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EMERGING CHALLENGES OF UNIVERSITY EDUCATION IN NIGERIA IN THE 21ST CENTURY

I am honoured to address you today as convocation lecturer. I am not particularly sure how the lot was drawn that resulted in my being inflicted on you. I am even more worried that the subject, Educating Nigeria for the 21st Century has been assigned me.

I have been a University Teacher for many years after a spell as an entrepreneur, a consultant and a manager in industry but I am not sure that I have managed to cumulate enough wisdom to speak with any authority on the subject of education. I respect myself and as a result, have thought such matters should be left to eminently qualified persons like Professor Pai Obanya, and if we want to disturb those resting peacefully, the memories of the like of Professor Babs Fafunwa. In my more rascally days as an undergraduate at the University of Nigeria in the season just following the Civil War, a hailing of the types of Prof OC Nwana would have been enough to settle who should have the right of way.

Since I did not have enough courage to decide my merit of the invitation to give this convocation lecture, I had no choice but to burrow into the subject matter in the hope that my understanding of the fact that parents are the first teachers of their children, should give me locus Standi, as a parent, to address the subject. So this is not likely to be the case of the mythical Onitsha woman socialite who when a sumptuous tray of Jollof Rice was served her said "Ha yee I was not expecting this" and promptly opened her bag to fetch the ready and waiting cutlery that would permit maximum effect in doing justice to meal.

Since curiosity drove me as a graduate student in the United States in 1979 to register for a class on Revolutionary education offered by a Professor doing research in Cuba, I have done little to educate myself on how people are educated, even though I am constantly engaged, in educating people, as

a parent, and in settings that are more formal, as a teacher of business. Indeed note has to be made here of a caveat I have often offered at the beginning of some of my class sessions which is not original to me. It says that those who can do it. Those who can't do it, teach, and those who cannot teach use the case study method. As you all know, being a Business educator I primarily use the case study method. My need for redemption is evident.

The foregoing effort at providing advance apologies for my limitations notwithstanding, the call of duty still demands that we proceed on this excursion down the track of my thinking on the subject of the challenges confronting university education in Nigeria in the 21st century.

It seems to me that a decent way to proceed would be to establish how I think the 21st century is likely to emerge; What I think the critical needs for fitting into that emerging civilization may be and how learning can enable culture adapt. An appropriate first foot forward may then indeed be a snapshot of Nigeria at the dawn of the 21st century and where tertiary education in Nigeria is situated as the 21st century unfolds.

NIGERIA AND NEW CHALLENGES

The 21st century dawned on Nigeria with a troubling remark by a man whose life spanned a good part of the 20th century and whose work defined the new discipline of management, Peter Drucker. He had noted that at the beginning of the 20th Century the quality of life of the average African and the average European were mainly similar or marginally different at best. But by the end of the 20th century, he pointed out; the difference was like night and day. This difference Drucker suggests is the result of productivity growth in Europe. In Africa, typified by Nigeria, productivity did not grow as it did in Europe because of education, technology and cultures of production.

Among the great boosts to output at the beginning of the 20th century was the advent of the moving Assembly line which made mass production possible and The Ford Motor Company would ensure that emerging middle class people could buy a motor car. But colonial Nigeria would not industrialize Nigeria. What colonial government required was maintenance of the activities of Law and Order, basic civility, and the evacuation of Raw materials to Europe. Formal education, beyond the requirements of acculturation of the traditional agents of socialization like the family, age grades etc. was knowledge for being obedient subjects of the empire and for administrative capacities to manage "minimum" government. The Higher

Colleges in Yaba and elsewhere, as well as the University College in Ibadan, were set up to produce the leadership elite of this limited public service. It was not until self-Government came that Nationalist leaders in their new garb as leaders of government embarked on an aggressive policy of Industrializing Nigeria.

Limited as the goals of colonial Administration were, the tertiary institutions they set up were known to have been of high quality. When at independence the government of Prime Minister Abubakar Tafawa Balewa wanted to determine the direction of the policy on higher education it set up a commission chaired by Oxford University educator Sir Eric Ashby. That commission's report is particularly remembered for its note that the quality of higher education in Nigeria in 1961 was as good as the best in the world, and for Ashby's comment that it was harder to get into University of Ibadan, than to get into Harvard, that year.

In the same manner as the University College in Ibadan set enviable standards the first autonomous university in the country, the University of Nigeria in taking a different turn to produce professionals for a more ambitious national development agenda. Drawing from the role of the Land Grant universities on the United States which were critical to the Agricultural revolution there, the UNN which was midwived by Michigan State University, inspired a new kind of excellence that took the American course system from object of jokes in British Nigeria, to the preferred approach for a good rounded education, as the General studies classes better prepared the UNN graduates for the general challenges of the environment and workplace.

