

Reviving Academic Standards in Nigerian Universities: Role of the Academia

by

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Introduction

I am truly humbled by this invitation to present a view from the academe on the vexatious issue of falling academic standards in our nation's institution of high learning. I am aware of several important voices that had addressed this subject. They are voices that ordinarily should not be ignored but ours are not ordinary times. These voices belong to Okigbo (1992) and Babalola (2006) to mention only two. Perhaps my silent discomfort with the turn of events vis-à-vis academic standards of Chemical Engineering Graduates from our Universities was not so silent after all and has attracted this attention to me.

I have been taken to task on many occasions in the past to defend my continued fidelity with an occupation that is continually inconsistent with what most saw as deserving of my pedigree. They would ask me why with my B.Sc. and M.Sc. degrees that are, respectively, 1st class and distinction equivalents obtained within four years from MIT, a Ph.D. that won the best thesis award from Pittsburgh, and other academic laurels, I would not elope to greener pastures outside this country or at least seek other more lucrative jobs elsewhere in Nigeria. These are my friends, my townsmen, my contemporaries from FGC Warri, and most curiously, my students past and present. I have had to formally address these latter, on their invitation, on the appeal of teaching in our academic environment. My position, which is consonant with that of important authorities on the link between education and development, is that the survival of our nation depends on teachers. I am grateful to the organizers of this forum for this opportunity to challenge the view of some who think otherwise and who are not threatened by the turn of events in the academia.

In his "Crisis in the Temple" Okigbo (1992) observed that the priests and protectors of the temple acknowledge the existence of an academic standards crisis but attribute it to external forces – decaying social values, inadequate funding and lack of coherent educational policy by government. In Okigbo's view much of the blame rests on the academia itself. Anchoring his position on internal evidence derived from reports of visitation panels to the institutions of higher learning across the country, he concluded without diminishing the validity and relevance of the factors identified above by the academia that internal vices and failings were at the root of the crisis. The latter indeed stoke and reinforce the former. He put a time scale on the problem with the political crises of 1964-1966 as origin. This and the civil war that followed, the oil boom, the explosion of numbers in student population and in number of institutions, the military incursion into the governance of the nation, the low cost recovery ratio for higher education in Nigeria and the total secularization of education at the primary and secondary school levels all served to subvert standards as they "recalibrated" our scale of values and compromised the viability of the educational enterprise. The internal factors are, lack of objectivity and fairness in the internal administration of the institutions, academic offences exemplified by "plagiarism, harassment of female students, lowering of grades in vengeance or upgrading students for clearly illegitimate favours, fraud and peculation in the use of University funds, favouritism in admissions policy for friends of the university administrators, arbitrary appointments of incompetent heads of departments."

Babalola's submission was in broad agreement with Okigbo *albeit* with different emphases on the key factors and on what needed to be done to arrest the drift. He, for instance, saw industrial unrests as one major factor that required outright ban by government to protect the academic calendar from crippling disruptions (Babalola (2006). Other remedies suggested by these gentlemen are presented later in this paper and, together with only a few additional entries, shall form the basis for the suggestions to be presented for your consideration at this workshop.

The voices of these eminent citizens were never significantly contradicted and their prescriptions have substantially been heeded in at least some of our institutions but the perception of falling standards generally persists. This has been expressed in several different ways. Unimpressive international academic ranking of our institutions of higher learning, the unusually large fraction of our graduates who are unemployable or remain unemployed several years after graduation, and the necessity for employers of even the best graduates to almost completely retrain them are some of the indications of trouble. Could it be that we are yet to navigate the full scope of the issue, or that we are just at the exponential growth phase of the malaise and that measures so far taken are, therefore, ineffectual? Perhaps a different observation post is called for.

