**THE ROLE OF THE REGISTRY IN PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION OF STRATEGIC PLAN IN THE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM**

**BY**

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**1.0      PREAMBLE**

The recent proliferation of Universities in Nigeria has not only thrown up new challenges of need and relevance, but also raised the level of expectations from governments, parents/guardians, students and other important stakeholders in the Nigerian university system. With about one hundred and seventy (170) universities on ground (Federal 43, State 48 and Private 79) across all states and parts of the country as at June, 2019, and more expected to be established, it is obvious that the time has come for every university in Nigeria to prove its mettle and relevance.

Accordingly, to survive these challenging times and realize its vision, it requires an enabling environment for the university, be it Federal, State or Private, to consolidate its achievements and relevance as well as realize its full potentials. The provision and or strengthening of such an enabling environment that will not only encourage and build confidence of all and sundry within, and in the system, but that is also capable of generating tremendous outside goodwill, support and cooperation for greater attainment by the university, can only emanate from strategic planning in the institution.

Indeed, just as a good product is a result of good thinking, strategic plan is now globally recognized as a sure recipe for the university to rise to the occasion of the twenty first century knowledge driven era. This is especially the case with the Nigerian university system where the universities are confronted by competition and survival induced programme expansion and implosion in student enrollment in the face of poor funding, inadequate quality staffing and learning resources as well as acute shortage of equipment and infrastructural facilities.

To embark on and or institutionalize the strategic plan in the university, the Registry as a major constituent component, and indeed, the engine groom of the university administration, will play a pivotal role in the process. It is thus in this respect that our discourse on the role of the Registry in planning and implementation of strategic plan will be hinged on, or, preceded by an understanding of the concept, the establishment of the nexus between strategic plan and university development; and, as well, the mandate and responsibilities of the Registry in the university.

**2.0 STRATEGIC PLAN AND UNIVERSITY DEVELOPMENT**

Given that strategic plan is a product or outcome of strategic planning, an understanding of the latter concept is a necessary starting point at this juncture. What then is strategic planning? In a draft manual produced by the National Universities Commission (NUC) to guide the Nigerian Universities and Inter University Centres, strategic planning is defined as:

*...a process of setting measurable medium-to-long term goals for an organization, and designing strategies based on its internal strengths and weaknesses, and the opportunities and threats in its environment to the goals. It is a coordinated and systematic process aimed at providing an overall course and direction for an organization for the purpose of optimising its potentials (NUC, 2005: 2).*

Strategic planning is also described in the document as:

*...an exercise of foresight that takes informed decisions about the future against the background of changing environment. It is an effort to take fundamental decisions which will lead to actions that will shape and guide what an institution is, what it wants to be, and how it can get to becoming and remaining what it wants to be (ibid).*

It is worthy of note that strategic planning is quite different from the traditional development planning which is often an exercise in drawing up shopping list of programmes and projects. In contrast, strategic planning is a continuous, rolling process of both planning and implementation of plans that involves review of the institution's mission and setting quantified targets or objectives within its internal and external environment.

Furthermore, the concept of strategic planning has unsurprisingly gained currency in the Nigerian university system through the National Universities Commission (NUC). This development has arisen from the Commission's recent efforts to ensure the revival and repositioning of Nigerian universities in line with current global trends and successes recorded by similar institutions in advanced climes and some countries in Africa. According to the Commission:

*The need to prudently manage the scarce resources available to the university system is therefore obvious, pressing and urgent. It is in a bid to make the most of the situation that the worldwide trend towards adoption of strategic planning by tertiary educational institutions as a means of optimizing the use of scarce resources whilst deciding the course to chart from the available choices in order to survive the continuing economic turbulence commends itself to Nigerian Universities (NUC, 2005: iii).*

Furthermore, the Commission has articulated the objectives of strategic planning as follows (NUC, 2005:2):

1. to build a sustainable long-term future within a continuously changing environment;
2. to achieve a balance between the institution and its turbulent environment and ensure campus peace and harmony;
3. to help the institution to absorb pressures, attract funds from allied sources, demonstrate competence, reduce unpredictability and remain in business, even in the face of uncertainties;
4. to identify priorities, set out objectives at various levels and ensure best and prudent management of limited resources; and
5. to make innovations and achieve organizational change through awareness and opportunity for participation.

Arising from the foregoing, it should be obvious that the strategic plan cannot but be the operating manual for the development-cum-repositioning of the 21st Century University System. The document not only assist the university to identify its targets, set priorities and approve a preferred course of action from among available alternatives. The strategic plan also allows the university to operate with greater efficiency that will take it to the next level since all activities and everyone will always be time and performance bound.

