

SOLVING THE PROBLEM OF POOR QUALITY OF UNIVERSITY GRADUATES IN NIGERIA- A PROPOSED HOLISTIC APPROACH

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ABSTRACT: *Various schemes have been devised to tackle the problem of poor quality of University graduates in Nigeria. In spite of this, the problem has persisted. This paper essentially links poor quality graduates in Nigeria to the decentralized examination system which governs University degree examinations. Therefore, for detail study, this paper focuses on the linkage between the problem of poor quality graduates and credibility of the decentralized, individualized and autonomous University examination systems. The approach adopted in this paper is predicated on the fact that the subjective nature of University examination systems undermines quality by “shielding” the prospective graduate from facing a universally standardised objective evaluation. The objective of this paper is to devise a scheme towards finding a lasting solution to the problem. To achieve this goal, the paper postulates a thesis called – Joint Graduation, Convocation and Certification Programme (JGCCP) – which would involve universal testing and certification of graduates in Nigeria. It is a standardized framework which will allow for harmonized and universal approach to solving the problem. The objective is based on the fact that examination is the most important instrument used in Nigeria in determining quality of graduates.*

KEY WORDS: Examination, Quality Graduates, Nigeria, University, Education

INTRODUCTION

All over the world, universities are regarded as centre of learning, training and research. Universities are also regarded as institutes of higher education. Education, basically, involves transfer and acquisition of knowledge and skills in certain competences through the process of teaching and learning. Julius Okojie (2013) notes that education is a process for manpower development which is necessary for the achievement of rapid growth and development in any country. S. O. Awokoya, a former Minister of Education in Western Region, Nigeria, was reported to have declared in a parliamentary debate: “Educational development is imperative and urgent. It must be treated as a national emergency second only to war. It must move with the momentum of revolution” (Ukeje and Aisiku, 1982). Former President of Nigeria, Olusegun Obasanjo (cited in Okojie, 2013) avers that education is the major agency for both personal and national socio-economic development; hence investment in human capital development is critical to growth, development and productivity of any nation. Now University education, according to UNESCO, is a platform through which human beings are equipped with knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values in order to position them to derive maximum benefits from the society, and lead fulfilling lives, and contribute to the wellbeing of the community in which they are members (See Okojie, 2013). The World Bank (2002) states that the University is fundamental to nation building and societal development.

The evolution of Universities in Nigeria has roots in the introduction of western education into the country by Christian missionaries. The date has been fixed somewhere around 1842. From that period on, education has developed from missionary and Quaranic schools to Primary,

Secondary and Higher educational institutes. More specifically, the emergence of University in Nigeria began when Higher College, now Yaba College of Technology (YABATECH), was sited in Yaba, Lagos in 1932. The establishment of Yaba College followed the introduction of three-tier system of education in the country by E. R. T. Hussey in 1930 which divided up the educational system into elementary, middle and higher levels (Ukeje and Aisiku, 1982). It was hoped that the Yaba College would develop into a University College; hence in 1948 the students of the college became the pioneer/foundation students at the University College, Ibadan (Ukeje and Aisiku, 1982). Since then the Nigerian University has evolved and proliferate to the number we have today.

The mandate given to Universities in Nigeria has been outlines in the National Policy of Education (NPE) 2004. The document contains the goals of educational programme and the strategies adopted to achieve those goals. The part of the document that focuses on university education is Section 8. According to the document, the aim of University education in Nigeria is:

To contribute to national development through high level relevant, manpower training; to develop and inculcate proper values for the survival of the individual and society; to develop the intellectual capacity of individual to understand and appreciate their level and external environment; to acquire both physical and intellectual skills, this enable individuals to be self-reliant and useful members of the society; to promote and encourage scholarship and community service (NPE, 2004).

Furthermore, the document states that the university shall achieve these by intensifying and diversifying its programmes for the development of higher level manpower within the context of national needs and requirements of the country.

To attain these objectives, the university admits students who are trained in the various fields of endeavour. These candidates are now graduated into the main stream of the society after they had been found worthy in character and learning. These university trained individuals are then expected to apply their learning and training to the various sectors of national needs thereby bringing about growth and development of the self and the society. However, in recent times, the society has raised alarm over the quality of graduates produced by Nigeria Universities. For example, Nigerian Institute of Personnel Management, NIPM, (cited in Anho, 2011) noted that the quality of graduates from Nigerian Universities is declining rapidly. Anho also cited the report of National Employers Consultative Association (NECA) which decried the quality of Nigerian University graduates who they argue “do not meet the demands of industry”. Ifeoma Onuoha and Kelechi Ewuzie (2012) notes that employers of labour often complain about poor skills displayed by graduates of Nigerian Universities, which speak volumes about the quality of the degree certificates issues by these institutions. Peter Okebukola (cited in Yusuf et al, 2010) maintained that graduates of Nigerian faculties of education, for example, were inadequately prepared in both content and pedagogy, hence they could not teach well or at worst impact wrong knowledge which contribute negatively to the quality of students they produce. Tosanwumi Otolumefor (2011) collaborated the position arguing that many University lecturers could not justify their degrees in the classrooms.

Also, studies carried out by Dabalén, Oni and Adekoya (2002) and Mafiana, Olamide, Adesina and Shanty (2005) revealed from their studies that the quality of graduates produced by Nigerian Universities was low. Onyeneye (2006) concluded, after a review of relevant literature, that studies concluded that the quality of Nigerian University graduates was

declining in recent times against the demands of graduates was declining in recent times against the demands of the 21st century society and expectations in the labour market. In symbolizing these anxieties in practical terms, the employers of labour have resorted to pre-job test and pre-job training programme to enable them upgrade the knowledge and skills of the graduates to meet the standards in the industry. Sam Egwu, Nigerian former Minister of Education, averred that 80% of Nigerian University graduates were unemployable (Nigerian Compass, 5th March, 2009). Former President of Nigeria, Dr. Goodluck Jonathan, recently said that the Nigerian graduates could not take up employment opportunities because they are lacking in basic skills and knowledge required by industry (Otokunefor, 2011). An executive with employment agency remarked about the graduates he had interviewed for job:

I am always amazed at the quality of people that I interview; the guys can't write, speak neither English nor vernacular well; it is difficult to find a barely trainable recruit for important job positions... I am thorough embarrassed by my experiences with Nigerian graduates these days (Otokunefor, 2011).