The 'alchemy' of soldiers and Oil would despoil this tradition of academic excellence that spread from UNN and UI through the original 5 universities including the University of Ife and Lagos and Ahmadu Bello University.

With military rule and Oil money the belief Nigeria could do all things led to a view of funding availability and a more egalitarian notion of higher education. The regime of General Olusegun Obasanjo by 1978 sort to open access in a way that resulted in overcrowded campuses, inadequate facilities, poor teacher- student ratios and deterioration of standards and culture consequent on such pressure on facilities by the end of the century many of the universities had reached a point where the universities were a shadow of their years of glory.

During this period from 1948, when the University College was opened and the end of the century the political economy of Nigeria had gone from a colonial marketing board economy but on agricultural commodities to an emerging industrializing economy in which the regions were competing for who would bring the most gains of progress to their nationality groups. This phenomenon which influenced the race to industrialization, Television, and free education programmes was aptly described by Michigan State University professors Robert Melson and Howard Wolpe as "Competitive Communalism"

The Competitive Communalism epoch that anchored Nigeria's Federalism would be eclipsed by a new season that characterized the last two decades of the twentieth century, the concept of sharing "the national cake" of oil receipts. This was done in a manner akin to the Vicar, the National Government, handling out prebends, to the Assistant Vicars. Richard Joseph in his book, Prebendal Politics in Nigeria labels this concept; Bureaucratic Prebendalism.

Its fruits unfortunately, included Dutch Disease, slow growth, a collapse of culture and a desperate need for structural Adjustment of the economy. One victim of structural Adjustment programmes and the need to shrink the frontiers of the expanding state was a decline in the funding of the university system.

WHERE IS THE WORLD IN THE 21ST CENTURY

If we are to educate Nigeria for 21st century effectiveness, a clear sense for that world, is imperative. Thomas L Friedman writes well the 'prehistory' of the 21st century. His conclusion: The world is Flat. In his much read book: The World is Flat- A brief History of the Twenty – first Century, Friedman reflects on the dramatic changes drive by technology and the emergence of huge populations of new middle class people with the coming of prosperity to India, and how globalizations ascendancy in the midst of all the new technologies are redefining standards and competitiveness.

The World had come to be a place of grave inequalities in the 20th century as Drucker already pointed out. Those inequalities came with the Great Escape from misery by a small part of the planet as a result of leaps in healthcare and output, as Princeton professor Angus Deaton provides a grand explanation for in the book: The Great Escape

The asymmetries of knowledge, information technology and access to capital were in a paradoxical way both deepened and eased by new technologies.

Processing the technologies increased advantage over those who lacked it yet access to it made it possible for those who did not have it previously to leapfrog stages of development and even have some advantage over those still struggling to defend yesterday's investments that were being overthrown or required more energy to unlearn what they had invested much to learn before climbing the new learning curve. I recall a personal encounter as the last century was barely three years to go.

I had been spending a sabbatical year from 1996 to 1997 writing a book as a scholar in residence at the Harvard Business School. I linked up with some of the Nigerian academics in the Boston area. One of them was an old friend Tayo Akinwande who was a Professor at MIT. In our conversation there was frustration that even though engineering had gone the way of microprocessing Nigerian engineering faculty were not keeping up. I then suggested that we could add value by designing a programme where we could select about 100 top engineering graduates in the country and bring them into a yearlong programme in which some of them could use their Leave time to come in and lead classes, and others intervene by satellite distance learning. We, from the Business school would have sessions in Entrepreneurship and then bring Entrepreneurs to endow a fund from which groups of these participants would compete on Business plans. The best would win a prize of about ₦10 million which could only be used as seed capital for the venture offered in the plan.

On return to Nigeria I took the idea to PTDF Secretary Chief Tayo Akpata in the hope they support the initiative. He liked it but time soon ran out on PTDF and the regime.

The World becoming flat had very direct consequence for learning, and Thomas Friedman spoke to this when he wrote that "The first and most important, ability you can develop in the flat world is the ability to "learn how to learn- to constantly absorb and teach yourself new ways of doing old things or new ways of doing new things" (p302 (release 2.0)). This is clearly an imperative in a world where every job is increasingly going to be subject to digitization. I recall a statistic from a few years ago that showed salaries had gone up through the years for every category of workers in the United States except for the group with less than High School of education. The reason was simple. If you had enough brawn in the 1950s you could get a good job working the Assembly line in Detroit, with hardly any education. With the unions, wages kept getting better and a house in the suburbs with two cars in the garage was quite possible. But as the 20th century moved to

its close the Assembly line in Detroit was increasingly robotics based and the factory worker had to understand how to programme those more efficient robots. With less than a high school education in Detroit you were increasingly becoming like the man in Organization learnings Rewan's axiom where the rate of learning has to be equal to or greater than the pace of change in the environment or the organization would be in the mode of a Dinosaur, progressively.