Having said this, it may be necessary to note, even if in passing, that not all the Nigerian universities produce and or operate with, or, on the basis of the strategic plan. In the same vein, even where the strategic plan is in place in the university, instances abound in which not all successive administrations adhere or are enamored of such plans. As it were, under such circumstances, the university is operated at the whim of the Vice Chancellor and chief executive which seems to substitute the strategic plan.

  Again, it is worthy of note that based on current realities and management trends in university administration, there are two broad categories of Vice Chancellors operating in the Nigerian university system. These are, on the one hand, the few exceptional due process 'compliant' or 'system players' ,and, on the other, the preponderant 'lone rangers' who operate as 'Garrison Commanders', and who also seems to be setting the tone and pace of contemporary developments in the system.

In other words, while the former is noted for efforts at managing the university in line with established rules, regulations and practices and in the process creating clement atmosphere for the attainment of institutional objectives. The latter category is mostly solo driven, and, being the most dominant force, it is largely responsible for the prevailing drift in university administration in Nigeria, away from global best practices.

Besides, it is evident that the administrative malaise in the Nigerian university system has been further compounded by the increasing involvement of academics in the day-to-day running of the university. The seeming abandonment of their core mandate of teaching and research for increasing involvement in an occupational turf for which they lack the necessary training, knowledge or temperament for, but only buoyed by their new found competition and scramble to belong to the seemingly more juicy and lucrative 'university management', has become a major bane of university administration in Nigeria. This is a challenge that now permeates most facets of daily operations of the university, ranging from admissions to office management and even routine and mundane matters like allocation of rooms in student hostels that are increasingly being handled and bungled by the academics.

Be that as it may, as a product or outcome of strategic planning that spells out the periodic objectives of the university and the strategies for achieving them, what is the role of the Registry in the accomplishment of strategic plan? It is to this that we now turn our attention, but first briefly, the mandate and responsibilities of the department.

**3.0 THE REGISTRY: MANDATE AND RESPONSIBILITIES**

The Registry in the university system is comprised of the Registrar's Office with its various divisions and sections that handles designated responsibilities. The department is headed by the Registrar, who is the chief administrative officer directly responsible to the Vice Chancellor. The Registry derives its mandate and responsibilities from that of the Registrar as Secretary to the statutory bodies as defined in university laws.

The Registry has often been referred to as the engine room of university administration, due to its housing of the secretariats of the major organs of governance, namely, the Governing Council, Senate, Congregation and the Convocation. Arising from this, and coupled with its being "responsible for the routine administration of the university except that bearing on financial matters"(NUC, 2010:4), the Registry performs the following duties that are at the heart of the university operations:

* **Provision of Secretariat Services** to the university committees, implementation of their decisions, analysis of relevant statistics and information;
* **Facilitation of Academic Matters and Processes** such as admissions, registration and matriculation of students, recording of students’ academic performance, processing of academic transcripts, advertising for entry into degree and other courses and processing of academic appointments;
* **Personnel/Human Resources Management** ranging from recruitment, placement, welfare, appraisal and promotion to discipline of all categories of staff;
* **Custody and interpretation** of all important records and documents of the university, as well as all rules, regulations and decisions reached at all formal meetings in the system (i.e., for future reference); and
* **Information and Public Relations** via dissemination of information to the university community and the general public. In addition, publication of university bulletins, calendars and prospectuses, as well as handling of protocols.

**4.0 THE REGISTRY AND THE ACCOMPLISHMENT OF STRATEGIC PLAN IN THE UNIVERSITY**

As it could be gleaned from the foregoing, the whole essence of strategic planning is geared towards moving the university to the next level of attainment and greatness. This is realized through the strategic plan which is produced and implemented by the collective efforts of all stakeholders in the system. In the particular case of the Registry, the role or contribution of the department in the accomplishment of the strategic plan is actualized through a number of sub administrative tactical plans and actions being carried out by the department and which are embedded in its statutory role in system. These include the following.

**4.1 FULL COMPLIANCE WITH UNIVERSITY LAWS**

A cardinal responsibility of the Registry is to ensure the full compliance with all the laws governing the university. As the custodian of the university laws, extant rules and regulations, the Registry also ensures that due process is applied to all administrative and other matters. In the same vein, fairness and firmness in the interpretation and application of the university regulations and conduct of official business is ensured.

  This is with a view to streamlining the university and preventing the usurpation and abuse of powers and responsibilities of statutory bodies by powerful individuals; the lack of proper guidance for the statutory bodies and staff, as well as the improper constitution and functioning of various committees which should exist from the unit and departmental level upward.