The implication of this negative trend for the society is catastrophic. President Olusegun Obasanjo (quoted in Okojie, 2013) notes that "the implication of declining education has far-reaching effects on our moral, civic, cultural and economic sustainability." If University education is the ultimate vehicle for the delivery of critical developmental goals of the country as enshrined in the NEP 2004, then the production of what is usually described as "half-baked graduates" by Nigerian Universities will undermine the growth and development of the country. The impact of this negative development is more visible in the security sector, where the graduates, obviously lacking in moral character, embark on all kinds of social vices including kidnapping, armed robbery, terrorism, assassinations, burglary, theft, etc.

Meanwhile, various factors have been blamed as the reason for this anomaly. Some of the causative factors identified are: castrated and/or truncated programme duration, illegal admission concessions, poor quality of matriculants, unqualified lecturers, lack of dedication among professors, defective institutional environment, inadequacy of study facilities, examination malpractices, incompetent examination administrators, the waiver clause which allows failed students to graduates, brain-drain syndrome, deteriorated infrastructures, poor funding, erosion of university autonomy, political interference in University administration, unions unrest, student union activism, lecturers' impunity, academia rascality, inadequate research, university privatisation, regulative failure of National Universities Commission (NUC), irrelevant curricula, federal character and quota system syndrome, etc (Ajani & Ekundayo, 2008; Ebuara, Udida, Ekpiken and Basse, 2009; Yusuf, Ajidagba, Agbonna and Olumorin, 2010; Otokunefor, 2011; Aluede & Idogho, 2012).

To ameliorate this situation, various models and hypotheses have been postulated. Some of the suggested remedies include: increased funding, university autonomy, scrapping of the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB), improved condition of services, better supervision by NUC, provision of study facilities, infrastructural revamp, etc. However, it is important for us to note that each of these factors or control mechanism is a research problem of its own. It is therefore not advisable to lump all of them together in a single research paper. Most of the times, researchers make the mistake of glossing over the issues in just four to five paragraphs.

Therefore, for detail study, this paper focuses on the linkage between the problem of poor quality of graduates and credibility of individualized or autonomous university examination

systems. My approach is predicated on the belief that individualised, autonomous or decentralised university examination system in Nigeria allows for all kinds of sharp practices to be perpetrated since the prospective graduate shall not have to face universally standardised examinations. Autonomous examination system allows the Nigerian Universities to push out all kinds of elements as graduates found worthy in character and learning – based on their sole subjective experience or at best castrated inter-subjective external examiner input. This study essentially links poor quality of university graduates in Nigeria to decentralised examination system. It argues that absence of universal and standardised examination system for prospective graduates denies them the spirit of positive competitiveness which would have otherwise repositioned them to study harder in view of the hurdle ahead.

WHAT IS QUALITY UNIVERSITY GRADUATE

Olabanji Obadara and Abayomi Alaka (2013) defines quality as “the ability or degree with which a product, service, or phenomenon conforms, to an established standard, and which makes it to be relatively superior to others.” In other words, good quality refers to demonstration of conformity to established standards and principles. Idumange and Major (2006) argues that quality in education is usually confused with standards; whereas standards are usually specified targets with measurable indicators for comparative purpose, quality can be referred to an achievement in core function of the university. Quality therefore refers to a set of properties or characteristics which demonstrates the individuals’ conformity to set standards and exhibition of expected traits. Quality, according to Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2007), refers to high standard or very good characteristics of a new thing or person. That is to say, high or good quality is a set of characteristics or properties describing or symbolizing high standard and desirable traits. It follows that high quality University graduates refer to University graduates with high standards, high prowess, competitive skills, superlative competence and very good moral traits. A good quality university graduate exhibits high pedigree in learning and character, not on paper, but in actual real life experiences. Such an individual is able to demonstrate high level of self-discipline in character and learning. That is to say, he is able to bring his education to bear on his daily experiences. He is able to interact with and transform his environment with the skills and knowledge he has acquired. Furthermore, in industry, he is not found wanting in his area of qualification. A good quality graduate is able to hit the ground running without unnecessary difficulty. He is able to use his learning to identify problems in the industry and devise scheme of resolving it. A good quality graduate neither needs one year pre-job training on industry skill nor is unable to communicate with his colleagues in the industry in consonance with the technical language obtain there-in. A good quality graduate is an individual that can be depended upon to carry out certain leadership assignment without much supervision. Above all, a good quality graduate is a leader of people and manager of resources. He is an individual the society looks up to for guidance and direction. Okebukola (cited in Onuocho & Ewuzie, 2012) states that the worth of a university degree is the depth of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values which the graduate bears as consequence of his education. The graduate is expected to demonstrate complementary skills such as reflective and critical thinking, interpersonal and team skills as well as communicational and organisational skills (Onuocho & Ewuzie, 2012). To achieve these objective, various programme and courses are offered.

It is expected that the Nigerian university students, at the end of their course, should have acquired knowledge and skills required to meet the challenges of world of work.

A graduate is expected to acquire knowledge while in the school to give him opportunity to contribute to the development of his society. At the end of his programme, it is assumed that he has passed through a standard process of training for the award of degree certificate (Yusuf et al, 2010).

