

Overcoming Challenges in Pioneering New Universities in Nigeria

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First, let me thank the Vice-Chancellor and principal officers of the Edo University, Iyamo for considering me worthy to deliver this address. I consider it an honor, this being perhaps the first foundation day lecture of this esteemed University.

I also wish to congratulate the founding fathers and patriots who worked tirelessly hard to ensure that this University is established despite the harsh economic realities in the country. From what I have seen, it's evident that a good foundation has been laid for the take-off of the University. I have no doubt in my mind therefore, that this University will reach its highest level of development in the very near future.

In the next 30 minutes or so, I will speak on the challenges of pioneering new Universities, example being the Edo University, and share my experiences on embarking on a similar exercise at the University of Medical Sciences in Ondo State. The presentation is being organized into 4 parts. In the first part of the presentation, I will speak on the philosophy of establishing new Universities in Nigeria and what this means for the country's development. In this section, I will explain the concept of *pioneering* and demonstrate that within our national experience, this is actually the most important phase in the evolution of Universities.

In the second part of the presentation, I will narrate some of the challenges a new University is likely to face, while in the third part, I will itemize some of the strategies that could be used to overcome these challenges. In the 4th and final part, I will focus on the challenge of funding limitation, and show that this should not be a deterrent to actualizing high quality education, but rather I will explain that “when

there is a will, indeed, there should be a way”. I will end by making key recommendations to various stakeholders on ways to deliver high quality education in our dear country.

Rationale for new Universities

There is on-going debate as to whether Nigeria needs new Universities judging from the fact that many of the existing 142 Universities in the country have not yet been fully developed. However, it has to be recognized that Universities exist for the sole purpose of building human resources for the advancement of societal development. The fact that despite the plethora of Universities in Nigeria, this country has not ameliorated its developmental challenges suggests that much more still needs to be done. Our mounting developmental challenges to which our existing Universities have not been able to find sustainable solutions indicate that this country must continue to search for new institutions with new strategic directions that can help build the type of nation and country we deserve. Countries like the United States and the UK have reached their developmental levels largely because of the contributions made by Universities such as Harvard, Cambridge and Oxford. Nigeria must also seek similar institutional buy-ins and solutions to the developmental challenges that we face. In my view, the search for new Universities must continue until we can find new Universities and institutions able to identify unique solutions to the existing developmental conundrum in the country.

Therefore, an important caveat in seeking to establish a new University is that such an institution must be focused in helping to solve a major developmental challenge in the country. It should as much as possible deviate from the “business-as-usual” approach of older universities, and must devote efforts at creating new ways and new paradigms that are solution-driven and action-oriented.

Thus, we must move away from the current propensity for rich persons seeing that they have made a lot of money and using the establishment of a University to

showcase their new found wealth. By contrast, a new University must be driven by the emergence of a new idea on societal development and an analysis that indicate that such a new institution can help to foster the social change that is required to rectify the situation. Thus, a new University must be founded on a new idea and a new mission and vision statements to actualize those ideas for the development of the country. It must be founded on whimsical and sentimental values that do not have a place for building the nation of our dream.

Pioneering a New University – the principles and concept

A new University is like a new house being built. An architect must first develop the drawings, and a strong foundation would have to be laid if the building is to stand the test of time. Similarly, for a new University, a strong foundation must be laid if the institution is to be able to overcome future shenanigans that would be put on its path to greatness. In my view, the most important phase of a new University is the first 5 years during which a foundation is being laid for its development. If anything goes wrong or right, this phase will always be blamed or praised as the case may be.

The good news is that history is always kind to foundation builders, but at the micro-level, insiders within the University are always able to say the right kinds of things about the role of foundation leaders either as stimulants or inhibitors of the development process of the University.

That's why pioneers must be very careful about the things they do because they will always be judged by history.

For the purpose of this lecture, I define pioneers as the first Visitor, Chancellor, Pro-Chancellor/ members of Council, Vice-Chancellor, members of Senate, principal officers and indeed, all staff and students who are the first to occupy key positions in the University. They have unique roles to play in developing the new University, different from the roles exemplified for staff and students in older Universities. In my view, they are the key visionaries of the new University and their success or non-

success will feature in the life-history of the University for all time. In the circumstance, while key officials in older Universities may be prone to seek to enjoy the pecks of their offices, officials in new Universities do not have such pecks of offices to enjoy. For the sake of the institutions that they head and for the sake of what the future will say about their roles in developing the University, such officials in new Universities must be ready to make sacrifices and focus only on the task of obtaining results in laying a solid and strong foundation for the University.

