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The role of academic planning unit in sustainability of university education

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Abstract

This paper examines the concept of planning, functions of the academic planning unit of the university and the importance of academic planning to university sustainability in Nigeria. It also examines the key roles played by the Academic Planning Unit considered as the fulcrum of university sustainability. Suggestions and possible solutions to the issues faced by the academic planning unit have been offered for ensuring sustainability of university education in Nigeria. The paper also provides possible solutions to intricate problems encountered during the planning process and implementation, since the major function of the Unit is to ensure that university realizes its aims and objectives. It would be wrong for any university not to have the academic planning unit as the unit is central to the university, especially in planning for what opportunity to seize and which to reject when situations arise.

Keywords: Planning, Academic Planning Unit, University sustainability.

1. Introduction

As a result of increase in student enrolment within the last couple of decades, the university education sector has been facing the crucial challenges of inadequate access, decline in the financial resources available to government and private providers of university education as well as ensuring quality delivery and output. This grim situation requires an efficient academic planning system. In this regard, the place of academic planning office for the growth and development of the Nigerian universities cannot be overemphasized. It is a corporate engagement that must be accorded its rightful place for the improvement of university education towards shaping the destiny of the Nigerian University System. It is a clear fact that the academic planning unit is one of the key domains of every university. Therefore, the academic planning unit can be directly responsible for the success or failure of any activity within the university since the unit is the backbone of the university. In satisfying the expectations of the society, the university adopts strategies that conform to National Universities Commission (NUC) regulations, as stipulated in the NUC Benchmark Minimum Academic Standards (BMAS). The Academic Planning Unit plans and coordinates of all the strategies and programmes that would ensure the realization of the mission and vision of the university. The planning process involves identifying the most critical needs of the University, projecting needs, planning and delivering programmes to address needs, evaluating the outcome of efforts and reporting that outcome back to the relevant stakeholders and constituents. Every staff of the Academic Planning Unit, regardless of position, responds to requests from faculties, departments, units and the public. This crucial unit is expected to be proactive, taking the initiative to meet the needs of the university and the public. In other words, the academic planning unit is the laboratory that works with other subunits of the university to bring about the desired transformation.

2. Strategic Planning and Academic Planning

Planning is the process by which managers decide the mission and objectives of the organization and take necessary steps to achieve the desired goals and better performances. It is the process of bridging the gap between an organization's present position and what it wants to be in the future.

Planning is a management function linked with other functions of controlling the organization. It involves determining the institution's objectives and developing strategies to achieving them. It is a matter of common sense that if people do not know where to go, they cannot tell whether they are going in the right direction or not. It is an intellectual process

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characterized by thinking before doing. In the process, available resources, in form of human, physical, financial as required to implement the strategies and process, are taken into consideration. The cost implications in form of budget are also scrutinized.

According to Alfort and Beatt (1951), planning is the thinking process, the organized foresight, the vision based on fact and experience that is required for intelligent action. Wehrich and Koontz (1986), see planning as activities that involve selecting mission, objectives and the action to achieve them. It requires decision making, which is, choosing from alternative course of action. Thus, planning involves determining the organizational objectives and the best way to achieve them.

Academic planning could be seen as a process of providing strategic direction. In other words, it encompasses a set of broadly defined goals critical to the evolution of a university and a series of guide posts for a journey along the path to the future. The ideas in this strategic academic plan are meant to guide our work, focus on our priority and along with our vision, and inspire us to move forward in existing new direction. Academic planning can also be described as the application of rational, systematic analysis to the process of university development with the aim of making university education more effective and more efficient in responding to the needs and goals of students and the society. In the academic planning process, we set decisions about the academic development of an institution in such a way that the goals and purpose of the institution would be sufficiently achieved in the future with available resources. According to Lockwood (1985), academic planning is a continuing and collective exercise of foresight in the integrated process of taking informed decisions on the future of academic development in the university.

3. The Academic Planning Unit

Academic planning unit is an integral part of the Vice Chancellor's office. This unit caters for the most critical needs of the University. It takes charge of projecting the university's needs and responding to them appropriately through effective planning, delivering relevant programmes, evaluating the outcome of efforts and reporting that outcome back to stakeholders. Academic planning unit is very essential for balanced growth and development of the university education system. Every academic planner, regardless of position, responds to request from faculties, departments, units and the public. He is expected to be proactive in taking the initiative to meet the needs of the university and the public, as well as for effective and efficient management of the system. The academic planning unit makes this possible by taking cognizance of past challenges and experiences and by using a pragmatic approach to deal with those challenges through logical processes and procedures.

