

SSAN

Ethics in Higher Education in Nigeria

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Ethics in Higher Education in Nigeria

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Ethical Issues in the Appointment and Promotion of Lower and Middle Cadre Academics in Nigeria

Alexander Nyitor Shenge

Introduction

For many centuries and especially in countries that are today tagged 'developed countries', universities and research institutes have served and will continue to serve as engines of development. This 'engine of development' service rendered by universities and research institutes to society and mankind is no longer restricted to the developed nations alone. Indeed, it is also being rendered in developing countries like Nigeria, following the introduction of the university and research ideas in those countries.

The university idea primarily seeks to develop, nurture and liberate human thinking and reasoning. This much is accomplished through diversity and congruence of ideas which academics initiate, validate, re-validate or criticize. By its very nature, the university is an institution for independent thinking, critical research and diversity of ideas, theory testing, and excellence. Thus, knowledge, which emanates from the university system and research institutes, permeates into the society, thereby influencing the course of activities in virtually every segment of the society. Based on their importance and superb, or supposedly superb, rating, universities all over the world tremendously influence political, social, economic and cultural events in the societies in which they are located and even beyond. Apart from influencing political, economic and socio-cultural events behind the scene, quite a number of academics, themselves, serve as policy formulators, executors and evaluators. Conversely and owing to the interactions which academics have with the outside world, what goes on in the society also goes back to shape academic discourses and programmes.

Theory and practice interact and influence each other when ideas that emanate from the universities and research institutions are applied to real life situations in the larger segments of the society and the feedback got from real life application of theories is used by academics to modify such theories. It is indeed the interactive relationship between theory and practice, together with the process of theory testing, that keeps, the knowledge propagated by academics going. The university idea and its true success depend largely on the quality of thinkers and researchers which universities and research institutions have. Collectively, these thinkers, knowledge seekers and theorists, on which the success of the university system depends, are called 'academics'. By the very nature and definition of university, academics, if they must excel, should ideally be universally drawn (that is from any corner of the globe where they could be found) based on merit.

The word academic might mean slightly different things to different people; but, for the purpose of this paper, we will refer to it in the context of someone who is involved in advanced learning, critical thinking and research in a university, some other higher educational institutions of learning or research institutes. This simple definition of academic connotes logical reasoning, advanced research or the putting into use of the thinking power of the mind. All over the world, members of academic communities make up an important group; indeed, they constitute an elitist group. This is because they are believed to have developed their intellect to an appreciably high level.

The Emergence of Universities and Academic Communities in Nigeria

In Nigeria, the emergence of academic communities is relatively recent. It began in 1948, with the establishment of the University College (now the University of Ibadan) at Ibadan. This was followed

by the establishment of the other first generation universities and later on universities of the second, third, fourth and fifth generations. Despite its relatively short existence, the Nigerian academic community has contributed immensely to the growth and development of the nation.

Apart from growing in size and complexity, Nigerian tertiary educational institutions, which harbour the body of academics, have gone through critical stages. With just three universities as at 1962, Nigeria has at present about fifty-two universities owned by the federal and state governments as well as some private operators. Many more are still being licensed. There exists an equally high number of polytechnics, colleges of education and some research institutes.

Quite a number of problems exist in the Nigerian university system today. But one of the most disturbing of these problems is the ethical problems in the appointment and promotion of lower and middle cadre academics. This has to do with the fraudulent and unprofessional way lower and middle cadre academics are appointed, promoted and sustained in the university system. Such ethical problems take the form of appointing and promoting academics based on subjective and selfish criteria rather than merit, scholarship and integrity. A more in-depth analysis of these problems will be made later in this paper.

Over the years, keen observers and critics of malpractices in Nigerian universities have tried to adduce reasons for these maladies, and even attempted proffering solutions. Of all the reasons adduced for this rot, the one that appears most plausible is the change in societal values. People are both a product and a reflection of their society. In the case of Nigeria, the change in the value system has in a way led to the lowering of standards. According to Obilade (1986), "the youth and, in fact, the entire members of academic communities are changing just as the society is changing." Apart from the basic problems of food, shelter and security, our society generally glorifies sloth or laziness, roguery and other vices, while praising people of questionable character. Certificates are unduly recognized, sometimes at the expense of competence even as nepotism and other forms of discrimination have in so many instances served as yardsticks for dealing with people in Nigeria.