By enthroning due process in the university governance and management, the Registry not only facilitates or allows for smooth operations by all the statutory organs and officers but also properly guide the overall activities and processes of the university. In other words, once the Registry ensures the rule of law, as opposed to negligence or complicity in the rule of men that obtains in most universities today, it would have created a befitting ambience for the articulation and attainment of the university's set goals and mission for which the strategic plan is all about.

**4.2 PROPER STAFFING OF THE UNIVERSITY**

The provision of adequate and competent staff at all levels of operations of the university is a *sine qua none* for the accomplishment of the strategic plan. In this respect, the Registry's handling of all establishment matters - recruitment, placement, promotion and discipline of all staff - is crucial to the process. Hence, it is the duty of the Registry to ensure that due process in the engagement of staff, viz: declaration of vacancy, advertisement, shortlisting, interview and investigation of academic qualifications and previous records of service, is always observed. This enables the university to properly select and recruit the best staff from available candidates in line with its established regulations and guide lines.

Further to the recruitment of the highest quality of staff in all cadres, the Registry should also facilitate and ensure a mandatory process of induction, mentoring and continuing education for all staff in the university. This is to avail the university with a workforce that is armed with sound knowledge of the purpose, rules and regulations and transitions of the university and of global best practices. With this actualised, the Registry should have played its part in the harnessing and assemblage of the requisite human resource to seamlessly drive the entire strategic plan process – from design to implementation, monitoring and evaluation- on a continuous, periodic basis.

**4.3 STAFF WELFARE AND MOTIVATION.**

Along with the engagement of the right calibre of staff into the system, is the equally important role of the Registry in ensuring the welfare and motivation of staff for maximum productivity.

This is to be facilitated by the Registry through, among others, timely promotion and leadership by example in terms of due diligence, top class performance, integrity, effective service delivery, as well as equitable and fair distribution of amenities and facilities. This is in addition to facilitation of comprehensive and robust capacity building measures that should, for instance, accommodate the projected needs of all departments and units over 5-year periods in the university.

To this end, and leveraging on effective and judicious utilization of TETFund and other internally arranged grants for staff training, the Registry should always facilitate the training and acquisition of Ph.D. degrees by academic staff without same and the continuous training and re- training of non-teaching staff to improve their competencies in line with the needs of the university.

With all the foregoing measures put in place, the university is assured of not only a quality, well-trained staffing but also one that is highly motivated and primed to work and reposition the institution in line with its strategic objectives and mission.

**4.4 PROVISION OF SECRETARIAT SERVICES.**

A major distinguishing hallmark of the day-to-day running of the university is extensive use of the committee system. Apart from enhancing the participation of all and sundry in the governance and administration of the university, the existence of functional committees provide the institution with the golden opportunity to " use each person's personal competencies, thus creating a strong sense of identity, joint- ownership and high performing minds"(Ladipo, 2018:112).

  In this regard, the secretary-ship and competent coordination of activities and functions of the numerous committees by the Registry staff, including the Registrar himself and all the other professional administrators in the system, is necessary for the smooth operation and attainment by the university.

  The secretariat services being provided by the Registry without which the university may find it difficult to seamlessly coordinate its various bodies and conduct its activities including the strategic plan, are the  coverage of committee meetings, implementation of decisions at all levels of governance and administration, and, the storage of relevant information for future reference.

**4.5 AUTOMATION OF UNIVERSITY PROCESSES**

In order to move the university to the next level in line with current global trends, the Registry should facilitate the digitalization of university records, procedures and processes. This should be carried out through enhancement of the basic record keeping and retrieval system involving the automation of processes, viz admission and registration of students, verification and collection of results and transcripts, as well as staff documentation, processing of mails, and production and circulation of minutes of statutory meetings in the university.

  Even though every university is supposed to have an IT Directorate with the mandate to anchor its computerization drive, the onus is actually on the Registry to drive the process because of its unique position as both the custodian of records and facilitator of processes and activities. Hence, a Registry driven automation of the

University processes will not only ensure efficiency of operations but also fast track the university's synergy with global best practices and trends, including strategic planning.

**4.6 SYSTEM WIDE SUPERVISION OF DEPARTMENTS AND UNITS.**

Due to its widespread presence and involvement in all academic and other activities in the university, the Registry has over time evolved and assumed the position for monitoring the activities and performances of the Departments, Units and Faculties in the system. With its staff posted in every department and unit, and, also involved in implementation of decisions at all levels, it has become necessary and an easy task too, for the Registry to keep track of events/activities, extent of progress and accomplishments being recorded in all sections, and, also, by the university itself. In this way and with regards to the strategic plan in particular, the Registry is able to monitor and ensure compliance, in addition to evaluation of extent of accomplishment and further review by the university.

