

DISCUSSANT'S COMMENTS ON THE 2010 GLADWYN LECTURE – “NIGERIA: 50 YEARS OF PROGRESS AND CHALLENGES IN THE EDUCATION SECTOR” BY DR NOSA ALADESELU

Today, history is being made as we are assembled here in the Palace of Westminster, the Houses of Parliament, where major debates have taken place after considerable consultations and deliberations at various levels of committees, regarding the course of the development of education in Nigeria. It was in this theatre that reports of the Advisory Committee of Education in the Colonies and the proposals of the relevant Committees of the House of Commons and the House of Lords were considered. It was from here that the influential Colonial Development and Welfare Fund Act was enacted.

And it was here that a mild drama took place: the Majority Report of the Elliot Commission on Higher Education in West Africa was adopted in June 1945 by the Conservative Government; but at the General Election of the following month the Labour Party defeated the Conservatives and appointed Arthur Creech Jones as Secretary of State for the Colonies. Creech Jones had served on the Commission and led the team that prepared the Minority Report. He reversed the earlier decision of the Conservative Government and decided to adopt his own Minority Report. The people of Ghana, then the Gold Coast, thereafter mounted a strong opposition to Creech Jones, who was forced to return to the Majority Report and establish a University in their country. It took three years for the issue to be resolved and this led to the delay in the establishment of the University College in Nigeria located in Ibadan, the first of the country's over one hundred universities [1].

This Lecture focuses attention on the development of education in Nigeria during this year that marks the 50th anniversary of political Independence in Nigeria, and we must therefore warmly commend the organisers for their foresight in the choice of this venue. As a historian of education, I believe that being here to see the place from where all the documents that I have been examining for several decades had come is an answer to prayers, and I thank all those who considered me worthy of the honour and special favour of discussing the Gladwyn Lecture that has just been so ably presented.

I must join the Lecturer in appreciating the several people in the Commonwealth who had stood by Nigeria and supported the country's various initiatives since Independence. We must note that Nigeria has never been short of friends in the Commonwealth, or those who invested heavily in the educational development of the country as teachers and administrators or simply as advocates for improved performance of education in the country. I was deeply touched to learn that these friends of Nigeria had decided to mark the 50th anniversary of Nigeria's independence with a focus on education here in the United Kingdom. I must thank the chairman of this occasion, the Rt. Hon. David Lammy, M.P., former Minister of Higher education in the UK for standing with these friends of Nigeria.

We must further commend the organisers of the Lecture for their excellent choice of speaker. Dr Nosa Aladeselu is an appropriate voice as she joins “the ever increasing group of women worldwide chipping away at the highest of glass ceilings,” and especially this year when Madam President Dilma Rousseff is elected into office as Brazil's first female President, following the likes of Sirimavo Bandaranaike of Sri Lanka, Indira Ghandi of India and Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf of Liberia, to name a few.

I wish to congratulate Dr Aladeselu for her excellent presentation, which has carefully woven a narration that reflects her rich mind and profound experience and knowledge of all the levels of education in Nigeria which she has acquired over the years, as an insider educationist and practitioner. She has been able to contribute, within the limited space possible and the material that is available to her, a position paper which is, as expected, rich, informative and analytical, identifying the progress made, highlighting the myriad of the challenges which the nation faces and proposing how to move ahead to a future full of promise and hope. She has

thus not disappointed us, and she has been able to prove without doubt, as president elect Rousseff put it at her recent victory speech: "Yes a woman can."

Perhaps we should note that it has been quite a while since such a distinguished audience was gathered to listen to a presentation on Education in Nigeria. We know of one of such attempt on 28th October 1935, when the Joseph Payne Lecture was delivered at the University of London Institute of Education by the then Director of Education of Nigeria, E.R.J. Hussey. Hussey had indeed started his presentation by admitting that it was "obviously impossible in a single lecture to give anything like a complete picture of an educational system", and he ended up, confining himself to "some aspects of education in Nigeria". Dr Aladeselu has, in a similar way, wisely focused her presentation on the progress and challenges in the education sector.

The account presented by Dr Aladeselu seeks to justify the decision by those who have chosen to celebrate the attainment of 50 years of age as an Independent nation. Independence presented Nigeria and Nigerians with the opportunity and freedom to be at the driver's wheel of education as the nation moved forward, to take decisions on their own educational destiny, make mistakes but learn from those mistakes, make a contribution and take the initiative, and chart the course of their own development [2].

And 50 years is half a century, for which man should give thanks to the LORD.

