital formation, higher educational institutions also represent one of the most viable platforms for character training and leadership development for a nation. Students from different ethnic, religious and socio-economic backgrounds live together, learn together and co-operate with one another to form viable network and lasting relationships. They are trained to process information and ideas, to express themselves boldly and logically and to dream big, both for themselves and for the future of the country and the world. The leadership cadre of the nation ultimately comes from the graduates of these institutions.

Furthermore, Higher Education Institution have also served as incubators for nurturing talent and developing innovation and excellence. As Dr. Nmadi Azikiwe, Nigeria's first President, succinctly

stated, “Originally is the essence of true scholarship. Creativity is the soul of the true scholar.” It is this urge to excel that had traditionally sustained the innovative spirit in colleges and universities and had opened up new fields of learning in the world of scholarship. It is also this spirit of innovation and excellence which propels a people and a nation greater heights and accords it the edge to thrive in a competitive environment.

Furthermore, the development of Higher Education in Nigeria as, undoubtedly, not divorced from these noble goals and objectives. Since the historic establishment of the University of Lagos in 1962 following the recommendations of the Eric Ashby Commission; the emergence of the three regional universities in Nsukka, Ife and Zaria; and the transformation of University College Ibadan into a fully-fledged university, Nigeria was well-set to harness the potentials of Higher Education for national growth and development. Nigeria’s universities were undoubtedly world-class institutions producing first rate graduates who left their mark in all field of learning and contributed their rightful quota to commerce, industry and public affairs both nationally and internationally. Nigeria’s capacity for human capital development was further enhanced by the expansion of the nation’s higher education sector and further establishment of universities by state governments and private organizations. With a total of 68 federal and state universities and 34 registered private universities, Nigeria commands the institutional capacity to develop optimally its human resource base and to compete favorably in the global environment.

But despite these strides, developments, especially in the last two decades, have evoked serious worries and the basic question still lingers: what is the worth of Nigeria’s human capital in today’s global arena? Although different answers may be proffered by different categories of people, the stark reality is that the quality and worth of our human capital have gone down quite drastically, with serious long-term implications for the effective management of the nation’s affairs, its prosperity and its global competitiveness. Many view the universities as purveyors of state and sterile knowledge that churn out half-baked products, who can neither be employed nor can they engage themselves gainfully. One may well venture to ask: what has happened to the famed legacy of our graduates from Ibadan, Lagos Nsukka, Ife, Zaria, Benin and other universities? What has happened to the innovative spirit of our university system and the search for excellence for which it attained international acclaim? How should the nation, at this critical juncture of its development, take a lackluster attitude towards sustaining the quality of its premier resource?

Clearly, the problems are multi-layered and multifarious. There is also sufficient blame to go around. The nation’s leadership, its economic woes and its ethical challenges have all left their imprints on many of our national institutions, including our educational system. But there was an equally palpable meltdown of the nation’s will to invest in its people and to bring up successive generations of Nigerians who are well-trained and well-prepared to sustain the integrity and competitiveness of the nation and to safeguard its future. My principal aim, therefore, is to raise these concerns and challenges in a manner which will enable us all appreciate their long-term implications and re-establish the strategic linkage between our Higher Education Sector and our nation’s development. It is also in this regard that I wish to share with you my views on the **four imperatives** which I believe should guide us as we undertake the task of rebuilding our higher education sector and our society to meet the challenges of the 21st Century.

3. VISION AND CONSENSUS

The **first imperative is** Vision and Consensus; no nation can truly succeed in this day and age without a clear vision of what it wants to achieve and how it intends to achieve it; as well as the resilience, especially in the Nigerian context, to stay the course. Indeed, it was the Minister of National Planning who, some months ago, had cause to complain that “most of our problems in this country stem from lack of proper planning. We just wake up from one morning to another, confronting problem that we should have been able to solve many years ago”. And nowhere is this problem more acute than in the Education Sector.

We need a real vision and robust national strategic plan to move Higher Education to greater heights in Nigeria. We need a vision and a strategic plan which shall set a clear goals for the sector and the nation, shall address real problems and which shall be able to mobilize our collective energies and resources to work towards the realization of our developmental goals. A situation where almost every Minister comes into office with his Reform Agenda which is hurriedly jettisoned the moment the incumbent leaves office is, to say the least, patently unhelpful to the orderly development of the higher education sector in Nigeria. We have had, in the last ten years, eight senior Ministers of Education at the Federal level, a phenomenon which may well be true at the state level. Definitely, the nation cannot derive any meaningful benefit from strategic plans whose nominal shelf-life does not exceed fifteen months.