By and large, in carrying out the supervisory and monitoring role of ensuring that all departments and units in the university remain alert and responsive to their duties and assignments, and especially for the Registrars who are yet to work out modalities or template in this regard, this can be realised via, inter alia:

* monthly meeting with Registry Management Committee comprising Heads of various Registry Divisions/Units and the Faculty Officers;
* bi- annual interactive meeting with all administrative staff; and
* Regular administrative and other postings based on competence and or need for experience/exposure.

**4.7  WORKING RELATIONSHIP WITH THE VICE CHANCELLOR**

Given the excessive powers that a typical Nigerian Law grants to the Vice Chancellor as the chief executive officer vis-à-vis the centrality and importance of duties and responsibilities of especially the Registrar as the chief administrative officer and head of the Registry, it is of utmost importance that a close and good working relationship is established between the two majors actors in the system.

Indeed, as noted earlier, given the penchant for abuse of power and flagrant disregard of extant rules and established procedures by an increasing number of Vice Chancellors, the onus is more or less now with the Registrar and the Registry as a whole to insist on due process in matters of governance and administration while at the same time ensuring that their 'administrative table' is not in return shaken to a breaking point by an overbearing Vice Chancellor. This is provided that the department itself and or its leadership (Registrar) are not complicit or unable to shun willful negligence and sheer incompetence that encourages the reign of impunity in the system.

Accordingly, and notwithstanding the often hostile and suffocating terrain and debilitating circumstances under which they operate, the Registrar and the Registry as a whole, should in addition to working closely with the Vice Chancellor on statutory matters involving Council, Senate, Congregation and Convocation, also establish useful working relationship and synergy with the chief executive on other matters such as information and public relations, student affairs and security that are also germane to the articulation and realization of the university’s set objectives and mission at any point in time. This is so that the university management is always seen to be operating and projecting a unified force that is taking the university to the next level of attainment as opposed to next level of decay or rot which the absence of a cordial working relationship may ensure.

**4.8 REPOSITIONING OF THE REGISTRY.**

A cursory glance at the operations and challenges being faced by the Registries in Nigerian universities would reveal a department in desperate need of "repositioning in terms of skills, knowledge and attitude to perform its statutory role" (Ladipo, 2018:122).

In addition to undue politicization leading to appointment of some Registrars that are not best fit to occupy the position and the increasing recruitment of all-comers some of whom are unwilling to learn and excel in the department, the Registry has been further afflicted in its operations by, among others, increasing invasion of its duty territorial space by academics, insecurity of tenure of the Registrar, inconsistent government policies bordering on disparity in salaries and general conditions of service and the emergent dwindling professional swagger and timidity of the career administrators, all culminating in a crisis of identity and relevance for a crop of professionals that were not long ago the toast of the system.

Hence, in order to reassert ourselves and reposition the Registry for more relevance in not only accomplishment of the strategic plan, but also in the general scheme of things in the system, there is an urgent need to work hard and consolidate our professional calling by demonstrable expertise and competencies in our duties to meet the standards and expectations of the twenty first century university.

In other words, since it is commonly agreed that charity begins at home and also given that one cannot give what he/she does not have, it is a categorical imperative going forward, that we in the Registry should re-invigorate and re-orientate ourselves via:

* recruitment of right calibre of staff into the department;
* conduct of induction/orientation for new staff;
* continuous training and retraining (capacity development) of the staff;
* purposeful postings and effective departmental blending;
* confirmation and promotion examinations;
* departmental strategic planning;
* restoration of honesty, trust, integrity and openness in operations; and
* Institutionalization of professional code of conduct and work ethics.

As a basis for enhancing our statutory role as part of the strategic planning and repositioning of the university as a whole.

**5.0 CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, it is discernible from the forgoing discourse that the strategic plan is an important tool in contemporary management of universities. It is also a veritable pathway to update the operations of a university in line with current global trends and best practices. Although it is an open secret that not all the universities in Nigeria bother about or even care to set up strategic plans for their activities, conducting university administration without such a plan is not an option now.

   There is no doubt that in any university that the Registry get its acts together and do the needful, the institution is assured of a proper roadmap and guidance towards the accomplishment of the strategic plan and the ultimate realisation of its set goals, vision and mission. However, where the Registry is deficient or lacking in its statutory duties and responsibilities by itself, or, in reflection of its  debilitating milieu, the chances of the university attaining its full potentials will remain bleak, if not altogether, unattainable.

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