

Instituting the Culture of Excellence in Teaching and Research in the Nigerian University System

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Matriculation Lecture Delivered at the 2nd Matriculation of Trinity University, Lagos on 4 July, 2020

PROTOCOL

The Chairman and Members of the Board of Trustees of Trinity University, Yaba, Lagos,

The Pro-Chancellor/Chairman of Council, and Council Members,

The Vice-Chancellor,

Other Principal Officers of Trinity University,

Members of Senate of the University,

Academic and Non-teaching Staff,

Parents and Guardians of the Matriculating Students,

Distinguished Guests,

Students of Trinity University,

Matriculating Students.

Ladies and gentlemen.

INTRODUCTION

My most sincere and profound appreciation goes to the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Charles Korede Ayo and the entire management of Trinity University, Yaba, Lagos, for this rare privilege granted me to deliver the 2nd Matriculation Lecture of Trinity University, Lagos. I especially commend the leadership and management of the University for the continuous provision of a conducive environment for academic activities in the University since the issuance of its

provisional licensing on 9th January, 2019 by the National Universities Commission, following the approval of the Federal Executive Council for its establishment as the 78th Private University in Nigeria.

In line with its Vision Statement, the University appears not to have left any stone unturned in its sustained commitment to 'be a world class institution of higher learning, which combines academic excellence with huge moral and ethical standards in the pursuit of entrepreneurship-focus education'. It is obvious that, the University is unwavering in its commitment to the core values of academic excellence, professionalism, responsibility, integrity, Christian values and leadership.

Nigeria will always be grateful to the private sector for their participation in the delivery of university education. No government in the world can single handedly deliver on university education because they have other sectors of the economy to grapple with. Consequently, when the private sector partners with government to provide university education, it further enlarges the scope of the delivery of quality and relevant higher education to the teeming youths that must be appropriately molded to contribute their quota to national and global development. For this reason, kudos must be given to the proprietors of Trinity University, Lagos for their foresightedness in establishing the University.

University matriculation, as it is known the world over, is the formal process of entering a university or of becoming eligible to enter a university after fulfilling certain academic requirements. It therefore goes without saying that the matriculating students of today have satisfied the national examination and Trinity University registration requirements to have been deemed eligible for the University's matriculation. I therefore congratulate the Proprietor, the Pro-Chancellor and members of the Governing Council, the Vice-Chancellor, Senate, Staff, parents, guardians and students, particularly the matriculating students for this milestone and glorious event of today. I wish the matriculating students a fruitful experience and successful voyage at Trinity University, Lagos.

I am particularly enthralled by the topic of this year's matriculation lecture, *Instituting the Culture of Excellence in Teaching and Research in the Nigerian University System*, which was conveyed in my invitation to deliver the lecture. I must commend Trinity University for the choice of the topic. The commendation for the topic is predicated on the assessment of a, not too distant, journey of the Nigerian University System that started with the establishment of the University College, Ibadan in 1948. The early decades of the Nigerian university system were characterised by impressive achievements when graduates from the system were reputed, nationally and globally for skills that tilted them high up on the relevance scale. Research output from the system was adjudged about the most impactful in solving national, regional and global challenges facing the society. Nigerian Universities at this time could compete favourable with the best in the world. When we compare Nigerian Universities of the early decades to the present, the imminent question would be, where and how did we miss it? The state of university education in Nigeria today therefore makes our topic of the matriculation lecture apt in the sense that it is time we made quality assurance, which will guarantee excellence in teaching and research, a priority in the operation of our universities. Academics are professionals in their own right and any action or inaction on our parts that would undermine quality delivery of university education is tantamount to compromising the ethics of our profession.

In order to effectively drive this topic home, since we are looking at excellence in teaching and research in our university system, it would be appropriate to refresh our memories on what the Nigerian University System is all about.

THE NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY SYSTEM

Higher education in Nigeria dates back to the 19th century when Nigerians sought opportunities to acquire this new and exciting vision of life, which was then only available overseas. Responding to the pressures generated by this hunger for knowledge, the colonial government established the Yaba Higher College in 1932. The college was established to provide "well qualified assistance" in medical, engineering and other vocations as well as teachers for

secondary schools then known as “higher middle schools.” With time the Yaba college offered sub-degree courses in engineering, medicine, agriculture and teacher training to fill specific vacancies in the colonial administration.

The restricted scope and vision of Yaba College generated pressures on the colonial administration to expand the opportunities for higher education. The British government responded by establishing the Elliot Commission in 1945. In its report, the Commission suggested that “the need for educated Africans in West Africa in general far outruns the supply, present and potential” and proceeded to recommend the establishment of a University College in Nigeria. Thus in 1948, the University College of Ibadan was established as a residential and tutorial college under the tutelage of the University of London. The nucleus of the initial intake of the University College, was formed by students transferred from the Yaba College. Thus began what has today become the largest educational industry in sub-Saharan Africa. By 1949, technical education was added to meet the emerging requirements of commerce, industry and the society in general. Consequently, a College of Arts, Science and Technology was established in each of the regions: Zaria (1952), Ibadan (1954), and Enugu (1955). These were to provide technical education qualitatively different in character from University education as well as professional disciplines such as secretarial studies, land and estate management, teacher certificates, accountancy, administration, pharmacy and engineering, leading to the award of diplomas.

