**REPOSITIONING OUR UNIVERSITIES IN CHALLENGING TIMES- THE ROLE OF THE PROFESSIONAL ADMINISTRATOR**

**BY: T. M. E. DOGUN II, REGISTRAR, RITMAN UNIVERSITY, IKOT EKPENE**

ANUPA TRAINING WORKSHOP FOR SENIOR ADMINISTRATORS (2019)

“In much of the world today, Universities are facing what has been described as a thunderstorm of changes so fundamental that some say the very idea of the University is being challenged” - George Kwanashie (2005)

So much has been written about our universities in an attempt to address the numerous challenges that they face, that I feel the addition of another paper is mere window dressing. But let’s face it – The world in which the Universities are situated is experiencing rapid and I dare say, overwhelming changes which call for new ways of doing things - new kinds of thinking and new kinds of associations. Interestingly, quite a lot of these changes do not emanate from or are not caused by our Universities which therefore tend to put our Universities in the “reaction” mode rather than in the “proactive”, mode.

Time was when our Universities were perceived as the “shapers” of societal culture, the providers of solutions to the society’s problems and the drivers of much of what was regarded as “enlightenment “.

Alright, let’s give credit to our Universities- from 1948 when University education started in Nigeria with the establishment of a campus of the University of London in Ibadan, now called University Of Ibadan, and the subsequent establishment of other universities through Federal, State and private enterprise efforts, our universities have largely attended to the country’s need for provision of manpower essential for the emerging public service. Beyond the role of the production cutting-edge research which when applied, should transform the country from an “ever developing” country to a developed one. With almost sixty year’s post-independence history of university education, the vast majority of graduates of our universities do not see the acquisition of a degree beyond “earning a salary” and “living the good life”, whatever that may mean. My point is that our universities for the most part have impacted knowledge, skills and competencies to our graduates but to what end? The vision and mission statements of a lot of our universities are mere declarations that are not exploited to reveal the power that they possess to drive behavior, associations and performance. The majority of the employees do not even know them, not to mention, being motivated by them. The core values of the majority of our universities are unknown to the generality of employees and I daresay, to even some members of the Management. A student graduates and is given a certificate because he has been found “worthy both in character and learning” – what “character” are we talking about? What learning are we talking about? What is the input of the “Character and learning” component of our university education? Which courses addresses the issues of character in our university curriculum and what does learning do for anyone except to provide employment, the primary reason for that being to secure livelihood? What type of education are we bequeathing to generations of students who attend our universities whose learning and character do not impact the society for growth and development in a general sense? Questions, questions and more questions!

THE 21ST CENTURY AND ITS CHARACTERISTICS

Evidence suggests that the advent of a new century always heralds the introduction of different thinking, different type of communication, different kind of associations, in short, a different world from the one previously known. The difference between nations is uniquely

determined by their ability to “foresee” the future and prepare for it by engaging their resources to benefit from it. The 20th century is gone, even though we see some of its vestiges still struggling to be relevant. However, whether we believe it or like it, a new age is upon us – a new century, barely twenty years old, has announced itself and with it comes plenty opportunities and possibilities which sometimes we prefer to call challenges. The 21st century has come with its own characteristics and some of them appear to be threatening the very foundation for our universities as we know them today.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THESE CHARACTERISTICS?

1. The rise of the knowledge society- one in which more than ever before, knowledge and highly trained knowledge workers have become the driving force of economic growth and societal development.

2. Globalization/ internationalization and increased competition (flat world)

3. The marketization of institutions and products.

4. The democratization of governance ensuring inclusivity, workplace diversity, and gender balance as critical issues.

5. The necessity of life-long learning

6. The revolution in information and communication technology (ICT) (artificial Intelligence)

7. The demand for new skills and competencies in all fields of endeavor.

8. New ways of thinking, dressing, talking, communication and living that call for global acceptance.

In a nutshell, standards, expectations and requirements that were once accepted are now being challenged and re-defined for global relevance.

