



TRANSFORMING UNIVERSITY EDUCATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY: THE ROLE OF STAKEHOLDERS

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1. PREAMBLE

It is my utmost pleasure to be in the beautiful ambience of the University of Ilorin once again to contribute to the ever-evolving need to deepen the mandate of the University sub-sector of education. Let me begin by appreciating the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ilorin, Prof. Wahab O. Egbewole, SAN, and his colleagues in the Consortium of Eight Kwara Universities (KU8) for the honour of invitation to carry out this assignment. In appreciating them, I acknowledge their foresight, leadership and thoughtfulness in coming together on January 12, 2023 to form this Consortium at the University of Ilorin at a meeting attended by the Vice-Chancellors of Kwara State University, Al-Hikmah University, Landmark University, Ojaja University (formerly Crown-Hill University), Summit University, Ahman Pategi University and Thomas Adewumi University.

It is quite impressive that the journey that started just this year has begun to bear fruit through many activities including this conference, which I understand originally attracted close to 500 participants in terms of abstracts submitted. I must acknowledge the proprietors of our universities for creating the environment that allows for the blossoming of ideas that generate this type of gathering. As I noted when the KU8 Vice Chancellors paid me a courtesy visit on April 22, 2023, the idea of synergy and partnership is definitely in sync with the visions of the proprietors to advance scholarship and promote development. It is the right way to go and I believe this initiative will have a multiplier effect on other universities in other states and places.

The KU8 is another dream conceived on the overarching need of the moment. That need of the moment is that of networking, collaborating and connecting because no one can do it all alone in our inter-connected world. As people like Steve Jobs, Seth Godin and Richard Branson have emphasised, everywhere we are, we should ABCD

or always be connecting the dots because no man is an island. That the University of Ilorin, undoubtedly one of the best universities in Nigeria took the initiative, speaks to the fact of an African proverb that if you want to go fast, go alone but if you want to go far, go together. A tree certainly doesn't make a forest and a big load cannot be lifted to the head with one hand. Besides, it is when we rub hands together that our hands get clean. The challenges facing education in general and university education in particular are enormous and a unilateral approach will not be sufficient to tackle them in a century that is marked by globalization, networking and collaboration.

It is on the basis of the foregoing that I must aver that the theme of the KU8 maiden international conference is apt, relevant and significant. The 21st century is still young and it is being bedeviled by many challenges that can only be solved through appreciating the centrality of the multilayered approach. The system can no longer supine and be looking for what the Greek call a *deu ex machina* (a machine god) or miracle which may come in the form of Government pumping in money and more money due to the need for funding. Rather, we have to think outside the box and without the box to interrogate the roles of stakeholders, including Government and all of us, in redeeming the fortunes of university education and repositioning it for relevance and transforming it for excellence in this century.

I am happy to share experiences about the university system in Nigeria the ways that I have experienced it or come to understand it. But I will try to amplify these experiences by interfacing both the university idea and the role of stakeholders in that idea. The primary role of the university is to advance the community whether locally or globally. Universities are, therefore, designed to be organic and not static in nature. This view arose from the fact that they are designed by humans, for humans, and for human society. They are, therefore, expected to play crucial roles in the lives and processes guiding the development of human communities and its civilisation. To underscore the importance of this subject at this present time, I am going to adopt an admixture of systematic review and case study method.

2. INTRODUCTION

As a first step to make the great leap forward, the strategy of our universities in their relationship with stakeholders should include explicit and systematic identification of stakeholders, their potential interests, desires, aspirations, and requests towards the university. This is because new trends that have occurred nationally and globally in higher education in the 21st century have caused fundamental changes in the ways universities think and operate. Unfortunately, this is not the story we hear from and about universities in Nigeria nowadays. I have experienced the university system in Nigeria in multifarious dimensions- as a student, teacher, administrator, Vice Chancellor, and now as an incubator facilitating the admission of younger people into that system. I am, therefore, competent to say something about the trajectory of the university system over the years. While I will not want to bore you by detailing what I saw or experienced over the years, let me just give a conclusion of where we are now. Today, there is crisis in university education in Nigeria. Our universities presently groan under the pains of largely self-inflicted injuries. If the system is not going to crash under the weight of inertia and wrong approaches in the handling of the university idea, we must all come to the rescue of the system. From the way I see it, unless we help in recreating the roadmap for the university idea, we are going to suffer a terrible crash and the society will not miss us as the world has moved beyond the notion of the Ivory Tower that is independent of society.