On the eve of Nigeria’s independence in 1960, the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, was established and the race for the regionalisation of higher education began as the college in Zaria and Ibadan became full-fledged universities. The Zaria college renamed the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria and the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University) were also established.

In 1959, another Commission, the Ashby Commission, was established to ascertain Nigeria’s post-independence educational needs. Its findings regarding balance in the structure and geographical distribution of University education, led to the establishment of yet another University in 1962, the University of

Lagos, the same year that the University of Ibadan attained autonomous status as a degree awarding institution. In 1975, the Federal Government decided to take over the regional Universities at Zaria, Ile-Ife and Nsukka as well as establish new ones – the University of Benin was established in 1970, while the University Colleges at Calabar, Jos, Maiduguri, Ilorin, Port Harcourt and Kano, established in 1975 became full fledged Universities in 1977.

As the Federal Universities grew in number and students enrolment increased, State Universities started emerging in 1979 with the Rivers State University of Science and Technology, Port Harcourt blazing the trail. In the same vein, the emergence of private providers of university education in Nigeria became a reality when the first three Private Universities were licensed to operate in 1999 after an earlier failed attempt. Currently, Nigeria has 172 Universities (comprising 45 Federal, 48 States and 79 Private universities).

The Nigerian University System thus comprises the Universities, the Inter-University Centres and the National Universities Commission. The Universities have the tripartite mandate of teaching, research and community service. It is important to note that each of these mandates, though distinct are mutually reinforcing. For instance, excellent teaching is greatly influenced by excellent research. Conversely the quality of research output strategically positions the university to positively affect the quality of life in the society. Therefore instituting a culture of excellence in teaching and research makes the universities more responsive to their mandate.

THE CONCEPT OF EXCELLENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Generally, the term 'excellence' in many fields of activity connotes very good or outstanding performance. The Collins English Dictionary (1979) describes excellence as "the state or quality of excelling or being exceptionally good; extreme merit; superiority" and "an action, characteristic, etc., in which a person excels".

In higher education, excellence means different things in different contexts. It could be equated with the reputation and standing of institutions where it

depends largely on the perception of student experience and the varying missions of the institutions. It can also be seen as a social phenomenon, which transcends theoretical and cultural variables to practical applications in the context of management and technological development. To quality assurance agencies, the word 'excellence' reflects the degree or level of quality of service provided by institutions, where it is seen to relate to the quality of teaching and research, the capabilities of students, the scale of resource provision and the level of student achievement.

Instituting an excellent culture of teaching and research in the context of this paper means carrying out those activities, actions and policies that promote the entrenchment of quality teaching and research in university education in order to produce "exceptionally good outputs (manpower and research) of superior quality".

Wherever the ideals of quality assurance are engrafted, excellence will pervade the entire system. Excellence has been described as deploying ones best in any venture or operation and then going the extra-mile. If we in the university system, at least, put in our best in our dealings with our institutions, the state of our universities today would be better. Suffice it to say that many do not have a problem deploying their best, going the extra-mile is usually the challenge. Excellence is an attitude; consequently, the spirit of excellence cannot be caught with "one's hands in the pocket". It therefore means that achieving excellence is an active process, which must be system-wide and not localized just as it is with quality assurance. People create excellent systems with the right attitude and efforts; it doesn't just happen.

INSTITUTING THE CULTURE OF EXCELLENCE IN TEACHING IN THE NUS

One of the tripartite mandates of the university as already stated is teaching. Through teaching and other training activities, universities can equip students for jobs in different areas of human endeavor; thus preparing them with the requisite knowledge and skills in the area of study. The students are thus enabled to understand the critical and complex connections, which underpin different subject areas, including linkages amongst the subjects and social well-

being. The critical, analytical and systemic thinking that is needed to conceptualize, understand and address these linkages and issues are indeed the mandate of every higher education institution.

A major challenge we are grappling with in the Nigerian University System now is that of teaching. Apart from the fact that many universities employ old methods of teaching, majority of teaching staff are engaged in part-time teaching beyond what they can cope with resulting in inadequate time for proper teaching in their primary universities of employment as well as in the Universities where they hold visiting appointments. There is therefore the need for new attitudes towards teaching, so that old ways of teaching, which perpetuate the status quo and unproductive university system, do not prevail. Universities, then, can shape and inculcate these new ways of thinking through effective teaching.