Now when a university graduate does not exhibit all these properties, traits and characteristics, he is regarded as of inferior quality. This means that a poor quality graduate is incapable of rising above the dreg of the society in order to chart a direction of hope. He could neither blend with the industry standards nor meet societal expectations. He is groping. He is found wanting in his area of training. He is rejected by the society to which he is produced. He is corrupt and ill-disciplined. He is a liability to his community and himself. That is a poor quality graduate. In addition to that Major (2006) argues:

The quality of university education is also measured in terms of four criteria namely: teaching/learning and research environment, quality of students, quality of staff and the curricular. The availability of standard, functional well-equipped laboratories, libraries, special rooms, lecture theatres and audio-visual aids - constitute the teaching and learning environment. Tougher admission requirements, smaller class size, high quality man-power and manageable teacher-student ratio are some of the ingredient that make up the quality of students.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

I have outlined in the introduction several reasons often advanced as the cause of decline in quality of university graduates in Nigeria. The factors reveal the systematic involvement of teachers, students, parents and the society in the process of back-peddalling the process of quality university education. Every facet of the society with its attendant institution has contributed to the production of poor quality graduates from our universities. Without much essay, it is easy to trace the entire causative factors to corruption. Corruption has eaten deep into the fabric of Nigerian society, and the problem we see today in our educational sector, particularly the university system, is due to corruption. The university lecturers are altogether deep in greedy pursuit of vanity of material possession. They subvert the system which they were called to guarantee, and use it in pursuit of immoral, illicit and contradictory personal goals which are in violent conflict with the ideals and fundamental values of the university. They ply their ominous trade through various avenues and agencies but the most central is the examination platforms which are inherently subjective for every university.

The examination system is the most perverted institution in the university yet it is the most critical element in evaluation and determining of quality graduate. It is also the examination system that decides who is worthy in character and learning. The examination system decides who the society should trust with the task of problem-solving and leadership. However, the parameters of university examinations is subjective and dependent of the characters in the university system. I have already argued that most of the characters in the Nigerian university academic space today are morally deprave, and sometimes worst than armed robbers. Prof. Tosanwumi Otokunefor repeatedly argued that his colleagues in the academia are severally lacking in moral and intellectual qualifications (Otokunefor, 2011). That is to say, they are not worthy in character and learning. It appears to me that due to internal and external brain-drain, thieves, rogues, and sexual predators have been recruited as academic staff of most Nigerian

universities. Now these are the same set of elements that sanction who should be certified as worthy in character and learning. And they do this through a subjective, subverted and perverted examination and evaluation mechanisms.

In this paper, I argue that the quality determining systems of most Nigerian universities are already weak. This quality determining system is the character and learning evaluation system called examinations. This means that I am arguing that Nigerian university examinations are no longer credible. There are a lot of sharp practices in the system. Lecturers aid and abet examination malpractices. This manifest in various forms such as selling of grades, upgrading of failed grades at result computation level, hiding failed grades, using best 120 credit units out of the 148 required for graduation, selling of examination questions, etc (Otokunefor, 2011). Most of these practices are already entrenched in the university system. When the bad eggs among the students pass through these black-market avenues they are passed and graduated into the main realm of the society and industry as those worthy in character and in learning. These are the ones called “half-baked graduates” or “low quality graduates”. They are liability to both themselves and society. Since our quality determining scale, our quality evaluation framework, our examination system is not only subjective and weak but steep in subversion and perversion, and the human parties are no longer competent, this paper argues for an urgent revolutionary step to be taken in that regard so as to stop the drift.

My emphasis on the examination system is predicated by the fact that even if all other quality subversive factors are controlled, without credible examination platform all that would amount to nothing. In other words, credible examination system is critical to credible university graduates. It is through examination system individuals are certified as worthy in character and in learning. So reforms in our university degree examination system are critical to arresting and reversing the decline in quality of our university graduates.

TRADITIONAL APPROACHES TOWARD ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM

There are various schemes designed to address the problem of poor quality of university graduates in Nigeria. Otokunefor (2011) notes that one of the super-factors that subvert standards of university education is hiring of unqualified lecturers. In addition, C. O. Oladapo (2013) notes that “some 49% of the teaching force is unqualified”. These unqualified staff, grossly incompetent in the act of teaching, are now ferried into the classroom under certain administrative misdemeanours. Consequently the ‘unqualified’ lecturers ended up offering nothing since they got nothing in the first place. Olagunju, Lasisi and Okuntade (2013) note that “if the quality of education is shaken, it is usually not uncommon to point accusing fingers at teachers.” For as the NPE 2004 states, that emphasis should be placed on teachers’ education since no educational system can rise above the quality of its teachers. This means that the first port of call with regards to poor quality of Nigerian university graduates is the teaching bay of the universities.

Following the educational revolution in the country in the 1950s, schools enrolment increased exponentially in disequilibrium with the percentage ratio of teaching staff on ground. This led to the hiring of all kinds of individuals to man the teaching post. Ukeje and Aisiku (1982) note that of the 39,573 teachers at the time only about 11,032 of them possessed teaching certificates. This situation has not changed significantly today. To check this problem, the Federal Ministry of Education(FME) in April 1959 appointed the Eric Ashley Commission

which in addition to investigating the nation's need in the area of higher education, recommended the rigorous pursuit of teachers' education at all levels (Ukeje and Aisiku, 1982). Consequently, the National Development Plan for the period of 1975 to 1980 upheld the fact that "the quality of the teaching staff is probably the most important determinant of educational standard at all level (Ukeje and Aisiku, 1982). This view was echoed by the National Council for Teachers Education, NCTE (1998) that "the teacher is the most important element in any educational programme. It is the teacher who is mainly responsible for implementation of the educational process at any stage." The NPE 2004 therefore place emphasis on teachers' education as the basis for quality education at all level of learning.