Obilade (1986) observes that "a society that scoffs at the academia may kill the ambition of the would-be intellectual. Being witness to the incidence of stark illiterates donating millions of naira and being nationally honoured (even when the money came from questionable sources) is not likely to motivate a student or a lecturer to work hard to excel in his or her academic work or research." Neither will being witness to fraudulent and subjective promotion of less qualified colleagues motivate a lecturer to avoid academic shortcuts.

Ethics and the University Idea

As it is the case with other fields of human endeavour, ethics sustains the university system. Within the university system, a mention of ethics entails the need for an academic, university administrator or worker to carry out the tasks for which he/she has been hired to carry out properly, with commitment and in consonance with the university idea. For the academic who does not occupy an administrative position in the university, these tasks range from teaching, research and community development to public service. For the academic who occupies an administrative position within the university, the task may, in addition to the three specified above, include administration, which, in no less measure, is expected to be accomplished creditably and in accordance with the rules of the game.

The term 'ethics' was introduced by a Greek philosopher, Aristotle. The term was created from the Greek word *ethos*, which originally denoted a location or place where people live together. As time went on, the word *ethos* acquired other meanings that included customs, temperament, character, a way of thinking and a way of behaviour. From the word *ethos*, Aristotle coined the adjective *ethos* ('ethical'). Therefore, the new discipline, ethics, was created and named by Aristotle in the 4th century BC (400 BC).

Aristotle was of the view that a moral man gets pleasure from moral activities and makes

prudent choice from available pleasures and pains. A moral choice is the one which a person makes in accordance with a mean, which is a principle of choice between two extremes. A prudent person takes account of the circumstances of his or her own actions. According to Aristotle, prudence is a key moral principle or standard. He argued that malice, envy, jealousy, shamelessness, adultery, theft and murder are always evil in themselves.

The terms 'ethics' and 'morality' are used interchangeably. It is in this respect that the term 'ethical norms' is used to designate 'moral phenomena'. According to Aristotle, a moral individual is one who is not to drift the tide but seeks to introduce a measure of purposefulness into his life. He builds a hierarchy of goals and subjects them to the supreme good, which are the goals. Attainment of personal happiness and perfection is, thus, the individual's goal, and it is ever present in his activity. Aristotle defined a perfect activity with respect to delight and suffering, but evil is the opposite of virtue. A human being has virtue because he has reason. An animal has no virtue because it has no reason.

Ethical relativism is a moral theory which claims that morals are relative; that they vary over time, among persons and across cultures. According to Oldenquist (1978), ethical relativists make the following claims:

- a. "An action that is right in one place or society may be wrong in another place or society".
- b. "Whatever a culture or society thinks is right is right, for that culture or society".
- c. "Whatever a person thinks is right is right for him".
- d. "Everyone ought to do what he thinks is right".

The differences in circumstances in each case determine the rightness or wrongness of an act. Since circumstances differ from place to place, so does the rightness or wrongness of an act. The cultural ethical relativism claims that morals are relative to human feelings and opinions; that they are not merely relative to circumstances and consequences. Thus, cultural ethical relativism claims that "what is right in one of culture may be wrong in another culture".

Dzurgba (2000) identifies a number of moral principles to include faith, hope, love, mercy, righteousness, truthfulness, peace, loyalty, humility, honesty, impartiality, kindness, courage, tolerance and equality. Others are discipline, justice, accountability, unity, power and authority.

