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ENHANCING THE QUALITY OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN AFRICA: EXPLORING THE COVENANT UNIVERSITY BUSINESS MODEL

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Abstract

It is not in doubt that higher education is a tool of high value to the welfare of any society. However, most of the Universities in Africa are reputed for producing 'half-baked' graduates, unfit for employment anywhere. This has been confirmed in a recent study conducted by the Inter-University Council for East Africa on the quality of graduates in Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda. It was found that between 51 percent and 63 percent of graduates from these countries were 'half-baked.' In order to reverse this and other negative trends affecting higher education, Covenant University (CU) has set out to achieve the goal of transforming higher education in African. The objective of this paper, therefore, is to bring into focus the relevance of Covenant University Business Model for enhancing the quality of higher education in Nigeria. The model is considered to offer the right approach as the acquisition and understanding of higher education issues turn away from a focus on the learner 'just finishing the training' to the more holistic approach of actively assimilating, in a congenial environment, what is learnt for further use.

Keywords: Africa, business model, Covenant University, higher education.

1 INTRODUCTION

Education is an object of critical importance to the well-being of any nation. It is a key requirement for improving the long term quality of people in order to sustain the political, economic and social profile of a country. It is a force whose multiplier effect on the development of a country cannot be ignored. Thus, countries strive to present a just and adequate view of it as a principal factor in developing new skills, cultural and social values expected in any society.

The pertinent questions at this juncture are: Are higher education institutions in Nigeria and Africa able to meet the demand of improving the quality of people in terms of development of new skills, cultural values and behavioural pattern as do similar institutions abroad? The response to the question will certainly not be in the affirmative. For instance, a recent study conducted by the Inter-University Council for East Africa noted that the quality of graduates in many African countries including Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda, are 'half-baked' (Mohamedbhai 2014). This could be traceable to some peculiar challenges facing higher education in Africa, nay Nigeria. These challenges have been articulated to include lack of access, cost and quality (Bamiro (2013). In Nigeria particularly, there is weak infrastructure, poor reading culture, indiscipline and vices such as cultism, perennial strike action by teachers in higher education institutions among others.

However, Covenant University (CU) is conscious of the fact that the power of a nation is determined by the level of quality education. Though, CU may not be able to fully address the issues of access and cost, a Business Model (BM) has been put in place to deal with issues of quality and discipline. We believe therefore that it is appropriate to explore the CU BM. The objective of this paper, therefore, is to bring into focus the relevance of Covenant University Business Model in addressing the quality of higher education in Africa. The model is considered to offer a workable approach to the understanding of higher education issues.

The paper is structured as follows- Section 2 presents CU in context, Section 3 presents the review of related literature, and sections 4 and 5 present the CU Business model and the conclusion respectively.

2 COVENANT UNIVERSITY (CU) IN CONTEXT

Covenant University (CU) was founded on October 21, 2002 as a Christian Mission University. Nigeria currently has one hundred and forty six universities of which 59 are privately owned. Of the privately

owned universities, CU is the foremost based on its vision statement. According to Oyedepo (2002), the vision of Covenant University is to be a "leading world class Christian Mission University committed to raising a new generation of leaders in all fields of human endeavour." In a wider context, according to Oyedepo, Covenant University is set out to "train students who will be mentally resourceful, intellectually equipped, entrepreneurially self-dependent, futuristically visionary, responsibility sensitive, and emotionally stable" through a human development based curriculum with emphasis on the development of the 'Total Man.' The vision is anchored on a set of Core Values which include: Spirituality, Possibility Mentality, Integrity, Responsibility, Capacity Building, Diligence and Sacrifice. Of the core values, Spirituality is the arrow head and a major determinant in the admission of students and employment of staff. The vision of the University is premised on the need to depart from:

- form to skill
- knowledge to empowerment
- figures to future building
- legalism to realism
- points to facts
- mathematics to life-matics (Oyedepo, 2002).

The above philosophy shifts the education policy of the University from a content based structure to a knowledge based structure in which the focus is on acquiring a problem solving mindset (Iyoha, 2011). The University currently has four academic Colleges and twenty-one Departments. These are complemented by various non-teaching departments and units.

