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The search for academic excellence: The hard facts and bitter truths

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Abstract

Globalization, with its attendant competitiveness in almost all human endeavours, has brought in its wake a renewed surge for quality in higher education. The searchlights have been thrown on, not only on the traditional areas such as the quality of lecture rooms, Lecturers, Libraries and performance of students, but on such other things like the quality of academic leadership as the driving force that greases the clogged wheels of higher educational institutions towards attaining the visions and missions of most institutions. The picture gradually emerging is one where the quality of academic leadership largely determines what will come on the academic agenda for pursuing relevance, access, affordability, equity, efficiency and economy in the 21st Century. This work seeks to explore the management dimensions of pursuing excellence as a strategic objective through building partnerships with major stakeholders rather than the use of high – handedness. Besides observations, the study relied on literature review. The era of the visionary and motivational leadership appears to be the key for higher educational institutions which seek to stand up to competition in the global arena. The social and political ends of higher education call for not just exemplary leadership, but also human-centred results-oriented approaches to sustainable tertiary institutions of excellence.

Keywords: Search, Academic Excellence, University Management, Academic Challenges

Introduction

Academic excellence, as it stands, does not come cheap. It comes from the hard work of academic leaderships that are visionary. The visionary academic leader is, nevertheless, usually heavily dependent on an efficient administrative support base. Hutchins (1947) pointed that the administrator is the one who makes others see the excellence that differentiates one institution from another. This leads us to the problem of who is an academic and who is an administrator?. The key actors in the university setup include the Vice-Chancellor who by the statutes of most universities is the chief executive officer. Also, the Vice-Chancellor is the chief disciplinary officer who approves or disapproves sanctions recommended by statutory or adhoc committees of the universities. In spite of such major administrative duties, Vice-Chancellors prefer to be seen as academics rather than as Chief Executives. While, a Pro-Vice-Chancellor is a part-time officer who assist the Vice-Chancellor in the day-to-day administration of the University (Ruth and Giles, 2010).

The Registrar, with the help of such deputies as he may think fit, supports and facilitates the vision and mission that the academic leadership brings into office. The Registrar is the chief scribe and also the custodian of all university property. From the foregoing complementary roles of teaching and non-teaching staff in tertiary institutions, a healthy partnership comprising senior academic, senior non-teaching, senior staff, junior staff and junior members is the way to excellence. This paper seeks to unearth the need for cooperation to achieve excellence as was strongly emphasized when Ojo (1987) came down heavily on Registrars who liked to recount how many Vice-Chancellors

they had outlasted on account of the fact that they are usually appointed to office until they are 60 years and retire. Bennis (1976) observed that Registrars have almost gone past the stage where they were seen as “*overpaid clerical appendages*” of universities. Many studies have been conducted on university administration but failed to categorize the roles played by the afore mentioned key actors in the university system hence, they university Registrars see themselves as professionals in their own right.

Methodology

Besides observations, this paper relied on secondary data and literature review for its analysis and discussions.

Discussions

University life

Bennis (1976) made a trite observation that universities are among the worse managed institutions, although many people outside the universities look up there for solutions to almost every facet of life. Academics and administrators undertake consultancies for all manner of challenged companies but are unable to apply similar prescriptions to deal with observed shortcomings in their own universities. This is frequently so because most universities are often unwilling to pay well for the services of professionals on their payrolls. As salaries in the educational sector almost always lag behind what prevails in the private sector, few are often willing to provide quality advisory services for little or no reward. Additionally, many professionals within the university believe that if they diagnose their own internal problems and in the process deprive others of possible consultancies, such displacements could eventually also

deprive them of outside consultancies through reprisals. How true it is when the Ronald and Richard (2011) observed that the doctor and the lawyer who attempt to treat or defend themselves take their clients for fools. Until the work of committees in universities is rewarded commensurately, most staff seeing on such committees will prefer to spend their time elsewhere.

Fascination with Qualifications

Universities place too much premium on qualifications. There is considerable preference for holders of PhD's, chartered professional qualifications and deference to persons of professorial status as if staff without these could not serve well on internal and external committees. The opposite is often the truth. Those who have not yet obtained the highest levels are often keen to prove their potential while those who are already perched up there expect to be recognized and respected for their past solid academic achievements.

It is common in universities to see that performance hardly tallies with the qualifications people hold. Chambers (1993) observed some of his colleagues that they fail to hold the balance between actual performance and ability with the result that, "they take on more and more and complete less and less, complete it less and less well, and as they become more eminent, are less likely to be told their work is bad." This is despicable. When this happens, the eminent scholars do not contribute to academic excellence but rather fail to mentor the young faculties under them. Academic excellence comes through motivating, mentoring and replacing oneself. From the forgoing phenomena, teachers, learners and all university operatives can be aided or impeded by rotten academic and administrative systems.

