Effective Leadership and Readership as an Indicator for Academic Excellence in Nigeria Institutions of Higher Learning

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ABSTRACT: Higher Education, no doubt, has been universally acclaimed as the bedrock for national development and effective Leadership as the drivers of academic excellence in the Institutions of higher learning in Nigeria. Qualitative teaching and learning remains the engine room that derives good governance and propels leadership positions. Leadership, however, cannot exist without Readership. The two are relatively interwoven. Leadership and readership has over the years become critical issues in organizational theory and practice. Thus, leadership and readership need to be taken up as a cause to be promoted in pursuit of academic excellence in the Institutions of higher learning in Nigeria. Reading is a great investment in one's personal development and, by extension, in achieving desired academic excellence. In this research, concrete effort is made to clarify the key concept of Leadership and Readership as drivers of academic excellence in the Institutions of higher learning in Nigeria, especially in the Polytechnic System. The research equally investigates both internal and external factors militating against academic excellence in Nigeria citadel of learning and finally makes recommendations, among which is training and retraining of employees, discouragements of unnecessary political interferences in appointments into academic leadership positions, Staff recruitments, admission of undergraduate students and effective monitoring policy of civil service rules.

KEYWORDS: Leadership, Readership, Internal and External factors.

INTRODUCTION

Academic excellence remains a demonstration of one's ability to perform, achieve greater heights, and excel in scholastic opportunities. It boils down to maximum development of one's intellectual capacities and skills in service to humanity which is achievable in a number of ways. The most important is to develop self-confidence, persistence and leadership abilities. In order to achieve the anticipated academic excellence in Nigeria higher Institutions, leaders and readers in such institutions must up their games because resources to genuine and enduring leadership emerge from meaningful academic empowerment through qualitative teaching and mentorship practices. Qualitative teaching and learning can only exist where there is good leadership propelled by readership, which has overwhelming impact on the products of the knowledge based Industries (Institutions of higher learning).

Acknowledging the significance of the aforementioned leadership and readership role, Oloyo (2015) as cited in Federal Polytechnic Act (1990) observed that, like Universities and other Institutions of higher learning in the world, one of the core functions of the Polytechnics is to provide full /part-time courses of Instruction and training to produce middle and high level manpower through qualitative teaching, research, knowledge transfer and services. Polytechnic graduates are expected to compete with graduates of other higher Education Institutions in the global job markets. It is, however, vital to note that effectiveness and efficiency in performance of the Nigeria Polytechnic graduates would highly depend on the leadership roles and motivation of workers in the Institutions. Therefore, leaders are charged with an enormous burden to effect organizational and social changes to a large extent. Assuming the leaders of these Institutions exhibit the most anticipated excellent leadership roles, coupled with the motivation of the human resources to higher productivity in these Institutions, the story would have been positively different. Hence, competent, steady, and progressive leadership can be a critical factor that determines whether an Institution survives, thrives or succumbs to the pressures and challenges of today's increasingly competitive marketplace (Moore, 2016).

Unfortunately, a number of factors have been observed as clogs on the wheels of progress of academic Institutions' leadership positions and have consequently hindered academic leaders from achieving academic excellence in Nigeria Polytechnics, especially in the South–East geo-political zone of Nigeria. The factors range from internal to externals. The former involves the role of academics in Higher Education Institutions (HEIS) and indiscipline while the latter includes politicization of education, lack of continuous training of employees, and poor funding of educational sector. This study, therefore, focuses on the conceptual meaning

of Leadership and Readership as essential elements in achieving global competitiveness in Education. Also meticulously but not exhaustively discussed are factors militating against academic excellence in Nigerian polytechnics and the way forward.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The key concepts in the topic of discussion are the meaning of Leadership and Readership, and the factors militating against academic excellence in Nigeria Polytechnics. It is, however, important to begin this discussion with the clarifications of the two key concepts of Leadership and Readership in order to present a platform for articulation of our views on the subject matter.

Saying that the overwhelming volume of information on leadership has made it difficult to determine a single definition of leadership is to state the obvious. Leadership means different things to different school of thought and it is a term thrown around in all kinds of context. McWhinney (2017) even acknowledged the foregoing assertion as he agrees that there are as many definitions of the word leadership as there are overwhelming perceptions on the nature of leadership itself. Many scholarly definitions of leaders and leadership have been given by a significant number of leadership researchers and reference materials on leadership.