This workshop's promoters probably reckoned that a teacher will provide the needed fresh perspective considering that the front-row seats for the observation of this decay belong to teachers. Here they are spectators as well as participants in most of the processes and factors responsible for standards decay. Therefore, it may be assumed that any lasting solution requires an examination of these processes and of the role of teachers in them. Mix this with the words of wisdom from the more detached independent observers and we have the desired result. There is a catch though. You are asking the teacher to indict himself – a rarity, I must say, in this country and for strong reasons. I take solace in the realization of the greater importance of stemming the tide of decay which goal, when achieved, puts our nation back on the track of sustainable development and restores the academia's dignity.

I shall approach the issue by examining the nature and ramifications of the standards decline, identifying in the process the causative factors. This will be followed by a summary of the roles for the academia in stemming the decline and in reviving academic standards in our Universities and Polytechnics.

The Genesis and Nature of Decline in Academic Standards

It is a relatively more straight forward matter to promptly establish the quality of knowledge imparted on products of our primary and secondary educational systems. One simply looks at the results of the candidates in standardized examinations like Common Entrance Examinations, the West African School Certificate (WASC) Examinations, and the National Examination Council (NECO) Examinations, the Joint Admissions Matriculation Board (JAMB) Examinations. The same cannot be said of the quality of knowledge imparted on graduates of tertiary institutions in Nigeria as the classifying examinations are significantly decentralized and much less standardized – the use of external moderation of these examinations may be noted for its ineffectiveness.

Consequently, internal institutional quality assurance processes notwithstanding, an unhelpful long time lag exists in the detection of standards problems in the products of higher institutions in Nigeria. The first real hint comes from the employers of labour only when even the short-listed “best candidates” for employment begin to exhibit traits unbecoming of first rate products. A cursory look at the results of the institutions' internal examinations ought to have raised earlier alarms. Internal corrective mechanisms would have been activated to nip the scourge in the bud. It is unrealistic to expect to sustain standards in the face of dwindling subventions from sponsors of the institutions, sustained drastic increases in student population, and the consequent infrastructural inadequacy. The academia complained about these shortcomings but the internal examination results belied them. Graduating class

classifications from three universities over several years illustrate this point (see Annex A). Institutions also complain about the quality of candidates thrown up by JAMB for admission. A reasonable expectation is that a consistent large number of these would drop out of the system making cheating at JAMB examinations unfashionable. The foregoing are grounds to consider other significant contributors to the academic standards crises.

It is my opinion that the onset of standards decay in Nigeria predates 1964, the onset of the political crisis in the Western Region just as that political crisis itself had incubated over a long period of time before blowing up at its exponential growth phase. Though standards were high initially, the sentiments that fuel decay were already evident in the Nigeria of the late 1940s and early 1950s at the premier university in Ibadan (see Animalu (1977) and van den Berghe (1973)). Education was not seen as a means for the constructive development of society but rather as the means to a larger share of the wealth of the nation – the same sentiments that ruled in national politics then and particularly still rules today, giving birth and prominence to issues and measures associated with distrust and inequity – insecurity, quota, and the principle of rotation. We had a nation founded on the merits of synergy degenerate to one where everyone literally must fend for himself minding and protecting very narrow personal interest.

Thus, the educational system today has to contend with examination malpractices of various types, admissions racketeering, and records falsification and misrepresentation as well as other vices that threaten its survival. From all this, most sadly, has evolved a culture of aspiring to that which the individual is not qualified for. The resulting academic terrain is, therefore characterized by the picture, painted below, of the student, the teacher, the administration of examinations and staff matters, the standards regulators (NUC and NBTE), and of governmental policies on education.

The Student

At the polytechnics and at the undergraduate level in the universities a good number of students are indeed intelligent, conscientious and eager to learn – the joy of teachers. Then there are others. The teacher observes all the goings on first hand. Increasingly large numbers of his students leave him in no doubt that their grades can be earned via any means whatsoever. Asked why they had chosen Chemical Engineering as their course of study, this group would unanimously offer, “to secure a job in an oil company”. They would cheat and take whatever line of action offered the surest means to achieving this goal except acquire the requisite knowledge that entitled them to being considered for the job. They would plead for extra marks to enable them move to 2-1, the minimum class required for most choice jobs. Had they not secured admission to the university or polytechnic by the same means? The teacher

