

POLITICAL ECONOMY OF EDUCATION: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES OF OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING IN NIGERIA

The privilege of a convocation Lecture is, in many ways, an opportunity for agenda-setting for the academic community. I am honored therefore, that I have been afforded this opportunity a number of times because to set agenda for the academe, in this age of the knowledge society is to provide Thought Leadership for society that must educate aright or lose relevance. I want therefore to thank the Vice-Chancellor and his team at the National Open University of Nigeria for thinking me worthy of so valuable a role.

To the Graduands, my felicitations. A new chapter in your course of being is about to begin. It is therefore not an accident that graduation ceremonies in the United States are known as commencement. Commencing a new phase of Life's journey with the equipment of worthiness in Character and Learning evokes images of John Henry Cardinal Newman. Cardinal Newman, an Oxford educator who went on to found the Catholic University of Ireland laid the foundation stone for modern understanding of the idea of a University. His views, which I embrace fully is that University education, beyond a place of building blocks of knowledge and discovery of new ways that advance the human condition should be designed to shape and form the full person: moral, social, religious and knowledge for action. It is as such therefore that universities examine students for proof that they have been found worthy in character and in learning.

As you look around you are sure you will find much evidence that a failure in character building looms large as one of the reasons our country has failed to claim the promise of Nigeria at independence. Even more painfully, our experience in nation building seems so to betray the dream of the founding fathers of Nigeria in an era of nationalist struggle during which the world out there imagined the emergence of new powers that would include Nigeria, India and Brazil. It is a testament to the loss of character that four decades after, the emerging powers would agglomerate as BRICS. (Brazil, Russia,

India, China and South Africa). Nigeria had fallen out of reckoning.

The same Nigeria in the time of our founding fathers witnessed a review of the state of higher education under the leadership of Oxford Educator Sir Eric Ashby who reported to Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa that the quality of Higher Education in Nigeria was as good as the best in the world. Yet few think of Nigeria today when they list the top 1000 universities in the world.

As you go into the world from the opportunity of the learning experience you have been through, each of you graduates has a duty to continue to seek to mould character such that learning and character can blend to give you success and fulfillment in the world out there.

To the faculty and staff who have facilitated the shaping of our graduates of today, be assured that the reward for your effort is not just in heaven, but can be located in the light of the beneficiaries of your hard work, spreading across the pathways of the earth as the graduates proceed on their many life pursuits that education empowers them to seek.

Sadly, extant culture in Nigeria somehow does not show enough appreciation for what teachers and academic support staff sacrifice to invest capacity in so many whose know-how and know-why define society's upbringing modes.

At most graduations, prime place, or pride of place, is often reserved for parents. In open university situations, the parents may be less in focus because the graduates may be older or have financed their own education. I still recall one commencement when one of my children was graduating in the United States and a former US President, George Bush the elder, began by acknowledging so many "broke but happy" parents who had spent a fortune investing the ultimate gift in their children: quality education. Often forgotten is that the distance learning graduate has long-suffering spouses and children who endure the burning of the midnight oil by their beloved. I salute all such who supported our graduates. Permit me now to turn to the

subject proper of this Lecture.

The Political Economy of Education

Education has always been critical for human progress because it is the bakery of ideas which turns the wheel of innovation and grooms Leaders who forge the synergy of talent pools and communicate a vision of where society is going. with resultant solution to problems that invariably makes yesterday's impossible. tomorrow's routine.

As a facilitator of the capacity to communicate culture. and. therefore. a vehicle for the transmission of values that allows one generation to socialize the coming one into how best to adapt to the environment. and better take dominion over it. education has been prized for millennia. But it is in how it separates the poor and miserable. and in how it sets apart country competitiveness in this age of the knowledge worker that education defines the age.

Given the prime nature of education. modern development planners have often suggested that the social sectors of education and healthcare define the primary focus of government in being the key anchor of the development process.

The difference that education makes stands in sharp relief when you consider the history of income evolution relative to Levels of education. Jonathan Tepperman unveils some of this in his efforts to find good examples in a troubled world in his book *The Fix*. But he had first to establish some of the troubles of the age before showcasing examples of extraordinary effort at fixing things. One of the examples of things gone awry he pointed to is the state of wages in America. According to Tepperman: "incredible as it sounds. the average American wage (adjusted for inflation) peaked more than four decades ago. in 1973. its been falling ever since"

Just as average wages have been travelling south in the US. the fastest

journey on the negative path has been for people with less than high school education. Studies show that, at least in nominal terms wages have been going up for all categories of workers except for those with less than High School education.

That development can be traced back to the legacy of how the middle class as we know it today, emerged. As Ted Levitt, the Harvard Professor authored *Giants of Enterprise* suggests the broadening of the middle into a bulge began when Henry Ford went from resisting modest wage increase demands to dramatic increases in wages. As the mass production revolution brought more people into factories in which their brain to move components around the assembly process, was key consideration, many of the uneducated came to own their houses in suburbia with cars in their garages.