Commitment

Kufour (1981) observed that universities comprise of so many professionals trying to work together. This often requires a leadership that is firm, committed to a vision and willing to pursue the goals or strategies that arise from such visions as cited in (Bogue, 1987). The abundance of different professional viewpoints often results in heated protracted debates. If these perspectives are well-managed, they would not necessarily lead to a compelling paralysis, but the determination of the best possible way forward. It is therefore a duty for bad administrators and academic leaders to be resisted because they control the wheels of the vehicles in which so many future leaders have stakes.

According to Bogue (1987), it is almost always natural to have long and confusing debates over resolving issues among highly professional gatherings. The arguments are more complex, confusing and compelling because of the broad exposures to the history and cultures of others. Those who chair and record the proceedings at meetings must be a step ahead, or at the worst, not amateurs. Bogue (1987), in describing meeting dilemmas in universities, said that. "Scientists will want an experiment and philosophers a logical argument. Lawyers will want an adversarial hearing and theologians a reference to the scripture. Sociologists will want an opinion poll and artists a panel of judges.

Engineers will want a systems study and economists a cost/benefits analysis." Such is the complexity of life inside academia. The bias for excessive talking is often beneficial because those who talk most, even if to merely display their oratorical abilities, often get selected, elected or appointed to committees and places where they would receive additional remuneration.

Redefining Status Equivalences

Recent developments in Effah and Henreitta (2001), clearly pointed to the growing mistrust between academic and non-teaching senior members in universities in Ghana. Some academic staff does not see why teaching and non-teaching staff should enjoy the same conditions of service. Such people have advocated for a decoupling of salaries. This is currently creating a lot of mistrust between the members of the University Teachers Association of Ghana (UTAG) and the Ghana Association of University Administrators (GAUA). These two groups of professionals need each other to conceive and implement change that will bring about improved quality in universities. The feeling which seems to be emerging is that academics feel they can do without administrators and administrators feel that they have what it takes to teach in the university too. Interestingly, both sides continue to behave as if they do not know their mistrust of each other is hurting them collectively.

University Reward Systems

Apart from the obsession with qualifications in universities, academics progress or rust depending on their publications output. The general adage that "*publish or perish*" is a mediaeval spill over that stresses publications in universities. As in Alinsky (1972), academics who concentrate on teaching well to give students the needed knowledge and skills that would make universities relevant to the communities find that it does not pay. Those who devote substantial time to extension and community service also soon find that it pays more to publish to attain the status of an eminent scholar.

Kubr (1996) pointed out that the ongoing educational reform process does not seem to appreciate the contribution of lecturers to the moulding of the youth. It is difficult to explain and defend the policy where the Best Teacher Award winners in basic and pre-tertiary sectors over the years can take cars and houses. These awards are bought with money from the Consolidated Fund while universities have to source funds from internally generated sources for fridges, television sets and other domestic appliances as prizes for lecturers who taught the teachers of the award winners. If the sacrifices of teachers can be recognized at the foundation level, then the sacrifices of teachers at the highest level of training ought to be recognized too. Walker (1981) observed that the failure to do this is the direct result of the greying phenomenon in most universities. It makes some sense to infer that one cannot expect considerable improvement in a system whose operatives are not motivated to go for total quality.

Besides, if there are so many sloppy teachers in universities, it is because good teaching has never been

recognized as contributing to excellence. Walker (1979) observed that it is bad enough to work in a frustrating system. It is worse to find oneself in a situation where the leader alone believes he has the organization at heart and every other subordinate around him is a wounded tiger that must be carefully watched. Such suspicion breeds mistrust and the mistrust degenerates into a fear to delegate. Walker (1979) and Bogue (1987) refer to such leadership styles as *“having the tendency to assign self-serving motives to others and more noble motives to ourselves. Others are the scoundrels and we are the knights”*.

Delegation in Universities

Walkins (1972) stated that, universities are among those organizations that have large concentrations of human resources. To benefit from the brain power of these personnel, universities are managed through various committees that broaden and engage the minds of most staff at several levels. The principle of collegiality which many universities uphold is to allow consensus to be built at various levels such that agreements eventually reached become agreements that run through the hierarchy of any university structure. This is not always the case, but in most instances, this result can be expected and obtained.