Suffice it to state that "teachers education involve a theoretical and practical training of teachers so as to make them functional and effective in the business of teaching the young ones and training of the nation's manpower needs" (Olagunju et al, 2013). Teachers education also involves the training given to prospective teachers so as to help acquire the skills necessary to impacting knowledge to students (Uche and Onyewerekaya cited in Olagunju et al, 2013). Basically, teachers' education is based on the notion that teachers are made and not born. Teaching involves use of pedagogical skills to transfer knowledge to the learner or regenerate knowledge in the student. To do this effectively the teacher must possess the necessary skills. Hence, all over the world the quality of students and graduates are measured in contrast to the quality of instruction and the instructors. For the reasons stated above, there is urgent need to train and retrain university academic staff in pedagogy. To this end, the FME had introduced Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) programme facilitated through National Teachers' Institute to help train and retrain the teeming teaching staff in our educational institutions but it appears that most university lecturers are too arrogant to be taught by those they often consider their 'junior'. To ensure compliance, I recommend that government should make minimum of PGDE in addition to Masters Degree, for non-education graduates, a pre-requisite for becoming a university teacher. This would go a long way to reposition the system. The FME through the NUC has also sought to make Ph.D a minimum requirement to becoming a university lecturer, I believe this should be encouraged.

Another approach adopted in order to solve the problem of poor quality of graduates is the introduction of Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB) in 1977. The quality of matriculants is also been fingered as the cause of declined in quality of university graduates in Nigeria. This argument is based on the belief that the quality of the raw material determines the quality of the finish product (Otokunefor, 2011). He further notes that the pass rate of prospective matriculants range from less than 2% to about 25% at best, including those who made it though undetected examination malpractice, yet the bulk of the unqualified candidates are awarded admission through various means including concessional admission. The UNICEF (2005) emphasizes quality of the learner as a critical determinant of quality in education. Consequently, the UNESCO expect universities to based their policies and admission on principle of merit (Ebuara, 2009).

Ukeje and Aisiku (1982) note that the period of 1970s was bedevilled with the crisis of admission in the Nigerian universities which allowed both qualified and inadequately prepared candidates to enrol in the universities. As a result, the Federal Government (FG) directed the NUC to set up a committee which look into the problem. The recommendation of the Committee led to the establishment of JAMB which was mandated to:

Ensuring high quality matriculation examination so that only those that are adequately prepared to benefit by university education do gain entrance to the institutions; and

ensuring high quality of administration of the examination to minimize the exploits of cheats toward ensuring the good quality of new entrants to the universities (Amended JAMB Act of 1999).

The FG, with the establishment of JAMB, had hoped that the quality of matriculants are adequate to ensure high quality graduates. However, John Idumange and Bahdwin Mayor (2006) and Otokunefor (2011) believe that JAMB had failed in its discharge of this function, hence their justification of post-JAMB remedial policies by universities. But in a study carried out by Ajaja Patrick (2010) it was discovered that there was no significant difference between the academic achievement of university students admitted through JAMB and those admitted through post-JAMB. It is important to note that the reintroduction of post-JAMB has re-enacted the pre-JAMB admission crises in Nigerian universities. Otokunefor (2011) observes that:

Two issues not yet addressed in many universities are of concessional and above quota admissions. The admission criteria supplied by NUC recognized three categories of candidates namely, merit, catchment and Educational Less Developed States (ELDS). Many university administrators create a fourth category known as the concessional admission. Concessional admission allows poorly performing candidates to be admitted ahead of much better candidates.

To overcome this problem, post-JAMB has to be outlawed and JAMB has to be repositioned to discharge its function effectively. This is one of the effective ways employed by government to enhance quality of university graduates.

Another fundamental approach to resolving the problem of poor quality of Nigerian university graduates is supervision of the university programmes. Otokunefor (2011) argues that poor quality of graduates is due also to failure of university supervisory agencies. This supervisory and regulatory lapses is more acute in the private universities (Idumange and Mayor, 2006; Ajani and Ekundayo, 2008).

The Nigerian educational space was not always standardised and supervised from inception. What is now regarded as Nigerian educational standardisation mechanism is a product of a chain of supervisory frameworks which extends from the colonial period. Ukeje and Aisiku (1982) note that Education Ordinance of 1926 culminated in the creation of a scheme for supervisory personnel to be appointed for all schools; this later resulted in a system of visiting teachers in 1930 created to supervise and ensure high standards in schools. In 1962 the NUC was established from the recommendation of the Ashby Commission of 1959 (Okojie, 2013). The NUC was established to ensure high standards in teaching and learning as well as good quality educational programme in the Nigerian universities. Consequently, NUC produced Minimum Academic Standard (MAS) in 1989 which considered the following criteria: minimum floor space for lectures, minimum laboratory facilities per student, minimum library space, library holdings, minimum staff-student ratio, minimum entry and graduation requirements for each discipline, and minimum standard of curricular for each discipline (Idumange and Mayor, 2006). This is one of the devices employed by the government to ensure high quality of university education.

Another model devised by the government to solve the problem of poor quality of graduates is harmonised and regularised education calendar. This was to make education predictable, hence measurable. However, as Ajani and Ekundayo (2008) note, irregular academic calendar has contributed significantly to lower standards of university education in the country. This

irregular academic calendar which has riddled our university system in the past recent decades is usually occasioned by students' union activism, lecturers' strike and other industrial unrest. When the ASUU strike, for example, is over, students are hurried into the examination halls with little or no lectures (Ibanga, 2009).

The period before 1970s was bastardised with irregular and chaotic academic calendar adopted by different levels of education including the universities. The academic calendar for North, East and West were different. Lagos adopted the shift system of morning and afternoon sections apparently to increased intake. University of Ife ran semester system as against others that ran trimester and sessional systems respectively (Ukeje and Aisiku, 1982). In addition to this, allowances were made to admit apparently unmerited students under part-time and weekend programmes in the universities. In recognition of this as a critical contributor to declining quality of university education, the FG in 1975 set modalities in motion that ushered in 6-3-3-4 system in 1982. Ukeje and Aisiku(1982) argue that one of the advantages of the 6-3-3-4 system was the inevitable elimination of the sixth form system which was an unnecessary bottleneck in the Nigerian educational system. Ukeje and Aisiku (1982) argue that it was hoped that the 6-3-3-4 system was going to ensure regular and relevant guidance and counselling services in the secondary schools to enable the prospective matriculants to make informed decision about their future academic path. Today that hope has not been fully realised due to dearth of guidance and counselling personels in our secondary schools. It is equally important to note that unions unrest in the universities have denied students the benefit of using the minimum duration for a course or programme. The labour unions and other stakeholders are obviously not concerned about this negative trend (Ibanga, 2009). This has contributed significantly to lower quality of graduates produced by Nigerian universities. Regularisation and harmonisation in academic calendar as well as in minimum number of hours per course/programme was a fundamental step taken by stakeholders to improve quality of university graduates in Nigeria. Government through its various supervisory, control and regulatory agencies should ensure full compliance to this policy decision by the universities.