But robotics and the ICT revolution reduced or eliminated the need for brain in most assembly lines. As restructuring took people off the assembly floor, those required there needed to have education to programme or manage electronic processes controlling robots. The education requirement for assembly work in this age of the knowledge worker had shot up beyond the range of people with less than high school education.

How well has Nigeria's educational system responded to this evolving reality? University of Ibadan's much acclaimed Professor of Education, P. A. Obanya has had many excursions of explanation and direction setting the agenda for education that is responsive to the environment and change taking place both in the local environment and global arena in which all are interlinked in this age of globalisation. Obanya does indeed allude to the constance of education in how man makes progress and how "its goals have always responded to the demands of changing times and have sought to meet the developmental needs of specific human environments. (P. African Education in the EFA decade) But this main tool that a society deploys for its survival" (P. J) has not been given its deserved place in the

planning process and policy implementation in Nigeria for some years. The result has been a retreat from where Nigeria stood in 1962 when the Ashby Commission on Higher Education in Nigeria said it was good as the very best in the world. So where did things go wrong? What can be learnt from how Finland and less well endowed countries leveraged education to become globally competitive? Even, more importantly, how can digital technology, teaching from a remote location enable broadening of access to the most beneficial and/or effective education. teacher quality?

But before we come to focus on the Nigerian context of the political economy of education and what this means for the need and mode of distance learning it should be useful to swing through the phases of technological innovation and human progress and view about how some phenomena have affected the application of knowledge to cause "The Great Escape" as Angus Deaton labels the phenomenon of Man overcoming Misery

Education, Power Relations in the Marketplace and the New self Worth.

The changing world in which we live has been changing so much faster since the 18th century. That change has been largely multiple times faster since then than in the millennia before then because education resulted in the redesign of the steam engine by James Watt, making power based productions possible. That ushered in the Industrial Revolution which saw the beginnings of a shift of power from the landed gentry to the capitalists of Industry. They, the new controllers of the major factor of production, in turn had much more power, over their customers, as captured by Henry Ford's famously arrogant response to the question about variety in colour availability of Model T Fords when he said "You can have whatever colour you want as long as it is black." But the Moving Assembly Line he made famous which resulted in mass production triggered the shift of power from producers shifting to consumers, reshaped matters. Competition led to market segmentation and the race for market share. The structure-Conduct performance paradigm in structural Economics provided strategical

templates for engaging the competitive terrain. But those templates came to be challenged by the degree of customization that the information and Communication Technology revolution brought with it. The customer had truly become king. This has had profound consequences not only for the kind of knowledge required to function in today's world but also in the power balance between the Teacher or provider of education content and the student or user of education content. The learner as king has the right to demand education of a certain quality at a certain price. This has consequences for distance Learning which we will do well to be sensitive to.

Higher Education and The Social Order

Before we turn to Distance Learning it is important to note that the shifting balance of power relations in the forces of production affects education and the politics of funding education. The more power to purchase with choice has moved to the consumer, the more education has been available to those typically left behind. In this regard social mobility has been greatly driven by educational attainment. This has caused both forces of feudalism to resist education and those desiring to escape the trap of misery to lust after it.

Example is given by a friend of mine whose father was commissioner for Education in Kano State when Audu Bako was the Governor in the early 1970's. On a tour of one of the outlying local governments he got an unkind welcome from a traditional ruler who was upset that aggressive expansion of access to schooling was practically undermining the influence of the traditional elite.

But in recent times we have run into the paradox of access. Whereas the effort of the first Obasanjo government in the middle 1970s declared universities tuition free and pressured the universities to admit more students than their facilities could carry at the output quality level, those times resulted in deterioration of quality of teaching and the environment for shaping character to the point that quite a few, including Chukwuma

Soludo as Central Bank of Nigeria Governor, to proclaim the graduates were unemployable. Access had, in great irony, taken away what university education gave the most, upward social mobility. The unemployable are not likely to climb that social ladder. The need for access and quality together remains the imperative of now.

This situation created the need to deal with access with quality at a time of declining resources. The reality of the times makes for advantage of costs that come with a traditional university. So the question to ask is can the alternatives provide what is traditionally on offer with Universities—the forming of people in character and learning to help society adapt better to its environment, advance the human condition and find fulfillment in life in both material and spiritual while coexisting with others in society. In other words, what is the idea of a university and how well will distance be structured to fit the idea of a university?

This is a conversation into which the National Universities Commission has to be drawn. As Guardians of the idea of a university in Nigeria the NUC has been traditionally slow to change. For the NUC a university was 100

Hectares of condominium with many faculties and traditional teaching methods. To be sure, it is changing but the pace has been slow. It took it long to accept the idea of Private Universities and even such methods of Pedagogy as the Case Study method. But we must not blame the leadership of the NUC alone.