In order to minimize, if not totally eradicate, the abuse of part-time lecturer engagement, the NUC's directive is that university lecturers should not be engaged in more than one university as a part-time lecturer. While the Commission alone cannot ensure the adherence of Nigerian academics to this directive, we call on the Vice-Chancellors to partner with the Commission to achieve this proposal.

To achieve excellence in teaching, a number of elements are critical. These include constant review of the curriculum; availability of qualified teaching staff; maintenance of adequate Teacher: Students Ratio (TSR); deployment of modern methods of teaching; capacity building in teaching (including mentoring of younger academics by the older ones), adequate facilities and infrastructure; and minimizing academic "moonlighting" to a manageable level. Others include engaging respected captains of industry to teach relevant aspects of the curriculum; institution of the Teacher Industrial Work Experience Scheme (TIWES); student-centred approach to teaching and learning; establishment of Teaching and Learning Centre (Pedagogic Centre); adequate provision of student support facilities and services to mention but a few.

INSTITUTING THE CULTURE OF EXCELLENCE IN RESEARCH IN THE NUS

Research is also one of the tripartite mandates of the university. The importance of research cannot be overemphasized, as it is the source of new knowledge and innovation. Research is not only required to inform meaningful teaching and learning, it is also the source of new knowledge for innovation, which is the route through which Universities all over the world distinguish themselves. In addition, universities are known to be relevant when innovations, patents and new knowledge from their research endeavours lead to tangible improvements by impacting positively on the living conditions of ordinary citizens or when research output lead to wealth creation, poverty alleviation, cure for diseases and overall socio-economic and technological development of a nation.

Unfortunately, the state of university research activities and their relevance can at best be described as parlous with little or no direct nexus between university research activities and Nigeria's socio-economic development. The little research going on across the NUS is concentrated mainly on publications for purposes of promotion and advancement of the academic careers of individual academic staff with little or nothing to show in the area of innovation patents and other tangible outcomes that can impact on the resolution of real-life challenges of the ordinary Nigerian or the technological advancement of the Nigerian nation.

The "publish or perish" craze is the reason there is not enough attention paid to real-life problem-solving research that may lead to innovations or patents capable of resulting to the development of new products and services or improvements in existing goods and services. Little wonder therefore, that it is quite difficult for many Nigerian universities to positively impact even their immediate communities beyond the employment of unskilled workers from host communities.

Attitudinal change to research is therefore crucial for the nation, the university

and the individual researcher and indeed humanity to benefit from research outcomes. Rather than work in “silos” university researchers should begin to collaborate with colleagues within their institutions or with researchers in other Universities within or outside Nigeria in addition to collaboration with industry. This lack of collaboration while being antithetical to the transdisciplinarity dictated by contemporary global best practice in research and innovation, also robs Nigeria of the opportunity to leverage on synergies and the optimization of scarce national research assets and resources, which such collaboration would have afforded the nation. Universities should therefore close ranks and collaborate to jointly design and conduct quality problem-solving research targeted at specific contextual challenges in their immediate communities or the nation at large.

A WORD FOR THE MATRICULATING STUDENTS

As I begin to wind down on this presentation, it is important to let our matriculating students know that when the culture of excellence in teaching and research is being discussed, the students are not left out. It is appropriate to let you know that you must engage the mindset of excellence from the beginning of your journey in Trinity University all the way to the finishing line. One major area majority of new entrants into the university have not mastered is managing the freedom they are suddenly confronted with coming from a relatively regimented system of the secondary school. Always have it at the back of your minds that freedom comes with responsibility. Yes, there is freedom in the university; however you must deploy excellence in your learning experience to be able to find a place in the critical mass of high-level manpower that your university will eventually turn out for national development and global impact.

Excellence in your academic performance is on one hand, while excellence in your character is on the other. You must always present your academic excellence on a platter of sound character. Don't let your talent, as it is often said, take you to a height where your character cannot keep. Your academic performance has the propensity of promoting you, but it is your character that preserves you in that position. A word they say is enough for the wise. Congratulation once again.

CONCLUSION

This paper has exhaustively discussed some steps that are necessary for the entrenchment of the culture of teaching and research in the Nigerian University System. A critical look at some of the steps show that while some influencers of the culture of excellence in teaching and research in the NUS are endogenous to the university system, others are exogenous to it. The endogenous factors could be tied to the quality of university management and faculty, availability of quality human and material resources and the exposure of the faculty and university leadership to prevailing realities in university education. On the other hand, the exogenous factors are related to the actions of the government/proprietor, industry, alumni and the social environment. Therefore, it is very glaring that to institute the culture of excellence in teaching and research in the Nigerian University System, all hands must be on desk.

The Chairman and members of the BoT, Pro-Chancellor and members of the Governing Council, Vice-Chancellor and Principal Officers of Trinity University, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, I thank you for your attention.

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