One other traditional approach to the problem of poor quality of university graduates is increase in funding of the universities. In this regard the government has not done much. But in recent times government has invested significantly to revamping our university system. Meanwhile, the academia most of the time misinterpret university funding in terms of lecturers' salary. University funding must be taken beyond agitation for salary increment for it to be meaningful at all. University funding must therefore include infrastructure financing; non-monetary provision of study facilities; provision of students loans, postgraduate research grants, bursary and scholarships; and provision of research grant to lecturers with proof of ongoing research as well as realistic remuneration of university staff. There are, however, a number of ways a University can independently raise funds for self-sustainability (See Inyang & Etuk, 2015).

JOINT GRADUATION, CONVOCATION AND CERTIFICATION PROGRAMME: A NEW ALTERNATIVE STRATEGY.

As I noted before, there is significant chaos and crisis going on in the university degree examination system. This problem is similar to the pre-JAMB matriculation problem which bedevilled the university system. This problem, like the matriculation problem, has rubbed off on the quantity of graduates our universities produce. The point of exit from the university is more critical than the point of entry, because all kinds of human characters are expected to gain

entrance into the University but finer characters are expected to come out of it. The university therefore has a moral duty not to graduate, convoke and certify morally depraved individuals as worthy in character and learning. Those who fail more in the discharge of this moral duty are the private universities, whose pursuit of university values are soon overtaken by desire for profits. To reposition and volunteer the system, this paper evolve a scheme which seek to harmonize, regularize, systemize, unify, standardize and universalize the university final degree examinations under the name Joint Graduation, Convocation and Certification Programme (JGCCP).

Under this proposed scheme, Joint Graduation, Convocation and Certificate Board (JGCCB) shall be established. The Board should be saddled with the responsibility of:

- a) Ensuring high quality of graduation, convocation and certification examinations, otherwise known as Final Degree Examination (FDE), so that only those that are adequately prepared to benefit by university certificates, diplomas and degrees do graduate from the institutions.
- b) Ensuring high quality of administration of the FDE to minimize the exploits of cheats towards ensuring the good quality of graduates from the universities.
- c) Ensuring a uniform standard for the conduct of degree examination and the recommendation of suitably qualified candidates to employers of labour bearing in mind the preference of the candidates.
- d) Ensuring uniform certification of graduates solely with the Board logo and name.
- e) Ensuring that only candidates with minimum requirement in a given discipline graduates.
- f) Ensuring that the candidates' cumulative grade point average, CGPA, tallies with his FDE scores.
- g) Ensuring that only candidates who were admitted through the right procedures are graduated.
- h) Ensuring that no waiver whatsoever shall be obtained for failed grade, and that best 120 credit unit shall not be used for graduation purposes.
- i) Ensuring that the most competent method and personnel, other than the candidates' Professors, are used for the examination. In addition, the candidates may be made to write the examinations in the venue other than their universities. While the scripts may be marked in a specified venue by randomized Professors other than the candidates' like the script-marking system used by WAEC.

ARGUMENTS IN SUPPORT OF THE THESIS

Although I have already articulated, in the course of the paper, various arguments and propositions which support this thesis, it is important to restate some of them here. One of the arguments in support of this thesis is that JGCCP will help organize, systematize and unify university degree examinations. In other words, JGCCP would organize, harmonize,

regularize, systematize, unify, standardize and universalize all university degree examinations. It is a framework where all students in all universities, irrespective of name and history, would have to sit for the same degree examination. This would therefore eliminate postgraduate aptitude tests and perhaps job test would become unnecessary. In addition to that, the Joint Graduation, Convocation and Certification Examination (JGCCE), otherwise known as FDE, would provide a common framework and basis upon which the quality of academic achievement of graduates would be measured. This would also make it possible to predict socio-economic indices of the society. Above all, the JGCCE shall help us achieve a universal and unified grading of the university degrees. In other words, the First Class Honours or Second Class Honours of one university shall not become controversial in another university. The argument that private universities award multiple First Class Honours for profits purposes shall be eliminated, since all candidates shall write the same examination on a competitive basis, and their class of degree shall be determined by the JGCCB on the basis of the JGCCE/FDE and other functional criteria. The JGCCE shall unify all the nation's university degrees. The decentralised system which led to lack of standard and uniformity in degree certification process whereby an individual obtain a degree he does not merit in character and learning, shall be replaced with a centralised system which shall ensure uniform standard for the conduct of degree examination and certification of suitably qualified candidates.

Another argument is that the JGCCE will help minimize the incidence of examination malpractice. As I argued above, university degree examinations and continuous assessment tests are replete with student initiated and lecturers aided examination malpractices. This range from buying and selling of grades, illicit upgrade of failed grades, selling of examination questions, sex-for-marks, and all kinds of sorting. For these ills in the system, Nigerian university degree examinations and results are no longer credible, and cannot assist in moulding good quality graduates for the society. Some scholars are of the opinion that the lecturers are involved in this illicit act due to poor remuneration, hence increment in lecturers' salary would check their involvement in examination malpractice since the incentives they get in examination malpractices might have been matched through salary increment. On the contrary, I argue that such argument advance in justification of lecturers' involvement in examination malpractice is lopsided. The real reason lecturers involve in examination malpractice is not because of poor salary but greed and negative moral character. As Otokunefor (2011) rightly note, lecturers who directly and indirectly aid and abet examination malpractice are those who are not qualified to be lecturers. Some of them 'sorted' their way through the system; and are worthy neither in character nor in learning. Hence, they are morally and professionally incompetent to administer degree examinations. This therefore makes JGCCE to become a necessity in the scheme of things. For the JGCCE shall reduce, to the barest minimum, incidence of malpractices in degree qualifying examinations due to the fact that the examinations shall be administered by those whom the students are not familiar before the examinations.

