

RESTORING THE SHINE TO THE NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY SYSTEM

Professor Peter Okebukola, OFR

Former Executive Secretary, National Universities Commission

17th - 21st Convocation Lecture

Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye

October 9, 2012

It is a delight to be part of this 2012 Convocation Ceremony and I am honoured to deliver the Convocation Lecture. When the Acting Vice-Chancellor, Professor Saburi Adesanya conveyed the approval of the appropriate authorities for me to give the lecture, I felt privileged and thought I could share some of my thoughts on how we can restore the shine to the Nigerian university system. A collateral expectation of the lecture is that Council, Senate, staff and students of Olabisi Onabanjo University (OOU) should reflect on some of the recommendations made for the entire system and apply same to local context so that the shine of yesteryears of OOU can be restored.

Having grown up as son of a police officer, I recall using "Brasso" to polish the metal buttons of my father's uniform. The technique is to dab the surface of the metal button with the liquid, wait a few minutes to dry and then gently polish off and bravo, the glitter on the button is restored! I intend extending this analogy in this lecture to warn that the shine does not come immediately but over time and with consistency in application of the remediation, the good old days will be here again. I have been asked to speak for not more than 30 minutes, just in time to scratch the surface of this vast issue. This is to forewarn that I will only provide highlights during the course of the brief lecture.

As I begin, it is fit that I pay tribute to all those who have been part of the development history of this great university- past Governors of Ogun State, Council, Senate, staff and students. As Vice-Chancellors, Professor Olubi Sodipo, Professor Timothy Bankole, Professor Layi Ogunkoya, Professor Tunji Oyeneye, Professor Afolabi Soyode, Professor Tola Osilesi, Professor Soga Sofola and Professor Wale Are-Olaitan contributed the building blocks to OOU and we are here today because they were here. I commend the Acting Vice- Chancellor, Professor Saburi Adesanya for bringing a freshness of vision to the administration of the university. We pray God to be with him, his Management and Council, in the onerous task of making aau, the pride of all. aau boasted the best medical school in Nigeria and demonstrated leadership in several academic disciplines. You did it before; you can do it again.

My flow of thoughts in the lecture will go in two directions. First, I will reflect briefly on the decay in the system and why we are where we are. The reason I

will be brief is that what I will narrate is no longer news. As I reel out the indicators of decay, you are likely to be nodding your heads in agreement; so why waste time on what you already know. Secondly, I will follow up with ten recommendations on how we can "apply the Brasso" and kick out the decay and bounce rapidly back to be in the top league, if you like, the "first eleven" in the global ranking of universities.

State of the Nigerian University System

The Nigerian university system with 124 universities enrolling about 1.5 million students is the most expansive in Africa. We look back to a highly respected system. A few weeks ago, a group empanelled by the Federal Government submitted a report on the state of the higher education system in Nigeria. The Federal Executive Council has initiated steps towards addressing the concerns raised in the report. If snippets from the report and others lead me to describe the present state of the Nigerian university system in a sentence, perhaps a rather long sentence, I will say it is one of massive explosion in student enrolment; increasing number of prospective new entrants in the face of inadequate and obsolete infrastructure and equipment; inadequate library facilities, inadequate academic staff in number and quality; low level of funding; pervasiveness of social vices notably cultism and examination malpractice; and generally low quality graduates. The quality of graduates from our universities is the basis which the ordinary person measures the quality of our universities. When you look at our university graduates, what do you see?

The most recent national assessment of the quality of graduates from the Nigerian university system was undertaken by NUC in 2004 through labour market surveys. Highlights of the results for a few of the programmes (which have hardly changed if we were to conduct the survey today), are given below.

Management and Social Science Graduates

- Poor communication and literary skills.
- Inadequate practical skills due to lack of linkage with industry.
- Lack of analytical and I(T skills required in the work place.
- Lack of entrepreneurial and problem solving/decision making skills.
- Inadequate technical skills as exhibited by their inability to appropriately apply acquired knowledge to the work place.
- Lack of professionalism and professional ethics,

Sciences

- Very poor in subject-specific knowledge, technical capability and critical thinking
- Very weak in laboratory practical skills and field experience.
- Very poor in skills in literary and oral communication and ICT

Arts

- Poor communication skills - particularly writing skills;
- Need training in personal appearance, comportment and civility.
- A high proportion lack confidence, discipline and reasonableness.
- Poor attitude to work (lateness, truancy), and a tendency toward fraudulence and the get-rich quick syndrome ..