General Problems Confronting University Education in Nigeria Today

Universities are part and parcel of the general Nigerian society. What affects the wider society, therefore, will most likely affect the university system as well. Over the years, Nigerian universities have experienced decay of severe and varying magnitudes. As opposed to what obtained in the past when all was well with Nigerian universities, university teachers and administrators in Nigeria today have been linked with quite a number of malpractices. These include bribery and corruption cases, lack of commitment, just to mention a few. Even as universities in Nigeria are confronted with reduced funding from government, Jega (1994) notes that, worse still, even the meagre resources that actually come into the system are quite mismanaged, misapplied, or misappropriated by corrupt university administrators.

Not a few university teachers and administrators have today been accused of throwing decorum and discipline to the dogs by their involvement in such scandalous acts as sexual harassment, extortion of students through sale of handouts and examination malpractices, among other areas of accusations. Some others have been accused of abandoning their primary areas of responsibilities to jostle for contracts and political appointments. Indeed, there are others who are accused of entrenching mediocrity within the university system by blatantly avoiding laid down standards.

Experts have recognised that the proprietor is always tempted to feel that the university is too important an institution to be left to dons alone, having regard to its crucial role in nation-building and manpower development. It is indeed one of the vital instruments for transforming the

social, political, economic, and technological status of society. But as a Vice-Chancellor of a Commonwealth university was quoted as having once observed as follows: "If governments believe in their attitude to the universities, that he who pays the piper must call the tune, they must realise that the tune sounds better when it is chosen by the piper himself."

Areas of fallen and falling standards in the university system, according to Akinkugbe (2001), include declining morale, flight of talent, poor libraries, ill-equipped laboratories, degrees in science without practical work, the open/shut campus syndrome, the sceptre of violence and cultism, explosion of student enrolment and a self-triggering implosion of the value-system. Unless these problems are addressed positively and aggressively, there can be no turnaround because attitudinal factors are no longer largely driven by resource assurance and consolidation.

Government for a long time the sole owner and regulator of universities (the emergence of private universities is a very recent phenomenon) has, through acts of commission and omission over the years, prepared good ground for this rot in the ivory tower. For too long, government has failed to provide adequate funding for universities. For so long and in too many ways, it has meddled into activities and processes of universities such as appointment of Vice-Chancellors and other key officers, determination of admission procedures and development of curricula as well as setting criteria for promotion of university staff. Other areas of university administration and decision making that government has interfered in, over the years, are staff remuneration, staff and students' unionism, determination and delineation of catchment areas for universities. All these acts of commission and omission accentuated during the long years of military rule in the country. It is, indeed, painful to observe that not a very significant change has been noticed even in the wake of our 'nascent democracy'. Today, the Nigerian society appears to be losing the confidence it used to have in universities as institutions and in academics as professionals. This indeed is an attitudinal disposition that academics, as forces of development, must seek to change.

Ethical Issues in the Appointment and Promotion of Academics

This paper operationally defines lower and middle cadre academics as academic staff from the level of Teaching/Graduate Assistant up to Lecturer Grade I. As it is the case with every discipline or field of endeavour, lecturing or teaching profession also has its ethical standards, which guide the activities of academics. In this wise, appointments and promotions of lower and middle cadre academics just like their higher level colleagues are supposed to be done on merit. Of course, this had generally been the practice in Nigerian universities in the past. But it can hardly be said to be so today.

But somewhat opposed to the past traditional criteria of merit, productivity, integrity, broadmindedness and objectivity in scholarship, among some other important criteria, not a few academics at the lower and middle cadre levels are today appointed or promoted based on subjective criteria set by the powers that be. For example, rather than appoint or promote promising young intellectuals that have flair for academics into their departments, some heads of departments and deans of faculties, with the support of academic colleagues and people in administration, settle for candidates that are known to be in 'good books'. This is regardless of whether or not the candidates have questionable integrity or are academic staff. Thus, one is saddened to see artificial barriers created by those in power for eligible candidates into the academia.

It is no longer rare to discover in some Nigerian universities that employment and promotions, especially at the lower and middle cadres, are based on relationships of blood, marriage, religion, ethnicity and other caucuses. Coming from a catchment area of a university is one other strong criterion for employing and promoting some lower and middle cadre academics today.

