

THE CHALLENGES OF THE UNIVERSITY AS AGENT OF SOCIAL CHANGE

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Abstract

University Education in Nigeria has expanded within the last few years from just one University college in 1948, Nigeria can now boast of not less than 50 universities. The role of the university is to train skilled graduates for industrial, administrative and community service positions. University is also expected to play a major part in shaping the quality of leadership as well as educate generation of leaders. Nigeria is currently facing increasing myriads of social malaise; from poor leadership, poverty, environmental degradation to high rate of unemployment. This paper takes a critical look at the functions of the universities in a globalised and knowledge driven world. The paper posits that the university should play a critical role in solving the problems of leadership which has been the bane of this country and also the issue of unemployment. This can be achieved if the university move away from knowledge recycling to knowledge generation provide the "critical mass" in leadership and remodel their curriculum from skill mismatch to a functional industrial based model.

Introduction

Social conditions in Nigeria present an alarming paradox despite the country's endowed natural and human resources. Poverty rate has jumped from 29.5 in 1980 to 70% in 2004; and may have become higher in recent years. Unemployment has remained at 80% high and Corruption has reached a startling proportion, requiring according to Nwabueze (2008), a peoples revolution. Interestingly, education which is seen as solution to social

malaise has expanded since Nigeria got her independence from the British in 1960. From one University College in 1948, Nigeria now boasts of over 40 government funded universities. Every modern state across the globe works efficiently and effectively by developing its human resources and creating the right dialectical equilibrium between human and materials resources (Ikechukwu, 2006). The critical function of developing human capital is one of the key role of the education system especially the university, one of its greatest expectation would be to produce young men and women who are intellectually equipped to deal with our social challenges. In a world that is already globalize and in which knowledge is changing very rapidly, how can the university produce men and women who will in turn transform our society?

Current trends in our university system point to the fact that they have been infected with the vicious cycle of the Nigeria society. Adebowale (2008) lamented the education crises in Nigeria and its monumental decay. The problems of "cultism, religious fundamentalism, examination malpractices, corruption, tribalism, excessive politicization of recruitment and promotion, admission racketeering, sexual harassment among many other vices have eroded the Ivory as well as the Tower. With these problems, can the university still provide the needed social change in the society?

The multi-ethnic globalize society also comes with new challenges as the wave of globalization pierces the social, cultural and economic walls hitherto, insulated by 'traditions'. The products of our universities will compete with people all over the world, work for international companies buy from the world and sell to the world, and also get involve tackling global problems (Centre for International understanding, 2005).

Nigeria is in need of critical transformation and the catalyst for this must come from the leadership - leadership that is prepared to tackle the myriads of problems and move us to

the shore of progress (Abati, 2008). Given the array of these catastrophic problems, can the university provide the leadership?

Social Change

The new Encyclopaedia Britannica (1988) defined social change in a broad sense as any change in social relations or social structure. According to the Encyclopaedia the flexibility and adaptability of the Homo sapiens is one fundamental reason for social changes and challenges. Several ideas of social change have evolved in various cultures and historical periods. First is the idea of decline or degeneration. Here, the state of a society is viewed under what the society has not been or what it ought not to be. The decline may be economic, political or social.

Second is the idea of cyclical change which is merely a pattern of subsequent and recurring phases of growth and decline. A society that is seen as stagnant or that is without progressive growth falls within the cyclical change. The third one is the idea of continuous progress which constitutes the key idea of the 19th century in the area of economic, social and political paradigm. This is still the drive for most societies. One basic assumption of social change theories is that the course of social change is not arbitrary but to certain degree, regular or patterned.

Social change essentially, is a form of progressive change which can occur as a result of new ideas, technological innovation, economic progress, demographical process among other factors. From the Marxian point of view social change is a dialectical process which involves the transition from one stage to another through a revolutionary transformation usually preceded by increasing deterioration of society.

Social change can also be the result of planning through a goal directed large - scale social reform or social reorientation. This can be achieved through government organization.

However, many unplanned social change in modern societies originate in organization which are established to generate knowledge and are essentially oriented to innovation that will transform the society. The education system is one of such organization that can transform the society and also respond to changes within the society.

Education for Social Change

Education for social change has been conceptualized as something positive, radical and forward looking and basically concerned with the abolishment of the present state of affairs (Rikowski, 2007). What is the present state of affairs which education must transformed or even abolished?