There is a growing demand for things to be done differently. It is no longer “business as usual” in nearly all fields of endeavor as marketplace drive and expectations become the dominant determinants of university curriculum. The nature of learning and scholarly communication is begging for change- to become more collaborative and inclusive of emerging technologies and moving away from linear flow of information. In this century, the expectations and requirements of information (knowledge) users will increase and the ways in which information is provided will be more diverse. Therefore, it will be increasingly important for knowledge institutions, especially our universities, to REINVENT and REPOSITION themselves to create efficiency in service provision and to demonstrate the MEASURABLE VALUE they add to the economy.

SOME CHALLENGES FACING OUR UNIVERSITIES

A recent publication by the National Universities Commission(NUC) titled “ Blueprint On The Rapid Revitalization of University Education in Nigeria :- 2018 -2023, in its Executive Summary listed the following as key challenges facing our University system in order of ranking –

1. Inadequacies in facilities for teaching, learning and research.

2. Inadequate funding.

3. Deficits in teacher qualification and quantity (including quality of Professors)

4. Governance deficits(Including stemming the tide of strikes)

5. Depressed quality of graduates

6. Inadequacies in access

7. Deficiencies in research and postgraduate training

8. Academic corruption and other social vices.

9. Regulation by NUC and other professional bodies.

10. Promoting ICT- driven universities

11. Fostering skills development and entrepreneurship

12. Gender issues.

On the basis of the foregoing challenges and within the framework of the ministerial strategic plan 2016-2019, the following strategic goals for addressing these challenges were agreed upon

1. By 2023, access to university education should have increased by a factor of 20% over 2018 figures.

2. By 2018, the curriculum of Nigerian Universities should be rated among the best three in Africa in terms of its relevance to productivity nationally, and regionally relevant graduates who are high- level human resources for delivering on Africa’s Vision 2063 and addressing global SDGs.

3. By 2023, at least 30% of facilities for teaching, learning and research should have been upgraded to meet international standards and maintained thereafter.

4. By 2023, the gap in the number of teachers needed in the Nigerian University System and those in post should have been reduced from 30% to 20%.

5. By 2023, the quality of graduates from Nigerian Universities should improve by at least 20% as captured in feedback from employers and users of products of the system.

6. By 2023, scholars of Nigerian Universities should be among the top three in productivity as measured by national and global productivity standards and reflected in relevance to solving Nigeria’s socio-economic challenges.

7. By 2018, NUC should introduce enforceable minimum standards in governance that will ensure at least 10% efficiency in the university system.

8. By 2018, the incidence of academic corruption in Nigerian Universities should have reduced by at least 10% and remain on the decline up to 2025 and beyond.

9. By 2020, a sustainable funding model should have been approved at all levels and implemented via appropriate instruments of Federal and State governments.

10. By 2018, NUC should have been restructured and empowered to deliver better on its regulatory functions.

Two Other Themes Were Added After Due Consultation and Consideration:-

1. Research and development for self-relevance.

2. Wealth creation and promoting self-reliance and wealth creation.

The implementation of the 5-year plan is expected to cost eight hundred and twenty three billion naira(N 823,084,656,360.00) 75% of the funding burden would be borne by the proprietors of the universities( Federal, State, and Private universities), 20% from internally generated revenue of the university and 50% from other sources including alumni, endowment and donor support.

NUC PROPOSALS ON RAPID REVITALIZATION AND REPOSITIONING OF OUR UNIVERSITIES

1. Access to university education.

2. Curriculum reengineering productivity standards and reflected in relevance to solving Nigeria’s socio-economic challenges.

7. By 2018, NUC should introduce enforceable minimum standards in governance that will ensure at least 10% efficiency in the university system.

8. By 2018, the incidence of academic corruption in Nigerian Universities should have reduced by at least 10% and remain on the decline up to 2025 and beyond.

9. By 2020, a sustainable funding model should have been approved at all levels and implemented via appropriate instruments of Federal and State governments.

10. By 2018, NUC should have been restructured and empowered to deliver better on its regulatory functions.

Two Other Themes Were Added After Due Consultation And Consideration:-

1. Research and development for self-relevance.

2. Wealth creation and promoting self-reliance and wealth creation.

The implementation of the 5-year plan is expected to cost eight hundred and twenty three billion naira(N 823,084,656,360.00) 75% of the funding burden would be borne by the proprietors of the universities( Federal, State, and Private universities), 20% from internally generated revenue of the university and 50% from other sources including alumni, endowment and donor support.