Mentoring process in a number of Nigerian universities today has been abused by some senior academics. For the mere fact that some of the would-be mentors have redefined the process of mentoring to mean perpetual servitude and exploitation, they naturally do not want to have

young academics in the system that would not be willing to do exactly what they want them to do, i.e. serving them perpetually and not having an independent say on issues. But the university is not, and should not, be a straight-jacket institution.

Sexual harassment is one other issue that has received wide attention within and outside university circles. Critical watchers of happenings in Nigerian universities would not want to rule out the possibility that illicit sexual relationships equally have a way of rubbing some appointment and promotion exercises in the ivory towers today.

It is interesting to note that quite a number of advertisements for lower and middle cadre academic positions in many Nigerian universities today are merely placed in the media to satisfy all righteousness, as experience has shown that many of the positions so advertised had already been filled through temporary appointment arrangements. It needs to be made clear here that hiring academics through the process of temporary appointment (especially when such academics are needed desperately) is in itself not a bad thing. It, however, becomes a problem in the academia when heads of departments and other university officials abuse it to satisfy and/or protect their vested and selfish interests of edging out qualified applicants and fraudulently determining who is to be hired.

There is no doubt that the above-mentioned malpractices have, together with other factors, contributed in no small measure to the decay in the Nigerian university system today. The problem involving young academics is even more worrisome when one realises that the future of Nigerian universities depends to a large extent on the stuff which young academics of today are made of.

Conclusion

Although education is the key to development, nevertheless, this sector in Nigeria, Akinkugbe (2001) observes, has been in a precarious state over the past fifteen years. The reasons for this are not farfetched and could, in part, be attributed to the unanticipated consequences of the adoption of the structural adjustment programme in the mid-eighties, which prompted a precipitous fall in the funds allocated to the sector. Another factor is bad governance at the institutional and societal levels. Of the latter, it could be said that the prolonged period of military rule in Nigeria had an adverse effect not only on the education sub-sector but also on the other strategic sectors of the economy.

Universities were worse hit by the economic and political crises of the past. Today, the physical facilities of these institutions either are in complete state of disrepair (as is the case in the first generation universities) or uncompleted/abandoned in the second, third, and fourth generation ones. Frequent strikes and work stoppages by academic staff and others have affected the duration set aside for various academic programmes and it is now widely known that these institutions may not be spending adequate time and/or covering syllables due to these disruptions.

University teachers, Akinkugbe (2001) further observes, were, until recently, receiving paltry wages with the result that quite a large number emigrated to Euro-America, South Africa, Saudi Arabia, Middle- or Far Eastern countries. The problems of universities are further compounded by a plethora of laws and agencies that ostensibly undermine their autonomy. Nigeria is today replete with laws and various supervisory agencies for higher education thereby resulting in a huge bureaucracy. All in all, the problems of Nigerian universities transcend systemic and institutional levels.

The return to democratic civil rule has made the need to overhaul the Nigerian university system and to make it respond more pertinently to the development needs and challenges of the 21st century. One of the vexed issues today is university autonomy that is generating both interest and anxiety.

Recommendations

In the light of the foregoing discussion on ethical practices in the appointment and promotion of lower and middle cadre academics in Nigerian universities and the need to do away with problems in the system, the following recommendations deserve consideration:

- (a) That funding of universities and remuneration of academics in Nigeria should be given more serious attention by government and other stakeholders so as to attract, once again, the best brains into the Nigerian university system. This will help in doing away with cutting of corners by academics who are easily lured into malpractices on account of poor remuneration and inadequate funding of universities by government.
- (b) The universities themselves should do some in-house cleaning and remove all policies that do not guarantee strict adherence to the ethics of the academic profession. Any policies of appointment, promotion, scholarship and research that are not founded on objectivity, fair play, excellence, integrity, and contribution to knowledge should be done away with. Indeed, universities should take bold steps to flush out from the system academics that do not have what it takes to be true scholars and academics of integrity.
- (c) The responsibility of appointing and promoting academics should not be an exclusive preserve of a few senior academic and non academic staff. Indeed, the responsibility should be broadened to accommodate different interests such as the students' body of the institution or department concerned, the various cadres of staff and outside assessors where possible. Criteria for appointment should be spelt out clearly and also adhered to strictly. Also, efforts should be made by university authorities to reconcile paper qualification with actual results in terms of contribution to knowledge and proffering of solutions to real life societal problems. It is dangerous to shy away from the reality that today not a few students obtain their grades and class of degree fraudulently, sometimes with the understanding and collusion of unscrupulous academics.
- (d) Similarly, commensurate motivation and encouragement should be extended to academics that discharge their duties creditably just as sanctions should also be applied to academics that perform below expectation.
- (e) Finally, government should grant its universities clearly defined and workable autonomy that will not leave any more room for government's meddling into such critical activities of universities as academic and principal officer appointment and promotion, curriculum and programme development and approval as well as financial appropriation. The same case can be made against attempts by government to determine the selection of students, appointment, and removal of academic staff. There should be a balance between teaching, research, and advanced study, the selection of research projects, and freedom of publication. Governing Councils of universities should, therefore, differentiate between their powers (and indeed their limitations) and those of academia.

The following paraphrased statement by Professor Ayo Banjo, a former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ibadan, earlier quoted by Akinkugbe (2001) captures the problems which lack of autonomy and near absence of academic freedom are causing in the Nigerian university system:

Academic freedom is, understandably, generally less controversial than university autonomy, though it is easy to see that lack of University autonomy sooner or later leads to serious erosion of academic freedom.

If we accept that one of the most important functions of any university is to seek the truth, any constraints on that search reduce the value of the university. If, also, we agree that a university has a duty constantly to reduce the area of the unknown socially and physically, a university is excellent to the degree that it is not only free but also empowered to do so.

However, in recent years there have been ominous signs of the intention to reduce academic freedom in Nigerian universities. The idea of a nationally agreed set of minimum standards for the nation's universities is good, though not an inevitable one. Besides, where such explicit formulations are considered necessary care must be taken to express them in more abstract terms than virtually handing down syllabus to the university.

An institution that is incapable of designing its own curricula and syllabus and being constantly innovative about them does not deserve the title of university.

The senate of a university is capable of designing programmes, which, while being relevant, do not detract from the status of the university or distort its historic mission. University autonomy does not, of course, mean absolute freedom. It is a condition for knowledge to be pursued in a single-minded manner. If there is an attempt to abuse this privilege, the Council of the University ought to be able to rectify matters. Within the laws of the land and broad policy guidelines laid down by government, each university under its Council should be allowed to carry on its business. Any attempt to keep the universities under tight reins is bound to be counterproductive as is the temptation to center-mange and rob the universities of their distinctive characteristics.

The following depositions of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), as made before the 1991 Commission on the Review of Higher education in Nigeria (the Longe Commission), point in the same direction of Prof. Ayo Banjo's views.

"There can be no argument about the overriding responsibility of government in the area of educational policy and financing in this country. Arising from this we recognize that government has a duty to set educational goals and the guidelines for attaining them. Government also does have a duty to monitor the performance of all public interest institutions to ensure that all times they are serving the public interest and that they are performing the functions for which they were established.

With regard to universities, it is our view that the fulfilment of their responsibilities does not require government to play the kinds of roles, which its agencies are currently playing. Indeed, our position (ASUU) is that such interference as currently exists only leads to confusion and lessening of the capacity of universities to perform effectively.

On a final note, Nigerian universities need to do some great deal of planning (both present and strategic) to be able to cope with the challenges of the present as well as the future. The wind of globalisation has been fast blowing across individuals, nations, organisations and institutions the world over. Mazrui (2001) calls this the 'villagization' process (making the world a global village). The globalisation process, therefore, demands that individuals, organisations, institutions and nations must brace up for international as well as local competition to be able to remain relevant in the things they do. It needs to be understood in clear terms that failure to plan in this regard is plan for failure at the feet of global competitors. Nigerian universities cannot afford to be left out of this exercise. The consequences for not performing effectively and efficiently are quite great.

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