Education has been democratised. The Information and Communications Technology (ICT) with the convergence of youth initiatives and ideas have opened the intellectual space to rare opportunities for people to learn beyond what the universities can provide now. The alarm is sounding now that our universities will have to double up to maintain their relevance in the global age. University funding has decreased due to global economic meltdown, new emerging realities are here- digitalization, growing competition, marketisation, and a lot of issues have gone on to roll back the funding, role, and relevance of higher education institutions in a global age. There is also now the business orientation of universities globally- ensuring that universities must build stronger relationships with all stakeholder groups to get support and to give support. It is because of this that we should now as stakeholders, begin to reflect on the character, aims, the guiding principles, philosophy, roles in society and the practical

functions and purposes universities are designed to serve. Thus, for us to help in the process of re-engineering the university idea, let us do a trenchant analysis of what is at stake.

3. WHAT IS THE IDEA OF A UNIVERSITY?

A critical examination of the idea of the university is important in our search for university stakeholders. The university operates on a tripod. This is through its activities in teaching, research, and community service. But the university system in Nigeria has almost forgotten the third plank of its mandate - community service. The transforming power of the university is huge. Let us briefly re-examine the idea of a university. We can then then link this up with their roles and functions in society. There is the inseparability of teaching, research, and community service. The business of the university includes the advancement of knowledge through research, the extension and interpretation of knowledge, the preservation of knowledge, and the diffusion of knowledge (Pelikan, 1992). In other words, both the intellectual and practical grounds must be covered for effective engagement. They must be taught and practiced by the university. Universities are not expected to remain in their cocoons, they are also expected to diffuse Knowledge in the society. We must begin to reinforce this conviction as a society.

4. WHO ARE UNIVERSITY STAKEHOLDERS?

Who are university stakeholders? We should identify, segment and prioritise them to enable us grasp the full import of their relationships with the university system. In addition, we should also determine here how universities should engage with stakeholders with different levels of interest, influence, and expectations. But first, let us first achieve a useable definition of who a stakeholder is to put our discussion in perspective. Stakeholders can be described as any individual or group of individuals either impacted upon by an organisation or able to impact the achievement of that organisation's objectives (Seres et al, 2019).

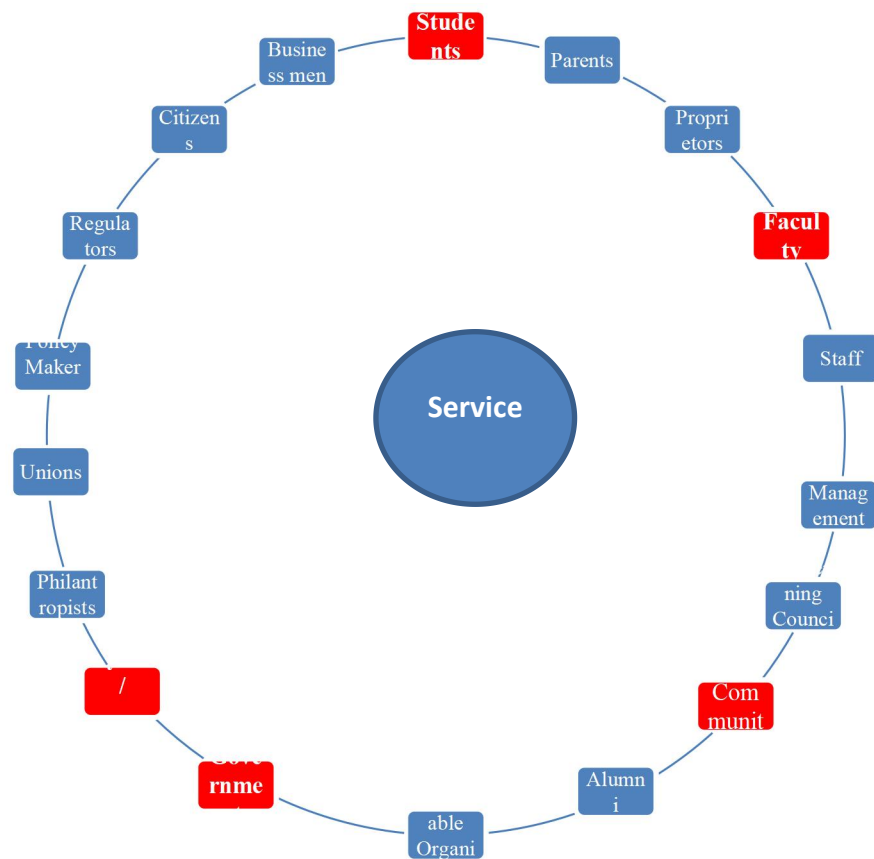
Like other elements of organisations, there are theories underpinning stakeholders within organisations some of which include the agency theory, resource dependence theory and transaction cost theory. While agency theory suggests that