Educating for the 21st Century will have to involve preparing people, in a time of rapid change, to understand and engage cultures distant and different, yet endowed in a manner that character can advertise trust, subject understanding, quickly communicate competence, and high Emotional Intelligence facilitate empathy with partners. These capabilities do not come easy but they flow readily from teachers passionate about their work, as a vocation, and tireless in pursuit of the education of the race, seeing that the future depends so on it. Universities the home of the highest level of such learning need therefore to be better understood.

WHY DO WE HAVE UNIVERSITIES

To determine emerging challenges for University education it should make sense to establish why universities exist. The idea of a University is one I have tried to explore following the profound thought of John Henry Cardinal Newman that Anglican clergyman and Oxford scholar who would become a Prince of the Catholic Church and found the University of Ireland.

Twenty years ago I offered a summary of what a University had come to be in the light of the debate around the Cardinal Newman's idea of a university. "Institutions of higher education, usually comprising a liberal arts and sciences college and graduate and professional schools and having the authority to confer degrees in various fields of study. The modern university evolved from the medieval schools known as studia generalis; ...The earliest studia arose out of efforts to educate Clerks and Monks beyond the level of Cathedral and Monastic Schools ... were institutions in which the essences or universities were studied." (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1968)

These essences or universals set the course of higher education at this ultimate level along a path that was deliberately comprehensive in scope. This point is in fact more richly summarized in the 1952 preface to John Henry Cardinal Newman's The idea of A University. He takes the view here that the university is a place of teaching universal knowledge. This implies that its objective is, on the one hand, intellectual, not moral; and on the

other, the diffusion of knowledge rather than the advancement of it. The diffusion need brings the students but they will lack the osmotic capability of absorbing fully the existing base of knowledge unless the universal knowledge includes values that give context, meaning and relevance to the knowledge gained in the university. This is why this university confers its degrees on people who have been found worthy in 'character and in learning.'

There are many who wonder if the character part of this qualification is still a serious consideration given the values of graduates in the workplace, the incidents of cult violence, examination malpractices etc., that have come to become pronounced aspects of the public view of the contemporary Nigerian university.

The idea of a university from the foregoing is of a place that diffuses ideas to people of character so the ideas can be properly utilized. But utilized for whose benefit? Since man is a gregarious animal and has always lived in communities which provide the non-appropriability goods he requires, it should seem reasonable that knowledge should be utilized both for his individual benefit and the benefit of the university community, and the progress of the society in which the university is located. A one-time chancellor of the University of Navarra in Spain, the Spanish priest Josemaria Escriva, states this most richly when he points out that:

"A university must play a primary role in contribution to human progress. Since the problems facing mankind are multiple and complex (spiritual, cultural, social, financial etc.), university education must cover all these aspects." (Escriva, 1974)

To contribute to human progress, the university has necessarily to advance knowledge to new frontiers that make living more comfortable than has hitherto been the case.

I have however argued in the past that the university idea needs to be reconsidered to be in more specialized form to bring the knowledge and progress required by a man at this time in history. At my remarks of acceptance when my 1998 book was presented The Abiola Prize for the best academic text published in Nigeria I said the following words:

"Since the convergence of three streams of technology – computing, telecommunications and broadcasting – the vision of the information age has

materialized and the possibilities for the future remain infinite. These infinite possibilities have redefined the competitive advantage of nations. To compete today countries not only need knowledge workers, they also need centres of excellence in academic research.

Ever since the Japanese showed that you could build successful technology companies without investing in basic science research and the Americans followed suit with companies like the Bell companies getting rid of Bell labs, tertiary institutions have had to play a more critical role in the research that moves society forward. How do our universities measure up in research?"

Books of worth cannot be published unless the best of academics are attracted to the university and have the resources to engage in research. Yesterday the best graduating students stayed back as junior fellows when the average, like myself, were thrown into the world. Unfortunately today what Nigerian society has done to the dignity of the academia led many of them to seek greener pastures outside the academic. This phenomenon has been made worse by the new idolatry of our time, the elevation of money to the level of god worshipped by society.

