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## Challenges Confronting the Academic Planning Unit in the improvement of Nigerian Universities

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### Abstract

This paper examines the concept of academic planning and the challenges faced by the Academic Planning Units of respective universities in the development of Nigerian universities. It also examines the key role played by the Academic Planning Unit in development of universities vis-à-vis programme and institutional planning. Programme and Institutional planning are, without a doubt, considered the fulcrum of university sustainability. Series of suggestions and possible solutions to planning problems have been offered for enduring and sustainable university system. The key to the resolution of these challenges is at best with an Academic Planner who is equipped with the knowledge of emerging issues. Moreover, the planner's requirements have to be supported by the university management team, if the university is to fully realise its objectives. The regulatory body which assures quality in the system, in the case of Nigeria, the National Universities Commission – NUC, should be determined to drive innovations into the curriculum to suit the nation's needs and aspirations for its universities graduates. Of course, the nation should have feasible strategic goals and objectives. Furthermore, this paper explores the key implications of programme planning in Nigerian universities, provides possible solutions to intricate problems of planning and programme implementation. We have endeavoured to answer the key questions of why, when, where, how planning should be done. Other related issues such as: who should do the planning and for what category of people or organization, have equally been addressed. In fact, University sustainability largely depends on providing the right answers to the key questions of strategic and academic planning.

**Keywords:** Academic planning, University development, Institutional planning; National Universities Commission.

### 1. Introduction

Challenges can be described as any endeavour that tests a person's qualities, ability and skills. Anyone who has been involved in planning at whatever level would know that it takes mustering of all available resources intellectual, experiential, research, etc. to come up with a feasible planning framework. And even when the plan has been finally drawn and has received good appraisal, it still needs to be fine-tuned from time to time to make it relevant and consistently useful within the context of our swiftly changing world.

While the foregoing is applicable to any planning agenda, academic planning presents a more complex scenario in that this is not planning for one or two sets of stakeholders. It is in most cases for an extended list of stakeholders and groups whose interests must all be factored into the plan and made consistently relevant for use now and in the future with appropriate revisions. Therefore, in Academic Planning the planners are principally concerned with the application of rational systematic analysis of all pertinent information to the process of educational development with the objective of making education more effective and relevant to the needs of its clientele and to society.

The task here, therefore, is to examine those issues, environmental factors and trends which test the academic planning horizon in Nigerian universities. It is also pertinent to examine the preparedness of the academic planning units to meet these challenges and then proffer suggestions on the way forward.

### 2.0 Planning perspectives

Planning is an innate experience dating back to the beginning of human organisation. It cannot be done without the involvement of people. Planning is a dynamic process which should be able to reflect the complexity of human civilization and progress. As society grows in complexity planning becomes more scientific in its approach. Just like any other field of human endeavour, many authors have given their perspectives in the definitions of planning.

Planning, according to Alford and Beath, (1951), is the thinking process, the organized foresight, the vision based on fact and experience that is required for intelligent actions.

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Drucker, (1974), sees planning as a continuous process of making present entrepreneurial decision taking systematically and with best possible knowledge of their futurity. Planning is the process by which managers decide the mission and objectives of their organizations 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 future.

Planning is a management function linked with other functions of controlling, organizing and supervising. Planning involves determining organizations' objectives and developing strategies for 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. Planning, according to Okumbe (1999) is the process by which managers decide the mission and objectives of the organization and take necessary steps to achieve desired objectives and better performances. It is the process of bridging the gap between an organization's present position and where it wants to be in the future. Planning is also the process by which managers decide in advance what, why and when to act and who carries out the action. Proper planning minimizes risk and ensures that resources are efficiently and effectively deployed. It is often said that proper planning prevents poor performances.

### 3.0 Academic Planning Process

Academic Planning is becoming a very complex responsibility due to a variety of changes that are both internal and external to the academic institution; the use of technological tools to combat some of these challenges therefore becomes imperative. In the near future, academic planners may be prompted to use mathematical models and forecasting techniques to predict and, therefore, plan for change with enough lead time so as to make these changes effective.

It must be emphasized that universities are complex organs composed of highly specialized sub-units, each of which has different needs and challenges in ways special to itself. Moreover, universities do not stand still: they change every year in themselves, and in response to continual change in their conditions and personnel. It is believed that a culture of meticulous planning must be part of the fabric of an institution, particularly in the current dynamic environment planners must keep themselves abreast and be aware of some problems in the institutions and the larger society in which they operate.

Among the knowledge area the next generation of planning officers must master is the knowledge of problems which is not taught in universities. It also means something that could be general for all the institutions or different in each institution, and top management is looking for it now more than ever. For example, the term emerging issues awareness does not appear in the lists of job qualifications or requirements, but it is often there, hidden in other language. When a job calls for a 'strategic thinker,' someone able to anticipate or who is adept at planning for current and future needs and meeting the needs of a changing institutional environment, the actual need is for people with awareness of emerging issues.