The Nigeria state; is confronted with a myriads of social maladies including environmental problems they include population growth and increasing poverty, poor leadership and followership, crime, environmental deterioration, illiteracy, political, economic and academic corruption, tribalism, just to mention a few. Can education provides the needed transformation?

Education is seen as a veritable weapon that can be employed to eliminate social vices and it remains the most powerful weapon that can be used to transform the society. Social scientists (Haveman & Wolfe, 1984, Levin & Kelley, 1997) have long viewed education as the solution to many social challenges. On a general note, education is seen as investment in human capital that has both direct benefits to the educated individual in particular as well as external benefits for society in general (Levin & Kelley, 1997).

Higher Education (HE) and Social Change

Global trend reveals that HE is playing an increasingly more important role in national development especially the universities. Basically, HE refers to the education

received after secondary school education from the polytechnics, colleges of education, universities, and monotechnics including institutions offering correspondence courses (Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN), 2004). The universities will be the core reference on HE in this paper as it represent the core body for microcosmic development. The responsibilities of generating and propagating knowledge rest squarely on the universities (FRN, 2004; Babalola, 2008).

The traditional roles of the universities are to train students through teaching, conduct research and serve as strategic support to the community. With globalization, the modern university now has both an academic and industrial sides and for it to function effectively, a modern university must seek output as well as input (Chen, 2007).

Chen (2007:207) summarized the functions of university to include;

- Train advanced students
- Promote academic development
- Promote social progress

To what extent is the university doing all these especially promoting social progress and contributing to the national development? What new role should the university play to bring about the desired social transformation? How can the university produce a generation of students who will improve the society?

The Nigerian Society:In Need of Change?

If international report about Nigeria is to be taken serious, the Nigerian state will be a failed state before the year 2015 (e.g. CIA report). Ironically, the government of Nigeria is desirous to make Nigeria a world class economy by the 2020.

Social conditions in Nigeria present a tragic paradox that despite our rich endowment of natural and human resources, most of the citizens are poor. The poverty rate in Nigeria increased from 27% in 1980 to 66% in 1996 and to 70% in 1999.

National Planning Commission (NPC, 2004): Infant mortality is among the highest in the world (77 per 1000); 30% of children less than 5 years are underweight and 90% of rural population that constituted about over 55% of the population depend on forest for livelihood and domestic fuel needs.

The Nigeria economy has been caught in a low growth trap with very low exports and industrialization. It is estimated that over 5 million Nigerians are infected with HIV/AIDS and the ratio of citizens to physicians is as low as 30 to 100,000.

Data from the National Bureau of statistics (2008) revealed that 80% of youths (about 64 million) are unemployed and 10% of the entire youth populations on paid jobs are under-employed. Most public sectors, remain inefficient, highly volatile and unsustainable (NPC,2004).

Since the establishment of its first university some 60 years ago, Nigeria now has over 90 universities including private universities. Why has Nigeria social conditions deteriorated in spite of expansion of a key ally of development? As Ekpang (2008:37) succinctly puts it:

The society looks up to the university as the repository of knowledge and wisdom...knowledge acquiring is not just for its own sake...but a commitment to active participation in social transformation, economic modernization...solving human problems including health, production, unemployment and as a means to improve the society.

Further, Ekpang quoted Schultz Theodore to support the cherished role of HE especially the university to include "improvement in the capacity of people to produce

economic wealth, the health of the working population and the technological skills of a working force. Where has the university gone wrong and how can it be repositioned to play its key roles in national development and social orientation?

New Challenges for the University

How should the university get us to the super highway of development within the paradigm of our societal needs? In a globalized world and knowledge driven society, knowledge generation should be at the front burner of the university. Most developed countries are concerned to develop and capitalize their knowledge aspects not only for economic growth but to generate a wealthier society. Such knowledge must first meet the immediate needs of the society. The university currently spends its energy in the recycling of ideas rather than the creation of new ideas. How useful is it in having over 90 universities and yet our society still wallows in social disequilibrium? The university must begin the tedious analytical dissection of the problems which constitute the prime necessity for society survival, social and technical progress (Sowell, 1986).

Basically the university must address the twin problems of unemployment and leadership confronting the Nigeria state. The problems of unemployment include crime, poverty and youth involvement in all anti-social behaviour. How can the university address unemployment?

That 80% of youth (about 64m) in Nigeria are unemployed is a very troublesome situation. There are mounting criticisms about the university as too academic and theoretical rather than applied and practical. Studies (e.g. Federal Ministry of Education 2006) revealed that large numbers of graduates are unemployed because they do not possess the basic skills required by most industries.