2.1 Review of Related Literature

The conditions under which higher educational institutions operate in Africa suggest that there are a number of challenges confronting them. There is evidence that the broadest of these challenges across African countries is limited access (Mulinge and Munyae, 2008; Egron-Polak, 2005 and Duderstadt, 2002). Some of the other challenges include "limited access for qualified candidates, diminishing financial resources, shortage of quality faculty, poor governance, lack of academic freedom, high student to teacher ratio, academic dishonesty among others (Iyoha, Gbrevbie, Egharevba and Iruonagbe, 2015; Mulinge and Munyae, 2008; Yizengaw, 2008 and Egron-Polak, 2005).

The Nigerian education system is not exempted from the challenges as presented in the preceding discussions. Though access to higher education is a challenge in Nigeria as not more than twenty five percentage of qualified applicant are absorbed annually, there are now other serious challenges that require urgent attention. These challenges, according to Iyoha et al, 2015, Akinnrinade, 2013 and Akinnaso, 2012) include "funding shortages, the negative influence of a corruptive and valueless political system, weakening of university administration, poor teaching and learning outcomes, diminishing research and consultancy traditions, questionable service to the community, disruptive unionism, poor commitment level by operators, internal corruption and inability to retain talents (brain drain)"

In spite of the enormity of the challenges enumerated above, there are other challenges that are very pronounced in Nigeria, little of which is heard about in other African countries. These challenges include violence of varying dimensions. According to Ighalo (2014), education in Nigeria is facing many challenges to the extent that:

Mass qualitative and effective learning is in doubt. Cultism is an ugly monster in our schools. Violence and criminality are rampant in our higher institutions of learning. There are cases of killing, assassination, kidnapping, sexual harassment and abuse, thuggery, destruction of properties, stealing, burglary, examination malpractices and poor academic performance of students.

Though the Federal Government of Nigeria has consistently taken steps to address the challenges, however, they have remained somewhat protracted. This, according to Iyoha et al (2015), could be due to a situation where "most times, reforms are articulated without proper examination of their consequences on other aspects and sectors of the national economy." The glumly situation notwithstanding, Obayan (2014) observes that there are "glimmers of light and hope considering the

impact in the higher education sector of the Living Faith Church of which CU is a subset." This supports a previous assertion by Okebukola (2014) that "the CU ideal is already being realized, being the University with the highest per capita rate of investment in education and training in Nigeria.

We argue that the ideals of CU are being realized as have been alluded to above due to the existence and application of a distinctive Business Model. According to the International Integrated Reporting Council (2013), a Business Model is "an organization's chosen system of inputs, business activities, outputs and outcomes that aims to create value over the short, medium and long term." In essence, businesses employ business models to explain how they are structured and the chain of distribution of their goods and services.

CU is known to be the only University in Nigeria that has been able to articulate and deploy a Business Model (BM), thus differentiating itself in the Nigerian higher education space. Through the BM, the staff, students and stakeholders are able to gain better information and understanding of the various aspects and activities of the University. In the context of Covenant University, the BM is the lens through which its activities are gleaned, desired output and outcome assessed against actual performance in order to prompt changes as required without losing sight of the overall objective of the University.

2.2 The Covenant University Core Values

At CU, value creation in terms of delivery of quality education is pursued through a business model focused on well-defined strategic guidelines, strategic assets and a system of rules and regulations. These are distributed along the entire value chain, governed by good governance built on integrated thinking and driven by a set of Core Values. Thus, the core values represent the foundation on which the model is built and run. The impact of the values on curriculum development, budgeting and budgetary control, investment decisions and service delivery enable the University to attain its strategic objectives. The values and ascribed meanings are presented below-

