

Antia, B.E. (2009). A German Initiative in Higher Education Management and Nigerian Applications. In: S. Mayanja & R. Sonaiya (eds.) *Network Dialoguing and the Strengthening of Academic Exchange between German and West African Universities*. Vienna: Boersedruck Publishers, 57-65.

A GERMAN INITIATIVE IN HIGHER EDUCATION MANAGEMENT AND NIGERIAN APPLICATIONS

Bassey E. Antia
Department of Languages & Linguistics
University of Maiduguri
Borno State, Nigeria
URL: www.basseyantia.net

0. Introduction

Higher education is experiencing phenomenal changes (for better or for worse) as a consequence of challenges and opportunities in its diverse operating environments. In Nigeria, responsibility for the oft-deprecated state of higher education typically triggers a blame game between higher education operators and external stakeholders – including the state – that has tended to conceal a number of important issues. This paper describes a German capacity-building programme in higher education management that has the distinct advantage of offering new perspectives from which to view challenges such as those facing Nigerian higher education. Delivered substantially from the standpoint of management expertise, by a faculty that included teachers of an innovative MBA programme in higher education management, the course curriculum encourages some of the search light to be trained on structures, competences and processes internal to the higher education system, while at the same time suggesting how the external environment can innovatively engage with the system.

1. Overview of DIES International Deans' Course - Africa (I)

The German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) has, together with the Committee of German University Vice-Chancellors (Hochschulrektorenkonferenz), continued to evolve support initiatives under its programme on Dialogue on Innovative Higher Education Systems (DIES, pronounced as a succession of 'd' and 'yes', rather than as the English verb). Within the DAAD, the DIES falls under the Higher Education Management Division (current Head: Christoph Hansert). One recent DIES project is the International Deans' Course, a capacity-building course on higher education management for senior academics who are potential leaders in higher education or currently hold intermediate-level management positions.

Although the course curriculum has applications for all levels of responsibility within the University, the course title explicitly mentions the office of Dean. Such foregrounding ostensibly makes the point that being a bridge between upper management and colleagues at lower levels, the Dean embodies, or experiences first hand, many of the challenges and opportunities of the system. The office is thus a good entry point into the workings of the University.

One of several rationales for evolving this course was the perceived dearth of professional training in higher education management and a widespread culture of learning on the job. For the tens of thousands of its alumni (individuals who studied in Germany with funding from the DAAD), the DAAD saw this initiative as part of its life-long commitment to its scholars, as a management complement to the sound scientific education received in Germany. A

similar consideration informed the decision of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation to be part of the initiative. The view was that although fellows of the Foundation were holding important positions in higher education as well as in their disciplinary networks, in the latter unlike in the former they have hardly received any previous professional training. For both organisations, as for other partners, there is a link between the kinds of framework conditions that managerial know-how creates and the quality of scientific work (teaching, research, publishing, community outreach) that can be done.

Together with partners at the German Committee of Vice-Chancellors ('Hochschulrektorenkonferenz', HRK), the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation (AvH), the Centre for Higher Education Development (Gutersloh), University of Applied Sciences (Osnabrueck), Moi and Addis Ababa Universities (in Kenya and Ethiopia respectively), the DAAD organised the first ever International Deans' Course in May 2007. Africa was the pioneer beneficiary of the course, billed to rotate among several world regions. There were altogether 33 participants, drawn from 9 African countries (Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda). Nigerian participants were AvH Fellows at the time of the first course.

Following an initial, intensive, two-week training in the German cities of Osnabrueck (theoretical foundations) and Berlin (case studies in the city's several universities), there have been follow-up meetings at country working group levels (around September 2007) and at a plenary level (February 2008). These follow-up meetings have served to provide complementary theoretical training, but more importantly they have enabled participants report on their personal action plans (PAP). Each participant was expected to conceive and execute a PAP that would initiate change or otherwise add value to their respective home environments.

2. The Curriculum

Over the three sessions that have so far taken place, a range of lectures in plenary and elective sessions have been offered. The list of modules and/or topics includes: the framework conditions of higher education in Germany and East Africa, the Bologna Process, paradigm shifts in models of university governance, strategic management, financial management, quality management, leadership, e-learning, change management, public relations, soft skills (such as meeting management, conflict resolution, etc.), and international cooperation. To give some substance to this overview of the curriculum, the following sub-sections outline a few of the issues discussed under some of the modules.