Challenges faced by pioneers of new Universities

There are several challenges that a new University faces. However, for the purpose of this lecture, I will focus on 3 challenges. The first is the challenge of refining the idea behind the University, so that it becomes understandable by all stakeholders. The second is developing a culture of universality on which a University is founded and ensuring that the basic principles of freedoms for which Universities are known worldwide are consolidated and not eroded by the circumstances under which the University was founded. The third is the challenge of funding limitation which both new and old Universities face, but which has more severe consequences for new Universities.

With regards to the idea behind the University, it is often not obvious to new Universities that this has to be refined, consolidated, made understandable, and disseminated to all stakeholders. Without such a process of consolidation, the mission of the University often gets mis-interpreted, which often accounts for the low esteem with which new Universities are held. Experiences have shown that Universities have been established in recent times without time taken to properly justify the University, to develop a strategic plan for the University and to describe uniquely assailable mission and vision statements. Principal Officers are often chosen without these primordial preparations, which meant that such officials will

have to take time to do the appropriate groundwork. This then becomes a challenge, especially because the principal officers are sometimes ill-prepared to fulfill such an undertaking. In my assessment of over 20 new Universities in the country, I found that many did not have strategic plans of action. The vision and mission statements are simply those that answer to the demand made for optimizing quality tertiary education that are now globally recognized without systematic efforts made to describe how these relate to the specific Universities in question. Thus, what you find are repetitions of mission and vision statements without the specificity and action plans needed to differentiate one University from the other. This is a challenge that new Universities often grapple with and in my view, it partly explains the low patronage of such Universities by staff and students.

The second challenge I would like to talk about is the protection of University autonomy, without which the University cannot hope to rise to the demand of global competitiveness. New Universities face this challenge mainly because their proprietors may not be properly nuanced in the traditions of Universities and are increasingly more likely to undermine the proper administration of Universities. There are two kinds of autonomies, also called freedoms that Universities have always enjoyed globally and that insulate them from the vicissitudes of the larger society. These include university autonomy and academic freedom. Substantive autonomy refers to the independent existence of the educational institution and its ability to govern itself using time-honored methods in university traditions and culture. By contrast, procedural autonomy is concerned with the rights of the institution within the legal framework under which it was set up.

Academic freedoms on the other hand was defined by Russell in 1993 as “the right of teachers to put forward new ideas or unpopular opinions, their freedom to follow a line of research where it leads, regardless of the consequences, and the corresponding freedom to teach the truth as they see it”.

While many Nigerian Universities can be said to have enjoyed *some* academic freedoms, it is arguable as to whether their current modes of operation actually allow teachers to conduct research and teach *regardless of the consequences*. It is doubtful whether a teacher would be able to research and teach some aspects that may be seen as harmful to the interest of the proprietors of the University where he/she teaches. This is a moot point which can be a matter of discourse for another day.

Regarding university autonomy, it's on record that the Obasanjo administration passed the University Autonomy Bill into law in 2003 to ensure that Universities are able to govern themselves without external interference. Councils were then given more powers to administer the Universities and to appoint and discipline key officials of Universities. While the intent of that bill could be said to be credible, its actual operationalization have fallen short of expectation in many federal Universities. There continues to be undue interference by governments either through the appointed Council members or through direct partisan involvement in University governance.

The situation in State-owned and private Universities is worse, which led the NUC to recently issue a statement on the need for proprietors of state-owned Universities and private Universities to respect the rules on University autonomy.

In my view, a new University has to work very hard and diplomatically, to prevent erosion of its autonomy right from the very onset, otherwise the future of the University in terms of its ability to achieve its mandate will be in jeopardy.

The third challenge facing new Universities that I intend to touch on in this presentation is funding limitation, which is a problem in all new Universities. Universities are being established by federal, states and private proprietors in this country today without adequate preparations made for sustainable funding. Indeed, some Universities are being established under the principle of commercialization and the erroneous belief that they can be profit-making. My view is that at this level of

our development, University education in Nigeria cannot be provided under a profit making motive because of the huge costs involved and the fact that students and parents are presently not in a position to pay the actual costs.

By contrast, University education ought to be seen as a social service that addresses specific development needs until such a time the country equilibrates in its development needs vis-à-vis its human resource requirements.