Leadership Definition

The Cambridge Advance Learners Dictionary (third edition) defines a Leader as a person in charge of a group, nation or situation and Leadership as a set of characteristics that make a Leader; the person or people in charge of an organization; and the position or fact of being a Leader. Similarly, the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary (ninth edition) simply defines Leadership as the state or position of being a Leader. In the view of Cohen (2017), Leadership is the art of influencing others to reach their maximum performance in accomplishing any task, objective or project.

However, in context of higher Education Institutions, which is the focus of this research work, Leadership is conceptually viewed as the key component which guides 21st century teaching-learning process which is necessary for equipping the 21st century learners with relevant knowledge and skills needed in the 21st century class rooms to transform Nigeria from resource to knowledge-based Economy for global competiveness. And from organizational perspective, leadership has been characterized as "activity aimed at bringing about change in an organization or social system to improve people's lives" (Astin & Leland, 2014). Leadership is important in developing effective knowledge based Industry and in facilitating quality teaching and learning. Leaders must not only manage the administrative aspect of their Institutions of higher learning but also focus on students learning and staff welfare, a responsibility which suggests that Leaders are charged with an enormous burden to affect Institutional and social changes in an academic environment. Concurring with Astin and Leland perception of leadership, Moore (2012) believes that competent, steady, and progressive Leadership can be a critical factor that determines whether an Institution survives or succumbs to the pressures and challenges of today's increasingly competitiveness. Leadership can also be defined as "a person or group that directs another group or organization towards a common goal." As simple as this definition sounds, it is an uphill task to lead a group of people towards one common goal. It is human nature to be somewhat egocentric. Given the above scenario, therefore, it can be extremely challenging to keep a group focused on a team's goal rather than personal goal or agenda. It takes a certain type of person to be able to gain the respect and support that is required for a team to be successful.

In a nutshell, leadership is about working with people to do new things in a world which is increasingly complex and fast changing. It is not necessarily linked to authority but it is about mobilizing people to tackle the toughest problem and meet important deadlines. Readership drives Leadership and has over the years become critical issues in organizational theory and practice. A genuine leadership without an associate readership is unrealistic and the two must have to be taken up as a cause to be promoted in pursuit of academic excellence in the Institutions of higher learning in Nigeria.

READERSHIP

Readership is defined as the people who read or are thought to read a particular book, newspaper magazine etc. It can also be seen as the office or position of a reader. Evidence suggests that reading can improve intelligence and lead to innovations and insights. Stanovich (2001) believes that reading makes one smarter through "a larger vocabulary and more world knowledge in addition to the abstract reasoning skills." Reading is one of the quickest ways to acquire and assimilate new information. Many leaders claim that reading across fields is good for creativity. Leaders who can sample insights in other fields and apply them to their organizations are more likely to be innovative and prosperous.

Reading, undoubtedly, can also make one much more effective in leading others. Reading increases verbal intelligence and makes a leader more adept and articulate communicator (Coleman, 2012). Therefore, great leader must be a great reader and being a great reader will help leaders to attain the much anticipated Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and it's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Education.

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The Benefits of Reading for Leaders

The benefits of Reading for Leaders cannot be overemphasized. A number of leadership researchers including Hyatt (2015), who believes that reading can uniquely develop and empower leaders through the following ways; it makes them better thinkers, improves their skills, mastering of communication, helps them relax and keeps them young.

Reading Makes Leaders Better Thinkers

Reading is one of the most efficient ways to acquire information and leaders need a lot of general information to keep perspective and seize opportunities. But reading does more than give us a toolbox of ideas. It actually upgrades our analytical tools, especially our judgment and problem-solving abilities. A study by Cunningham (2001) compared the general knowledge of readers and television watchers. In his comparison, he observed that the readers not only knew more but were also better at deciphering misinformation. In other words, reading improves their judgment because readers use cognitive facilities that television watchers aren't required to use.

Hill (2015) even recommends what he calls "irrelevant reading," going outside your field to spark new thoughts and make fresh connections. This can also help readers to actively contribute in a topic when an issue outside their field of specialization comes up for discuss. Every book read becomes a mentor that reveals skills and lessons that can help leaders more quickly climb the learning curve of being a successful leader as portrayed in the picture below where learning exponentially improves with increase in reading, experience or length of time.

Source: www.Psychologytoday.com (2014)

Reading Improves Leader's People Skills

Sometimes one thinks of readers as anti-social introverts with their nose in a book and ignoring the people around them. But reading can actually improve a leader's people skills. Stories give us an opportunity to walk in other peoples' shoes and see the world through their experiences and with their motivations—this is especially true for novels, biographies, and memoirs. When asked about the reading that helps her lead her business, one CEO said the insights about human nature in fiction and poetry has made all the difference in understanding and relating to her people. The physical act of reading is actually what makes these lessons connect. In a recent study carried out, brain scans show that as we relate to characters in stories we make neural connections that linger days after we shelved the book. This actually points to the fact that the experience of reading has the potentials to help boost our emotional Intelligence Quotient (IQ) and identify with people better. And empathy is a vital leadership skill for creating an alignment, understanding, motivation, setting organizational goals, and many more.