For any vision or strategic plan to be successful, it must be a shared commitment among all key stakeholders. We must initiate a genuine process of dialogue and consultation. We must learn to respect difference of opinion and perception. We must also be able to compromise so as to sustain the broad consensus which every vision and strategic plan require in order to build acceptability and ownership. We must, above all, realize that there is no way we can move the higher education sector and the nation forward when the key stakeholders act at cross-purposes and behave like inveterate enemies locked in mortal combat. It has become all the more necessary to seek a new paradigm and common ground with a view to establishing a strategic partnership among all stakeholders and to restoring healthy and harmonious industrial relations within the higher education sector. Nigeria remains one of the few countries in the world where disruptions to the academic calendar are taken for granted. We must work collectively to consign this phenomenon to the dustbin of history if we really wish the higher education sector to play its rightful role in the nation's development. It is my sincere hope that the current road map that has been developed by the Federal Ministry of Education can play this pivotal role.

4. SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

The **second imperative** which holds special significance for Nigeria's development is the revitalization of science and technology education in our higher education sector. Since the establishment of University of Lagos and other premier universities, the importance of science and technology to national development and its utility in improving the welfare and wellbeing of our people were paramount in the minds of the nation's leaders. Alhaji Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Nigeria's first and only Prime Minister, reiterated this point during his installations as the first chancellor of University of Ibadan when he stated that "the key to a nation's economic wellbeing is likely to be the amount of efforts that is put into scientific research and education." General Yakubu Gowon, reeling from the euphoria of the Apollo moon landing in 1969 was even more enthusiastic. "it is perhaps not too much to hope", General Gowon declared, "that if it ever becomes necessary for the human race to transfer en masse to some other planets, like Mars, our scientist and technologists would be ready with the necessary means of transport for Nigerian citizens".

The fundamental question is what has happened to our bold and ambitious hopes and dreams? Today, how many of us would be stranded if we have to rely on our scientists and technologists to transport us to other planets? Why have we allowed our research infrastructure, including our laboratories to decay to the point of becoming museum pieces? These are questions which we must address as a nation if we wish to rise up from our slumber and become the true giant of Africa that we claim to be. We must be able to renew our commitment to become a knowledge-based society and a technological nation. We must assess our strengths and weakness and regain our confidence that yes, we can achieve what we have set out to achieve.

But despite these concerns, it is also important to point out that indications abound to suggest that not all hope is lost and with a determined push, our higher education sector could quickly regain its competitive advantage. Nigeria has been able, in the last two decades, to double enrolment in science and technology disciplines, a feat which places it among the top performers in this category as these enrolments in many sub-Saharan countries have registered a substantial decline. Our expenditure on the higher education sector as a percentage of our total education budget is also substantially higher than many of our counterparts on the continent.

There are also encouraging signs to indicate that long-awaited rehabilitation and upgrading of our science and technology education infrastructure may have begun. Many universities, despite the paucity of resources, have been able to maintain standard laboratories for several years now and to set up specialized laboratories for the purposes of research and teaching. I am equally delighted to learn that the Federal Government, through the Education Trust Fund (ETF), has also embarked on phase rehabilitation of tertiary education infrastructure where it intends to expend about forty-five billion naira (N4b) on selected higher education institutions in the next two years. These are, no doubt, noble efforts; but they need to sustain to yield the tangible results we all yearn for.

Another worrisome aspect of the development of science and Technology in Nigeria is the scant attention paid to research and development. Universities in Nigeria as well as in Sub-Saharan Africa have failed to harness advance in global scientific research to innovate and expand the frontiers of technology in their respective countries. According to UNESCO figures, there is no African country, including South Africa, which spends up to 1% of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on Research and Development (R and D), while R and D Intensity, excluding South Africa, is less than 0.3%. Africa as a whole accounted for less than 1% of world's expenditure on R and D, with Asia having as high as 30.5%; North America 37.2%; Europe 27.2%. It is therefore not surprising that Sub-Saharan Africa's

global share of industrial output has stayed below 1% and has not shown any sign of substantial improvement.

Nigeria must rise to the challenge and pull Sub-Saharan Africa out of this development quagmire. Government at all levels must come to appreciate the strategic importance of research institutions in a meaningful and systematic manner. We must improve the quality of our research infrastructure and ensure that our scientists and technologies are conversant with and exposed to the most recent advances, in their fields. Our universities should equally redouble their efforts at seeking research funds and research partnerships, both nationally and internationally/ the value of universities as consultants s predicated on their status as a reservoir of new knowledge and expertise, invariable enhanced through research. Otherwise, the system will only end up regurgitating the same old idea which does neither the university nor the development of the nation any good.

As we embark on resuscitating Science and Technology research, we must not forget about entrepreneurship development and establishment of effective partnership with industry. Nigeria has come of age to develop a truly patriotic and forward-looking Business Class which takes pride on associating itself with our institutions of higher learning and contributing it quota to the human capital development for the nation. It is this class which should also take advantage of nurturing local talent and funding R&D programmes that will enhance their businesses and develop the research capacity of our institutions. There is no better place to make this call than in Lagos, the commercial capital of the nation.