can and will stop them on their tracks if he knew how, if doing this will not compromise his personal safety or his greater interest. He is unlikely to do so otherwise. In our present circumstance the odds weigh heavily in favour of choices that lead to the compromise of academic standards. The student is curiously extremely ingenious in subverting measures erected to ensure the sanctity of examinations and so can still have his way in spite of the teacher. To this end he would deploy the latest technology even when these are inaccessible to the teacher. The teacher himself may be handicapped in several ways. Under pressure, from demands way beyond his capacity or from his own personal limitations, he may find himself in no position to correct the wayward student. Generosity may win him peace of the mind at the expense of standards maintenance. None would want to be the odd person out and end up incurring the “wrath of the students”. Some would argue the virtues of “assisting” the students. The students get used to this assistance and thereafter virtually turn off any motivation to study.

No level of our tertiary educational system is more seriously afflicted by the standards malaise than the vital post graduate level – the breeding stage for future teachers. This level is now increasingly populated by students who, unable to secure any jobs or admission for further studies in foreign institutions, reluctantly accept places in our institutions. These will later, again reluctantly, allow themselves to be ploughed back into the educational system as teachers thereby exacerbating the academic standards problem. I met a teacher at the professional examination for Nigerian Engineers who did not know the textbooks he was using to handle his course in Thermodynamics and who could not write down the first law!

The Teacher

The teacher is human and is put under challenging tests. He is grossly underpaid (until recently) and still relatively poorly remunerated, he is seriously over-worked, he has been given a job without the requisite tools for successful execution, and then he is a tortured soul, psychologically, having lost respect and dignity in a society that measures worth only in pecuniary terms and having to teach largely uninspiring students. He is under immense pressure for improved performance from the administration which continually raves up performance baselines in the bid to redress standards decay. He must climb to the next rung of the professional ladder. Constrained by infrastructural and other inadequacies, he succumbs to the temptation to take unethical shortcuts to achieve the goal. These include but are not limited to plagiarism, patronage of obscure phony journals to satisfy the ever increasing minimum number of publications for the next promotion. He concentrates on this publication

activity at the expense of other essential duties, particularly his teaching assignment. No one takes any notice so long as the students get the grades they desire.

Amongst the teachers there are those that are further tormented by a sense of failure in their true mission as teachers, a failure that took away the initiative of positively affecting society from them. Those others, referred to earlier, naturally see and feel no problems at all having arrived at this station by the same train on which the student he now faces are traveling. These came to teaching as a job of last resort. This class of teachers owes its rather high nuisance value to its ability to self propagate and an uncanny understanding of how to take advantage of the system. It is in our best interest to fashion out ways of transforming these reluctant teachers into true teachers.

True teachers see teaching as a vocation. Our system is still blessed with a decent number of true teachers but their numbers are being eroded with the loss of ability to self propagate. Brain drain due to poor conditions of service, inadequate infrastructure for teaching and research, and ageing are leading causes of the decline in their numbers. The same infrastructural inadequacy also makes it difficult to groom potentially excellent teacher materials to proper bloom. Today a purely home-bred teacher of chemical engineering may not have seen a standard laboratory, way into his teaching and research career. Yet one absolute truism is that no nation can rely on another to guarantee her supply of vital human capital without paying dearly for it.

The Administration of Universities and Polytechnics

The responsibility of coordinating all the internal elements that influence academic standards at the institutions of higher learning rests on the administration of these institutions. That these across the country appreciate what is required of them is in no doubt. This is evident in the vision and mission statements professed by them (see some of these in Annex B). Success of the institutions in achieving the objectives implied in these statements reflects naturally in the quality of the products of the institutions, namely the quality of the graduates and of the ideas emanating there from but also, particularly, in the appropriate classification of these. The latter defines the appropriate deployment of these products – a factor that greatly influences perception of worth. The underlying activities are the administration of internal examinations, the collation of results, and the proper handling and archiving of the resulting records. Protection of the sanctity of these processes is essential.