administrators/managers have to control the behaviour of their agents so as to fulfill organisational objectives, resource dependence theory posits that stakeholders possess resources and thus have enormous powers over organisations. The thrust of the transaction cost theory is that stakeholders who are internal to the organisation and who participate in a very small competitive set can “increase transaction costs to levels that justify their absorption into the firm, where the costs of hierarchy are lower than the transaction costs.” (Michell, Agle & Wood, 1997 p.863).

Using the resource dependency theory as an operational model, universities require a lot of resources and it is in this respect that Salmi (2009) construes it as the centre of the three canonical factors that make universities attain world class status. According to him, these are concentration of talents (including students, teaching staff and researchers), abundant resources (including public budget resources, endowment revenues, tuition fees and research grants) and favourable governance (consisting of supportive regulatory framework, autonomy, academic freedom, leadership team, strategic vision and culture of excellence).

The stakeholders in the university system are diverse. Eighteen of them are students, parents, proprietors, faculty, staff, management, Governing Council, host community, alumni, charitable organisations, governments, employers/industries philanthropists, unions, policy makers, regulators, citizens and businessmen.

The relationship among the stakeholders is cyclic and cyclical as the performance of one affects the other.



A wide range of research have identified university Stakeholders (Tam, 2001; Baldwin, 2002; Kotler and Fox, 2002). I will group all of them together but ultimately narrow my discussions down to one of them. These are current and potential students, management and academic staff , government and their financing agencies, employers/industries, families, accreditation agencies, donors and foundations, professional companies, the local community, society in general, Alumni, mass media, trustees, suppliers and business community, grant organisations and donors, university council, secondary schools, social movements, trade unions, and so on. A great number of these Stakeholders may be classified as internal or external stakeholders, individual or collective, academic, or non-academic, shareholders or non-shareholders, potential or actual, active or dormant (if not docile).

Seres et al (2019) have drawn our attention to a critical aspect of the university relationship with the stakeholders and I need to quote them *in extenso* here:

...It should be said that the universities are traditionally focused on a limited number of specific stakeholders, based on the goal that they wish to achieve through stakeholder management. The focused stakeholders may as well be the most significant, but due to the great number and diversity of the entirety of their stakeholders, universities may be neglecting and overlooking to manage several other important groups of stakeholders (Seres et al, 2019:9056)

But while all stakeholders should be involved in defining and implementing the response of the universities to development issues such as innovation hubs, job creation, support for agriculture, and capacity building in information and communication technology, other less-endowed groups must leverage on the goodwill of the universities to advance. One of such groups is the local community.

5. THE WRONG-HEADED NOTION OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Unfortunately, it is not the university only that has lost focus in relation to its roles in its host community. The local Community in Nigeria has also lost focus in its relationship with the university. Rather than ask for a profitable engagement with the university, communities are now more interested in who becomes the Vice Chancellor. A strong dose of nativism has now pervaded the university-community relations. From north to south and east to west, the strident call from the communities is how their sons and daughters must occupy the exalted seat of either the Vice Chancellor or Registrar of the university in their locality. This is an unfortunate narrower view of progress and development. The question we should ask is how that has transformed the communities concerned. Development has gone beyond self-serving ideas of personal positions or personal incomes. There is a major argument in favour of social and economic arrangements, such as the development of facilities for education and health, and the ends that make development important. A community must direct its attention to that process. This must affect and benefit many people rather than a few individuals being showcased as the success stories of our communities. Amartya Sen, the Indian national and one-time winner of the Nobel Prize in Economics has made it clear that communities must be more proactive in recognising their needs and in

ensuring sustainable development. He stated inter alia: “What people can positively achieve is influenced by economic opportunities, political liberties, social powers, and the enabling conditions of good health, basic education, and the encouragement and cultivation of initiatives. The institutional arrangements for these opportunities are also influenced by the exercise of people’s freedoms, through the liberty to participate in social choice and in the making of public decisions that impel the progress of these opportunities.”(Sen, 1999:5) How much of these have the universities located in our communities facilitated? And they surely have the capacities to achieve these. It is also part of their mandates and responsibilities.