2.1 Quality

The nature of preoccupation with quality (an obsession, an after-thought add-on to substantive matters, no action) was seen as a function of the attitude of higher education operators to:

- the competition (for highly qualified staff and students) in the globalised higher education market;
- a drop in the quantum of resources typically received from traditional state sources;
- the massification of higher education, the state of lower or pre-university tiers of the educational system, the financial status of students;
- the very conception of quality. Quality conceptions can be differentiated along a number of stakeholder or actor dimensions, *viz.*: for a ranking agency or scholarly

body (= academic excellence), for an accreditation agency (= traditionally, set of minimum input requirements), for students (= added value and client orientation), for a standards agency in the mould of the International Standards Organisation (= processes), and so on.

Against this backdrop, it became evident that intervention in the area of quality requires multi-faceted models, several of which were presented. An account of quality provided by the Inter-university Council of East Africa looks at quality from the standpoint of inter-relationships among policy plan, governance, human resources, funding and financial management, educational activities, research and community outreach. The European Foundation for Quality Management outlines the following quality parameters: result orientation, customer focus, leadership and constancy of purpose, management by facts, and people development and involvement. The European Network for Quality Assurance (ENQA) Guidelines recommend standards related to policy and procedures for quality assurance; for approvals, monitoring and review of programmes; for assessment of students; for quality assurance of teaching; for learning resources; for information systems; and so on.

Implementation of quality proposals in any environment necessarily involves ruffling of some feathers, given that interests would typically have emerged around the maintenance of the status quo. This backdrop provided the context for viewing quality as an object of change management. Presentations on the processes of change management made it obvious how quality management in respect of any aspect of institutional life could be introduced as seamlessly as possible, or in a way that both anticipates and addresses typical obstacles.

2.2 Strategic management

In part, the relevance of strategic management at faculty level derives from the centrifugal forces, the contradictions and fears that define the office of Dean (or of any office of significant responsibility), and that prevent:

- the institutionalisation of long-term thinking, as well as
- decision-making in the context of goals or select priorities that make for sustainable futures.

Strategic plans may be directed at a range of aspects of institutional life: directive principles, values (equity, internationalisation), stakeholder relations, excellence in teaching and research, and so on.

Consensus obtained for a strategic plan facilitates management in the sense that it legitimises steering efforts or operative instruments. Strategic management, that is, management on the basis of long-term, goal context-oriented plans, allows individuals and units within a system to see possible system-wide impact of what would otherwise have been considered isolated, harmless decisions or actions. The constancy of general purpose, the existence of a litmus test for the degree of alignment or disarticulation of individual and group actions vis-à-vis strategic organisational objectives can make for an almost self-steering mode of exercising authority, in addition to projecting a positive external profile for the system.

Challenges associated with evolving strategic plans and managing by strategic objectives were addressed in the context of presentations on organising a strategic management process, typical mistakes in the process, and available instruments.

2.3 Bologna and the changing framework conditions of German Higher Education

Changes in German higher education are being driven by an admixture of national concerns (e.g. continuing competitiveness of Germany in a knowledge economy, which has seen the rise of new superpowers such as China and India) and regional pressures, notably the Bologna Process. The backdrop to the Bologna Reform Agenda was the perceived need for compatibility/comparability of higher education systems and qualifications in Europe, greater market solvency of European higher education graduates, enhanced international competitiveness of national higher education systems (at a time of increased challenge from notably North America and Asia) and for a European brand in the international higher education market. Bologna sets itself a number of objectives: evolving a system of easily readable and comparable degrees; establishment of a two-tier system (undergraduate and postgraduate) of higher education; adoption of a system of credits (that are also obtainable in non-higher education contexts) in order to, among others, facilitate student mobility and admission; promotion of mobility of students, teachers, researchers and administrative staff; cooperation in quality assurance; and promotion of European dimensions in higher education, such as through the integration of study and research programmes, and so on.

In response to this emerging policy framework or to operative mechanisms put in place for implementation, German higher education is tending towards a number of directions, including:

- management by negotiated and cascaded objectives (state → university; internally, at successive levels of management: University President/Vice-Chancellor → Professors and/or Deans → Heads of Department/Staff);
- performance-based contracts or clauses in the appointment of several cadres (e.g. Professors, Deans, Heads of department);
- introduction of performance-based funding allocation mechanisms (again between state and university, and at successive management levels internally);
- shift of emphasis in quality assurance systems: from programme orientation to institutional processes; from input to throughput and output; and
- the increasing differentiation of university profiles, with universities seeking to carve out teaching/research niches, encouraged in the process by competitive mechanisms of extra statutory but substantial funding.