One of the most enduring discussions of Institutional change was offered in a 1990 book by Douglass North who recently passed away. The winner of the Nobel Prize in Economics had canvassed, in the book *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*: that institutions evolve and do so largely from the activism of interested parties who end up finding that a level playing field better serves the interest of all.

I have, myself, been engaged in a few battles with the NUC but also much gratified by the NUC inviting me to teach its leadership team the use

of the CONVOCATION LECTURE



case study method and in Entrepreneurship Development strategies. under different regimes. So what is the idea of a university we are hoping distance learning can continue to uphold even as the institutions change and adapt.

The Idea of a University

To mention the idea of a university is always to move the mind to that prince of the Catholic Church The Blessed John Henry Cardinal Newman. the Oxford educator who found the Catholic University of Ireland When universities announced that graduates have been found worthy in character and in learning to be awarded a degree. they are following a tradition defined through the years. by the most resilient of institutions ever created by modern man. The university. whether it be from the great African University tradition of the university at Timbuktu. which Ali Mazrui celebrates. or the university of Ireland as founded by Cardinal Newman. the university was about character. know - how. know- why and social impact.

We have sadly seen failure of the Nigerian Universities to live up to the idea of a university even as there has been explosion in the establishment of universities. The need to find exemplars is a desperate one. Clearly. the heroic effort in changing the world through education as robustly captured by Chris Lowney in *Heroic Leadership* where he explores lessons from 450 years of Jesuit Education

We can see a bit of this inaction with the Loyola Jesuit College Abuja. As a 14 year veteran UC parent. I am a witness to the transformative possibilities of Jesuit education at a time public policy is mouthing platitudes about a transformation agenda. Even though UC students. Like two of mine who spent 6 years there. each call it Little Jail for children (UC) in fond jest. do we need little jails for education to transform? So what are universities if they are not jails?



'Universities are organizations engaged in the advancement of knowledge: they teach, train and examine students in a variety of scholarly, scientific, and professional fields. Intellectual pursuits define the highest prevailing levels of competence in these fields. The universities confer degrees and provide opportunities both for members of their teaching staff and for some of their students to do original research.' (Ben-David, 1968)

Yet another definition tells us that universities are:

'Institutions of higher education, usually comprising a Liberal arts and sciences college and graduate and professional schools and having the authority to confer degrees in various fields of study. The modern university evolved from the medieval schools known as *studia generalis*... The earliest studia arose out of efforts to educate Clerks and Monks beyond the level of Cathedral and Monastic Schools, which were institutions in which the essences or universals were studied' (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1968)

These essences or universals set the course of higher education at this ultimate level along a path that was deliberately comprehensive in scope. This point is in fact more richly summarized in the 1952 preface to John Henry Cardinal Newman's *The Idea Of A University*. He takes the view here that the university is a place of teaching universal knowledge. This implies that its objective is, on the one hand, intellectual, not moral; and on the other, the diffusion of knowledge rather than the advancement of it. The diffusion need brings the students but they will lack the osmotic capability of absorbing fully the existing base of knowledge unless the universal knowledge includes values that give context, meaning and relevance to the knowledge gained in the university. This is why this university confers its degrees on people who have been found worthy in character and in learning.

We owe that and much more to Blessed Cardinal Newman. I have interrogated his ideas on this subject in some of my writings including in the books *Why Nations are poor* and *Critical Perspectives in Political Economy*



and Management.

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

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

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

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

Bearing all these in mind, we can say of the university that it is a place of enlightenment for exploring the frontiers of knowledge and socializing people into the application of discovered things, ideas and values: the knowledge of the natural order; for pursuit of the common good and individual well being. The university is an enterprise in which freedom is a critical variable if the frontiers of knowledge are to be challenged because the status quo often resists new ideas for, as Machiavelli reminds us, those

who benefit from extant order usually try to frustrate a new way of thinking

The university which we have just defined does not differ in Africa from the traditions of Europe even though the academy of learning was a feature of medieval African civilizations such as Timbuktu. Those early civilizations became fully extinct so that when colonial experience led colonials anxious to staff the bureaucracy with locals decided on universities for the colonies, they were recreating the western university with hardly any influence from the traditions of the academies of earlier African civilizations. The challenge of the modern academy drawing from ancient African traditions is part of the considerations for today's universities. But few even have a sense for the early African academies. Ali Mazrui richly articulates the progeny of the African university.

'The African university was born as a subsidiary therefore of precisely that Westernizing transnational corporation to which I referred- Western Academic establishment (Ashby, 1964, pp, 1-2). Colleges like Makerere Ibadan and Legon in Ghana, and colleges in the Francophone African part of our continent, were literally cultural subsidiaries of British and French academic traditions.