Russel (1949) posited that a chief executive who believes that he alone can do things right will not delegate much to his support team. Such leaders frequently refer to their authority from Council and remind everyone to note that they were appointed on the basis of their vision and not anyone else's thoughts on what needs to be done. Such stance easily offends the sensibilities of colleagues. There will be some who will hang on to get favours, but there will be others who will oppose a leader's style even though they share in his vision. Machiavelli (1996) noted that “men are... thankless, fickle, studious to avoid danger, greedy of gain, devoted to you while you are able to confer benefits on them, and ready while danger is distant, to shed their blood and sacrifice their property, their children to you....” Many university administrators, according to Bogue (1987), lack the patience and humility to absorb hostility from academic leaderships just as many academic leaders lack the skills to manage and obtain good results from the people under them. Human beings do not want their every act to be put to rigorous scientific scrutiny, especially when the scrutinizers are not willing to be put through similar tests.

Academic leaders who cannot delegate have cluttered desks and praise themselves to the skies for modest achievements. They are, however, willing to blame their followers when the results are not good (March and Cohen, 1974). Those in need of praise ought not to run in the face of blame. Some academic leaders search thoroughly for hard evidence that it is the follower or committee that bungled an enterprise and never their own lack of accomplishment. The problem of poor results must always be from the follower and never the leader. If such leaders were in private enterprises then, their business would have plummeted for their nagging and authoritarian dispositions (Bogue, 1987).

As all Vice-Chancellors are usually professors, it is not

uncommon to see some carry their professorial pomposity to great heights. They see dissent as an affront to their reputations as eminent scholars; especially if the voices of dissent are coming from non-professors or persons below professorial equivalents. With this attitude, the expectation that many will acquiesce and watch, leads several to kill the initiative of committee members and become a law unto themselves. When the committee system is stalled, the leader can misinform faculty that he is in constant consultation with higher authority. The faculty watches in utter disbelief, hoping that only time teaches the fool sense (Machiavelli, 1996).

As the committees collapse, the Vice-Chancellor takes on their duties and expands his power base considerably. He justifies this by complaining that he is compelled to takeover because the committees are not working. With an expanded power base, he sidelines the dissenters while rewarding those praising him. As is the case when one man has too much power, spineless individuals will fall over each other to compete in flattery for benefits. Machiavelli (1996) observed that when this begins to happen, the death bell for collegiality has been tolled. The worst is about to come. “Arrogance is the only known disease of which its sufferers are not aware and help often comes a little too late”. This partly explains why institutions expected to teach best practices in managing organizations sometimes end up as despicable work places.

Exemplary Academic Leadership

Academic leadership, in spite of all its trappings, is not a job many scramble for. Walker (1979) posits that “Many have heard this tale that when the first vice-chancellor braced the odds to enter Heaven, God himself was so amazed that he rescheduled his programme to welcome the brave loner”. This must surely mean, if we consider the number of universities in the world and the frequent changes in this office, that the job of a vice-chancellor is a difficult one. “Nevertheless, then, one would still have my ears on the ground to hear that the first Registrar has at last also arrived in Heaven” (Walker, 1979). The job of a Registrar is a thankless, stressful lot until retirement rests thee.

As observed by Walker (1979), the job of a Vice-Chancellor is “to provide healing interpretations to the academic community.... It is... to mediate and arrive at creative solutions. It is the job of the President to create an environment where dialectical change is encouraged, where people deal with one another not as scoundrels but as colleagues, and where perspectives may be compromised in ways that resolve tension and permit action” (Walker, 1979). In practice, what happens in the universities is often a far cry from what Walker (1979) perceived as exemplary leadership. Drunker (1966) posits that since a man leads according to his convictions, his convictions should be as close as possible to what society believes to be very crucial values for them at the time. The exemplary leader must use discretion but not discriminate, apply rules across board with reasonable firmness and demonstrate a strong commitment to the pursuit of the objectives he expects his followers to internalize.

There is no perfect leader, but insightful leaders. Mistakes are bound to come; only dead men don't make mistakes. All reasonable men profit from their own mistakes and those of others if they bother to remember them. Of effective chief executives, Drucker (1966) discovered about top leaders that, "there are extroverts and aloof retiring men, some even morbidly shy. Some are eccentrics; others painfully correct conformists. Some are fat and some are lean. Some are worriers, some are relaxed. Some drink quite heavily, others are total abstainers. Some are men of great charm and warmth; some have no more personality than a frozen mackerel". Leaders often have their handicaps. If you have a leader who will not attract any attention in a crowd, then he will need a crowd puller as an aide. Since the best scholars are not always the wisest men, it is always possible to find a modestly educated man come up with the brightest idea on how a particular problem should be addressed. Kempis (1995) noted that "God shall judge us not by the degrees we have obtained but by what we have done with our degrees".