The work of academic planners contributes directly to the quality of the institutions. Academic planners in tertiary institutions are the internal experts on the national norms for institutional development. They guide their managements on issues relating to orderly development of programmes in the institutions. It is necessary that the planning officers bring

themselves up to speed with emerging policies and planning issues. It is, therefore, important to examine the current needs of planning which are vital for institutional development, especially with regard to academic programmes and governance.

### 4.0 Concept of Academic Planning

When people in the knowledge industry especially in the universities begin to ask of what relevance is Academic Planning or the planners, it is obvious that there is much enlightenment to be done.

It is quite understandable and even forgivable if people have not come to a proper understanding of the work of Academic Planning Unit. For one reason, it is a relatively new field in our part of the world, and new ideas are not known to always gather support and momentum unless they have been tested over time. But there is no doubt that the needed change is coming. There are so many challenges besetting the university system in Nigeria and people are naturally forced to think of solutions and examine how other countries managed to solve their own problems. Nearly two decades ago, when the banking institutions needed new ideas to keep ahead of competition, they made strategic plans a fad as each organization competed to hold management retreats and install and strategic plan to turn the tide in their favour. When Nigerian universities came to this same bend of the road, it was at that time that Academic Planning became widely adopted as part of the solution. The challenges in the system are so many now and they seem to be mounting by the day. Every institution in the third millennium is operating in a totally new terrain and needs new capabilities and inspiration to make the required difference. The universities, known universally for research and knowledge generation, have to apply their cumulative and collective wisdom in beating a sure path to a sustained future. Today, no matter the challenges and the misgivings in whatever quarter, the beaten path is Academic Planning. This is the laboratory that works with other subunits of the university system to bring about the desired transformation.

### 5.0 Challenges faced by Academic Planning in the development of Nigerian Universities.

There are many challenges confronting Academic Planning in Nigerian Universities. The following challenges offer a glimpse of some of the issues we need to deal with, they are:

**i. Political Factors.** The basic problem of academic planning in Nigeria is coping with the uncertainties of a future that cannot be wholly predicted or controlled. At many times, political and social uncertainties have done incalculable damage to effective academic planning at our institutions. For example, at certain periods, the public universities in Nigeria had lost either a semester or a whole session as a result of student unrest or staff industrial action fuelled by political and socio-economic instability. Responsible planners will need to put the welfare of the total educational enterprise before the needs of special interest groups. Because politics is the art of the possible, many decisions will result in doing what can be done rather than what should be done. If the role is not well understood by the planner and others, the value and credibility of systematic approaches and decision making will be challenged and eroded.

**ii. Economic Factor.** Planners will need to learn how to plan and manage conditions of economic adversity and intense

political action. The paucity of funds for the university system, aggravated by a downturn in the national economy, would subsequently lead to deep-seated decay and instability in the system and a gradual decline in the quality of its educational delivery.

**iii. Leadership of the Institution.** The direct involvement and support of the chief executive officer is absolutely essential to the success of the academic planning activities. The absence of a long-term leadership capable of providing guidance and empowerment to make long-term commitments severely hampers the development of the planning activities. In such a situation, institutional momentum slows down, morale dips, and resistance and inaction become typical patterns of behaviour. Opportunists jump to take advantage of immediate situations, while others prefer to drag their feet and wait for a new leadership who might be more supportive of their objectives. These characteristics have indeed become manifest at many of our universities following incessant changes in the Directorate of Academic Planning and other levels of educational administration.

On the other hand, academic leadership must develop the vision and strength to steer the affairs of the institution aright. There are risks in taking initiative; the greater risk, however, is to wait for orders. This means that administrators at every level must lead, not just manage. Poor administration has often hampered effective implementation of academic plans at some of the Nigerian universities.

**iv. Inadequacy or Lack of Information.** In building a planning process, high priority should be given to developing a reliable and useful management information system. Rational planning and decision making simply cannot occur without data and information. Inaccurate information or inadequate data collection is detrimental to the planning activities.

**v. Administration of Academic Planning Unit.** There is poor capacity for the operation of academic planning unit in some institutions by the persons in charge due to lack of requisite training, experience and skills for their assigned roles in the unit. This often poses an enormous challenge to good governance of the unit. It is common knowledge that poor management can thwart the achievement of the mission of any organization. As indicated by Uvah (1995) the present status of academic planning as a profession and not a practice is far from satisfactory. It is evident that planning officers come to planning from diverse backgrounds and either get 'trained' on the job or leave without getting trained. This has led to questions such as: who is an academic planner? It is often asked what kind of training is required to be eligible for employment as an academic planner. Furthermore, what are the avenues for training academic planners in Nigeria? To this end, one would like to see formulation of a definite career structure for academic planners at the universities akin to what obtains at the National Universities Commission.