At the level of organisation of the system and of study programmes, the Bachelor's degree (previously non-existent as the Master's was the first German degree) has been introduced; courses have been modularised with emphasis on learning outcomes per module; there have been pressures for information technology to support the delivery of courses; the 'publish or perish' pressure is increasingly being extended to: 'English or perish'; and so on.

A number of these changes in the framework conditions of German higher education have meant that previously 'unthinkable' measures have been institutionalised. For instance, student evaluation of professors has challenged traditional concepts/abuses of academic freedom; study programmes that have failed to meet performance benchmarks have had to close down, etc.

2.4 Changing nature of university governance

As the previous section has shown, changes in higher education everywhere are pressured by both global forces (e.g. new concepts of public sector management, economic globalisation, knowledge-based economy, ICT) and national concerns (e.g. massification of higher

education, more stakeholders). The take on these pressures affects institutional arrangements, rules, values by which power is exercised.

Europe and North America offer three traditional models for governance or the exercise of power in higher education. Given three levels of authority in higher education, *viz.*: national (i.e. the state), institutional (i.e. Vice-Chancellors or Presidents) and base units (e.g. faculties, departments, unions), represented respectively by S, I and B in figure 1, we see differences across three regions (USA, Continental Europe and United Kingdom).

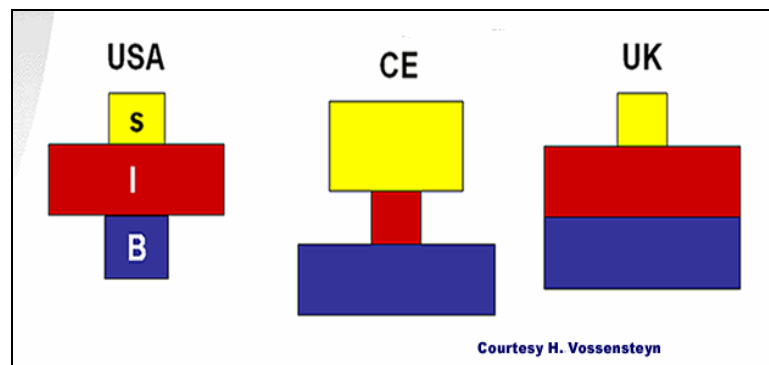


Figure 1: Differences across systems

In the US and the UK, unlike in continental Europe, there has traditionally been very minimal state involvement in the operation of higher education institutions. The locus for much of the authority in the US higher education system lies with top level institutional management.

A much more granular framework for thinking through what mode of governance is appropriate to a given set of circumstances in the operating environment of a higher education system is what was dubbed the governance equalizer. Five dimensions in the exercise of power together create a mix that reflects a particular mode of governance. The dimensions are as follows:

- (State) regulation: top down detailed directives
- Academic self-governance: collegial decision-making
- Stakeholder guidance: goal-setting by state & external stakeholders
- Managerial self-governance: institutional leadership
- Competition for scarce resources: allocation through market-based mechanisms

Figure 2 shows the governance equalizer in two dimension constellations: one in which regulation and academic self-governance are high, while stakeholder guidance, managerial self-governance and competition are relative low; a second, favoured by the New Public Management paradigm, with low regulation and academic self-governance, but with relatively high levels of stakeholder guidance, managerial self-governance and competition.