Being indigenes or alien of a Vice Chancellor has nothing to do with sense of responsibility, commitment and passion for the university which are essential for university transformation. I must admit however that some indigenous persons have experienced outright suppression, discrimination and persecution in their lands and from those entrusted with the sacred duty of transforming the society through the instrumentation of the university. I can bear witness to one of such unfortunate cases in the University of Ilorin.

Notwithstanding such abnormal situations, development must be linked to public facilities, social care and of effective institutions for the maintenance of progress, local peace, and order. Such activities had been carried out by our universities in the past. We have a few examples to lean on. Prof. Oladele Adebayo Ajose of the Department of Public Health at the then University College Ibadan (Later, University of Ibadan) has started the Ilora Health Project to give health and vitality to that rural community. Not only did he and his team begin health clinic in that community, but they also drained the big pond in the community, dredged it and through that effort brought an end to the debilitating problem of bilharziasis assailing members of the community. They stocked the new pond with tilapia fish to eat the disease bearing things in the pond and periodically sold the fish from the pond to the members of the community, and thereby enhance the protein content of their food. UNILORIN Community Based Experience Services (COBES), bread, school and farm were monumental examples of once upon a time-penetration of town by gown.

6. UNIVERSITIES AND THE DUTY OF CARE

The concept of the Duty of Care is relevant to our discussions of university stakeholder, especially in relation to the local community. The Duty of Care is defined as a moral or legal obligation to ensure the safety or well-being of others. The universities have the duty to care for their surrounding communities. Recently, the universities have distanced themselves from their communities. This is not right. Thus, apart from their contributions to the world of knowledge and knowledge production, they have the responsibility to take care of the local communities. The Centre for Ilorin Studies (CILS) and the National Centre for Hydropower Research and Development (NACHRED) if properly deployed can play immense roles in this regard for the Kwara communities.

One major plank of this duty of care is the secondary school system. Our universities should start intervening in different aspects of our secondary schools rather than waiting for them to first churn out sub-standard product and then later, organising remedial programmes. Strategies should be evolved to see how the products of the schools should be enhanced at their formative stages and not when they are waiting to enter the universities. Merely establishing (as good as that is) their own international secondary school within their own campuses is also not serving their local communities well enough.

The latest in agri-food transformation and nanobiotechnology is now in the public domain. How much of this is being transferred wholesale from our universities to farmers across the country? Nigeria should not be food deficient or food dependent in a country where universities dot every corner of the country. The research being conducted in the field should be in the public space and its effect fully felt in food production. This is not being done well or widely enough. Nigerian is an agrarian society. Our universities should be seen been extremely busy leading the agricultural revolution rather than leave food and cash crop production to the smallholders. Rather than lamenting the inadequacy of resources, they should partner with their local communities by bringing their ideas together with local capacities to ensure progress in food production and economic development. They must prove their mettle in being

locally relevant. In this case, universities can pool resources to engage the farmers in their catchment areas to widen and diversify agricultural production.

Our universities should be more community-focused. At the University of Ilorin, we established close relationship not only with the Ilorin community but also developed a very robust engagement with the larger Kwara community through the Aran-Orin Community in Irepodun Local Government of Kwara state. What we initiated at the University of Ilorin is the proper reflection of how a university should engage its community. In 2012, we established the UNILORIN geological research centre in Aran-Orin in the Irepodun Local Government Area of Kwara State. Also, for two months in 2016, residents of that community enjoyed free medical test, free treatment and free treated mosquito nets, and free drugs by our Master students of the Department of Epidemiology and Community Health who were on a field posting experience to the community. Before settling for that community and the projects to embark on, the students of the University of Ilorin had proactively embarked on the surveillance of health facility, water sanitation, housing, education and nutritional issues. The University also provided an incinerator to stop the indiscriminate dumping of refuse and thereby preventing outbreak of diseases. The nurses at the community health centre were constantly being trained by doctors from the University of Ilorin and the equipment at the centre equipped by the university (Ilorin, Info, 2016). We have maintained and even advanced our engagements with that community till date. The University runs a community centre and we interface with them periodically to now monitor and harvest their areas of need. In February 2023, the university even released an ‘Invitation to Tender for the Construction of Four (4) Bedroom Bungalow Block ‘A’ and Perimeter Block Wall Fence Including Associated External Works for COBES, at Aran-Orin.’ This is an article of faith. This is what should be done by every university.

