

BECAUSE WE ARE ALL INVOLVED

Address delivered by the Vice-Chancellor, University of Ilorin, Professor Is-haq O. Oloyede at the workshop on “Enhancing the Participation of Disadvantaged Groups in Nigerian Universities” organized by the Committee of Vice-Chancellors of Nigerian Universities in collaboration with Ford Foundation on the 3rd of March, 2008 at Old Senate Chamber, University of Ilorin, Ilorin.

It accords me great honour and privilege to welcome you most heartily to the University of Ilorin. It is also my utmost pleasure and gratitude for our University to host this important workshop on one of the critical areas ensnaring our University education: the participation of the disadvantaged groups. I want to begin by acknowledging the commitment and sacrifice of the initiators of this laudable project. I also want to express my appreciation to you distinguished ladies and gentlemen that have been nurturing this dream since conception up till this stage. It is the deputy Vice-Chancellor of Nassarawa State University, Professor Zainab Alkali, that reminds us in her novel, *The Stillborn* that “like babies dreams are conceived but not all dreams are born alive. Some are aborted. Others are stillborn”. It is gratifying to note that you did not allow this dream to abort and I encourage you not to let it be a stillborn. This can be ensured by following the findings and submissions of this programme to a logical conclusion.

Distinguished academics, let me remark that an unfortunate consequence of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), as noble as its vision might be, is the pauperization of Nigerians and a drastic reduction in the funding of the education sector. The resultant introduction of fees at all levels of education, especially at the University level, has created a pyramidal structure that is evidently anti-development. Access to education which ordinarily should be a right suddenly becomes an exclusive preserve of the privileged and the rich who can pay for it. The fair policy that produced eminent Nigerians like late Obafemi Awolowo, Tafawa Balewa, Nnamdi Azikiwe, among several thousands that have contributed significantly to the development of the country, despite their poor/disadvantaged backgrounds, is upturned. The gap between the rich and poor becomes

increasingly widened as life for an average Nigerian becomes Hobessian: “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short”. Caught in the web of this scenario are especially the disadvantaged groups.

The disadvantaged groups are generally referred to in various terms. They are ‘groups of concern’, ‘socially disadvantaged groups’, ‘underprivileged groups’, ‘vulnerable groups’, etc. Narrower terms for these groups are ‘beggars’, ‘crime victims’, ‘disabled persons’, ‘disadvantaged children’, ‘disadvantaged youth’, ‘educationally disadvantaged’, ‘the elderly’, ‘the poor’, ‘prisoners’, ‘prostitutes’, ‘unemployed’, ‘vagrants’, etc. That many of these groups are represented in our Nigerian universities is undeniable. Nothing tangible has been done to address most of their problems and redress their suffering is incontrovertible. This is why the Committee of Vice-Chancellors, impassioned by the axiom that “the great key to real joy is serving others”, has taken this right step in the right direction, with the generous support of Ford Foundation.

You will agree with me that the youth are the future of the country. Almost all of our undergraduates today would conveniently fall under the ‘disadvantaged youth’ category because, at least, they do not enjoy what some of us enjoyed as undergraduates three decades ago. All hands should be on deck to support them to achieve their potentials. Many great leaders of the world would also be classified as “disadvantaged” in their early years as history records few great people born with silver spoons in their mouths. The institutional framework provided by their governments allowed them to attain greatness and success. This greatness can also be achieved by our own disadvantaged groups, especially the

physically challenged and the poor if we rise up to empathize with them, not just sympathize with them. The admission policy into Federal Universities attempts at redressing some of the inequalities through the catchment and “educational disadvantaged” affirmative actions.

As this is the second stage of this important project, I solicit for the cooperation of all of us stakeholders in the University system to contribute further to the acceleration of development which equal access to education brings about. Without being apologetic, the disabled and the physically challenged should know that there is ability in disability. The issue of who is able(d) or disabled is relative. As conceptualized through English language, it is often suggested that people are either one or the other. This is a false, unfortunate contrast. I believe that everyone has both “abilities” and “disabilities”; everyone is “advantaged” or “disadvantaged” in a way, from childhood through advanced age.

Being disabled or disadvantaged, I want to emphasize, is a relative concept. Some read and learn music much better than others. Some are Math wizards, while others barely can do simple arithmetic. Some are physically coordinated, others relatively uncoordinated. Some people see and understand injustices when others are unable to see them. Some reflect before making choices, others are more compulsive. And one's abilities or disabilities might vary over time and circumstances, depending upon consciousness, age, maturation, challenges, etc., according to Brain Willson. What might be considered a disability in one set of circumstances is considered an ability in others, and vice versa. The whole issue boils down to the fact that by supporting the disadvantaged ones among us, especially in our

Universities, we are indirectly addressing our own disabilities too. This programme is thus fundamental *because we are all involved*, as individuals, organizations, institutions and governments. The University of Ilorin has a Supportive Centre for enhancing the access of the hearing-impaired to university education, and, all our hearing impaired students are aware of the supportive centre. Our University is also handicapped-friendly, with access to classrooms with the wheel chair. We do not intend to rest on our oars.

In conclusion, the University of Ilorin is honoured to be the zonal host of this workshop. I thank the wife our dear former Vice-Chancellor, Professor (Mrs.) Ebele Amali, for her roles in this respect and as I acknowledge her commitment to the success of this workshop as a regional Coordinator. Tribute also be paid to Prof. Musa Abdullahi, the Secretary General of Committee of Vice-Chancellor for vibrant administration and innovative programmes with which he is tapping many of the hitherto latent potentialities of the committee. We also thank the Ford Foundation for its support. I welcome you once again to Kwara State, the state of harmony. I welcome you to the University of Ilorin, the distinctive citadel of learning that is “better by far” than the rest. One University that believes both in words and action that education is important. We can boast of a committed group of staff and students, who have made it possible to run this University for the past 7 years without a single strike. I wish you happy workshop proceedings and fruitful deliberations.

Thank you very much for your attention.