

## **CHALLENGES IN UNIVERSITY GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA: A KEYNOTE ADDRESS<sup>1</sup>**

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I was at first taken aback when I was approached by Professor Olayinka with a request to address this assembly of petroleum explorationists. It is true that I am a regular consumer of the end-products of their labours, but addressing the experts in the field, I thought, was a different matter. However, I was soon relieved to discover that this Keynote Address is intended to be in the field of university governance, in which I am a little more comfortable. But that was not the end of my dilemma. What, I wondered, is the relevance of university governance at a conference whose theme is ‘Enhancing Skill-Based Learning and Professionalism in Geoscience Education in Nigeria’? Perhaps at first blush not so obvious, but it seems to me that the organizers of this forum have rightly come to the conclusion that the well-being of their profession is inextricably linked with the well-being of the university system; and for this realization, I heartily congratulate them.

It has to be said that not many professionals recognize the fact that excellence in their profession is ultimately contingent on excellence in the university system. Indeed, there has even been a sad period of our national history when the government allowed itself to be persuaded that money spent on the universities was mostly money wasted, and that the country should be investing in primary education instead. But what kind of primary education is that which does not rely on well-run universities to produce good teacher-trainers who in turn would turn out competent staff for the primary schools? I do not think that we have as yet lived down the consequences of such absurd counseling by an international agency. The universities determine the tone of a country’s entire education system, and ultimately the tone and pace of its national development.

University governance is traditionally discussed in terms of a typology of unicameral, bicameral, tricameral and the so-called hybrid models. These terms are sufficiently self-explicit, and to us in

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this country who are used to the bicameral model, it may seem strange that there are universities which are unicameral, implying that the duties of university Council and Senate are vested in a single body; or universities which operate a tricameral model in which, in addition to the governing Council and Senate, there is also a body known as the university Educational Council, whose main function is to oversee the election of Chancellors and Rectors. The hybrid model, as one would expect, reflects the incorporation of features of the other models into what is essentially a unicameral model.

The beauty of the bicameral model, with which we are familiar in this country, is that it neatly divides the responsibilities of a university into the academic, for which the Senate is responsible, and the management of finance and property, which is the function of the university Council. But more important is the fact that both Senate and Council operate through a committee system, on which the overall efficiency of a university is dependent, and some of the committees necessarily have joint Council and Senate membership. For example, in matters of the appointment of Vice-Chancellor, and the award of honorary degrees, there are joint committees of Council and Senate involved, but such committees report to Council.

Practice differs even among Nigerian universities. In some universities, for example, the Appointments and Promotions Committees are committees mandatorily reporting after every meeting to Council, which must take all decisions, whereas at Ibadan, for example, the Council has delegated its powers in this respect to the committees themselves, whose decisions are final, even though it is recognized in all universities that the Council is the employer of all university staff. Provided the committees operate in accordance with the provisions of the university law setting them up, it is unlikely for any serious problems to arise.

The Vice-Chancellor, as the executive head of the university, is of course the most important agent for efficiency in the institution. As Chairman of Senate, he gives leadership in determining the academic standards of the university and in ensuring the welfare of staff and students. At the same time, his importance on Council is reflected in the fact that he sits next to the Pro-Chancellor and Chairman at meetings of Council and is undoubtedly influential in the conduct of

Council meetings. It would be useful therefore to consider the governance of a university in terms of the burdens that this key individual is called upon to bear, especially in contemporary Nigeria.

The first, and certainly most onerous, burden is that of finding enough funds to run the university. This particular burden has been much talked about in the past twenty years or so in the country without any bold or innovative attempt to solve the problem involved, which is a systemic one. The federal government has continued to create more universities without correspondingly increasing the allocation to this sector of education. Obviously, it is not in a position to go on doing this forever, and the assumption to question is whether the federal government should continue to offer near-free education in all its universities, when the financial situation of the country hardly justifies this.

For one thing, the emergence of private universities has demonstrated that students' sponsors are prepared to pay substantial fees for their wards' tertiary education – indeed, many parents have even been doing this for their children in primary and secondary schools. Free tuition in federal universities may be an attractive ideological stance, but it increasingly makes less financial good sense. The simple solution is that, even in federal universities, the financial burden should be shared by the government as proprietors, and all the other beneficiaries. I define the beneficiaries as the federal government, the State governments, the local councils and the students themselves. I have suggested (Banjo, 2012) a manner in which all tiers of government could contribute in agreed proportions to the running of all universities, whether public or private. Scholarships and bursaries can, additionally, be offered imaginatively to ensure that competent but indigent students are not excluded. In many developed parts of the world, the practice is to make students take loans to finance their university education; but many would argue that this country is not yet sufficiently developed for this.

