

UNIVERSITY ADMINISTRATION AS A PROFESSION

BY

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I feel flattered by your invitation to me to participate in this Seminar and to present a paper. By now, 12 years after formally severing connection with university administration, I can hardly be expected to be a good discussant of trends in university administration. For the word trends calls for up-to-date knowledge of the changes in style or fashion of administering a university. You will agree that unless the direction of administration has been static, 12 years' absence may put one at considerable disadvantage in discussing trends. On the other hand, there is for me some saving grace. First, in order to assess new trends, it is necessary to know the old approach, and in this, as far as Nigeria is concerned, I thought I might be useful. Secondly although I have not been involved in actual detailed administration in the last twelve years I have somehow been in a position to observe some of the happenings in the Nigerian University scene. From 1970-1975 I was a member of council of the University of Ife. From 1981 to date I have been a member of council of the Federal University of Technology Akure; and recently I had an opportunity of some intensive study of some institutions of tertiary education in Nigeria and abroad. So, although I may be out of touch with current trends in respect of particular areas of university administration, I can at least comment on ways in which some aspects of general university administration differ from what they used to be.

University Administration as a Profession

I find it intriguing that university administration seems to have been confirmed as a profession. This is evident from the name of your association. No one thought of it as a profession in my time and that was just over a decade ago. A profession is a calling for which you receive some formal training, from which you normally earn a living and which you devote much of your time. To be a profession, the character of the calling or occupation must be sufficiently distinct so that those who belong know one another and can form a body as such. Sometimes



members of a profession bind themselves together by prescribed standards thereby excluding pretenders and raising the prestige of their profession. I can find no reason why university administration may not, like teaching, engineering or medicine, be regarded as a profession, provided that it is sufficiently specialised and training therefore is formalised.

First, there are some peculiarities of university administration which distinguish it from general administration. This might be perhaps clearer to me than to you, because I have had some experience of other types of administration. For instance, I have headed a Public Service Commission which, though it has little to do with details of administration in ministerial departments nevertheless afford the opportunity of a general over-view of the Civil Service - its structure, purpose and ethos. I have also had the privilege of heading the Board of Directors of a Corporation which gave me the opportunity of an insight into the nature of company or business administration. From my experience, I could almost say that university administration is in a class by itself. Examinations are a peculiar feature of university administration. Of course, examinations constitute the main business of bodies like Matriculation Boards, West African Examinations Council, etc, but whereas the number of separate subject papers involved in university examinations runs to hundreds, these bodies administer only a few papers, although probably to larger numbers. Students are a peculiar feature of the university and its administration, as the whole has noted perforce in the last fifteen years when students have drawn disproportionate attention to themselves. In statu pupillari is not the same thing as apprenticeship. Students are learners, but not in the same sense that the intermediate and clerical cadres are learners in the civil service. Students claim to be as free as emancipated as their teachers and this has subtle implications for the Administration. Again in no other type of situation do you have the high degree of concentration of brain power which characterises the university. A professor is a unique creature; he is the epitome of all the knowledge in his field; his type is rare in any other situation. There are several professors in a university and each reigns over a particular department of knowledge and as

a concomitant, there is a large number of departments each requiring individualistic approach. Furthermore, the degree of complexity attendant on university administration is hardly to be encountered in any other situation. Many universities are residential institutions with municipal characteristics - Hall of residence, staff quarters, elementary and secondary schools, comprehensive health clinic, student buttry, the stadium and swimming pool, zoological gardens, security, water scheme and power plant, drainage and sewerage (to mention only a few items) are inherent mundane responsibilities which jostle with traditional academic functions like Senate, Convocation, Congregation, Faculty Boards, Board of Studies, etc. Accordingly, you have an unprecedented range of functionaries - Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, Visitor, Deans, External Examiners, Hall Masters, Registrars, Bursars, Secretaries, etc. I am not aware of any other situation in which administration is as many-sided.

The higher management personnel of a university is supposed to be able to talk with understanding about the whole range of activities which constitute the administration. It is because of this peculiar nature of university administration and the high demands of quality and relevance in the higher management personnel that C. Northcote Parkinson called for a "staff course in higher administration, to be supervised by retired Vice-Chancellors and held at some centre for research which could be furnished with all the information obtainable about all the universities of the world."¹ He suggested that in the future British universities limit their higher offices to those who have taken such course. Had Northcote Parkinson's suggestion been followed, university administration would long have attained recognition as a distinct profession. As far as I know, the nearest we have come to Northcote's proposal is a three-month Certificate Course in University Administration available for Assistant Registrars at the University of Ife, Institute of Public Administration. It was essentially an orientation course and came nowhere near a "staff college." It terminated about five years ago.