The speaker is right to have drawn attention to the important changes that took place in the development of education in Nigeria before the attainment of political Independence in 1960. Let us add that when the Prime Minister, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, pronounced his hallmark statement on 1 October, "TODAY is Independence Day ... At last our great day has arrived, and Nigeria is now indeed an independent sovereign nation," [3]he was obviously only referring at the time to political independence. For education had already passed to the control of Nigerians following the granting of self government; this had helped the governments of the Western and Eastern regions launch free education programmes in 1955 and 1956 respectively, and enact the University of Nigeria law in 1955[4].

I think it is desirable to report on the regular attempts made by the governments and people of Nigeria to review educational delivery in the country. As Dr Aladeselu has noted, the military administrations of Gowon and Murtala/Obasanjo launched the National Policy on Education. Let me add that during the Second Republic, President Shagari set up a History of Nigeria panel, led by a distinguished historian and a former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ibadan. The panel dedicated one of its volumes to the subject of education [5]. We may further add that during the civilian regime of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, the Federal Ministry of Education convened the National Stakeholders Consultative Forum on Education in August 2000. Two years later, the National Universities Commission convened a National Summit on Higher Education in 2002, the proceedings of which have been published [6]. Later the Senate Committee on Education of the National Assembly convened a summit on education. We are all perhaps aware of the recently concluded summit on education at which President Goodluck Jonathan actively participated throughout the sessions. We should add that the National Association of Nigerian Students have at different times made observations and recommendations on making progress in the development of education in Nigeria. Furthermore the Nigerian Academy of Education devoted its Congresses to the consideration of how to move education in Nigeria forward, and published its proceedings to public consumption and as an aid to policy formulation [7]. There are a number of practical suggestions advanced by respected academics led by J.F. Ade Ajayi, former Chairman of the United Nations University Council, and Is-shaq Oloyede, President of the Association of African Universities and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ilorin in Nigeria, about how education in Nigeria can advance [8].We must note that there is sometimes a disagreement between the official position of government and the views of respected academics. An excellent example is the current decision of the Government to establish six new Federal universities and the suggestion by the outgoing Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ibadan that a strengthening and expansion of the existing universities and the use of open and distance learning would be a better option to an improved performance at the tertiary level of

education. In any case Nigerians, who are known for their energy, resilience and determination, are making an effort to address the myriad of challenges confronting the educational development of the country. The African proverb which states that “the hen is indeed sweating but its feathers are preventing the sweat from being seen”, may perhaps apply to this situation in which much is being done but are being overwhelmed by yet greater challenges.

As to why not a single university in Nigeria has achieved world class university status, a former Executive Secretary of the Nigerian Universities Commission has explained that “the 62-year old Nigerian university system is a mere toddler when viewed against the age of universities in Europe, North America and Asia that are top of the league table of universities.”[9]

A respected voice in education and a former Minister of Education has however added that the question of attaining a world-class standard should not be a priority at the moment when most of the institutions are severely handicapped. In his view: “Meeting the world standard is not a pressing issue and should not take priority over other more fundamental needs. You have to be good first, before you can be very good, and very good before you can be excellent. Nigeria must cure itself of putting the last things first.”[10]

Our Lecturer has comprehensively identified those items that should constitute first things and one of these is the issue of the quality of education. The issue of quality of course has to be linked with the subject of teacher preparation, the provision of institutional facilities such as good libraries and laboratories, and the home environment. This idea is supported by the proverb which states that the person who is dancing is able to do so only because there is an efficient and effective drummer behind, giving the signals and dictating the tune.

This means that the provision of the learning environment is of critical importance. Hussey, in his 1935 Lecture, to which reference has already been made, advised that “in planning an educational system we must provide opportunities for promising students as full as those provided for students in Great Britain or any other European country.” [11]

Those who are familiar with the products of the educational system will appreciate the capacity of Nigerians to use available opportunities and facilities fully. For example, I have been impressed by the quality of the contributions made on Facebook by the newly inaugurated Cambridge University Nigeria Society. I have also taken an interest in the work of Nigerian academics and I recently listened to a brilliant inaugural lecture of one of them, and I have found that many of these remain patriots to the core, to borrow the title of a book from Jacob Ajayi [12].

At a personal level I have had a taste of the stimulation that a conducive learning environment can introduce in a learner. Since my arrival here in London I have fruitfully used the resources of the British Library in a calm and serene atmosphere, punctuating my search for literature with access to cups of green tea served nearby where I could also use an electronic version of the catalogue of the library. Users can also benefit from the resources the Library generously offers in assisting readers to discover new and innovative tools and techniques for research and thus acquire additional skills.