Lastly, it is also important to emphasize that the researches in our tertiary institutions must Endeavour to address real and tangible problems of our society. We must accord Agriculture a priority to ensure food security for our people and the emergency of a vibrant Agro-Industrial Sector. We must utilize our traditional knowledge base to introduce new and more effective drugs which would cater to the health of our vast populace. We must be able to safeguard our environment, to ameliorate environmental degradation and to secure our long-term survival. We must not also neglect our built environment, the challenges of urban management as well as the search for durable and affordable housing for each and every Nigerian/ undoubtedly, these and other concerns should provide a veritable local research agenda for our research scientists and technologists alongside other setting-edge scientific research projects they may be involved in. b

5. THE IMPERATIVE OF ADEQUATE FUNDING

The **third imperative** is that of adequate funding, which, for so many years, has been a contentious issue within the tertiary education sector. The budgetary allocation to education had always been viewed as meager, which, between 1999 and 2007, fluctuated between 5.09% and 11.83% of the national budget. It was, indeed, President Umar Musa Yar'adua who succeeded in raising the budget from 6.07% to 13% in 2008, a percentage which he sustained in the 2009 budget. In addition to the usual budgetary allocations, the higher education sector also benefits from the intervention of national trust funds like the Education Trust Fund (ETF) and the Petroleum Training and Development Fund (PTDF). The Education Trust Fund (ETF) alone expended over N100billion on the Education Sector in the last few years.

But how adequate are these funds in meeting the basic developmental needs of the sector? It is my belief and indeed that of many Nigerians that we need to expend much more on our tertiary educational sector to sustain minimum standards and make the sector competitive. Although reliable and up to date figures are hard to come by, it has been adjusted that Nigeria's expenditure on Education, as a percentage of its GDP, is lower than that of many Africa countries. There is also a study by Prof. Peter Okebukola, the former Executive Secretary of the National universities Commission (NUC) and Prof. Oye Ibidapo-Obe, a former Vice-Chancellor of this university, which indicated that the nation would need to expend a mean annual sum N5.65billion to enable a Nigerian University be among the top 200 universities in the world. This comes to a ten-year total of N56.5 billion per University by the year 2020. These are indeed sobering statistics which tell us, in no uncertain terms, how far we have to travel to attain world-class status and the imperative of facing the challenges of adequate funding of our higher educational institutions without delay.

Be that as it may, it is also important for all of us to appreciate the fact that increasing the quantum of resources to the sector alone cannot address all the problems. It must be matched by a renewed commitment to efficient and effective management of available resources; probity and accountability and optimal allocation of these resources t critical areas of teaching and learning that will have a synergistic impact on the system as a whole. Every Nigerian should be worried when the **Education Trust Fund** (ETF) announced recently that it has N22.6 billion of funds belonging to tertiary institutions and state governments which they have failed to access. As far as I know, ETF's principal conditionality is the accounting of any previous allocation before a beneficiary can draw from

the fund. I think it is incumbent upon us all that where financial resources are available within the system to make a difference, their effective and judicious utilization must be made top-most priority.

6. CHARACTER-BUILDING AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

The **fourth and last imperative** is that of character-building and leadership development into our institutions of higher learning. Our tertiary education graduates are indeed the nation's greatest assets. We train them to run our public affairs and the commanding heights of our commerce and industry. We develop them to manage our diplomacy and international relations and represent us in international relations and represent us in international institutions.

We cannot, therefore, by any stretch of imagination, remain indifferent to how this vital component of our human capital is prepared to take over the reins of leadership of the nation. And it is for this very reason that we can ill-afford our institutions of higher learning becoming a hostile moral environment for the proper development of the younger generation.

We must be a nation of values and Higher Education Sector must ensure that it provides the enabling environment for our future leaders to imbibe these values and live by them. Our institution of higher learning must integrate into their curricula the issue of character-building and leadership development. And whenever we stand before the nation during convocations to declare that we find our graduates "worthy in character and learning", we can really stand by our declaration.

We must also fight fiercely and with courage and determination against cultism and other nefarious activities designed to corrupt them. In this context, teachers also bear a special responsibility. They should be seen to live by these values and should not act in anyway which shall compromise their exalted status and put the institution they serve to disrepute. Each generation of Nigerians must ensure that it exerts its best efforts to produce a morally, ethically and professionally better generation that can succeed it and move the nation to greater heights.

7. CONCLUSION

In light of these imperatives which I have enunciated, I wish to avail myself of this opportunity to call upon both the Government and the Organized Private Sector (OPS), in the spirit of Public-Private Partnership, to establish a robust **National Research Foundation** which shall fund science and technology research as well as support multi-disciplinary research in the Arts and Social Sciences in our institutions of higher learning. I would also like to call upon the Federal Government to consider and establish, as many state governments have done, a fully-fledged Federal Ministry of Higher Education, which would devote its energies and resources to human resource development and human capital formation for the rapid growth and development of our great nation.

Vision and leadership and with sacrifice on the part of each and every one of us, we will, by the grace of Allah (SWT), not fail to realize our dreams of a united, dynamic and prosperous Nigeria which shall take its pride of place in the comity of developed nations.