1. C. Northcote Parkinson, "Organisation and Method", Universities Review Vol. 32 (October, 1959) at page 12.

In thinking of university administration as a profession, the first question is who should be involved. Who are those to be regarded as professionals? For while those of us in this seminar may be thinking of Registrars, Bursars, etc, let us not lose sight of a large number of academic people involved at various levels and in varying degrees of non-academic decision-making processes. But what degree of participation should entitle the academic to pose as a professional administrator? A Dean or Provost has charge of Faculty management; a head of department specifically handles departmental organisation and administration; the dean, the head of department, and the more senior lecturers take part in the intensive committee work which has come to characterise university functions. Again, in Nigerian universities, there is usually a committee of Deans, which ideally should be a forum for inter-faculty consultations in respect of academic matters but which the Vice-Chancellor is tempted to use as advisory body for miscellaneous non-academic purposes (probably because of the maturity of the body). But it is my view that these functions, though, administrative, are not sufficient to make a Dean, a head of department or lecturer eligible as professional administrator.

Anybody would think that this was so obvious as not to be worth mentioning. But it is a fact that many academic people regard Registrars, Bursars, etc as mere incidentals in the management scene of a predominantly academic establishment. The Senior academicians control the policy-making bodies - the Senate, the faculty and departments - and in some parts of the world, this is all that matters. For example student residence and its concomitants which occupy so much of the time of administrators in Nigeria is a mere trifle on the continent of Europe where less than 10% of student population live in any organised and supervised hostels. Many administrative functions which are carried on by a number of full-time administrative officers in Nigerian Universities e.g. admissions, student discipline, labour relations, come within the range of responsibility of the Faculty in Europe. So, there may be good reasons in certain situations in the university world for the subordination of the "Administration" to the "Faculty." There is a clear need in Nigeria for "professional" administrators to function in their own right; the alternative is to consider what would happen if the Registrar, the Bursar, the Directors and their subordinates were suddenly withdrawn from, shall we say, the University of Ibadan!

It follows from the fore-going observations that if a Nigerian university found a way of avoiding responsibility for (1) students residential affairs (including feeding, laundry and house-keeping) (2) Community services like staff schools and staff housing) (3) maintenance of roads and estate (4) central workshop for service of staff cars and departmental vehicles (5) Health care scheme covering the whole university population; etc, not only would the complexion of administrative function change, but the academicians could then more fairly claim that the administration is the handmaiden of the Faculty.

The Special Position of the Vice-Chancellor

At this particular point in time in Nigeria the Vice-Chancellor is a veritable "jack of all trades". He is ostensibly selected on the score of distinction in scholarship. As far as my experience goes, this gesture of his academic distinction is canvassed with such emphasis that one is bound to come to the conclusion that it is the only thing that matters and that his main burden would be leadership in the academic field and inspirational role in research. Yet when a Nigerian Vice-Chancellor claims that he is the "Chief Executive" (a title sometimes conferred by the relevant Act, or Decree) he is invariably thinking solely of dominance in the field of administration, notwithstanding that all his previous experience may have been limited to the running of his own department and participation in Senate and some committees. His administrative expertise suddenly swells up to cover the chairmanship of any and every conceivable committee from Tenders Board to Students Disciplinary Committee. He claims that the Registrar (now sometimes called Director of Administration), Bursars, Librarian, Academic Secretary and the whole battery of 'Directors' (Health, Works, Academic Planning, Information or Public Relations, etc) should report to him directly. He presides over Senate (the details of whose business, in the face of greatly increased number of faculties, must be increasingly difficult to follow). He is not just a member of the Governing Council, he is the moving spirit; for he must advise the Pro-Chancellor on agenda and personally brief the Council on most issues (in controversial or contested issues, by preparing a paper). He is the institution's Public Relations Officer par

excellence, not only in its dealings with the public, the government and other national universities, but also International and Commonwealth University groupings. He is a member (or may be the head) of the Committee of Vice-Chancellors (an informal body which met once a while when sufficient need arose for consultation, but which is fast becoming a club with pre-fixed regular meetings whose dates are sometimes chalked up in university calendars). His responsibility for students is complete when there is a crisis; otherwise no more is demanded from him personally than occasional presence at the games and athletics finals, or the students' theatre. He cannot afford to be absent from interviewing committees for teaching staff since the quality of staff goes to the root of academic excellence which is the foremost of the Vice-Chancellor's academic responsibility.