In Uganda, reference is made to the Uganda Martyrs University, a small faith-based university at Nkozi, Kampala, Uganda that not only generated its own electricity but supplied electricity to the local community. That remains our vision for NACHRED.

Our universities must not only become more proactive and robust in their internal development but also in their external communities' engagements.

7. LIVELIHOODS AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

What efforts are being made by our universities to find answers to the myriad problems of unemployment, industrial collapse, and youth delinquency? We have seen the great collapse that attended the industrial sector in this country since the introduction of the Structural Adjustment Programme in 1986. In Kwara here, we can recall with pains the flourish of Nigeria Paper Mill, Nigeria Sugar Company, Bacita, Doyin Investment, Owolewa & Co., Circular Hotels, Philip Moris, Owoniboys & Co., and many others. How should universities intervene in this sector to evaluate the problems and in several cases, provide hands-on experience to refloat the comatose industrial sector? Unfortunately, individually, or collective, their voices are muted. That is not the way to go. In the US and other developed countries universities have been known to partner with communities to change the society. In Nigeria, our universities, staff, and students can adopt many simple and accessible ways to add value to different organisations and the general society. We can help our country to flourish immensely through the engagement of the local communities. What is important is that through skill infusion and immersive learning, we can create better graduates and add valuable feedback to our curriculum as we prepare our products for industry standards of career-ready competencies.

These competencies should be developed as a mantra in every field ranging from agricultural development, mechanical engineering to religion and accounting, financial resource mechanisms and several other spheres. Knowledge should not be divested from aptitude as it is being done in the country today. Scholars must be seen to engage their communities and should be seen to impact the community in life-altering and positive ways. In an age when national governments, international development agencies, research institutes and others are placing increased emphasis on rural and agricultural development as part of the strategy to reduce poverty and achieving the United Nations 17 Goals of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), our universities should become tools to learn lessons from many rural development

initiatives pursued over the last two decades in different parts of the globe. One of the past programmes that should come in useful for us is the *Saemaul Undong* used by South Korea to leapfrog its development in the 1970s. Several other programmes have become extremely significant in different places. Western Nigeria in the process of developing its Farm Settlement Scheme in the 1950s understudied the Israeli Moshavim and the Sudanese Gezira Schemes in the 1950s and 1960s to launch its agricultural and rural development programmes. The University people contributed a lot to that study and implementation. What have our universities done with their studies of the failure of the Farm Settlement Scheme that arose from this?

At its inception, just as University of Ilorin did in its early days, the University College Ibadan's Agricultural Farm was in great partnership with the University Community supplying fresh eggs, poultry and farm crops to the university community and its environs. The University of Ife that developed later also copied that idea. Unfortunately, many of these brilliant ideas have become comatose. Although some universities also still do this, they are insignificant in number. What we are saying here is that our universities must now 'repair and return' to the lives of their students and communities.

8. MODERN UNIVERSITIES AND FUTURE TRAJECTORIES: DOING AWAY WITH REDUNDANCIES

We have now come to another turning point in the history of the world. It is a new period when universities are being told in clear and unmistakable terms to shape up or ship out. Everything that is wrong with the university system as previously configured is being corrected in the global age. The old structure of the university system is being pulled down left right and centre in different countries of the world. It is giving way to new structures and processes. Not only are university teachers now becoming expendable, but wiser countries are also keying into the global trajectory of carving a niche for themselves with new programmes and skills in high demand. Nigeria should learn from these. Two examples will suffice.