NUC PROPOSALS ON RAPID REVITALIZATION AND REPOSITIONING OF OUR UNIVERSITIES

1. Access to university education.

2. Curriculum reengineering

3. Modernizing and maintaining facilities for teaching, learning and research.

4. Ensuring adequate number of teachers and other staff in the right quality.

5. Producing nationally relevant and globally competitive graduates.

6. Improving research productivity, efficiency and effectiveness of postgraduate education.

7. Improving Governance

8. Tackling academic corruption

9. Sustainable funding of the system

10. Towards ICT driven universities

11. Leadership in skills development and entrepreneurship

12. Strengthening NUC for improved regulatory functions.

13. Gender issues.

14. Research and development for self -reliance and wealth creation.

15. Promoting self-reliance and wealth creation.

These then, are the goals, objectives and strategies that, the foremost regulator of university education in Nigeria has come up with to revitalize, reposition and in a sense reengineer our universities in these challenging times. The ultimate purpose is to make our universities competitive, relevant, globally well ranked and technologically well placed.

**THE ROLE OF THE PROFESSIONAL ADMINISTRATOR**

The ultimate professional administrator in our university setting is the university Registrar, who is by designation and description the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) of the university. In this role, he is the chief adviser to the university on administrative matters and the Secretary to Senate, Council, Congregation and Convocation. All the other professional administrators in our universities draw their duties from the Registrar’s brief. It would not therefore be out of place say that together with the Registrar, all other professional administrators are service providers whose services reach out to the Management, students, the teaching staff and researchers, other non-teaching staff as well as other stakeholders such as parents, guardians, and members of the general public.

While it is the job of the teaching staff to instruct the students academically and prepare them for various roles in the society, it is the professional administrator who provides the conducive atmosphere, the ambience and the communication that make this possible. Generally speaking therefore, the functions of the professional administrator include: leadership, management, Secretaryship, Handling examinations, records, results, certificates, student affairs( hostel, sports, welfare, student union government – where applicable, matters of discipline, Senate matters/ committees, Council matters/ committees , Boards, Congregation, Matriculation, Convocation, Personnel/Human resources( recruitment, appointments, leave matters), support services for faculties, departments, institutes, centers, units etc , staff accommodation, passages, Alumni issues, parent association, etc. Wow! No wonder then that the Registry is called the lynch pin or engine room of the university!

With this gamut of responsibilities, the professional administrator is also experiencing the challenges facing universities. However, the blue print developed by the NUC is strikingly silent on the role of the professional administrator in the revitalization and repositioning of our universities, except a mention that professional administrators need to be trained for competence!

In recent times, I mean in the last ten years, training and retraining of the professional administrator has assumed greater importance than hitherto. The reason is not far-fetched- if this group of staff members are not trained, the university system will suffer serious injury. As Moji Ladipo posited in a recent talk to Registrars of Nigerian Universities, the Registry in our universities need to be revitalized for optimum performance. (Moji Ladipo UniAbuja 2019). As she rightly put it “ the Registry is a vital component of the revitalization of the University system in general and in each university in particular”. The reason the Registry needs to be revitalized, in her opinion, is because the Registry needs to move from what she calls “minimum perceived performance” to at least “target performance” in the immediate to mid-term, while aspiring to “optimum performance” in the medium to long term.

The role of the professional university administrator is therefore to equip and situate himself in such a way that he/she can contribute maximally to the cultivation of a high performance culture in our universities.

**SUGGESTED WAYS THE PROFESSIONAL ADMINISTRATOR CAN CONTRIBUTE TOWARDS THE REVITALIZATION AND REPOSITIONING OF OUR UNIVERSITIES**.

1. The professional administrator (PA) being a generalist has the problem with self, peer and institutional perception of the value of his contribution to the university system. Personal, social and institutional perception about the importance or value of a job or profession in the overall scheme of things can affect performance (Moji Ladipo.2019) . the PA therefore must work on himself to improve his self-esteem in such a manner as to accept that he is a very important contributor to the overall wellbeing of the University system. The PA must learn to accept that he is worth his weight in gold!