3.1.1 Objectives of the Academic Planning Unit

Higher education at the beginning of this century faced many challenges. The world for which we are preparing the students requires that they understand and incorporate the technological advances that drive innovation in both education and research. The main objective of academic planning unit should be to clarify the challenges and opportunities facing the university and to provide recommendations intended to highlight the specific priorities.

This approach will provide a sharp focus and direct our academic activities towards common goals, and better define the infrastructure and resources required to achieve them. Some of the key objectives of the academic planning unit include identifying the key objectives which address and advance the mission and vision of the university and highlighting specific means or action to achieve the objective this will enable the University have a very clear objectives. Having a clear objective will help universities to embrace the challenges and opportunities that define the future of the university.

As planner, our commitment is to prepare our students for a fulfilled life; intellectually, personally and professionally. This knowledge will enable our students to prepare their mind with adequate information about the twenty-first century where the frontiers of knowledge are characterized by fierce global competition and even increasing technical advances. To inspire critical, personal growth and passion for teaching faculty, staff should work together to produce an environment in which is inextricably linked to the concept of research.

Further, one of the objectives is to engage each unit in academic planning and to provide reports that describe the objective of their academic programmes, method used to measure whether these objectives are being met as well as the outcome of these evaluations. These reports would enable university to assess their programme and make adjustments where and when necessary. In addition, it helps develop a database for existing programmes in university. The Academic Planning Units across the country help the NUC to gather relevant information from their respective universities. It is in this regard that the Academic Planning Unit in every Nigerian university could be described as a mini NUC within the university. It also stores and retrieves relevant institutional data for approved researches, especially on academic staff workload, area of specialization, university's research output, public service performance output, and uses the data to generate information for evaluating the internal operations of the university against approved criteria for feedback planning purpose.

3.2.1 Role and Functions of the Academic planning Unit in the University System

The Academic Planning Unit is an integral part of the Vice Chancellor's office. The Academic planning Unit promotes and maintains academic excellence through orderly development of academic programmes. The Unit is concerned with the development and reviewing of the University's Academic Brief, Academic Programme Planning, Quality Assurance and Resource planning. The principal functions of the Unit include but not limited to; Guiding and monitoring the University's activities in accordance with National Universities Commission (NUC) rules and regulations toward the realization of the vision, mission and goals of the University. The Unit also participates in preparing the Annual Estimate meeting for National Universities Commission (NUC) in conjunction with the Bursary Department.

The Unit also updates the analyses and interpretation of data for planning purposes. Its role in the collection, analysis and interpretation of annual/trend statistic for both internal and external consumption assists the University in the continuous evaluation of programmes for the rationalization of courses, demerger/merger of academic units, and in ensuring quality

assurance and coordination of accreditation of academic programmes, including preparation of the NUC self-study form.

Another function of the Academic Planning Unit is to liaise with the Registrar, Bursar, Provost, Deans, Admission Officer, Establishment Officer within its educational institution on information and data on staff and students for planning purpose. The Unit prepares annual recurrent budget estimates in liaison with the Bursar, and monitoring resources allocation and utilization in the University. The Unit also functions very well in University Curricular Revision Committee and ensures that the University complies with procedure and guideline on new programme development as stipulated by the National Universities Commission and other regulatory bodies. The Unit projects student's enrolment and determines the Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) as well as advises on adequate staff strength and requirement to guide against any possible excess staffing and its attendant issues. It oversees the appraisal and processing of requests for affiliation from other tertiary institutions.

Academic Planning Unit has in recent years become indispensable in Nigerian universities. If there is any university which has not set up this vital functional unit, it must be due more to the inability to recruit the staff appropriate to work in this crucial unit than to the failure to perceive the values of its economic philosophy. Thus, the Academic Planning Unit can be said to have become the main professional weapon which the university can use in analysis and interpretation of educational policy and decisions for managing Nigerian universities. The roles are;

- Ensuring that quality and international standards permit all the conceptions and activities of the university, starting with its vision, mission and strategic objectives, and cutting across its operations in the areas of teaching, learning, research, community service, student admission and registration, staff employment, academic programmes, curricular contents, human and material resources, and other related matters;
- Coordinating the academic programmes of the universities, streamlining their growth and development and avoiding unnecessary duplication of programmes. Ensuring that the various activities of the university are in line with the vision, mission and strategic objectives of the institution, and are in line with international standards;
- Providing database information to guide the operation of the university;
- Collation, analyses and interpretation of data from relevant units and faculties across the university;
- Periodical analyses of data for the internal evaluation of the performance status of the university in relation to all NUC-approved funding parameters;
- Providing updates on data for planning and preparation of the university budget and subsequent resource allocation;
- Establishment of academic linkages and collaborative efforts with universities within and outside the country;
- Coordination of the production of the University's Annual Report, organizing university-wide conferences, seminars, workshops, lectures and international events and coordinates the disbursement of the Senate Research Grant (SRG) and the Direct Teaching and Laboratory Cost (DTLC);