Architecture

- Practical skills: it was noted that Architects working with the firm did not have sufficient practical knowledge of architecture.
- Limited knowledge in some critical allied fields especially structures.
- There appeared to be a disconnect between theoretical knowledge and the practice of the profession: Industrial training (IT) was said to have not been properly supervised and that students have not been serious about the programme.
- Lack of basic IT skills.

Impediments to quality in the Nigeria University System

Depressed funding; capacity deficit in governance and management; political interference; low carrying capacity and corruption are some of the major impediments to quality in the Nigerian university system. The contribution of poor funding to lowered quality is huge. The scenario that emerged over the years is gross inadequacy of proprietor funding which pushed university managers to over-enrol poor quality students into satellite campuses and remedial programmes, primarily to earn income from tuition. Poor funding also explains infrastructural deficiencies and the engagement of university management in unwholesome income-generating activities. Occurrence of social vices such as examination malpractice and sorting as well as incessant strikes and closures may not be unconnected, directly or indirectly, with poor funding.

Capacity deficit in university governance and management impedes quality. Vice-Chancellors, deans of faculties and heads of departments who project weak disposition towards applying strict rules to governance in the pursuit of quality are increasing in number especially in the state and private university communities. They bow to political pressure to admit weak candidates and be soft on disciplining students of influential members of the society or their staff relations. They succumb to compromising quality as payback to godfathers who were instrumental in their appointment. Such university managers were usually appointed on a "man-know-man" basis and hence lack the capacity to run a quality system. Some, such as dean of faculty or head of department got to positions on the basis of ethnic affiliation or religious disposition rather than through merit. Hence you find a "son of the soil" lecturer grade II with low management capacity but with high local connection superintending over a department with senior colleagues including professors who are not indigenes.

Political interference stands as obstacle to the quality assurance process in the appointment of weak but politically well-connected vice-chancellors and council. Pressure is brought to bear on the vice-chancellor to obstruct the course of discipline and warp student admission and staff recruitment processes. Council of some universities is laden with political office holders who lack understanding of the university system. Oftentimes, the mission of the university managers on quality diverges from that of such council members whose desire is to corner contracts and derive financial gains.

The low carrying capacity of the Nigerian university system poses a huge challenge to quality. The deluge of secondary school leavers angling for the severely limited places in the universities brings with it a host of quality challenges. The capacity of 200,000 for new entrants into the 124 universities is a drop in the ocean for over one million aspiring candidates. Examination malpractice and admission racketeering show up as collateral damages. Those who manage to secure places will desire to keep such admissions. The weak students resort to "sorting" to progress their way through to graduation. Also, low carrying capacity is one of the causative factors for degree mills which pollute the quality environment of the Nigerian university system as detailed in the preceding section of this paper.

Corruption displayed by staff, students, parents and others that patronise the Nigerian university system affects quality. The quality process is compromised through corrupt practices in different shades and forms- admission, discipline, and examination processes are most affected.

Restoring the Shine

At the heart of this lecture are the recommendations for bringing back the shine to the Nigerian university system. What do we mean by the "shine"? We mean producing graduates who are nationally relevant in terms of meeting qualitative human resource needs of Nigeria and who are globally competitive. We mean universities with iconic, enduring and befitting buildings not laden with buildings like glorified secondary schools with bushy environment where you can hunt for an elephant with no light, no water and no functioning toilets. We mean having professors whose scholarly works are globally known, not available only to the local community through road-side journals and self-published books. We mean university Councils which win funds for the university not "chop-i-chop" group that scrambles to pocket the meagre funds available to the university. We mean a university system where Vice-Chancellors are prudent managers of human and financial resources and who transparently apply basic tenets of university tradition without bending rules to student/staff unions and political pressures. We mean having students who are morally, academically and ethically above board with no place for cultism, sexual harassment, "sorting" and, examination malpractice. We mean curriculum delivery where teachers use the latest technology in teaching and not reading antiquated lecture notes in front of a

large class where over half of the students cannot hear what the lecturer is saying. We mean stable academic calendar not interrupted by strikes. We mean a university system where results are officially released by Senate a few weeks after close of semester, transcripts issued a few weeks after request, is made, convocation ceremony is held in due season not years after graduation. We mean a lot more in terms of "the shine" but we must stop here and take shine to mean having Nigerian universities among the top 500 in the world of 18,000 universities.