Too much time will be taken listing all the demands on the Vice-Chancellor's attention. Does all this make the Vice-Chancellor a professional? It all depends. In Nigeria, I think not; if only for the reason that the tenure (four years certain and possibly an extension for a further three years) is too short. For someone who did not start by being an expert in administration but has to learn on the job, more than four years is needed to make him a professional. In the United Kingdom the tenure of the Vice-Chancellor is more ample, which was why it was why it was assumed and suggested that he would be the best qualified to supervise a special "Staff College". In Nigeria, the Registrar is potentially more likely to be the better supervisor.

The function of the Vice-Chancellor in our universities is one of those that call for possible change of trends. No one doubts that the Vice-Chancellor takes ultimate responsibility for ensuring that the institution fulfils its purpose. While individual officers may be culpable for particular lapses, the Vice-Chancellor must bear the blame for any act that mars the academic standard or the image or communal well-being of the institution. It is therefore understandable that he should want to be involved in every detail. The question is how he should go about it.

Various ideas have been suggested or are being tried. For example there is the idea of multiple deputies who would be assigned to various sectors of responsibility - Finance and Budgeting, Student Affairs, Academic and Curriculum Matters, Physical Planning and Allocations, etc. Each deputy would be required to master the details in his area of authority and bring to the Vice-Chancellor only that which he needs to know about or which requires his decision. This would make the traditional system practised in Nigeria anomalous, for you cannot have the deputies system and also have Registrars, Bursars, Academic Secretaries, etc.

Again, in the United States, at any rate in the big colleges, you have what is called the "Cabinet System" which serves essentially the same purpose. It is thus summarised in The Managerial Revolution in Higher Education by Rourke and Brooks:

"More and more the task of managing internal university affairs has been delegated to an assortment of vice-presidents in charge of such matters as business, students, or academic affairs. As a result a new lawyer of top-level officials has become firmly fixed at the summit of the administrative hierarchy. Where once he reigned in solitary splendor, the university president has now come to share responsibility for governing his institution with a variety of other executive colleagues."

"Of central importance here is the fact that these vice-presidents commonly sit together with the president in an executive cabinet, which meets on a regular basis to handle most of the major decisions that come before the university, including budgetary allocations, plans for campus expansion, and other matters of critical nature. Sometimes this cabinet is very formal in character - an administrative council, budget committee, or some other decision-making body explicitly provided for in the constitution or bylaws of the university. Very often, however, it is a highly informal arrangement - a "kitchen cabinet" of advisors with whom the president habitually meets to

1. The John Hopkins Press, 1966, at page 109.

discuss the university's most pressing problems."

If, in the 'Deputies' system, the deputies devote all or most of their time to their specific non-academic areas of assignment, and they have a permanent tenure, they will be regarded as Professionals. Of course, the American Vice-President is an administrator first and is expected to specialise in his own area of concern within the context of general university administration. He is both a professional and an expert.

New Pressures and New Trends

Now, if one is thinking of university administration as a profession with particular reference to Nigeria, one has to bear in mind that some experiments in trends are being discussed or tried which may have effect on the nature and content of Administration in the future. I know of an institution which is planning to eliminate the dining-hall system by transferring students' feeding to approved contractors. Student accommodation has long been an ailing subject and the ailment has reached an advanced stage in some universities whereby only final year students may expect allocation of university rooms. The university of Ife once thought of farming out all estate maintenance and cleaning duties to contractors so as to cut down to manageable size the permanent staff of the Department of Maintenance, Works and Transport, etc. More of these ideas will surface as the university comes under two different types of pressure: The first is the financial squeeze by the governments resulting in dwindling support; and the second is the pressure from student numbers which, unless a low profile is adopted, will be incompatible with dwindling financial support.

This matter is relevant because if the universities are forced to curb non-academic activities, then the scope of the professional administrator will be limited. The Faculty staff will then probably use intermediate and junior staff to carry out the non-academic administrative processes incidental to their functions. This will not eliminate professionals, but it will reduce their number and functional horizon. It is not a particularly

comforting thought for those who have a career in university administration, but it will be fool-hardy not to advert to these negative possibilities.

As usual in these Seminars, the duty of the main speaker is to throw out a few ideas, sometimes at random, and for the discussants to collate, analyse and draw conclusions. I have not said much, but I hope that the little I have said will be a light unto the feet of the discussants. Let met anticipate them a little by suggesting that the training of university administrators ought to be taken more seriously. Whatever effort was being made in the past to give some in-service training appears to have ceased. I have already referred to the Certificate Course in University administration of the University of Ife. I understand that the ad hoc training programme at the University of Ibadan whereby some means was found from time to time to send a senior officer abroad for two semesters for study and experience has also ceased. It is my experience that training is grossly underrated in the whole field of Administration in the Public Service. Many civil servants have spent two decades in the service without any formal course of training! Compare training in the private Sector, or in the Army!