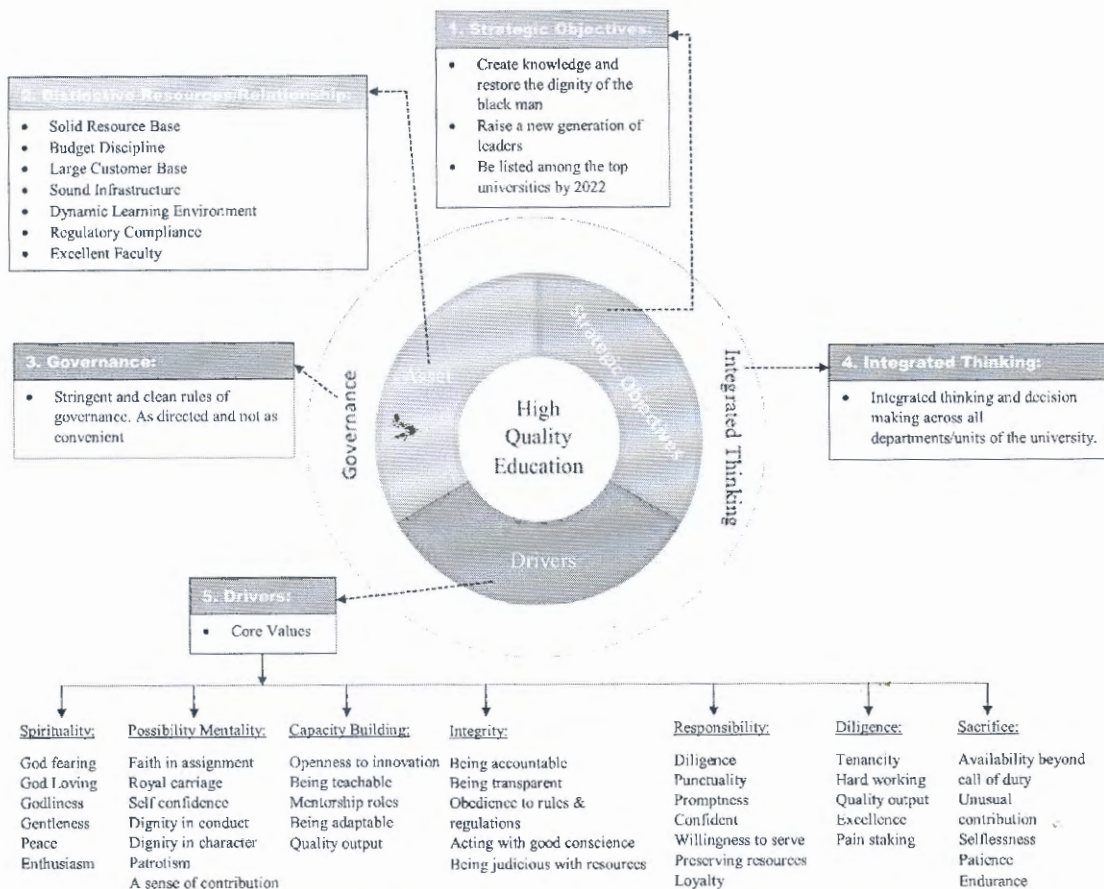
Table 1: Covenant University Core Values

S/N	Core Values	Ascribed Meanings
1	Spirituality	The fear of God in the lives of both students and teachers
2	Possibility Mentality	A royal attitude, habit and character. It calls for obligations and aspirations in all circumstances where decisions that affect the public interest are in focus
3	Capacity Building	A continuing commitment to learning and development. An important element in maintaining public confidence and trust.
4	Integrity	The established habit of doing right where there is no one to make you do it but yourself.
5	Responsibility	Responding to issues as 'demanded and not as convenient' It is knowing what to do and doing it.
6	Diligence	A servant-leadership philosophy where commitment is regarded as the greatest qualifier for attainment.
7	Sacrifice	An individual's willingness to place the interest of others ahead of his or her own. It presupposes service before self.

Adapted from Covenant University hand book (2002).

3 THE CU BUSINESS MODEL

The starting point of the Business Model (BM) is the definition of the strategic objectives which influence the materials and resources to be engaged and the route to travel in order to ultimately realize the objectives-creating knowledge and restoring the dignity of the black man, raising a new generation of leaders and be listed as one of the top ten universities in the world by the year 2022.



The University engages assets- materials and resources (tangible and intangible) in transforming the inputs (fresh students) into output (talented graduates) in order to realize the objectives. The materials and resources are not unique in themselves but the deployment thereof. For instance, the University has uncommon budget discipline which to a very large extent, defines its culture. The discipline applies to all other resources. This is made possible by a set of strict rules and regulations which according to Oyedepo (2002), are meant to be observed as "directed and not as convenient." It is important to note, however, that the rules and regulations are not grievous.