Do the foregoing sound utopian or attainable only in our dreams? Definitely not. While I was an undergraduate at the University of Ibadan in 1970 after my higher school at Remo Secondary School, Sagamu, all of the scenarios just described were true. They were also true in all the universities in Nigeria at that time. Since we did it before, we can do it again. We can apply the Brasso on the metal button to restore its shine. So, where do we apply the Brasso? I will provide this by way of ten recommendations targeted at different levels of the system beginning with the proprietor, council and vice-chancellor in view of the key role of leadership in such restoration agenda. We should note that even if all the money for education were assigned to our universities, with poor governance and leadership, we will end up with a mediocre university system. Incidentally, in making recommendations on leadership, we will flag off with the matter of funding.

Recommendation No. 1: The proprietors of our universities- public and private need to come to the realisation that we either have a well-funded university or we do not. What does well-funded mean? It means providing the financial resources to support quality delivery of education by way of teaching, learning and research. How do you determine this cost? The cost is determined by summing capital, personnel and overhead costs to cater for students enrolled in all the programmes based on NUC minimum standards. From this, you can derive the unit cost per student, per programme. Totalling the unit costs will give you what you need to properly run a university. So, who pays for the cost? It is the combination of the proprietor and other stakeholders notably the students. The sad story that pervades the public university system in Nigeria is that the public proprietor (federal or state government) fails to provide enough funds to meet this cost and insist for political reasons that only a small fraction of the differential should be paid by the students. In some cases, governments, especially state governments provide half of staff salaries, no kobo for running cost, little money for capital development and the university managers are asked to generate funds internally to Close the gap as done in older university systems in Europe and North America where alumni and industries contribute to and endow funds to the university. Moved to a tight corner, such university managers resort to over-enrolment into programmes, running all manner of sandwich courses for all manner of persons with forged SSCE results- vulcanisers, carpenters, cultists expelled from other universities, market women and semi-literate businessmen. In no time, quality is depressed and it is the

same proprietor that will be quick to blame the university managers for turning out half-baked graduates and breaching community peace through the activities of cultists. The solution is for government to provide enough financial resources to run the universities under the supervision of a prudent and transparent council and vice-chancellor or close the universities down if unable to do so. Expecting our relatively young universities to generate funds internally in a honest way in an unpleasant economic environment is unfair. The long and short of this recommendation is for proprietors to provide the balance of the funds needed for running top-class universities in terms of capital development, staff salaries and overhead costs after deducting the income from fees as approved by government and internally-generated revenue from credible sources.

Recommendation No. 2: The proprietor should avoid undue interference in the day-to-day running of the university as we find in state-owned and private universities. In some cases as documented in Visitation Panel reports, contracts for repairs of toilets and fixing of bulbs are awarded directly by the state government. State government officials direct Council and the Vice-Chancellor on who to admit as students or promote as professors. If the proprietor has lost confidence in the ability of Council and the Vice-Chancellor to run the university well, the logical action is to remove them and appoint others in line with due process.

Recommendation No. 3: Councils with no evidence of seeking external support for capital and academic development of the university, two years into office but engaged in internal squabbles relating to contract awards, should be disbanded and a new Council put in place made up of persons with understanding of the university system and not what some have labelled "political jobbers".

Recommendation No. 4: The procedure for appointing Vice-Chancellors in Nigeria is one of the best in Africa. Nigerian Vice-Chancellors are also one of the best paid in Africa. What is emerging however, is that a number of persons so appointed soon change from being the "progressive", disciplined and transparent colleague when they are given the "red or green pen". The university community waits out the fixed term of five years of such persons praying God to let the period go fast and the "yeye" man or woman to "carry his or her trouble go". Rather than allow such persons to set the university back by way of his or action or inaction, a mid-term review should be conducted after two-and-a-half years by way of mini-visitation and a Vice-Chancellor who underperforms should be given the boot.