As the repository of the essence of tertiary institutions, no effort ought to be spared to achieve appropriate and secure handling of student academic records. This, the sheer volume of the

records, and the notorious proclivity to cheat, characteristic of the Nigerian educational environment, present a major challenge to the administrators who must square up to IT proficient academic fraudsters. Examination malpractices and other academic fraud feed on confusion, unreliable data and on frustrated access to academic records. Centralized database management computer applications will reduce the challenge to manageable dimensions. These are necessary but are lacking in most institutions.

I envision a situation where the records database may be queried for efficacy of teaching, the quality of assessment from individual course's grades by flagging down courses with telltale unreasonable distribution of grades, any compromise of established quality control measures, and even a possible violation of the sanctity of the database itself.

Another function of the administration as important as the management of examination, classification of graduates and maintenance of records is the recruitment and sustenance of a virile work force. A related role, equally important, is the maintenance of industrial harmony. This is sine quo non for exciting productivity and enlisting loyalty from academic and ancillary staff of higher institutions. Fairness to all and equity are keys to this. Staff welfare should count for much in the reckoning of administrators. Here, I would disagree with Chief Afe Babalola who would have ASSU strikes banned (Babalola 2006). An old Igbo proverb says that the elder is entitled to smack a child but should not insist on the child not crying. In her tribute to musical legend, Michael Jackson, actress Brooke Shields quoted from Antoine de Saint-Expurey's classic *The Little Prince*:

“Lamps must be protected. A gust of wind can blow them out.”

What gales there must be in the Nigerian academic environment, triggering and sustaining brain drain and extinguishing not a few of the best personnel. How different things would have been had we not lost the Ogunaike, the Jeje, the Omatetes from Unilag's Department of Chemical Engineering alone, and particularly had even a few of our first classes and genuine second class uppers been ploughed back to the system.

Attracting quality staff from better developed foreign institutions even when these are Nigerian nationals or from other sectors of the economy has fallen into disfavor in recent times. Nigerian institutions must make do with own graduates or graduates of other Nigerian institutions. The Nigerian academic environment is no longer seen as conducive to academic pursuit. The point has already been made that the cream of institution's own graduates shun their post graduate programmes, preferring foreign institutions or other sectors of the economy seen as more lucrative. The low quality of academic standards of the institutions' products hardly commends them to prospective staff. This should apply to institutions' staff as well as the students.

Addressing the standards problem will change all this. Aside from the measures identified in this section, the administration is best advised to reduce to the barest minimum the level of ignorance amongst staff and students on best practices and on what constitutes unacceptable conduct. To this end modern information technology should be deployed. Access to vital resources could be made contingent upon having gone through a session of an appropriate informative tutorial on appropriate conduct and upon demonstrating an understanding of the same.

The Regulatory Agencies (NUC and NBTE) and Governmental Policies on Education

The National Universities Commission (NUC) and the National Board for Technical Education (NBTE) are the agencies set up by government to oversee developments in the Universities and Polytechnics across the nation. These agencies act as interface between the government and the institutions' administrations. They issue policies and monitor compliance with established regulations. Their effectiveness in guiding the institutions to a path of success in the latter's missions should be a measure of the regulators' own success. Over regulation or inappropriate regulation will produce unwanted results. The Nigerian academic environment provides ample opportunity for inappropriate regulation. It is important to conduct a thorough impact assessment of any regulatory measure before deployment. It may also be necessary to re-examine the paradigm underlying a particular policy thrust. Some examples will illustrate these points.

It may be impracticable to achieve success in improving quality of graduates simply by raising the pass marks in the academic environment like ours. Doing so exacerbates the problem. When employers of labour started to insist on second class upper degrees and upper credit diplomas as minimum entry requirements, our system simply adjusted to produce record numbers of these with the new 2-1s unlikely to be any better than good 3rd classes of yore. A viscous cycle ensues, leading to increasing standards decline rates.