Those who stayed behind found themselves unable to find basic journals, not to talk of travel grants or funding for serious research. The need of the moment is therefore finding the best formula for ensuring that the best people stay behind and that the books, journals, travel grants and research funding are available. In my opinion one of the best ways to achieve that would be to have more specialized institutions in tertiary education and to encourage the other universities to become particularly known in some fields. In that way they can have closer cooperation with industry in the areas they add value and industry can better support them.

In my opinion we need to redesign many masters degree programmes as finishing schools where people who have developed decent skills that are inadequate or obsolete can realign their knowledge base to new realities. Take as an example the issue of engineering skills. Our professors are diligently striving to impart engineering know-how to their students. But the reality of our times is that micro-processing skills drive innovation and productivity gains.

We cannot expect business-as-usual professors in such areas. The challenge is to have a Centre of excellence that brings the best minds with engineering degrees and provides them both micro-processing skills and

entrepreneurship training. To deliver the kind of value we hope to see in such a situation the institutions cannot afford to be all things to all people, so they have to focus.

In suggesting specialized tertiary institutions I am in no way consigning the traditional university with a broad spectrum of disciplines to the dustbin of history. Far from that. There is a place for universities that serve to provide raw materials for the finishing schools that many graduate programmes will have to become. The very specialized institutions complementing work done as undergraduates could be the anchor for the specialized skills needed to stay competitive.

The idea is to have a complementary network of knowledge providers, some of which train the average to maintain systems while others function as centres of excellence that shape the best for the challenges of moving society forward. At a time when we must leapfrog to close the development gap that has opened up between Europe and us in this century we cannot afford to ignore the ideas of centres of excellence that will light the torch for society to follow. It has by now become familiar refrain for me that the challenge of development is to restore in 2000 the relationship of the lowest decile of the population in Europe and Africa in 1990. In 1990 the difference between the quality of life of these groups was marginal. Today the difference is as with day and night. Technology driven productivity increases, which have given mankind more productivity growth in that last 100 years than in the 10,000 years of recorded history before the redesign of the steam engine by James Watt, have separated us from the industrialized West. To bridge this yawning chasm we need to reinvent education and create special centres of excellence that will provide the leadership for circumnavigating stages of development; competitiveness in knowledge is a function of the quality of human capital.

In the network of complementary institutions we also need to encourage diversity. There should be private and public institutions unrestricted by bureaucratic requirements that serve no purpose beyond the restriction of imagination and the satisfaction of the bureaucrats' desire for control. Whereas the university should be a place for ideals and idealism where faculty are, as a colleague jokes frequently, a collection of anarchists united by a common car park, we should have competing concepts. There should be tertiary institutions with a niche in the locus of praxis where making things happen is treasured above the idealization of reality.

CHALLENGES BEFORE HIGHER EDUCATION IN NIGERIA IN THE 21ST CENTURY

If the land grant universities “democratized” the prosperity the Agriculture revolution, and the computer based research and teaching hubs created industry clusters like Silicon Valley that transformed a struggling US economy of the late 1970s; what should universities do for Nigeria in the 21st century?

In my view the challenge of claiming the promise of Nigeria involves purging from the effects of a collapse of culture; positioning for competitiveness on the global value chains of factor endowments of different regions of the country. It is also a challenge building creative problem solving dispositions as different from the system –maintenance and solutions importation mindset that a season of oil wealth has foisted on Nigerian culture. As the effects of ICT and convergence shrinks the world into that mythical global village, globalization has demanded of us global citizens who play to global standards and not to Nigerian standards.

How can the universities rise to these challenges after a long period of underfunding and politicization of university administration in which, sometimes, academic excellence and town-gown engagement to solve society’s problems, were literally suspended?

As I have said before, this will involve each university trying to define its purpose in the face of some of these needs and a world constantly in the throes of change. And this may involve unlearning so it can learn. Let me illustrate with an example of what I once called executive vocational education.

Speaking at a summit on job creation in Rivers State a few years ago I lamented the paucity of skills in many sectors and showed that investors are sometimes limited by quality of people available in technical skills areas. My favorite illustration that when you see tiling that is neat you almost instinctively, conclude Malians, Togolese and Ghanaians had been recruited for the job. I concluded by suggesting that in the face of so many unemployed graduates ‘executive vocational training’ to provide six months crash course in Tiling/Masonry to such graduates with an Entrepreneurship module. The idea was that such graduates would recruit others a little less skilled, as part of gangs that would step into opportunities where Togolese Artisans were making a fortune while they went from office to office begging to apply for jobs not there.

But it would be difficult in the traditional university system to think of such course offerings unless a track of unlearning precedes new learning.