Quality in Universities

What do people expect to find in any university considered to be a centre of excellence? The answers would certainly be varied depending on whom the question is thrown to. Lebouef (1982) contended that competitive advantage, incentives, age structure of faculty, research output, labour-management perspectives and leadership style can make a whole world of difference. March and Cohen (1974) posited that the surge for excellence in most organizations depends on the clarity of vision, mission, priorities and strategies that filter down to the great majority of operatives. Keller (1983) pointed that efficiency in academia suffers due to the trademark of most professors not to come to closure; allowing discussions to go on without the problem getting near being resolved. Many academic leaders lack management training but rather blame committees instead of accepting responsibility.

According to Bogue (1987), performance of universities can be scrutinized under reputation, size, examination, growth and contribution towards the upliftment of living conditions. It is, however, a known fact that the performance of staff and students of highly rated universities frequently falls below those of the less rated ones. Big size is not necessarily one of pursuit of excellence as big universities also have peculiar disruptive tendencies as compared to in smaller ones. Highets (1976) indicated that "the demise of the mythological large Greek bird, Icarus has shown mankind that being large may be advantageous only if one knows how being large could be put to use". Ronald and Richard (2011) posited that it is not right to infer excellence from performance in examinations alone because the mandate, mission, objectives and strategies of some universities could promote community improvement requiring monitoring and evaluation of outcomes rather than performance of students at examinations.

Quality may be measured in other forms such as by access, relevance and affordability. On access, it is clear that

good things do not come cheap, hence are often not accessible to the great majority of the poor. On affordability, Highets (1976) and Bogue (1987) agree that "men will pay more to be delivered from danger than to be assisted in developing themselves" even though in neglecting education, they place themselves at more danger ahead. Academics like to be treated as equals and with respect. They hate leadership styles that rush to quick closures making many feel that no real value to their contributions was really intended. One needs to plan meetings properly so that what is intended as information and for discussion are clearly acceptable to the listening dons (Bogue, 1987). Academics therefore seem to admire the view of Joubert (2011) that "It is better to debate an issue without resolving it than resolving it without debating it". The good university leader is the one who knows how to hold this delicate balance between coming to quick closure and allowing members to engage in academic debates over simple matters. Joubert (2011) emphasized that when lecturers and students easily get consultancies or jobs, it may suggest that they have what prospective employers in the job market are looking for. We could infer that if universities were not delivering repeatedly to satisfaction, people will not continue to subscribe to their services and products. Competence and relevance are therefore important to match performance with customer expectations.

Governance Structures

According to Kerr (1963), the outside world must have confidence in the results that are published in any university. This means that there should be mechanisms to make admission procedures easy, hall systems enjoyable, easy access to student certificates and results, zero tolerance for examination malpractices and a motivated staff ensuring that goals and objectives are being met. Any reasonable leader will restructure an organization so that reasonable men can work in it and fit their competencies to the tasks. Structure determines strategy and strategy determines what goals will be pursued. Drucker (1966) revealed that "To structure a job to a person is almost certain to result in the end in discrepancy between the demands of the job and the available talents. It results in a dozen people being pushed around to accommodate one". Excellence comes with the use of people with multi-talents working together as a winsome team. It is important to stress that universities are public bureaucracies and ought to so manage that all with the ability have equal opportunities. It is stressed that, "The test of excellence in an organization is to make common people achieve uncommon performance" (Drucker, 1966). Training draws our attention to the different make-ups of people and offers us techniques by which we can work together as teams and yet enjoy being ourselves individually.

Conclusion

The boundary between mediocrity and excellence is often too thin. This gives the belief that it is the little things rather than lofty deeds that separate institutions (Kerr, 1975). All said and done, academic leadership moulds what should be done and how it should be done but the outcomes

are often the collective efforts of all stakeholders. The era of crateful and motivational leadership with sensitive mentorship arrived for good. Every stakeholder in excellent performing enterprises is a valued social partner whose contribution to the outcomes must be cherished, respected and encouraged for a sustained quality. The facilitator is as important as the leader for a leader without committed followers is heading for disaster. Any partnership of equals being treated unequally drives a wedge through the bonds that hold the partnership together. The pursuit of self-interest without regard to the feelings of other stakeholders is a sure recipe for a headlong collusion that will do no good for any party. The various unions should fight for a common cause. Since leadership style is often dictated by several variables in an environment, these peculiarities explain why Makridakis (1995) and Clark (1995) see top managers as “rare and paradoxical; creative and practical, visionary and pragmatic, flexible and persistent, easy going and demanding, risk-taking and conservative”. Improvement in the quality of education as a social end is the main object of most educational processes in the 2st Century.

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