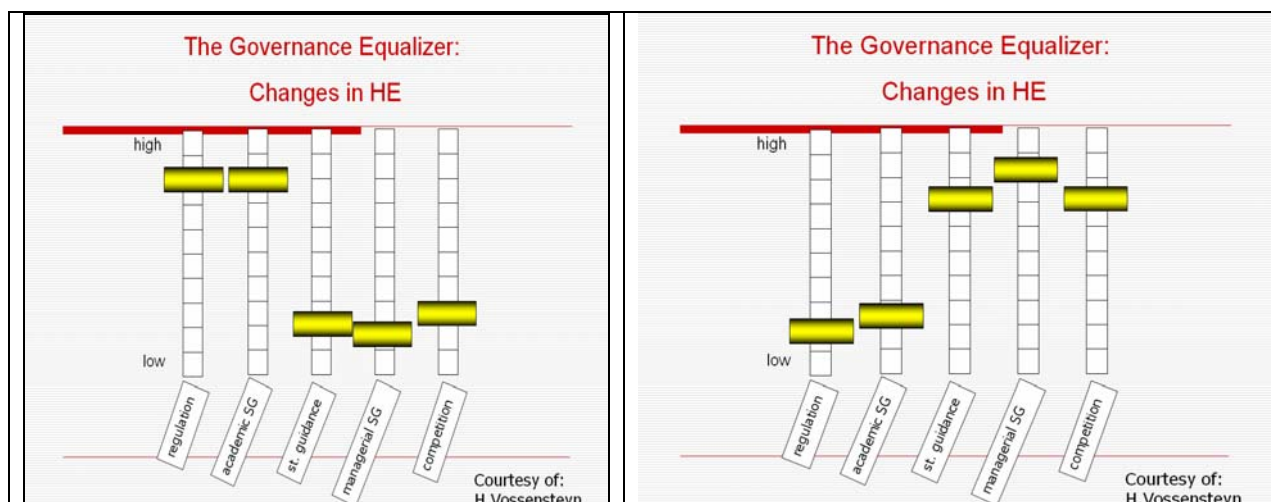


Figure 2: Different dimension constellations on the equalizer

On the face of it, the first governance model in figure 2 is one that impairs the capacity of a higher education institution or system to innovate and to respond rapidly/efficiently to new situations. It might also be associated with lower levels of accountability and client orientation. Though, in principle, the second model can easily allow for abuses in the latitude it offers for executive action, the acknowledgement of the importance of stakeholders and competition creates a goal-context for management, and perhaps tempers the ruthless ring of an approach of 'the-end-justifying-the-means'.

As pointed out earlier, the curriculum for the International Deans' Course was quite broad, but perhaps the above summary of four thematic areas suffices to give some impression of the content.

3. A Nigerian uptake

Obviously not each and every insight from the course constitutes a basis for wanting to intervene in the Nigerian higher education system. For instance, the two-tier structuring of higher education into undergraduate and postgraduate studies and the introduction of a 'diploma supplement' (statement of result or transcript detailing courses taken, grades obtained, workload) have traditionally been features of higher education in Nigeria.

Even with respect to novelties, it might be argued that the specificities of the framework conditions of Nigerian higher education are such that translating some of the insights into reality is currently impossible. The almost conventional wisdom is that the military and the political elite have, over the years, systematically undermined the universities (seen traditionally as hotbeds of opposition). The erosion, over time, of all the critical inputs into the university concept that have traditionally made the system relevant (funding, academic freedom cum autonomy, conditions of service) is having a number of consequences beyond the much talked about brain drain. Universities are increasingly becoming higher institutions of lower learning; they are becoming less relevant to society and their graduates are increasingly becoming under-employed, where not outright market-insolvent; private universities (charging premium fees) are emerging; there is an unprecedented flight of students from economically privileged backgrounds to institutions in sister African countries, notably Ghana. Against this backdrop, the argument is that it is naïve to expect that change processes can be meaningfully initiated from within the system itself.

A counterargument would be that some of the characteristics of the Nigerian higher education space, much as we would like to think of them as unique, constitute in fact the dilemma of post colonial universities, as an eponymous book illustrates with respect to Sub-Saharan Africa (cf. Lebeau & Ogunsanya 2000). Yet, within more or less similar constraints, some operators of the system are reforming in rather fundamental ways. It was refreshing to read recently from a colleague in Kenya that her university was involved in a process of quality certification by the International Standards Organisation (ISO).

On our reading, the DIES International Deans' Course provides the basis for reflection (in the form of questions, posers, critical statements, recommendations) on some 20-odd low visibility issues concerning the running of public universities in Nigeria. For each thematic area summarised above, we identify a number of issues.