- Storing and retrieving of relevant institutional data for approved research, academic workload;
- Making student intake projections related to the NUC, JAMB, WAEC, NECO, etc. on matters bordering on the introduction of new academic programmes;
- Interacting with the NUC on accreditation and resource verification matter;
- Guaranteeing high quality undergraduate programmes, particularly those linked to teaching and research skills, and should be prepared to make budget reallocations;
- Providing an enabling environment for students to develop a set of life and learning skills that promote a continuing ability and desire to learn, and set of technical and professional skills that permit a range of career choice. For instance, by ensuring quality curriculum and academic programmes.

3.3.1 Structure of the University Academic Planning Unit

The Academic Planning Unit is headed by a Director, who reports to the Vice-Chancellor in most universities. In some universities, it is an arm of the registry. Whether it is an autonomous Division or part of the Registry, the function is still the same. For these functions to be carried out successfully, the Academic Planning Unit is staffed with a full complement of personnel to execute the various technical and coordination aspect of the job.

The Academic Planning Unit plays a vital role in successful conduct of university business. It must, therefore, be staffed with competent and result-oriented personnel to enable it perform its functions effectively. The competence and sustainability of the staff are very important. It does not matter what structure the University wants the Unit to adopt; what matters is that the Unit has a better understanding of its functions and is properly organized to perform them effectively.

As a guide on how its functions are to be carried out, the National Universities Commission published a management manual in 1996 in which it spelt out these functions as: allocate planning, feedback planning, process planning, institutional planning, research, statistics and publication, and secretarial services.

4. Constraints of Academic Planning Unit

As planners, we all believe in the potential of planning. To establish balance, one must consider the limitations to the programmes and the obstacles to overcome in attempting to implement any programmes in higher education. In spite of the fact that the Academic Planning Unit plays a vital role in the successful conduct of university business, it has many barriers and constraints which if not effectively controlled will hamper the functions and effectiveness of the unit in bringing about the desired change within the university environment. Some of the most common ones have been highlighted below:

Academic planning is a costly process as time, energy, and money are involved in gathering of facts and testing of various alternatives. In some universities, the division of responsibility is sometimes not clear enough for strategy setting between the disciplinary units and the organization as a whole. The strong disciplinary, decentralized nature of higher education makes strategy setting difficult for the institution as a whole. Individual units tend to scan for their own discipline's interests. They, in most cases, make informed micro-judgments which may conflict with the

macro-judgment being made for the organization as a whole. On the other hand, individual units seldom consider adequately certain boundary-spanning issues and trends that may affect them in the future.

Culture and histories of universities often make them slow, if not hesitant to change. The faculty orientation towards debates and reviews must be taken into account when accessing the potentials for change. Sometimes, the work of the Academic Planning Unit may seem to restrict the individual's initiative and the desire for creativity as it strictly adheres to pre-determined policies and programmes of the university.

Further, the propriety of planning and its effectiveness are sometimes questioned as a result of the external social, political, economic and technological factors which are beyond the control of the planners. The Academic Planning Unit depends on reliable facts and figures which unfortunately in most cases are not readily available especially in developing economies like Nigeria. Lack of reliable information renders all planning activities of no value and wastes the valuable efforts of planners.

One of the hardest things to achieve is change. In spite of the fact that everything in life is constantly changing, changes are often vehemently resisted notwithstanding how attractive the expected outcome may be. Thus, planners and plans can be frustrated in the face of people's reluctance to accept the novel initiative or outright rejection of them.

5. Conclusion

Academic Planning Unit, metaphorically, is the back bone of every university. This Unit, to a large extent, determines the quality and standards of all curricula and non-curricular activities. Academic planning units are managed and developed according to the analysis of the local and national needs through the criteria set by the National University Commission (NUC).

The essence of the Academic Planning Unit in the university system is to ensure excellence in all activities in faculties across the university, especially in the areas of research, teaching, scholarship, creativity, staff development and public engagement. The unit must involve all the stakeholders as every contribution is crucial at thought process. The focus of the unit is to help the university achieve its vision, mission, philosophy and core objectives.

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