Reading Helps Leaders Master Communication

When we read, especially widely and deeply, we pick up language proficiency that transfers across board, including speaking and writing. Reading uniquely expands our vocabulary. Again, Cunningham (2001) believes that the books, magazines, and other written texts we read as adults double and triple the number of rare words we hear on television. This is important for leaders because an expanded vocabulary means not only greater precision in our communication but with all round improvement in emotional IQ which trickles down on the Polytechnics graduates.

In addition, we will also be able to choose words that are more persuasive and command the kind of behavour we want. This kind of skill transfers to both writing and public speaking is an essential tool in leadership position. Therefore, for a leader to be successful, clear communication is of paramount importance. To ensure that the audience understands the message passed and this can only be done when leaders master communication through reading.

Reading Helps Leaders Relax

Every leader faces the challenge of managing stress. However, the good thing is that while we are reading and picking up the benefits, we can simultaneously lower our stress levels. According to research conducted by the University of Sussex in United Kingdom, it is believed that reading reduces stress levels by 68% when compared to other stress relievers like walking, listening to

music, or drinking a cup of tea. Reading was found to be the most effective and it worked to lower heart rates and relieve tension in as few as six minutes. It really doesn't matter what book you read. By losing yourself in a thoroughly engrossing book you can escape from the hustles and bustles of life. Having looked the concept and clarifications of Leadership and Readership, the next topic of discussion is the factors responsible for poor of academic excellence in Nigeria Institutions of higher learning- Tagged internal and external factors:

Internal Factors Militating against Academic Excellence

Leadership in most Institutions of higher learning, especially politically influenced or induced leadership, has truly failed to uphold the academic desires of Nigerian teaming graduates and undergraduates as result of a number factors classified as internal and external. Internal factors are those factors directly associated with the individual students. Some of them include:

Role of Academics in Leadership

The believe that an Institution is as strong as its academia holds just as true as the one which affirms that an Institution is as strong as its leadership. What makes an Institution great is the character and motivational drives of its leader. In further engaging the topic of our discussion in this paper, it has become imperative to critically look at the role and place of the academics in academic leadership and as champions of academic excellence in Nigeria Higher Education Institutions. Academic leadership, according to Altbach, Gumport and Johnstone (2001) and Thelin (2004), is a concept of higher Education's typical blend of tasks, goals, employees, governance structures, values, technologies and history. The enormous task of actualizing the visions and missions of any Institution of higher learning, therefore, lies on the principal administrators of higher Education Institutions (Ofoegbu & Alonge, 2017). Ogunruku (2015) defines Academics as those who are engaged in the business of teaching, research and community service at Institutions of higher learning. They are the live-wires and propellers of the knowledge based Industries whose primary function is to ensure realization of Institutions' objectives. The career structures for this category of employees range from Graduate Assistants to Professors in the Universities and Assistant Lecturers to Chief Lecturers in the polytechnics/ Colleges of Educations. This set of employees is the foundation on which recipients of knowledge Industries are built upon. And in the words of **Nita Ambani**, an Indian billionaire, Education is not just a tool for development of an individual, community and the nation, but the foundation for our future. It is an empowerment to make choices and emboldens the youth to chase their dreams. While the researchers agree with Nita's position, it is important to state that the recruitment of this category of Staff into the system is of great essence to higher Education Institutions. Because where the recruitment processes of these academic facilitators are faulty, then the products of such system are unlikely to be found worthy when it comes to global competitiveness.

Usually in the time past, brilliant scholars are recruited into the system through a process of invitation of the brightest in the class of graduates or from graduate class of the Institution following a period of tutelage. On successful recruitment of such bright minds, the Institutions subject them to rigorous training and mentorship programmes to make them suitable to the system for over all purpose of driving an academic excellence and achieving the intended noble objectives of the Institution. Serious teaching assignments are not given to such individuals at the onset to enable them concentrate on their primary function. In true tradition of academia, they usually start off with good first degree and gradually progress to masters and thereafter Doctors of Philosophy (Ph.D.) in their areas of specialization.

