

Why leadership training should be institutionalised

The disruptions in higher education activities due to COVID-19, coupled with the prolonged staff strike by the Academic Staff Union of Universities, the powerful pillar representing all the teaching personnel within government-owned universities in Nigeria, have exposed the quality of leadership, or lack of it, at different levels within the country's education sector, and have revealed this as a distinct underpinning of a weak system.

This is important as the challenges in higher education have also highlighted the importance of the efforts of academics in tackling the educational, economic and social questions that Nigeria is facing.

Nonetheless, the institutional leaders who have to oversee the academics cannot work successfully without proper leadership training embedded in Nigeria's higher education system.

Leadership and innovation

Higher education leadership is of strategic importance for the growth and overall development of nations, an essential safeguard against the many challenges that confront societies.

The development of institutional and academic leaders is a key factor in the management of higher education and delivering quality students.

If there were effective institutional and academic leaders, there would be an opportunity to share innovative ideas within the system and the subsequent experience journey could enhance the quality of institutions and the knowledge produced.

More so, the leadership characteristics and qualities that higher education institutions need to adapt are necessary to produce the performance-based indicators that could ensure the smooth running of higher institution learning and growth.

In its uniqueness, higher education leadership allows for a situation in which institutional leaders, policymakers and academic leaders are able to implement strategies and programmes that will lead their institutions and organisations towards the realisation of their aims and objectives.

Institutional leaders and academic leaders within institutions, capable of demonstrating great capacity, creativity, vision and

values, are generally viewed to have excellent leadership skills that can overcome challenges facing their institutions.

Exemplary higher education leadership builds and enhances people's trust in their educational system and its absence can have the reverse effect.

This is why Nigeria needs an extensive institutionalisation of higher education leadership training, guided by skilled experts capable of motivating others to pursue their institutional and national goals at large.

Traditional vs conventional leadership

As opposed to higher education leadership, conventional leadership portrays the ability of leaders in their respective organisations and designations as remaining true to a vision and eliminating every obstacle that hinders the success of desired goals in every respect.

Also, it highlights the effectiveness of leaders' use of influence to pave the way for positive outcomes within organisations.

Thus, in line with the world's current dynamics, leadership allows leaders to exchange innovative ideas within the interactive system to foster collaboration in order to promote and ensure positive outcomes.

But we must also be conscious of the fact that not all academics in the leadership positions of higher institutions possess leadership skills. Rather, they usually perform their tasks within the confinement of an academic and research mindset.

Ideally, institutional or academic leaders in higher institutions of learning are assumed to be leaders who have all the expected abilities to lead.

Hence, academics like professors and associate professors, among others, usually display more managerial competencies as they implement institutional plans and create detailed steps to achieve university goals.

They also concentrate on solving issues facing the university and finding solutions to those problems, using a myopic way of thinking that does not necessarily transcend the issues at stake.

In aspects of governance and employee relations, institutional leaders with managerial inclinations control, direct and coordinate those they work with and, by acting responsibly, use authority to avoid conflicts within the university.

Now, the importance of the institutionalisation of leadership development within the higher education system in Nigeria, through extensive leadership training, cannot be overemphasised.

It is absolutely necessary to have Nigerian higher institutional and academic leaders who understand the imperativeness of leadership within their institutions.

If the institutional leaders are to be trained in the perspective of leadership, they will be able to align their visions with those of colleagues or co-workers to motivate and inspire them.

It is only once the Nigerian educational system starts to perceive the necessity of leadership within institutions, that the system will be able to empower and develop the capacities of institutional and academic leaders who can lead institutions to be successful.

Furthermore, assuming the role of institutional leaders will greatly support the academics in the development and articulation of unchallenged visions, directions and change strategies within the university.

Through this, leaders in tertiary education systems must be viewed as potential transformative agents with a holistic view of the higher education status quo and who govern by acting decisively and energising their colleagues to overcome the stumbling blocks to achieve meaningful institutional outcomes.

Leadership training in Nigeria

Nigerian higher education has, over decades, been grappling with enormous challenges. The absence of a leadership academy in higher education to facilitate leadership activities in higher education institutions in Nigeria is totally inexcusable.

Complexities in leadership always multiply because of increased responsibilities and expectations from higher education leaders, particularly those of public tertiary institutions who lead institutions without appropriate leadership skills.

However, this could also be due to the lack of emphasis on leadership skills by the higher education system in Nigeria.

However, the effectiveness of the higher education leaders should be based on core leadership skills that must be learned and mastered by selected individuals chosen to occupy different higher education leadership positions.

As it is today, no single academy or body has been responsible or dedicated to continuously train and retrain higher institutional and academic leaders in the basic skills of leadership to help them cultivate the essential leadership skills needed to excel as higher education change-makers.

Again, no single framework has been put in place by the agencies and organisations responsible for implementing and overseeing the governance of higher education as a benchmark for appointing higher institutions and academic leaders.

Usually, they are required to have a doctorate degree or should be a university professor and have 'administrative experience' in a few cases.

Without the necessary standards for higher education leaders, there will be a continuous mismatch of roles preventing the growth and development of the higher education system in Nigeria.

Lessons from other countries

Nevertheless, in order to guarantee the institutionalisation of higher education leadership training in the Nigerian higher education system, there are available institutions and centres for higher education leadership around the world that are worthy of emulation.

They include: the Academic Leadership Academy of the Penn State (US); the Higher Education Leadership Academy, Malaysia; the Higher Education Leadership Institution, Australia; the Higher Education Leadership Academy of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, India, and Advance HE in the UK.

The institutions are among many excellent centres that provide outstanding extensive leadership training that enhances the understanding of institutional and academic leaders in the most innovative and interactive way.

The establishment of such academies or centres in Nigeria, with leadership training and development as their major activity and focus, could also contribute research on topical issues in higher education leadership and development, research-based advocacy, promotion of collaboration and networking among higher education leadership and academics in order to improve the quality and performance of higher education institutions.

It is, therefore, important for the Nigerian government to continuously support higher education initiatives involving leadership training and development. This is critical in order to safeguard the reputation of the higher education sector.

This is because higher education leaders are the undisputed champions who could drive forces that will combat the corruption, injustice, extreme inequality, weak governance and complete stagnation that, for decades, have undermined quality higher education in Nigeria.

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