3.1 Quality

- the number of years (3, 4, 5 or more) it takes for students that have duly completed a study programme to be actually issued their certificates;
- the tales of woe (missed postgraduate admissions in foreign universities, lost job offers, requests for bribes) from graduates requesting transcripts from their universities;
- the interminable process of approving student results;
- the non-institutionalisation, across the entire system, of mechanisms for students to evaluate their teachers;
- meetings (at departmental, faculty or senate levels) lasting in excess of four hours, of which as much as an hour goes into correcting minutes of previous meetings;
- even with funding levels linked to student enrolment figures, there is a lack of investment in resources that could mitigate the effect of unprecedented teacher-student classroom ratios, sometimes in the order of one teacher to seven hundred students or more;
- the lack of personal integrity that sees both students and staff exploit the weaknesses of the system: the former to plagiarise term papers/research projects done at other institutions; the latter to become co-authors of articles in respect of which they would otherwise not have deserved even a footnote acknowledgment;
- the absence of structures to provide orientation for new appointees to academic and administrative offices, with perpetual learning on the job and attendant inefficiencies being the result of this inattention to institutional knowledge management;
- in financial management, the banishment or devaluation of personal integrity as basis for official conduct, which then leads to an over bloated bureaucracy (in the name of "checks and balances") that creates severe problems of efficiency for the system;
- the non-utilisation of resources for intended purposes (e.g. improvements in teaching, laboratory supplies), and the observation that, following the directive of the Yar' Adua government, universities have also found themselves in the league of establishments returning to the treasury (at the end of the financial year) unspent funds that had obviously been requested in the first place to enhance quality of infrastructure, services and so on.

3.2 Strategic management

- the absence of explicitly negotiated and periodically reviewed agreements between the state and higher education for purposes of management by time-bound objectives;

- a culture of management by exigencies of the moment, the sacrifice of long term goals on the altar of pressure and short-term calculations;
- the unwholesome pressure which both external and internal stakeholders make (successfully) on processes within the system: admissions, graduation, staff promotions, and so on;
- the courting of external pressure that goes with the invitation to high officers of state (e.g. governors) to attend purely academic events (at which no fund raising is even envisaged);
- weak information systems, leading to low degrees of institutional self-knowledge, with attendant consequences on the quality of information available to support or steer strategic thinking and acting;
- a non-systemic or organic view of the internal stakeholder community that has traditionally created the impression that technical, junior and administrative staff have negligible roles as far as the functioning of the system is concerned;

3.3 Bologna

- a need to strive towards collegial, international/regional (rather than just national) benchmarking of study programmes in order to ensure compatibility and encourage cooperation in quality standards;
- a need for a regional (e.g. West African) Higher Education (Research) Area in which regionally available world-class expertise in different disciplines could be leveraged through a range of mechanisms (summer schools, doctoral student conferences, etc.);
- the institutionalisation of (voluntary) 'study abroad' semesters on the basis of learning agreements between partner institutions within the region – as a means of fostering student mobility and curtailing academic in-breeding;
- in order to enhance market solvency of graduates: researching, and making explicit in study programmes, the market relevance of parts of the curriculum, or the support the curriculum offers to the pursuit of goals on the (international) development agenda;
- the need to promptly address a long list of internal problems in order to carve out a niche for a Nigerian/West African higher education brand that should form the basis of recruiting students internationally, in the same manner as British, American universities and (of late) Malaysian institutions are engaged in a battle royal for the cheques of privileged Nigerian parents.

3.4 Governance

- the paradox that although heads of higher education institutions should ideally have more executive powers in order to more rapidly respond to changes and to run their institutions more efficiently, there is considerable abuse of existing powers;
- the need to ensure that a decentralised mode of exercising authority (e.g. committee system), while intended to ensure broad participation in governance, does not become a clog in the wheel of institutional progress. Action is not infrequently stalled because relevant committees cannot sit on account of (engineered) lack of quorum;
- as a means of responding to the above need, activities within universities should be designed that seek to continuously evolve, inculcate and strengthen a positive/preferred model of culture to support governance;
- with respect to branding of higher education institutions, neither the state nor universities must relent or pay lip service to this, presumably because a non-strategic short term view is taken of the fact that demand for higher education currently

outstrips supply. Such logic would in turn imply that rankings are irrelevant, no special funding incentives need be provided for programmes that excel, universities or units need not engage in public relations on behalf of their programmes, and so on.

4. Conclusion

The dominant discourse into which generations of Nigerian academics have been socialised is one of the state undermining higher education. While evidence for the assertion can be found, this discourse tenor has the disadvantage of concealing the role played by competences, processes and structures internal to the higher education system in bringing about a state of affairs deplored by all.

The German initiative in higher education management described in this paper has the merit of providing the basis for thinking about not only the role that the state and higher education operators play in the present and future of the system. It also offers a discourse model that introduces new rationalities and temperaments into the higher education debate, and that is capable of redefining the terms of engagement by the various stakeholders.

References

Course materials from the International Deans' Course 2007/2008.

Lebeau, Y. & Ogunsanya, M. (2000). *The Dilemma of Post-Colonial Universities*. Ibadan: IFRA/ABB