'The African university was conceived primarily as a transmission belt of high Western culture, rather than as a workshop for the transfer of high Western skills (Ibid., p6). African universities became nurseries for nurturing a westernized black intellectual aristocracy. Graduates of Ibadan, Dakar and Makerere acquired Western social tastes more readily than Western organizational skills.

"They joined my generation of Africans- the lost generation of the colonial period. They embraced the new gospel of respecting Westernism, and the new gospel was not only born but expanded. The one change which did not take place was transformation in the role of the university. The university became a place for perpetuating and expanding the Westernized elite, creating new members for it. The ghost of intellectual dependency



continued to haunt the whole gamut of African academia. The semi-secular gospel of Westernism continues to hold African mental freedom hostage."

In our experience Nigeria has gone from six thousand students in the Higher institutions in 1960 when there were the Universities in Ibadan, Nsukka (UNN), Ife, Lagos, Zaria (ABU) and the Institute of Technology, Benin as this number grew rapidly from an enrollment of 15,000 in 1970 to about 12 million by 2012 (Clark et al 2013).

In 2013 1.7 million registered for the joint Admission and Matriculation Board (UAMB) examinations into universities. They were competing for 500,000 available places in Nigerian Universities.

To bridge this yawning chasm the idea of distance learning has become the way to make the idea of a university come alive.

Distance Learning and prospects of University education

Given the number that need to be educated, and the dire statistics of our population of nearly 200 million, vast needs for leaders in many areas of our lives and the ratio of applicants to places in universities, Distance Learning has become an imperative of now and the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) example provides us an opportunity to interrogate the challenge.

If people who have the university environment to pass through, and the university to pass through them, can be thought to be unemployable, can we trust products of distance learning to have the character and learning that would make them employable in a world in which, as we know, values shape human progress?

We will find that in some models of Mass Open Online Courses (MOOCs) there is enough interactivity across cultures that can indeed provide more opportunities to build character and provide the sharing of experience that can amount to much more than you can actually find in a





university classroom. It is such knowledge that provides hope for distance learning. The great benefit of student life, the personal growth of living on campus, can today be significantly provided for in online interaction.

So as we look at our universities with poor and decaying infrastructure. (I was recently moved to tears when I saw photos of Zik's flats in Nsukka where I lived in 1974); dearth of competent Teachers (The best used to stay back as Junior fellows now they go off to the banks and oil companies) high cost of good quality on-campus university education; and the practical relevance of what is taught there on-campus, we cannot but think alternatives from tradition.

Imagine that the option provides access to some of the best educational content from all over the world, with access to local industry and their extent challenges and approaches to solving problems from the comfort of your home. Welcome to distance learning done well! These are the possibilities that the National Open University of Nigeria can offer if properly led.

About two years ago, I gave a lecture at Covenant University on this subject at a conference organized by ICT groups. There I tried to navigate the terrain from MOOCs to the pedagogy of edX. I will limit myself today to a narrow scope of introducing models of distance learning.

There are of course MOOCs which are open to anyone with no mandatory entry qualifications and pay no fees. They are fully online, but are lightly tutored and supported. There can be modest assessments and may be offered certificates of completion.

The goal of MOOCs is to reach the remotest parts of the world and help people move forward in their careers because of enhanced capacity. They also help people expand their networks and build networking skills.

In December 2011, (MIT) announced edX, an online distance learning platform aimed at letting thousands of online Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) learners take laboratory-intensive courses, while





assessing their ability to work through complex problems.

The pedagogy of some of the distance learning involves use of video lectures, mastery learning and peer assessment and separates the richer interactive sessions for paying students versus what is offered to the non-paying students.

Whether it be distance learning, the traditional campus for learning or objectives to be met, we need a philosophy of knowledge and a supporting pedagogy. I have offered and continue to experiment with one that I call the pedagogy of the determined. It derives its mainframe from the work of the Brazilian educator from the 1960s Paulo Friere who wrote the 'pedagogy of a state of mind' captured and deployed through the pedagogy in post colonial societies. The one I offer uses similar thinking to create an entrepreneurial independently thoughtful but interdependent community of problem solvers.

Conclusion

The goal of university education so central to modernity can be achieved today not only in the traditional university. Distance learning is critical to broadening access and growing the very important human capital factor in how man makes progress in today's world. To get optimum value from the possibilities for distance learning requires that the NUC become more responsive to a rapidly changing environment: our infrastructure stock improved dramatically to accommodate higher bandwidth for internet access that is universal.

Mr Chairman, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen there I could go on but I do not want to test your patience. Education matters and all hands must get on deck for it to work to the desired outcome.

Patrick Okedinachi Utomi (Prof)

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