The rules and regulations derive from integrated thinking and decision making. This ensures that there is no tradeoff between decision making and decision management. Consequently, silo thinking and decision making are avoided. All of this requires a modest mindset which is created by a set of core values. Each of the core values is important in developing talented graduates. For instance, Spirituality protects talent (Lancu, Popesus and popescus, 2010; Masten, 2012 and Iyoha, 2014) while Possibility mentality energizes talent (Iyoha, 2014). Similarly, Capacity building is believed to sharpen talent (IFAC (2012), Integrity tests talent (Iyoha, 2014) and Responsibility is believed to strengthen talent (Oyedepo, 2002 and Iyoha, 2014). Finally, Diligence is believed to promote talent (Oyedepo, 2002 and Iyoha, 2014) while Sacrifice sustains talent (Mathenge (2012; Jackling, Cooper, Leung and Dellaportas, 2007: 938).

3.1 Outcome of Model Implementation

This Covenant University Business Model is novel in the business activities (teaching, research and community development) of African Universities. There is evidence that the model is generating appreciable results based on a number of feats achieved so far. For instance, CU is the preferred choice of candidates seeking admission to private Universities in Nigeria, favourable employer reference on CU graduate employees, substantial self-employment among graduates and the best case scenario of staff and students discipline in the Nigeria University system (Okebukola, 2012). In

fact, the summary of the feats of the University between 2002 and 2012 in relation to other universities is provided below:

Table: CU Score Card: 2002-2012

S/N	Criteria	Score	Remarks
1	Governance	A	Strong
2	Academic performance (Teaching and Rsearch)	B+	Good but improvement needed
3	Physical Development	A	CU is the most well-built and most funded University in Nigeria
4	Spiritual Development	A+	Staff and students are at the centre of God's will in they do
	Overall	A	Pass

Source: Okebukola, (2012)

There is further evidence regarding the feat being achieved by Covenant University. In the February 2015 Webometric ranking of Universities, CU was ranked first in Nigeria and as well as in West Africa. CU is also the only University in Nigeria and perhaps Africa to have hosted three Nobel laureates in two years under the International Conference on Africa Development Issues (ICADI). These should be considered great feats having regard to the fact that the University is just thirteen years old and also because one of the Nobel Laureates is now on the faculty of CU as a visiting professor. It is also on record that in the first, second and third editions of the Presidential Special Scholarship for Innovation and Development (PRESSID), CU has topped the list among Nigeria universities, of successful candidates by producing the highest number of first class graduates for sponsorship to 25 top universities in the world (Okebukola, 2014).

The above feats are being achieved at Covenant University in a congenial atmosphere. This is in contrast to what obtains in other universities in Nigeria, where according to Ighalo, (2014), cultism has become a scourge that has spread in our higher institutions. In Nigeria, the activities of cultists have been known to disrupt academic calendar, killings and assassinations, kidnapping, stealing, drug and abuse.

According to Ighalo (2008), cult members are used to hard drugs in order to operate at higher levels in any of their activities and the abuse of hard drugs and other psychotropic substances have been identified to be closely related to high incidence of violence, rape, armed robbery, school drop outs, academic failure, traffic and industrial accidents, unsafe acts in work places, health hazards, and other notorious crimes." In these situations, students are pushed out when adverse situations within the school environment lead to consequences, ultimately resulting in dropout (Doll, Eslami and Walters, 2013). It is interesting to observe that the vices as described above are not known and practiced at Covenant University.

4 CONCLUSION

That the higher education sector in Nigeria, nay Africa faces daunting challenges in terms of quality and access is not in doubt. It is also not in doubt that the governments of a number of African countries have taken steps to address the challenges. However, the challenges appear to defer workable solutions. It is in this context that Covenant University (CU) Nigeria has set out to achieve the goal of transforming higher education in African by adopting a well-articulated Business Model in executing its programmes. The model which is considered to offer the right approach to situating higher education in Nigeria is achieving the desired results. It would therefore not be out of place if other African countries adapt the model to suit their various peculiarities with the aim of turning around the fortunes of higher education in Africa. It is therefore recommended that the model be adopted or adapted by other African countries.

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