Another argument in support of this thesis is that by substituting individual university logos and names with the uniform logo and name of the JGCCB, it would provide a level playing field for all graduates in the labour market. Sometimes, employers favour certain graduates from certain big name universities or the employer's al mater, during job interviews. We have seen a situation where some job applicants were disqualified even before the job interview began just for the simple reason that they graduated from "village university". We have also seen a situation where only graduates from the employers al mater were shortlist for appointment. Also, we have seen a situation where some applicants were short-listed for job

on the basis that they graduated from a university owned by the church the employer or job interviewer attends and place membership. So by replacing the logos and names of individual universities with the universal logo and name of JGCCB, the hurdles of favouritism will be removed and there would be a level playing field in the labour market. With JGCCE, the superstitious, subjective and objective rating of universities in the country shall not affect the degree the graduates are issued; because nothing in the JGCCB-issued Honours Degree shall link any graduate to any particular university.

One other reason in support of the thesis is that by substituting the logos and names of individual universities with logo and name of JGCCB, the degrees issued by some internationally unknown universities will no longer be relegated by foreign universities and the international communities. It is common knowledge that some graduates could not gain admission into postgraduate programme abroad because the foreign institutions do not know whether such “unknown” universities are credible legally and academically. With the irregular and haphazard accreditation, de-accreditation and dis-accreditation of courses, programmes, campuses and universities by NUC and the attendant scandals it generate in the media, some foreign universities and their affiliates often choose to recognize the degree certificates obtain in the first and second generation universities which they trust for excellence on the basis of their long existence and antecedence that some European scholars had taught there. Also, some religious universities gain foreign recognition of their degree certificates because of some linkages and affiliations with some foreign religious bodies. So with JGCCE, graduates of “unknown” universities seeking admission in postgraduate programmes abroad would receive universal recognition of their degree certificates.

Another argument in support of the thesis is that the JGCCB shall aid JAMB to achieve its objective of distribution and placement of suitably qualified candidates into the universities. Over the years, due to relegate treatment of degrees obtained in “unknown” universities by foreign institutions and the favouritism attended to graduates of first generation universities as well as religious universities, candidates seeking admission into universities often concentrate and overcrowd these “special” universities – in the process some of the best qualified candidates do not gain admission into university while the less qualified ones do. The less prepared candidates gain admission into the “unknown” universities because the competitive candidates have all gone to fight for the limited space in the “special” universities, leaving the less prepared to have field day in the “unknown” universities. For example, in 2011 and 2012 admission-years University of Lagos got more than ten per cent of the application for admission by JAMB candidates (Alechenu, 2012). But with JGCCE and JGCCB, the incentive which causes candidates to neglect so-called “unknown” universities and oversubscribe a few so-called “special” universities shall be removed. Best prepared candidates would not have to wait endlessly for admission into “special” universities since now the name and logo of individual universities shall no longer count in the labour market and overseas.

Another argument in support of the thesis is that establishment of JGCCB shall bring about check and balances in university Continuous Assessment (CA) test and internal degree examinations by acting as the framework to compare and test the credibility of CGPA with JGCCE scores thereby encouraging professional rationality and ethical responsibility. Presently, the universities examination system is all too subjective due to the fact that it is based on self-righteous decentralised system that lack uniformity in standards. This self-righteous system allows the lecturer and university administrators, some of them defamed in character, to manipulate the system without recourse to universally valid standard. In fact, the university

examination system is in a state of nature (of chaos, irresponsibility and indiscipline). The system is so slack that it allows all kinds of sharp practices and irregularities to be perpetrated. JGCCE shall therefore counter-balance university internal examinations in the process subjecting it to credibility test. This shall ultimately make the academia to sit up professionally, because they would be conscious that the CA and other results shall have to tally with JGCCE scores.

Another argument in support of the thesis is that the proposed JGCCE shall enhance or provide for professional marking of examination scripts. It is gradually becoming acceptable within the university system for lecturers to abdicate their responsibility of marking their examination scripts to postgraduates or even undergraduates or school leavers. Although the Nigerian university system provides for employment of Graduate Assistants (GA) to assist lecturers and professors in their duties, their capacity are often either undermined, underutilized or outrightly neglected by the same people who were expected to use their services. Lecturers often times prefer to use their stooges in the undergraduate and/or postgraduate in the programmes to achieve their nefarious acts, especially by handing over scripts to them for marking. Some of the graduate students who mark these scripts are incompetent in the subject area they are to evaluate either by area of specialisation or outright incompetence. As a result they wrongly grade the students, despite using marking guide/scheme. The proposed JGCCB and JGCCE shall ensure that examination scripts are professionally marked. This means that JGCCB shall ensure that those who grade examination scripts of students are competent in the subject area; thereby ensuring that only qualify students are graduated with due grades.