So, adequate funding by proprietors is crucial to the survival of new Universities. Some have argued that Universities cannot seek universal autonomy and freedoms while relying on governments/proprietors for financial sustainability. Indeed, this has been the main argument that governments and proprietors have used to deny autonomy to Universities, for they often say “those who pay the piper must dictate the tune”. However, those who argue this way must also know that financial autonomy does not happen in one day. It can only come to pass when Universities enjoy proper autonomy under a knowledgeable, focused and self-less leadership. Thus, the process of leadership selection not only guarantees proper administration of the University but will eventually engender financial autonomy for Universities.

Addressing the Challenges

I propose a 4-point approach to mitigating the challenges associated with pioneering new Universities within the context of Nigeria’s declining economy. First, a new University must not be brought about in a hurry. There has to be a dedicated period of planning (at least 2-3 years) during which the rationale and specific ideas behind the University would be solidly consolidated. Planners with experience in University culture and management must be brought on board to assist with the planning process. The recommendations by the National Universities Commission that new Universities should provide evidence of legal establishment, an academic brief and physical planning development before they are given recognition has to be taken seriously as these provide evidence of a planned process for growing the University.

The aspects of the academic brief which describes the academic programme and the orderly manner in which such programs would be established and funded by the proprietors also has to be properly considered and described. Academic programs must not be established in a haphazard manner, but rather must be planned to align with available funds and resources, with evidence provided to justify the specific purpose for establishing the programs. In particular, the planning phase should also provide opportunity for the proprietors to develop a strategic plan for the University complete with mission and vision statements, the identification of possible challenges, and phased futuristic planning on how those challenges would be mitigated and prevented.

Secondly, the choice of principal officers in a new University is extremely critical for achieving its developmental milestones, and should not be taken lightly. The Chairperson of the Governing Council and members must be men and women of high integrity who have the knowledge and wherewithal to take the right decisions in accordance with the traditions already established for best performing Universities. The Vice-Chancellor must also be someone who can stand ethically tall among his colleagues, so as to engender the required cooperation and support for running the University. Indeed, external influences on University's governance can only be ameliorated if the Vice-Chancellor "knows his/her onions" and has a profile that is respectable and reputable. He must be extremely savvy, and diplomatic such that while insisting on the doctrines of autonomy, he/she does not "step on toes", but is understandable and convincing in his quest for such autonomy. As affronts on University autonomy and academic freedoms also exist within the University community, a Vice-Chancellor in a new University must also be *courageous and bold* in dealing with his colleagues while not being *autocratic* in seeking to uphold the basic principles on University culture and governance. *Coaching* must also be added as one of the characteristics of such a Vice-Chancellor, as employees who may be working in a University environment for the first time would have to be taught the

basic principles of University governance that are different from those of the larger society.

A third recommendation is the need to immediately establish working organograms and rules that govern the running of the University to which all staff should be made to be compliant. Examples can be drawn from other institutions with similar mission and vision statements, but such rules and regulations must be modernized, made understandable and must address the specific needs of the new University.

The fourth recommendation is that which relates to funding and financial management in a new University. It's almost evident that a new University would have limited funding to undertake initial infrastructural development. In my review of over 20 newly established Universities in Nigeria, none had adequate take-off grants for required infrastructural and human resource development, and many had no definitive source of adequate future funding. Thus, my main recommendation based on my experiences at the University of Medical Sciences is that a new University must not rely on funding from its proprietors alone, but must immediately work on establishing multi-sectorial funding outlets. In the two years of existence of UNIMED, we have established a full-time Advancement and Fund-raising Unit, through which we established the Friends of UNIMED Fund, an international advocacy group for the University, and have sourced funds from several international agencies. Through these efforts, we have built considerable support, which have enabled the University to overcome some of its immediate funding challenges.

However, another principle is the establishment of a good accounting and financial management policy in the University. I strongly believe that despite the limited funds available, the proper disbursement of those funds and strategic use of the funds for key activities of the University are even more important, if critical milestones are to be achieved. Universities exist for teaching and research. Thus, funds should be strategically disbursed to prioritize teaching and academic activities, and less on

administrative and other mundane activities. The time to lay a solid foundation for accountable and transparent financial management is at the foundational level of the University when Council would establish the ground rules for financial management and also ensure that the rules are followed, especially the prompt retirement of financial advances and adherence to internal and external audit milestones and procedures. Without such adherence to sound financial management policies, not much can be achieved even with when funds become adequate for running the University.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude this analysis by reiterating that we should not shy away from establishing new Universities in Nigeria if those Universities are strategically positioned to address the mounting socio-economic challenges that confront the country. However, a systematic planning process and adherence to the time-honored principles on University governance would help to ensure that the mission and vision of such Universities are achieved within the shortest period of time.

I thank you all for listening.