2. Understanding The Requirements of the 21st century workplace: literature asserts that four skill clusters are essential to success in the 21st century workplace. The four skill clusters are:

a). Digital Age Literacy

This includes the various competencies expected in a 21st century workplace. They include but are not limited to –

- Basic Literacy – The ability to read, write, listen and speak as well as compute numbers and solve problems.

- Technological Literacy - Having an understanding about technology and how it can be used to achieve a specific purpose and goal as well as speed of delivery.

- Information Literacy – the ability to find, access and use information as well as the ability to evaluate the credibility of the information.

- Cultural Diversity – includes the ability to value diversity, to exhibit sensitivity to cultural issues and to interact and communicate with diverse cultural groups.

- Global Awareness – to have an understanding of how nations, individuals, groups and economies are interconnected and how they relate to each other.

b. Inventive Thinking- A successful PA needs to develop and cultivate the following essential skills-

- Adaptability And Managing Complexity- that is, the ability to recognize and understand that change is a constant and to deal

with change positively by modifying ones thinking attitude or behavior” to accommodate and handle new environments.

- Self –Direction – Ability to work independently whether developing goals or plans, managing one’s time and work or evaluating one’s knowledge or learning process.

- Curiosity – The desire to learn more about something and is an essential component of lifelong learning.

- Creativity – This is the means of producing something new or original that is either personal or significant to the organization.

- Risk Taking – This is the willingness to think about a problem or challenge, to share that thinking with others and to listen to feedback. It is the ability to go beyond a safety zone, to make mistakes, to creatively tackle challenges, or problems with the ultimate goal of enhancing personal and organizational accomplishment and growth.

- Higher-Order Thinking And Sound Reasoning – The higher-level thinking process include the ability to analyze, compare, infer, interpret, evaluate, and synthesize. Sound reasoning applies common sense and acquired knowledge and skills to ensure good problem solving and decision making.

C. EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION – This is the ability to communicate orally and in writing with both individuals and groups in a positive manner. Effective communication involves –

- Teaming And Collaboration – Teaming is a situation in which individuals share a common goal, bring unique capabilities to the job or achieving work in a structured environment and exhibit trust and respect towards one another. Collaboration is the cooperative interaction between the members of the team as they work together to achieve their goal.

- Interpersonal Skills – The ability to manage ones behavior, emotions, and motivations to foster positive interactions with other individuals and groups . the ability to effectively manage conflict is also an important interpersonal skill required to succeed in the 21st century workplace.

- Personal Responsibility – This require one to understand the legal and ethical issues related to technology and to manage and use technology in a responsible manner.

- Social Civic Responsibility – use of technological in promoting community service – the protection of the society and environment.

- Interactive Communication – This requires that individuals learn to communicate using a wide range of media and technology. This includes the ability to select the most effective method of communication for the intended audience and to use it responsibly and effectively to enhance the dissemination of information.

D. HIGH PRODUCTIVITY – High productivity is expected of the workforce in the 21st century. Individuals need to master these skills if they are to be productive:-

- Prioritizing, Planning and Managing for Results – These organizational skills will help and individual achieve the goals that have been set through efficient management of time and resources, effective problem solving and strong leadership skills.

- Effective Use Of Real World Tools – This requires that individuals master current and new technology to communicate and collaborate with others to effectively problem solve and accomplish tasks. They must learn how to select the appropriate tools for task at hand and to apply these tools efficiently and effectively to achieve results.

- Ability To Produce Relevant, High- Quality Products – This is the ability to produce intellectual , informational, or material products that serve authentic purposes such as Minutes of Meeting, Reports, Executive Summaries, Decision Extracts, Memos etc, as the system requires.

IMPLICATIONS

- SKILLS MASTERY

Our universities, beset as they are with 21st century challenges, require workers who must master the skills required in the 21st century. Thus, the PA cannot efficiently and effectively contribute his quota within/outside the University if he does not master and use these skills for maximum impact. It therefore becomes the responsibility of Registrars of our Universities to endeavor without wavering , to create the atmosphere within our universities, for the PAs to learn these skills and opportunities given to them (PAs) to use these skills to achieve optimum impact in service delivery.