According to Hills, Robertson, Walker, Adey and Nixon (2003) the role of the university is to supply suitably skilled graduates to the work place. Similarly, Maharasoa and

Hay (2001) asserted that if education is a form of a service industry then university must move away from mere acquisition of knowledge to knowledge with greater concern for application and practices with particular emphasis on economic and social relevance, promotion and job satisfaction (Kimani, 2005; UY, 2003). What must be done therefore is to ensure constant interaction of the university with industry to ensure that the curricula centrepiece operates in a functional setting in relation to specific skills, career insights, creating job prospects and enhancing employability (Chalkley, 2000). Universities researches can only contribute to national development if essential research outputs are used by industries. This requires that the universities collaborate with industry to determine research needs and ensure that their researches are not only innovative but such researches are used to improve industrial outputs (Okonofua, 2008).

The Quality of Leadership and Training

One of the critical needs of the Nigerian nation is in the area of quality leadership. The quality of the leadership has often been described euphemistically as Nigerian share of natural disasters. The World Bank report (1988) documented the important role of the universities to include preparing and supporting people in positions of responsibilities both in government and the business world. While there have been emphasis on producing future leaders, there is nothing within the curriculum to reflect leadership and development of leadership skills. Studies (Eyler & Giles, 1999, Sax & Avalos, 1999) provided mounting evidence that students' engagement in community service substantially enhances the development of leadership skills. This is critically an activity (Community services) that does not exist and where it does it is essentially marginal on most campuses.

The core challenge of the universities is how do we produce a generation of students who will give good leadership and improve the society? Certainly, students will find it

difficult to lead until they have experienced effective leadership as part of their education. They are not likely to be committed to making changes unless the universities display similar commitment. How can the universities nurture the next generation of leaders to be committed to leading for the common good of the society, since the curriculum pay little or no attention to leadership development? The current pedagogical practices in the universities are basically geared towards acquisition of knowledge in the traditional disciplines. The university curricula must begin to think very seriously on how to promote and develop students' personal qualities - honesty, integrity, empathy, respect for others, civic responsibilities and commitment to national greatness. Unless graduates possess these qualities, it will be difficult to have transformative leaders who can devise more effective and more efficient solutions to one decadent and anachronistic society. Acquisition of knowledge and production of new knowledge constitute the preoccupation of most universities. However, such knowledge must advance and solve the immediate needs and problems of the environment before they are considered worthwhile.

The crop of graduates milled out yearly from our universities not only lack the relevant knowledge but they are tragically barren in as much as leadership qualities are concerned. One other basic factor for this is that the universities administrative structures are also very defective. The degree of academic corruption is witnessing a dramatic upsurge creating problems of credibility and underling the core values of the universities. The hitherto high social prestige enjoyed by the academic is diminishing.

The employment of poorly trained staff, pursuance of non-academic values and the commoditization of academic post and grades are all vices that must be fumigated out of the Ivory tower to make it responsible to leadership needs. As Kellogg Foundation (1999) and Heifetz, (1994) aptly noted, the social problems confronting most societies today call for adaptive and creative solutions that require a new kind of leadership.

Conclusion

The university is the main outlet for microcosmic development as it is responsible for educating our young people, engages in training advanced students and thereby promoting social progress and economic development. For the university to be functional, it must respond to social demands many nations have transformed their universities in response to globalization and the realization that economic prosperity and social progress can be driven by knowledge through the instrument of education especially the university.

In knowledge - driven world, the university must meet the challenges of developing human capital for social mobilization, gainful employment and quality of leadership. These can be achieved if the university is transformed from knowledge recycling to knowledge building, remodel from its current traditional disciplines to a veritable panacea for numerous social maladies.

It must be noted that the rate and volatility of knowledge makes social change difficult to forecast. This poses a great challenge to the university and makes curriculum reform a necessary and continuous process. We must also anticipate future needs and challenges so as not to continue to run the saber-toothed tiger curriculum in a new world ruled by modern forces of globalization, industrializations, democracy, scientific and technological advancement and other buzzing array of topical issues. The current tumbling down of the competitive from market economy (capitalism) barely two decades after the crash of Marxist socialism; the intensive research in space technology and the deep ocean are new global challenges with its attendant social paradigm shifts. Curriculum experts must be ahead of these forces and develop a model of programmes that will reduce incidence of "future shock".

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