The small country located in the Arabian Peninsula; the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has recently announced that its Artificial Intelligence University has established

dedicated robotic and computer science departments to meet surging global demands. Its Mohamed bin Zayed University of Artificial Intelligence (MBZUAI) has established two new departments and four associated graduate programmes dedicated to robotics and computer science designed to cater for what it called the ‘surging global demand for these disciplines, which is expected to hit USD \$225 billion and \$140 billion, respectively by 2030’ (*Globe Newswire* (August 3, 2023)). Also aligned with the new departments, MBZUAI has established master’s and PhD programmes in robotics and computer science to help further develop the UAE’s wider Artificial Intelligence (AI) ecosystem and strengthen its position as an international hub for AI research and Innovation. These developments represent the university’s efforts at developing a solid foundation for research excellence and innovation in AI. The world is moving on.

But if the foregoing is happening in a developing country like Nigeria, what major developments are happening to university systems in the developed parts of the world? The United Kingdom provides us with an example of the need to do away with elite overproduction and redundancies. This has resulted in department cuts, staff dismissals and closing of some degree programmes. The University of Brighton in July 2023 cut 103 academic staff jobs. And the reasons given? The university said it had retained “the right staff with the collective skills, experience and expertise to continue to deliver our full range of courses.” (Blunt, July 24, 2023). Out of the 36 professors at the university, 10 are facing redundancy. According to the University of Brighton’s spokesperson, “As a provider of high-quality, skills-based education, there are significant opportunities for us to continue to strengthen our position as we look to the future... The changes we are making to our workforce will help us to do that.” (Blunt, 2023). This is a very fundamental move. No university is above the law. No university in the contemporary period can shy away from the two examples provided to us by the universities in the UAE and the United Kingdom.

Indeed I foresee in not distant future, universities serving as validity and certification rather than teaching centres.

9. WHAT IS WRONG WITH THE NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY SYSTEM: CAN IT BE CHANGED?

What are we doing to strengthen our own universities as we look to the future? If we carried out a forensic analysis of the Nigerian university system today, we would see a lot of impurities and redundancies. First, the kind of leadership and mentorship that goes with the attainment of a status of a professor has atrophied significantly. There have been allegations that many of our senior professors have stopped teaching and only use their offices and the university as mere mailing addresses. But because of their years of experience, the senior professors are expected to be central to the training and building of a wide network of committed researchers and scholars who should be interested in critically analysing and addressing the problems of development assailing this country. Unfortunately, many of our scholars are shying away from basic research that will change our story. We need to get back to work.

The future of our universities and of our country is in your hands. The tendency of the present generation to ‘Japa’ is not in your best interests. Put your hands to the plough, Build your country. Create a future for the young and the old. Therein lies our salvation as the largest concentration of the black people anywhere in the world. Replace ‘*JAPA*’ with ‘*JAPADA*’.

10. CLARION CALL

One of the major obstacles the communities have in seeking university’s assistance is the route. It is my view that an establishment of University Community Service Centre (UCSC) by a university or a collective such as KU8 would go a long way in dismantling the obstacles. A centre such as the one in Aran-Orin can be the point of contact and a midwife for all shades of requests and from to the community by the university.

11. CONCLUSION

Our universities must now pay greater attention to community service and development. You cannot design and build a university based on the local community as an outsider. We must become involved in their health, ecology, livelihoods and through that add value to their existence. We cannot continue to go on strike

incessantly without working on other areas of community needs that would enhance our relevance. There is now a greater threat to the academic. With the rise of technology, and the arrival of the ChatGPT, the Artificial Intelligence (AI) tool for generating human-like text based on context and trained to follow human lines of thinking, the academia has a greater challenge than we had initially anticipated. We must get out of comfort zones and carve a new niche that will allow the society to value what we do. We cannot afford to be trailing behind China, Singapore, Malaysia and even South Africa. We must go back to being developmental universities rather than leeches on society. The surest way to achieve this is to partner with the local communities to take our progress to greater heights and beyond the classrooms and the laboratory.

I think it is not enough to organise conferences, as important as they are. It is more important that we walk the talk and clean our corners to make change happen. As everyone of us is a stakeholder and we had identified our roles right from the beginning, let us all resolve to recommit ourselves reversing the trends that have made university education in Nigeria what it is. I am certain that we are capable of making changes if we decide to as stakeholders to do so. The task of transforming education is our sole responsibility as stakeholders, not anyone else's. Let me conclude with the words of Unique Jabir:

No one can help you unless you help yourself. No one can believe you unless you believe yourself. No one can defeat you unless you give up on yourself. No one can change you unless you change yourself. No one can love you unless you love yourself. No one can do it for you unless you do it by yourself

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