Again, when NUC decreed that all university teachers must possess Ph.D.s the quality of doctoral research supervision absorbed the shock. The available supervisors are inadequate for the demand and these are already over stretched as observed earlier. Haste needed to be made slowly in this matter. In the meantime, why not try making teaching sufficiently attractive to reverse brain drain. Where will the money come from? Babalola offered a lead on this. We must revisit the notion that anything of value can come free.

Government has not helped matters by their frequent often precipitous changes in direction at the primary and secondary school levels of the educational system which feed the higher institutions. A more evolutionary approach to changes is preferable.

Summary of What Needs to be Done

Following from the foregoing discussion are what needs to be done differently or more emphatically, and new suggestions that will alleviate the decay of academic standards. Those requiring intervention from or the participation of academics are itemized below:

- (a) Stricter care needs to be exercised in admitting students but cheating to gain admission into the institutions must be discouraged through internal measures that quickly prevent undeserving students from fraudulently earning institutions' certification.
- (b) The danger of infrastructural inadequacy needs to be recognized and properly articulated with a view to being redressed. This will be helped by greater probity in the management of available funds and improved maintenance of facilities and by resisting excessive student enrolment.
- (c) Students need to be counseled on the true value of their education and on best practices at achieving success in their quest for it. The administration and the teachers have roles to play here.
- (d) Administration and the teachers need to lay more emphasis on character by showing good examples, and by making this quality a requirement for graduation.
- (e) Stricter handling of the institutions' examinations and records using appropriate information technology to ensure the sanctity of these processes, appropriate classification of students, and to elicit the zeal, in students, to excel academically.
- (f) Postgraduate programmes of the universities need to be strengthened by appreciating the deficiencies of available students, making up for this by appropriate adjustments of the curricula and duration.
- (g) Greater care needs to be taken in setting minimum standards for elevation of staff and rules and procedures need to be scrupulously and more strictly adhered to.
- (h) The academia should win back their role in properly influencing society through exemplary conduct, articulation of the direction to meaningful change, demonstration of outstanding performance in addressing the needs of society through relevant research.
- (i) The academia should articulate the necessity for improved conditions of service for teachers as a means of redressing the staffing inadequacy of the institutions.
- (j) The academia should lead the campaign for improved funding of the institutions through improved cost recovery and making the case for appropriate school fees.

These are all within the purview of the academia and should constitute his role in reviving academic standards in our institutions of higher learning.

Conclusion

The social, economic, and environmental factors that have led to the prevailing poor academic standards in the nation's institutions of higher learning have been discussed in this paper. The roles of the academia in these were examined in relation to the search for means of redressing the undesirable situation which has denied the nation of vital support for developmental processes. The influence of society itself through an irrational scale of values was noted as not only a factor but also as a key trigger to several other factors that have acted in concert to drive the decay of standards. Observing that the academia has a duty of positively affecting society, this paper decried the reversal of roles and suggested ways of making amends. A fairly detailed list of measures has been proposed as roles for the academia to revive declining academic standards. Among these are the character question, the handling of examinations and academic records, and the training of new entrants to the teaching profession at the postgraduate level which may be considered as the Achilles heels of higher education in Nigeria. Armed with greater respectability, academia would be better placed to influence government and society.

Thank you all for listening to me.