Another argument in support of the thesis is that the proposed JGCCE shall enhance the university curricula delivery. Generally, the universities operate subject-centred curricular. This means that more emphasis is placed on subject-matter and content, hence the justification of the lecturer method employed in the universities. However, over the years, lecturers research apathy has resulted in less attention paid to the development of the subject-matter which implies delivery of marginal content. This means that students are not adequately exposed to expected industry experience. Hence, they question on quality of the graduate – usually rightly described as “half-baked graduates”. Of course, the curricular is undermined because the lecturers ultimately evaluate themselves and set examination questions on the insignificant content churn-out and the students are passed and graduated half-baked. This problem is usually complicated by unions’ unrest (Ibanga, 2009). Now with JGCCE there shall be uniformity of curricular in the nation universities which implies that a lecturer’s relevance in the classroom shall be ultimately determined by the scores of his students in the JGCCE. This further implies that incompetent lecturers shall be shown the door and the attendant impact it would have on the quality of graduates. This shall make the left over to demonstrate commitment at research thereby developing the subject-matter of their courses which in turn shall lead to production of industry relevant graduates.

OBJECTIONS TO THE THESIS

There are some objections which can be raised against the thesis I propose here. One of such objections lies with the argument regarding university autonomy. According to the ‘objection on university autonomy’, the harmonisation and integration of universities degree examination under a single administration shall lead to the erosion of administrative and academic autonomy of universities in the country. Ukeje and Aisiku (1982) argue that the university system today

seems to be facing a crisis of loss of autonomy brought about by harmonisation scheme and administrative centralisation under the NUC as well as government involvement in the appointment, transfer and dismissal of Vice Chancellors (VC). (This problem is equally evident in the church controlled universities). On the basis of this, therefore, it could be argued that establishment of JGCCB to administer all universities final degree examinations shall hurt the university.

My response to the ‘objection on basis of university autonomy’ is that it is true that centralisation of core administration of universities in Nigeria under the NUC has to some degree erode university autonomy but it is not true that harmonisation of universities degree examination under the JGCCB shall undermine university autonomy in the country. The closest example that could be cited to buttress my position is the JAMB under which universities matriculation examinations are harmonized and integrated. Over the years, JAMB has been largely successful in terms of founding objectives despite some isolated cases of marginal short-comings. Judith Asien and Yusuf Lawal (2007) note that before the legislative enabling of the harmonisation framework of JAMB in 1978, the universities in Nigeria matriculated candidates on their subjective guidelines and standard which was replete with lack of standard and uniformity and ultimately led to crisis in the system. Ukeje and Aisiku (1982) note, that the pre-JAMB universities system was riddled with serious limitations which bordered on general untidiness in the uncoordinated system of university admission and matriculation. The universities, before the advent of JAMB, operated anarchist system of matriculation. However, with the coming of JAMB in 1978 the problem was removed. The candidates no longer had to face disparity in admission guidelines and standards of the universities. All candidates enjoyed equity of opportunity and level playing field as well as transparency in university admission process. With the success recorded in the past decades, it is important to note that JAMB, rather than eroding university autonomy, has contributed to strengthen the university system in the country. If we now conceptualize JGCCB as a prototype of JAMB, it is apparent that the success of JAMB, in terms of university matriculation examination administration, will be replicated in the university convocation examination.

Meanwhile, although university autonomy is not the focus of this paper, it is important to point out that most analysts and scholars seem to have misunderstood the concept of university autonomy and its attendant practical deployment. Sometimes, analysts and scholars seem to represent the university as a system that ought to exist independent of the society which it operates. In other words, some analysts and scholars seem to represent the university as a system that ought to run on a parallel orbit in contradiction to the orbit of the society in which it operates. Babalola, Jaiyeobo and Okediran (2007) argue that university autonomy should not be absolute but that the university require minimum autonomy to function effectively. Framing the university as a universe of its own with its own constellations, galaxy, Milky Way, solar and lunar systems has contributed to production of graduates who are university sages but industry idiots. University autonomy should not be conceptualized as a right of the university to exist independent of the society rather rightly as a moral licence to operate outside the dictates of or deviate from the traditional social conventions and superstitions of the society. University autonomy rightly refers to protection of the universities from political interference in the administration of the university in terms of student admission, appointment and dismissal of staff, including the VC, and determination of the content (Babalola, Jaiyeobo and Okediran, 2007). It shall therefore be strange to argue that harmonisation and standardisation of university matriculation and convocation examinations under one administrative umbrella shall hurt university autonomy. Generally, I shall note that when academics argue about loss of university

autonomy to university examination administrative harmonisation and standardisation they often do so in terms of the money they would lose to harmonisation and standardisation agency not in terms of the goods it would bring to the university system.

Another objection that may likely be raised against this thesis is what might be described as ‘objection on the example of JAMB’. According to this objection, centralisation of the administration of convocation examination under one umbrella shall compromise the quality of graduates rather than enhance it. This argument is likely to be based on what may be referred to as the example of JAMB. In the last decade, JAMB has come under increasing criticisms by analysts and scholars over what is usually described as loss of focus, under-capacity and corruption. Asein and Lawal (2007) note that the scourge of examination malpractice has caught up with JAMB examinations; hence it has undermined its ability to ensure that only suitable and qualified candidates are admitted into the universities. The former JAMB Registrar, Prof. Dibu Ojerinde, confirmed this allegation in a press statement issued on 31st May 2007 that “some examiners and external agents compromise their positions and actively colluded with candidates to perpetrate examination irregularities” (cited in Kwache, 2007). The grading system of JAMB has continued to face serious disrepute and controversy from candidates. In 2009, for example, it was alleged that JAMB machines which optically grade answered scripts had erroneous answers (Wikipedia, 2013). Some analysts argue that the reason for the lapses is due to exponential growth in the number of candidates applying for university admissions through JAMB and the attendant fallout. Asein and Lawal (2007) note, that when JAMB was established in 1978 it had about a paltry 30,000 candidates seeking admission into the universities but today the number had exceeded one million candidates – which is far beyond the projected carrying capacity of JAMB. On the basis of this, it could be argued that the same problem of examination malpractice which has come to raise doubts on the credibility of JAMB-conducted examinations shall equally compromise JGCCB-conducted examinations.