Before now, they were not saddled with assignments that distract them from their fundamental responsibilities. However, owing to geometrical progression in establishment of a number of both public and private Institutions of Higher learning in Nigeria, unhealthy interference of Politicians and "Godfatherism" syndrome in Nigeria political space when it comes to recruitment of qualified academic staff, what has been observed is the misplacement of this category of academic staff who should ordinarily be in training position or leadership positions in the academia. The foregoing actually agrees with the researchers opinion that all readers are not leaders but all leaders are readers, and that a readership crisis remains a leadership crisis.

Similarly, Ogunruku (2015) also observed that it was not strange to find an Assistant Lecturer being appointed into academic administrative positions. In alignment with Ogunruku submission, the researchers equally concurred that the same situation is prevalent in a number of Polytechnics Nigeria where non-teaching and teaching staff below the rank of Senior lecturers are appointed into academic administrative positions. This has negative implications to the system because such members of staff begin to see themselves in the same hierarchy as senior lecturers/chief lecturers or professors as the case maybe. The tradition of learning at the feet of the "masters" becomes completely distorted. In some instances, it is the junior fellows that carry out the job description of teaching, project supervision, examination supervision and marking of examination scripts on behalf of their seniors. The teachers /examiners are hardly available and some have been known in a number Polytechnics to engage the services of individuals who are not even on the payroll of the Institution.

In addition to the pictures painted above, the young lecturers also become veritable tools in the hands of the Academic Unions to press home demands for improved conditions of service and this usually leads to a situation where both mentors and mentees meet on equal footing during union congresses, thereby creating a loss of respect for the senior colleagues. It becomes possible for an

assistant lecturer to shout down a chief lecturer. Again, the implication of this for the system is grave as discipline becomes compromised. The above scenario equally presents a lot of challenges for having a normal academic environment where knowledge is searched and presented to advance and promote academic excellence in the Nation's Ivory Towers.

Indiscipline

A part from the role of academics in leadership of higher Education Institutions, another internal factor that militates against academic excellence in the Nigerian Polytechnics is indiscipline. Cambridge English Dictionary defines indiscipline as a situation in which people do not control their behavour or obey rules. Any behavour considered to be wrong and not generally acceptable in a society is known as indiscipline. Then, when students portray such behavour in schools, it is known as school indiscipline. According to Igwe (1990) as cited in Mokaya et al. (2015), school indiscipline is "any mode of behavour, actions and conducts which deviate from the established and approved rules and regulations of an Institution and the acceptable code of behavour, norms and the ethics of the society at large". Therefore actions that do not conform to the standards of a school are considered as acts of indiscipline. There is no gainsaying that indiscipline in schools contributes enormously and greatly affects the quality of teaching and learning, uncovered/unfinished school curriculum resulting to poor results, dropouts, and wastage of resources invested by stakeholders in Education such as parents and the government (Mariene, 2012). High Education Institution leaders ought to focus on the strategies to use in order to inculcate discipline in the lives of the students (the anticipated leaders of tomorrow).

Disciplinary measures and increased supervision can also be used to maintain discipline in the higher Education Institutions. In order words, one can boldly say that discipline comes through effective management of the Institutions of higher learning by their leaders. Agbenyega (2006) as cited in Ngwokabuenui (2015) stated that decent discipline is one of the key attributes of effective schools and most school which experienced frequent deviate undergraduates' behavour have been blamed on lack of effective implementation of school rules and regulations for discipline to reign in schools. Therefore, the goal of achieving academic excellence in Nigeria Polytechnics depends on how the leaders carry out their tasks in curbing indiscipline in the Institutions.

External factors

These are outside factors that influence undergraduate students' success and prevent the school from attaining its strategic goal of academic excellence. Some of the notable factors include:

Politicization of Education

Education has been dragged into the dirty water of politics in Nigeria and has become the latest victim of the political elites, where politicians unduly interfere with leadership affairs in public owned tertiary Institutions in Nigeria. It is an understatement to uphold the fact that this political interference has caused a great damage in Nigerian Polytechnics especially in the south eastern region where Staff recruitments, appointment of Rectors and undergraduates admission processes have been literally hijacked by politicians at all levels of Government. This approach has led to employment of half-baked graduates and admission of products of "special centre candidates" as undergraduates into most of the South-eastern Polytechnics in lieu of eminently qualified candidates into leadership and readership positions. The foregoing has not only affected the quality of products of such Institutions but has also resulted in unemployment and leadership crisis in Nigeria as a developing Nation whose Economic growth and development should be subject to products of such Institutions of higher learning.