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Annex A

Graduation Statistics from Some Departments of Chemical Engineering

University of Lagos

<u>SESSION</u>	<u>1ST CLASS</u>	<u>2-1</u>	<u>2-2</u>	<u>3RD CLASS</u>	<u>PASS</u>	All Graduates	% (1st+2-1)
2008/2009	8	32	21	17	4	82	48.78
2007/2008	15	21	19	8	1	64	56.25
2006/2007	14	46	32	17	0	109	55.05
2005/2006	8	73	37	21	0	139	58.27
2004/2005							
2003/2004	4	44	32	0	0	80	60.00
2002/2003	2	31	43	14	1	89	37.08
2001/2002	3	14	35	5	0	57	29.82
2000/2001	2	19	25	2	0	48	43.75
1999/2000	2	22	15	4	0	43	55.81
1998/1999	7	21	22	0	0	50	56.00
1997/1998	2	16	11	4	0	33	54.55
1996/1997	3	21	24	9	0	57	42.11
1995/1996	2	5	21	4	0	32	21.88
1994/1995	0	11	25	6	0	42	26.19
1993/1994							
1992/1993	3	9	18	5	0	35	34.29
1991/1992	1	13	14	0	0	28	50.00
1990/1991	2	8	18	1	0	29	34.48
1989/1990							
1988/1989							
1987/1988							
1982/1983	1	3	8	4		16	25.00
1981/1982	3	3	5	0		11	54.55
1980/1981	3	12	8	0		23	65.22
1979/1980	3	7	8	0		18	55.56

1978/1979	0	2	0	0	2	100.00
1977/1978	2	8	10	4	24	41.67
1976/1977	3	7	5	0	15	66.67
1975/1976	3	2	5	4	14	35.71

Annex A Contd..

Rivers State University of Science and Technology

<u>SESSION</u>	<u>1ST CLASS</u>	<u>2-1</u>	<u>2-2</u>	<u>3RD CLASS</u>	<u>PASS</u>	All Graduates	% (1st+2-1)
2008/2009							
2007/2008	1	29	144	11	0	185	16.22
2006/2007	0	66	160	7	0	233	28.33
2005/2006	1	28	64	9	0	102	28.43
2004/2005	0	24	40	0	0	64	37.50
2002-2004	0	23	55	3	0	81	28.40
2001/2002	0	15	22	2	0	39	38.46
2000/2001	0	19	21	8	0	48	39.58
1999/2000	4	10	24	4	6	48	29.17

Federal University of Technology Owerri

	<u>1ST CLASS</u>	<u>2-1</u>	<u>2-2</u>	<u>3RD CLASS</u>	<u>PASS</u>	All Graduates	% (1st+2-1)
2008/2009							
2007/2008	0	26	56	21	0	103	25.24
2006/2007	1	37	78	32	0	148	25.68
2005/2006	0	17	89	55	2	163	10.43
2004/2005	1	23	73	50	0	147	16.33
2004/2005	0	32	108	2	0	142	22.54

Annex B

Vision and Mission Statements of some Nigerian Institutions of Higher Learning

(Sources: Individual Institution's Websites)

University of Ibadan

Vision

To be a world-class institution for academic excellence geared towards meeting societal needs.

Mission

- To expand the frontiers of knowledge through provision of excellent conditions for learning and research.
 - To produce graduates who are worthy in character and sound judgement.
 - To contribute to the transformation of society through creativity and innovation.
 - To serve as a dynamic custodian of society's salutary values and thus sustain its integrity.
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University of Lagos

Vision

"To be a top-class institution for the pursuit of excellence in knowledge through learning and research as well as in character and service to humanity"

Mission

"To provide a conducive teaching, learning, research and development environment where staff and students can interact and compete effectively with their counterparts both nationally and internationally in terms of intellectual competence"

Ahmadu Bello University

- **Our Mission**

"To provide regular and liberal courses of instruction in the humanities, the sciences and other spheres of learning of a standard required and expected of a University of the highest standing; to promote research and the advancement of science and learning, and to secure the diffusion of knowledge throughout Nigeria"

Ahmadu Bello University Law

- **Our Charter**

"The cardinal principle upon which our University is founded is to impart knowledge and learning to men and women of all races without any distinction on the grounds of race, religious, or political beliefs. This principle is enshrined in the University Law. Only through freedom of membership and freedom of enquiry and research can a University be drawn into the full ferment of thought from which new knowledge comes. Only if it adheres to those freedoms can it become truly great...[But] our character must reflect the needs, the traditions, the social and intellectual heritage of the land in which we live... We must develop our own pattern to suit our present background and our future needs. Our University must grow out of our own soil. We shall be a truly Nigerian institution and not the mirror image of some alien body..."

Sir Ahmadu Bello