Recommendation No. 5: Professors are the tip of the academic emblem of a university. Appointment into professorial positions which has been watered down in several universities should be re-aligned to match international best practices. There are several spurious publication outlets to which many Nigerian scholars subscribe. Fake "European Journal of.. ..", "British Journal of", "American

Journal of... " abound to which a number of Nigerian researchers publish their wishy-washy research and claim to have numerous publications which amount to nothing in the real world of scholarship. Our over 3,500 full professors should also be encouraged to step up their mentorship of junior colleagues rather than sit in their little corners complaining about everything or run around politicians chasing political appointments.

Recommendation No. 6: All university teachers should be empowered through training and provision" of the necessary ICT tools to deliver their lectures, manage their classes, and conduct their research using the latest technologies. The standing of the Nigerian university system in the global league of universities rests largely on this.

Recommendation No. 7: Regardless of admission pressures and what is often called "long throat" for increased revenue, students should be enrolled in the right quantity and quality. Over-enrolment is deleterious to quality; more so with populating the community with poor quality candidates who cannot write a simple sentence in English correctly or speak English without violating all the rules of grammar and pronunciation.

Recommendation No. 8: Over the next ten years, all university buildings for teaching, learning, research and hostel accommodation for students should be upgraded to fit the profile of a modern-day university. In the face of limitation of funds, it is wise to attend to one or two faculty buildings per year and over the tenure of two Vice-Chancellors, the university would have taken a more respectable look. About one billion Naira is estimated to be expended on two good faculty buildings. The kind of building we aim for are not the poorly-constructed and poorly-finished types referred to as "shagbelojuyoyo" with the structure crumbling and paints peeling off a few months after commissioning. Proprietors who are genuinely interested in bringing their universities to world-class standards need to build such funds into their 10-year strategic plan and engage quality contractors in putting such buildings in place. The matter of maintenance of such buildings should be given priority by the management of the university.

Recommendation No. 9: Elimination of corrupt practices in our universities is a goal we should pursue with vigour if we are to restore the shine to the system. There is corruption in admission, examination administration, contract awards, appointment, promotions and in virtually all aspects of university life. We are happy to note that the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) is partnering with NUC to stem the tide of corruption in our universities. A system study and review is currently underway following which appropriate preventive and remedial actions will be deployed.

Recommendation No. 10: Universities should take steps to meet all the NUC minimum standards for institutional accreditation. These standards are set to ensure that our universities move rapidly forward to achieve alignment with global best practices. If the standards are sustained in the next five years, we will begin to see the Old glorious days of our universities, now in 21st century light.

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, if all ten recommendations are applied, we shall have a university system with befitting buildings and conducive teaching, learning and research environment; quality students and staff; and excellent delivery of curriculum and quality graduates. The world-class status of our universities will emerge and it will be the envy of the world. It is my hope that Olabisi Onabanjo University will find these recommendations helpful in the bid to reposition the university to get its shine back, even to a brighter lustre.

On-going reform effort

It is noteworthy that there are on-going efforts to salvage the university system. For instance, the level of funding for recurrent and capital expenditure has increased significantly in the federal university sub-system especially in the last ten years. a massive overhaul of the curricula was undertaken in 2004 and 2009 which sets new benchmarks and minimum academic standards, modernised the curriculum and made it more socially relevant with a slant on entrepreneurial education; the system of accreditation, monitoring and quality assurance has been invigorated; there is greater enforcement of carrying capacity quota; access is enhanced through the licensing of more private universities and a blueprint on cultism is being implemented. The Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TEFund) has been repositioned to improve its intervention to higher education institutions. Here we commend the efforts of the Honourable Minister of Education and the Executive Secretaries of NUC and TETFund. Together, these efforts are reported to be impacting positively on the system. However, the rate of improvement of the system which had suffered decades of neglect is perceived by many to be slow. There is an obvious need to catalyse the recovery process.

A word to the graduating students

Now to the final word which is to the students. I congratulate the several sets on their graduation. Be proud holders of the OOU certificate. Although many in the early sets would have been working or completed their higher degrees, you all should continue in the OOU tradition of excellence in all that you do. Your watchwords should be honesty, diligence and fear of God.

I congratulate all staff for the good training you offered the students. I am sure you will be happy when you run into these students in the future as President of Nigeria, Governor of a State, Vice-Chancellor of a university, Director-General of

a UN agency or head of a private sector conglomerate and they say "Sir/Ma, you were my teacher in OOU".

Congratulations again and may God continue to bless your efforts.