Politicization of education, no doubt, is the manipulation of education for political gains and over ridding interest of Nigeria economic prospects as well as academic well-being of her citizens. Most of the problems faced in our Polytechnics today are as a result of the politicians trying to decide who becomes the Provost, Rector or Vice-chancellor of an Institution of higher learning in order to fulfill their own political and self-centered desires, and what we have in return is a stampede on staff welfare which often leads to legitimate union demands through Industrial actions. This disagreement or lack of understanding between management/government and academic communities often result in deadlock that usually disrupts academic calendars. A popular slogan has it that when two elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers it. The grass, in this case, is the students who bear the brunt of the disagreement kick started by egocentric politicians. Incessant strike is a common knowledge which affects the academic performances of student. Because when learning is suspended for a long period, the students' reading abilities and academic motivations drastically drop. Even the knowledge acquired during the learning period is often forgotten by some students and this mostly turns some students into certificate seekers rather than knowledge seekers, which eventually hinders academic excellence.

In addition to influencing the leadership positions in tertiary Institutions in Nigerian, undergraduates' admission processes in universities, Colleges of Education, Polytechnics, and Monotechnics are sometimes subject to Politicians demand for quota allocations rather than academic performance, National quota system or merits. This has made the standard of Education to drastically deteriorate as the objectives for which they are established are no longer attainable, but what we have in return is system bedeviled with leadership crisis. This excessive political inference needs to stop and decisions in Education should be made on the basis of hard-won experience in the classroom, not political ideologies from above (Harman, 2015). The Institutions should be

allowed to run by eminently qualified leaders who have been working in a given Polytechnic for years so that the entire benefits and resources by the government will be effectively utilized in view of achieving academic excellence.

Lack of continuous training of the employees

Continuous training and retraining of staff has also been identified as another external factor militating against academic excellence in the Institutions of higher learning in Nigeria. Although Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFUND) was established by the Federal Government of Nigeria in 2011 to address the aforementioned factor, but the scheme has been riddled with corruption problem since inception. Even the immediate past Executive Secretary of TETFUND, Dr. Abdullahi Bichi Baffa, admits the corrupt practices in disbursements and management of the fund when he said, in a newspaper interview, that making TETFUND corruption free is not a rocket science because it comes from the top, and that once the head is firm, qualitative and focused then the ffollowers queue in. Continuous training of the staff is essential as it will help them develop their skills and improve standard of performance which will lead to academic growth of the school. A continuous training program should, and will, ensure that the employees are always up to date with the latest technological developments**,** not just with the skills it takes to do their job well now, but also with the skills it will take to do their job well tomorrow (Nikos, 2016). Therefore, adequate measures should be taken by the leaders to ensure that the employees undergo continuous training programs so as to help them acquire the knowledge needed to carry out their duty effectively and when this is done, the academic excellence of the school will be achieved.

CONCLUSION

Leaders are Readers goes a popular slogan, and higher Institutions have been globally recognized as the breeding ground for readers. Higher Education has also been acknowledged World-Wide as the bedrock and drivers of knowledge based economy as well as technological advancement. A paradigm shift from resource to Knowledge based economy has become the order of the day and no Nation thrives economically, politically or technologically without the existence of strong Institutions of higher learning. This research, therefore, concludes that effective and efficient academic leadership and readership positions are the building blocks for sustainable academic excellence in Nigeria Institutions of higher learning. However, it is regrettable to note that Nigeria is not yet among the committee of Nations reaping the gains of higher Institutions of learning because her standard of higher Education has deteriorated to a point where the noble objectives for which they were established are mere mirage. The Nation's higher Institutions of learning now turn out certificate seekers rather than Nation's builders. What we have in return is system bedeviled with leadership crisis often caused by unhealthy politicization of higher Institutions' leadership appointments, Staff recruitments and undergraduates admission processes, indiscipline and host of other internal and external factors. Repositioning Education sector in Nigeria, therefore, requires political will and total eradication of corruption in the system.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the researchers' findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. Appointments into academic leadership positions and undergraduates' admission processes as well as teaching and non-teaching staff recruitments should be purely on merit and devoid of any form of political influence or undertone.

2. Training and retraining of employees is essential as it will help them develop their skills and improve standard of performance which will lead to academic growth of the school. Adequate measures should be taken by the leaders of Institutions of higher learning in ensuring that the employees undergo continuous training programs so as to help them acquire the knowledge needed to effectively carry out their duties in order to achieve the anticipated academic excellence.

3 Effective monitoring policies and enforcement of civil services rules should be properly implemented so as to truncate the activities of academic staff who engage the services of individuals who are not even on the payroll of an Institution to lecture and examine the students.

4. Effective implementation of school rules and regulations (Polytechnic Acts) for discipline to reign in the Institutions of higher learning is paramount and should be vigorously enforced by the management and expanded management of higher Institutions of learning.

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