- MASTERY OF GOVERNANCE TOOLS - The PA must know and understand the information contained in the University law, Conditions of Service, the Scheme of Service, the Student Handbook, the Departmental Handbook (for Faculty Officers) and other such documents that relate to governance. This

knowledge and understanding, undergirded by the acquisition of necessary thinking and communication skills, would enable the PA to offer wise and correct counsel and interpretations when required, to move the system forward with confidence.

- THE VISION, MISSION AND CORE VALUES OF THE UNIVERSITY - Performance in the absence of a vision or mission is non- performance. The literature has established a co-relation between understanding the vision of an organization and the productivity or performance of its workers. As part of the engine room of the University, the Professional Administrator must seek to understand, internalize and allow the University vision to galvanize him into action for maximum productivity. Effort or endeavor must be driven by direction and nothing captures the future direction of a University better than its vision statement. The vision statement provides the driving force for all endeavors in the university and should be internalized as such by every PA. Core values help shape the culture of the university. Our Registrars can revolutionize their respective Registry by developing core values for the Registry that support and promote the core values of the university and provide the basis for optimum performance. For example, core values of punctuality, honesty, integrity, accountability, diligence and resourcefulness, synergy and so on would give the Registry a shared sense of responsibility among its members in its determination to help reposition the university.

- ACQUISITION OF BASIC DIGITAL COMPETENCIES – As our universities respond to the global challenge to be competitive and relevant in this digital age, the acquisition of basic digital competencies currently required by a technology-driven global economy is essential. The day-to-day activities’, including the conduct of university business, requires digital skills with to the internet. The advantages of the internet are numerous and can bequeath the user with speed of delivery, access to information, cost-saving or reduction, fast exchange of information, accuracy and precision in the execution of jobs to deliver expected results, etc.

CONCLUSION

To compete well in today’s competitive, disruptive environment and to drive university business value demands that two important requirements be met-

1. Although the Registry is regarded as a department of generalists, nevertheless, great effort should be made in recruiting quality candidates who not only have sound qualifications, but should also have the right attitude towards the establishment, co-workers students and people in general. At this stage of the development of our universities, digital competence, artificial intelligence an array of necessary thinking skills and the ability to communicate, must be possessed by candidates hired into the Registry. This should be followed by proper induction into the system.

2. In deploying PAs to assignments, Registrars need to focus on talent to ensure that the right PA is matched to the right role that will ultimately create the right value. While this talent alignment may be challenging, when it is done right, the outcome can prove to be a significant performance differentiator. Taking a more organized approach to talent matching as part of a major digital transformation will trigger several advantages. Redeploying talent in a value – focused manner is essential, it must consider knowledge, skills, intrinsic traits and experiences to match the candidates best suited for each role.

The role of the PA in repositioning our universities in these challenging times is critical for the success of our universities and cannot be over-emphasized.

CREDITS

1. Blueprint on the Rapid Revitalization of University Education in Nigeria.2018 -2023 – Abubakar Adamu Rasheed, Executive Secretary National Universities Commission.

2. Revitalizing the University Registry for Optimum Performance – Moji Ladipo- ( Paper delivered at Business Meeting of ARNU, University of Abuja, April, 2019).

3. 21st Century Skills for Success –

The National Institute of Professional Practice, UK. (blog).

4. 6 Elements to Create a High Performance Culture- Carolyn Denwar and Reed Doucette (April 2018)(Blog).

5. Training and Retraining in Nigerian Universities: The Perspective of Administrators - Professor Shekih A. Abdullahi OON. (Paper delivered at ANUPA Training Workshop, Ahmadu Bello University Zaria – 2006).

6. The Role of Universities in Nigeria in the 21st Century – Ayorinde O Ogunruku (Paper delivered at the First Registry Lecture of Akwa Ibom State University, January 22, 2019.)

7. repositioning the Registry in Ahmadu Bello University (ABU Zaria) for Improved and Effective Performance- T.M.E. Dogun II (Paper delivered at ANUPA Workshop, ABU, Zaria, 2006).

8. Current Skills for Effectiveness as University Administrators – T.M.E. Dogun II (Paper delivered at ANUPA Workshop, Benson Idahosa University Benin. 2013