The second burden is that of ensuring that the very highest academic standards are maintained. The constraint of finance is here immediately apparent, but a university should never lose sight of its responsibility for the very highest standards of teaching, learning and research. In this

connection, a university is as good as its academic staff. It is they who ensure the highest standards of teaching, learning and research, as well as the admission of students with a demonstrated aptitude for serious academic work. Here, the Senate and its committees are in focus. By presiding at the meetings of the Appointments and Promotions Committee and of the Staff Disciplinary Committee, which are committees of Council, the Vice-chancellor ensures that only those with a proven record, or an unmistakable promise, of a successful academic career are employed and that the ranks of academics at the university are scrupulously kept from any kind of pollution. At the same time, by presiding over the business of the Development Committee of Senate, the Vice-Chancellor is able to keep in view an orderly growth of the university's actual and projected contributions, nationally and internationally, to the growth and dissemination of knowledge.

Part of the burden here is that of satisfying the growing insistence on relevance. In some respects this opens up the necessity for the university to work in collaboration with the private sector to ensure that the products of the university are adequate in number and relevance to the world of work. Associations like yours obviously have a role to play in this respect, and indeed I suspect that it is this realization that has led to our assembling here today. Until the very recent past, Nigerian universities had not managed their external relations with the private sector as seriously as they should, but there are clear indications now that things are changing

Finally, it is important to consider the burden that the vice-chancellor bears in relation to staff and student welfare, on which the peace of the institution largely depends. If the Vice-Chancellor bears those burdens earlier mentioned internally, the manner of his bearing the burden of staff and student welfare is unavoidably borne in full glare of the public. Indeed, for many onlookers from outside the university itself, the success of university governance is determined mainly by the way that the executive head is able to keep the members of staff happy in and out of the workplace, and how he manages to keep the students contented in and out of classrooms and laboratories.

Every Vice-Chancellor naturally aims for the ideal situation in which there is peace and contentment on campus, but a number of factors that he has to contend with may make it difficult for him to realize this ideal. Perhaps the most important of these factors is the unionization of staff and students.

Student unionism is an accepted integral part of university culture everywhere in the world. Student unions make it possible for students to acquire the desirable qualities of democratic self-reliance and leadership. Allowing students much scope in running their collective affairs, and giving them a voice where considered necessary in the larger governance of the institution, are necessary steps in achieving peace in that very excitable segment of the university population.

There seems to be no consensus on the extent to which the students as a body should be allowed to participate in the governance of a university. Certainly the Student Union has to be guided by the university authorities, but it should, at the same time, be given enough freedom to be creative in responding to the requirements of its members, and should certainly be allowed to collect union dues directly to the union's coffers rather than through the university bursary, knowing that a union that fails to secure the financial support of its members is a discredited union.

There have been perennial debates over which of the committees of Council and Senate should have student representation. I would personally find it difficult to justify the presence of students on either Council or Senate but, as has long been the practice here at Ibadan, students certainly ought to be represented on the Student Disciplinary Committee and the Student Welfare Board. They can also be represented on ad hoc committees specially set up to solve specific student problems.

But the dimension of student unionism that poses an even more complex problem is the fact that problems may not originate from within a particular campus but may be imported into it. The reason, of course, is that the union at any public university is a branch of the national union of students, and a dispute and breakdown at one university can lead to a sympathy strike which grounds the entire university system. This is a feature of publicly-owned universities which calls

for an imaginative solution. Private universities, while encouraging unionism within their campuses, disallow affiliation to the national union, precisely for reasons of stability.

The situation is even more bewildering with regard to staff unionism, for there are, usually, not one but as many as three unions which may sometimes be hostile to one another. The basis of the hostilities, usually, is the perceived preference given in the scheme of things to academic staff and their union over the senior non-teaching staff and their union. The privileges relating to study leave, sabbatical leave etc, which are obviously *sine qua non* to the career of an academic, are now being claimed by the members of the other unions. The latest demand by these two unions is to enjoy the same retirement age as the academics. I am sure all these are matters that can be rationally resolved but are potential flashpoints for a very busy vice-chancellor to grapple with.

Like the student unions, staff unions in public universities are branches of a national union, with the kind of problems discussed above also applying. Again, the private universities do not allow their staff unions to be affiliated to the national union though, it must be admitted, any benefits successfully claimed by the national union immediately provokes the demand for similar benefits in the private universities.

The basic problem is the extent to which each university is allowed to be different from the other universities. Ideally, the Council of each university should be able to determine the conditions of service for all the categories of its staff. The private universities, indeed, act independently of one another, but it may be claimed that this is because they have different proprietors. A trend to be commended is that of the federal government giving greater freedom of action to the council of each of its universities, including the right to appoint the vice-chancellor. Federal universities do not have to be carbon copies of one another or operate an identical university law but, like the private universities, should be empowered to be distinct and add something unique to the entire mosaic of our university system.

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