My response to this objection is that there is no doubt that examination malpractice is increasingly becoming a challenge to JAMB but that is hardly enough ground to base a forecast that JGCCE shall be replete with irregularities. The challenge of examination malpractice alone is not enough ground to discredit an examination body; rather the credibility of the examination would also depend on the response of the examination framework to such challenges. For example, JAMB is always in the habit of publishing detailed reports which indicate statistics showing the number and magnitude of candidates and examiners involvement in examination malpractice. This implies, as Kwache (2007), rightly argues that JAMB is operating a transparent system which is determined to ensure that no candidate is unfairly treated in the process. JAMB also has a system which allows for prompt release and checking of results. In addition, JAMB usually provide comprehensive list of results of each and every candidate on Compact Disc which assist the universities in checking admission malpractice and prevent dubious candidates from presenting fake result to the universities (Kwache, 2007). Moreover, since 2014 JAMB has been administering Computer Based Test (CTB) to candidates which in turn reduce examination malpractice.

This is contrary to already moribund degree examination system of individual universities. In most universities, including the so-called special universities, degree examinations are conducted without adequate mechanism to check examination malpractice – coupled with the apparent morally bankrupt examiners. In spite of intensive propaganda seeking the replacement of JAMB with decentralised matriculation examination (called post-JAMB or post-UTME),

Asein & Lawal (2007) and Otokunefor (2011) observe that the post-UTME conducted by universities has been replete with examination fraud in the few years after its introduction. In a study conducted by Patrick (2010) it was revealed that there was no significant difference in the academic achievement of students admitted through Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME) and those admitted through post-UTME. In addition to that, contrary to prompt release of results by JAMB most universities in the country, including the first generation universities, either release their examination results too late or never release it at all – this therefore give room for examination irregularity in the system. In August 2013, the Facebook was awash with students' agitation that a certain university should release the result of examination it administered to less than 40 students in June 2012 – and that university was a first generation university in the country. Also most universities never published the result of post-UTME they conducted, just as they fail to publish result of degree examinations they conduct. In addition, while it takes JAMB a few days to compile and publish comprehensive detailed results of each and every candidate, it usually take most Nigerian universities years or even decades to prepare graduates academic transcript or issue their certificates. All these show that decentralised examination system in the country is riddled with fraud, and lack of transparency, standard and credibility. Establishment of JGCCB shall therefore transform the system and reposition it to produce good quality graduates.

Suffice it to point out that there is the urgent need to amend the Examination Malpractice Act 1999. Examination malpractice shall continue in our institutions unless offenders are brought to book. The proposed amended Act should allow Examination Malpractice Tribunal to sit on examination venues during examinations; prosecution and conviction of offenders should be immediate, which in turn send deterrent signal to the others. A mobile tribunal of this nature cannot be effective in the universities because the administrative structure would find it difficult to accommodate it. A mobile tribunal of this nature can only be effective for centralised examinations administered outside the university administrative structure.

One other objection that could possibly be marshalled against this thesis is the argument that the proposed guidelines of JGCCB shall lead to culture of complacency and lag in the administration of the university. This objection is exceptionally strong because it argues that by obscuring the personality of individual universities through the replacement of the names and logos of individuals universities with the universal name and logo of JGCCB on degree certificates, university administrators shall become lazy since their lapses shall be neither sought nor discovered, and especially because there is nothing to compete for with other universities in the world.

My response to this objection is that the thesis taken to the extreme may justify such fears. However, it is important to note that effective running of running of university, or any organisation for that matter, is not a function of competition but that of compliance and conformity to enabling regulatory and quality assurance mechanism as well as that of obeisance of ennobling principles. Ajayi and Ekundayo (2008) note that the NUC as a statutory regulatory agency has vital role to play in ensuring that universities conform to laid down standards. In other words, the NUC was established for the purpose of ensuring that university administration was qualitative and effective. The NUC has achieved this through programme monitoring and accreditation as well as through the licencing of universities. So with NUC playing its role effectively in university administration, the problem of complacency in university administration as fallout of JGCCB shall not arise.

Moreover, it is not true that JGCCB shall obscure the personality of individual universities or lead them into lag and complacency. Over the decades West African Examination Council (WAEC) and National Examination Council (NECO) have been administering certificate examinations to school leavers in the country. Despite this, the fact of WAEC and NECO has not led secondary schools in the country into administrative lag and complacency. Rather, the existence of WAEC and NECO has engendered secondary schools in Nigeria into optimizing their efforts so that their candidates would not be ridiculed at the WAEC and NECO examinations. Schools in the country usually go the extra-mile of preparing their students for the WAEC and NECO examinations, thereby indirectly benefitting the students in terms of curriculum delivery and skill development.

In addition to that, centralisation of secondary schools certificate examinations has made the schools administrators to sit up professionally and ethically, in terms of internal supervision of their staff and teaching processes – since mass failure of their students in WAEC and NECO examinations often bring shame and discredit to the name of their school, and in turn lower enrolment in such institutions. In the same vein, the establishment of JGCCB for Nigerian universities shall optimize administrative efficiency, since universities shall not want the incidence of mass failure of their students at the JGCCE which would bring shame and discredit to their name and erode enrolment. Therefore, the fact of JGCCB shall force university administrators to sit up by internally supervising their staff and classroom with greater rigour.

CONCLUSION

It is important to conclude this article by recognizing the fact that there is room for improvement in the thesis. It is also important to recognize that the proposed strategy alone cannot be the sole solution to the problem of poor quality graduates in Nigeria. However, it is equally important to recognize that the thesis shall reposition the Nigerian universities in the manner JAMB, WAEC, NECO and Nigerian Law School (NLS) have done. By turning around our universities degree system on the principles proposed here, JGCCB shall contribute significantly in improving the quality of graduates produced by our universities. If JAMB, NECO, WAEC, and NLS have succeeded in standardising their targeted examination system, the JGCCB shall equally succeed in standardising universities degree examination system. There are a lot of inspirations to draw from other successful examination harmonisation and standardisation agencies such as JAMB, WAEC, NECO and NLS.

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