So, just as most businesses go out to fashion a strategy for their venture and revise them in the face of change, universities should be able to do the same. A Business case study I used to teach some twenty years ago was of a steel producer in the US that had mini-mills around the country and was one of the thriving stocks on the New York Stock Exchange. The name of the company NUCOR, which came from its earlier incarnation from the Nuclear Corporation of America points well to how corporate purpose can evolve.

Surely the purpose of the Nigerian university praised by Sir Eric Ashby has changed. Part of the crisis of university education in Nigeria is the failure to change purpose with shifting reality.

The university, besides being a place people come to learn should itself be a learning organization where, as in Rewan's axiom, the rate of learning has to be equal to or greater than the pace of change in the environment. My prescription is that this learning adopt the "pedagogy of the Determined" approach.

I have advanced in previous writing a rejigging of Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed, idea.

The promise of colonial education was to improve the lot of once peasant peoples and help them raise their living conditions But, as Peter Drucker pointed out the quality of life of the average African in 1900 was only marginally different from the average person in Europe in 1900, but as the twentieth century came to an end the difference in their quality of life was as night and day. So what happened in the course of the twentieth century? Part of the explanation may be found in the thesis of that Brazilian educator from 40 years ago, Paulo Friere. He was a Marxist and great admirer of Franz Fanon. I too admired Fanon but Catholic education saved me from being a Marxist long before I learnt that if at 18 you were not a Marxist something was wrong with your heart but if at 40 you were still a Marxist, something was wrong with your head. So I took the essentials of The pedagogy of the Oppressed, stripped it of its ideological overhang, drawing from the inherent entrepreneurial foundation of human nature, captured in Judeo-Christian tradition in Genesis 2:15 where man is made co-creator with God, moving creation forward, and offered the 'Pedagogy of the Determined'

as escape from the pedagogy in which oppressed peoples from colonial situations received only enough to keep the status quo of oppression. That pedagogy of the oppressed also allowed limited controlled ascent of the colonized, and post-colonial Africa. The pedagogy of the determined entailed and compelled of every learner a vision of leapfrogging the productivity surge Peter Drucker identified in his comment about how Europe and Africa grew apart.

For modern America, education brought it prosperity through the institution of Land Grant Universities that supported the Agricultural Extension Services and made America's Agricultural revolution possible, with some help from such remarkable institution building effort as the Peruvian Economist Hernando De Soto identifies in his *Mystery of Capital* and both Nial Ferguson, the British Historian at Harvard and Alan Beattie the *Financial Times* Economist show clearly in their books, *Civilization and False Economy* which strive to explain how North America prospered and Latin America faltered.

To liberate Nigeria from its location on the misery index is to retool its educational system in which an elite lacking in vision allowed the conditions of the pedagogy of the oppressed. We can see the evidence in how we took character building out of the educational system. Where once schools like Government Secondary School Owerri prided themselves with the motto: When wealth is lost, nothing is lost; when health is lost something is lost but when character is lost, all is lost; to one that does not teach civics. How will they know values shape human progress. When history is not taught, how will they be inspired by heroes past to dream the impossible and make it happen.

The future of education is in taking the factor endowments of regions of the country and deciding to become globally competitive on their value chains, with educational systems aimed at vocational training, engineering, and scientific experimental skills that support dominant play on those value chains.

As a corporate learning organization the pedagogy of the determined should compel universities to begin the search for purpose with a vision of Nigeria in shrinking, interconnected planet at once imperiled by man's conduct but opening opportunities in the interdependence arising therefrom.

The imperative of now is a learning university, healing yesterday's errors, enabling a leapfrog over the years the locust has eaten, and opening up a brave new future. As Prof. Pai Obanya insists; "Higher education institutions in Nigeria will have to start from now on to apply the global vision on the development of higher education curricula with its emphasis on the inculcation of generic skills, the aim of which is to prepare students both for the world of work and to the demands of learning society of the 21st century. Beyond his prescription flowing from those comments which include a foundation year during which students are exposed to ways of learning; eliminating narrow specialization in Bachelors degree programmes, the involvement of wide range of stakeholders in curriculum review and IT as base subject for all the challenges the universities to rethink teaching and learning methods.

Chairman, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen; the journey of this discussion lead to a simple conclusion. Like the sage said to the children who thought they were smart and came to him with a young chick held in the palm of their hands behind as they waited for his response to whether the chick was alive or dead: the future of higher education, as is that of Nigeria is in your hands, you the chieftain of the university system. What you do today will determine tomorrow. That is a sacred trust.

I thank you for your kind attention.

Patrick Okedinachi Utomi

BA. M.A. MPA, Phd. DBA

(Honoris Causa)