**vi. Curricula of Courses.** There has been growing concern by the Nigerian public on the quality and relevance of the products of Nigerian universities to national development. Public perception of the average graduate is that of inadequacy of subject-specific knowledge and skills. Universities, ivory towers as they are, must nevertheless run programmes that have socio-economic relevance to the aspirations of the polity. It is for this reason that the academic

programmes of the university must be relevant to the needs of industry while much of university research must have bearing with finding solution to the problems of society. The community service programme of the university must also relate to the training and research needs of the host communities.

**vii. Facilities.** It is common knowledge that the present levels of student enrolment have far outstripped the physical provision at the universities, despite concerted efforts government is making on the physical development of universities. A large percentage of the universities have inadequate and obsolete equipment in laboratories, libraries, classrooms and offices. Many universities have insufficient classrooms, lecture theatres, library, laboratories and workshop spaces for their teeming population of students. Some of the universities also have inadequate and inappropriate office spaces for the staff and recreational facilities for the students. Very few universities pay any meaningful attention to the environment. Not a few universities crown this litany of woes with poor maintenance of the existing equipment, facilities and infrastructure.

**viii. Over-bloated Enrolment.** While the carrying capacities of most of our higher educational institutions have not increased substantially over the years, student enrolment has continued to grow from year to year ostensibly due to the high demand for spaces from the growing population. This leads to overcrowding in classes which in turn makes it difficult for lecturers to cope effectively. It also overstretches the infrastructure, library services, utilities and academic consumables. The net effect is a fall in the quality of factor inputs and consequently of the graduate output itself. In this scenario, the financial carrying cost of the high admissions far outweighs the financial benefit received from the students in terms of the meagre user fees paid to the institutions.

## **6.0 The role of the Academic Planning Unit in the development of Universities**

The key objective in academic planning is the attainment of the overall mission and vision of the university. It is a project which involves the entire spectrum of the university leadership and membership. The academic planning division or unit plays these critical roles in ensuring university sustainability. This unit guides and monitors the university's activities in accordance with its' the statutory goals, mission and vision. It prepares and revises the Academic Brief of the university as well as dealing with the matters concerning the National Universities Commission (NUC), resource and academic programmes planning, attending to academic development matters and quality assurance. This indispensable unit ensures that the academic experience at the university is at national or international standard through the promotion of quality enhancement practices in the academic programming of the university. The unit advocates and ensures the adequate provision of a conducive teaching, learning and research environment for staff and students, as well as the determination of adequate staff strength and requirement to guide against any possible excess staffing and its attendant results.

We also look at other roles that the academic planners play in the development of the universities in Nigeria, these include: preparation, computerization and publication of data on students' admission, enrolment projections and determination of Full-Time Equivalent (FTE), supply of staff and students'

data to NUC when required. Carrying out continuous evaluation of the performance of academic programmes, rationalization of courses, de-merger/merger of academic units or departments also form part of the role of the academic planning unit. The unit oversees the collection, collation of required data and unit costs for resource planning and budgetary preparations, including providing a variety of operational data and basic information for effective university administration and governance. Further, one of the central roles of the academic planning unit is assisting the Vice-Chancellor in all accreditation matters and advising faculties and departments of programme review and preparation for NUC accreditation visits. In some universities, the appraisal and processing of requests for affiliation from other tertiary institutions are handled by the academic planning unit while in others this matter is dealt with by the research unit. Attendance and participation at the conference of Directors of Academic Planning of Nigerian Universities (CODAPNU) meetings and other NUC organized workshop affecting Academic Planning/Quality Assurance are essential for upgrading the skills and competences of Directors of academic planning units. The academic planning directorate or unit as it is called in some universities liaises with the National Universities Commission on behalf of the university and discharges any other duty assigned by the Vice-Chancellor.

### 7.0 Conclusion

The Academic Planning Unit, metaphorically, is the brain box of every university. The office, to a large extent, determines the quality and standards of all curricula and non-curricula programmes. Academic programmes are planned and developed according to the analysis of the local and national needs assessment through the criteria set by the regulatory bodies, especially the National Universities Commission (NUC). The totality of the challenges that face university education delivery in Nigeria is a manifestation of poor planning and/or the implementation of perceived goals. The key to the resolution of these challenges is at best with an academic planner who is equipped with the knowledge of emerging issues and whose requirements are supported by the institution management. The regulatory body which assures quality in the system should be determined to drive innovations into the curriculum to suit a nation which should have its strategic goals and objectives that are feasible.

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