I used this same facility for my Commonwealth academic staff fellowship programme several years earlier and I have prayed for a rehabilitation of the Nigerian National Archive on which the late Professor Kenneth Dike had worked so hard and for the completion of the National Library project which the administration of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo had started. My Fellowship programme, which came in the mid-term of my professional career, fired my imagination, opened doors of opportunities for my professional and social advancement and introduced me to incredibly encouraging mentors, colleagues and friends. As we put it in our prayer sessions, “the award turned around my situation”.

We should note that Nigeria began to have a decline in its educational fortunes shortly after the attainment of Independence and the discovery of oil. Many international agencies decided

to vacate their support for educational projects and programmes at a time that the military did not consider investment in education a priority. The education sector thus suffered on both local and international sides. Foreign teachers and students began to leave the country and the result has been poverty in the diversity of the staff and student population.

But added to these negative developments has been the impact of the brain drain in which the best brains in which the country has invested leave Nigeria, never to return again. There is thus the need to address the situation in which about 35 percent of those who come to the UK for further study choose never to return to the country. Perhaps one way to do this is to address the rejection of the conditions of service by the teachers in Nigeria who complain that their take-home pay cannot take them home.

It seems that one theme that may be explored in restoring standards is that Nigeria, like other countries all over the world, should not work in isolation but seek the input and contribution of partners. An African proverb says that it takes several hands working together to help lift the heavy luggage onto the head of the one attempting to carry it. There should therefore be a call for mobilization leading to the restoration of lost or missed opportunities and enlisting the cooperation and support of both traditional friends and new partners.

There has to be a return to the old universalism in staff and student intakes, and thus the valuable cultural dimension and diversity. It seems that one way of doing this would be through the resumption of vigorous staff and student exchange programmes, which will be of mutual benefit to the Commonwealth countries. For the exchange programmes had, without doubt, over the years “led to the mutual benefit and greater solidarity of all peoples of the Commonwealth”, as the talented students and staff were encouraged to learn at some of the world’s best institutions. Thus foreign students and staff have remained invaluable resource and a manifestation of the degree of the achievement in education marketing by countries and the institutions.

This point has been made recently in an Editorial of the Nigerian Guardian, one of the most respectable newspapers in Nigeria, as its contribution to the Independence anniversary celebrations:

“We recall with nostalgia the times when Nigerian institutions, especially the universities were ranked among the best in the world. Nigerian campuses played host to foreign students and visiting professors. If the standard of the time had been retained without subjecting our educational institutions to military jackboot and inconsistent policies of insensate civil administrations, today, Nigerian institutions, especially the universities, ought to rank among the very best in the world.” [13]

There seems to be a need to make everyone know that globalisation has forced on the world the need for interdependence and interconnections. Indeed the Ashby Commission noted in its report that “Investment in Nigerian education is an investment in her economic future and political stability, and as such may command international attention ... We recommend that the Federal Government explore the possibilities of international aid to help carry out the recommendations of this Report.” [14]

For example, there is so much partnership-building between the educational institutions of China and those of the United States, between China and Europe, and between Europe and the United States. Yet there is currently very little partnership between the institutions of Africa and Europe, and Africa and the United States, and far less between Africa and China and other Asian countries.

Lord Gladwyn, in whose memory this Lecture is organised by the Council for Education in the Commonwealth, was an apostle of educational advancement for all. A former acting Secretary General of the United Nations, his attachment was to all nations. And at the 20th Annual Ramsay Muir Memorial Lecture, which he delivered at Royal Holloway College on 1st August 1965, he drew attention to the conviction of his Liberal Party in the provision of educational facilities to assist man to discover himself: “That man is free who is conscious of

himself as the author of the law that he obeys.” [15]There is no doubt therefore that he would have remained an advocate of an enhanced partnership with Nigeria in its quest for building a country founded on full access to education.

This means that it will be most desirable that in spite of the current cuts in spending by the Government, the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan, which has brought much benefit to the developing Commonwealth countries, should be left untouched. Furthermore, the UK Departments for International Development and Business, Innovation and Skills, as well as the Foreign & Commonwealth Office should [i] preserve funding for the Plan and [ii] secure a more generous contribution to the Plan’s Endowment Fund. One of the main responsibilities of the strengthened Plan should be the increase in the provision of scholarships, operation of staff and student exchanges, and collaboration in research, capacity building and teaching.

It is tempting to go on endlessly with comments on this fascinating presentation, but time will not allow the luxury. Please allow me, therefore, to conclude my remarks with an echo of the words, first of Nelson Mandela that “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world”; and then those that are believed to have been first used by the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, in May 2005, and which have now been made into a High School musical in California: “We are all in this together.”

Thank you for your attention and God bless you all.

Professor Michael Omolewa
michaelomolewa@yahoo.co.uk

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Notes

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