



Junior Academics within Middle Level Academic Leadership in Emerging Universities in Nigeria

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Abstract

One of the emerging developments within middle level academic leadership in Nigerian universities relates to the inclusion of academics who are at the very beginning of their careers within middle level leadership. The term junior academics is used here to refer to academics who are on staff development terms, registered for doctoral studies, or just graduated from doctoral studies and starting the process of being socialized into institutional academic cultures. In most emerging (3rd generation) universities, such academics are often allocated academic and administrative roles that would otherwise be performed by middle level academics in well-established universities. This trend, occurring majorly among emerging universities, appears to be a response to the dearth of middle level academics to occupy middle level leadership positions. While this development appears to serve as an emergent response to the challenges on hand, the implications on middle level academic leadership, university administration and governance as a whole need to be critically explored. This article interrogates on how junior academics serving within middle level leadership came to be, implications on university leadership, and finally a conclusion on how this challenge can be addressed to pave the way for effective middle level academic leadership within university administration.

Keywords: Managers, Junior Staff, Academic, Administration, Higher education

Résumé

L'un des événements émergents au sein du leadership académique de niveau intermédiaire dans les universités nigérianes est lié à l'inclusion d'universitaires en tout début de carrière au leadership de niveau intermédiaire. Le terme « universitaire junior » est utilisé ici pour désigner les universitaires qui

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sont inscrits aux études doctorales ou sont nouvellement diplômés de programmes doctoraux et qui entament le processus de socialisation dans les cultures académiques institutionnelles. Dans la plupart des universités émergentes (3ème génération), ces universitaires se voient souvent attribuer des rôles académiques et administratifs qui, autrement, seraient effectuées par des universitaires de niveau moyen dans les universités bien établies. Cette tendance, qui se produit principalement dans les universités émergentes, semble être une réponse à la pénurie d'universitaires de niveau intermédiaire dans des postes de leader de niveau intermédiaire. Cette évolution semble répondre aux défis à relever, mais les implications sur le leadership universitaire de niveau intermédiaire, l'administration et la gouvernance universitaires dans leur ensemble doivent être examinées de manière critique. Cet article porte donc sur la manière dont les universitaires débutants servant au sein du leadership de niveau intermédiaire ont vu le jour, les implications sur le leadership universitaire, et il conclut sur la manière de relever ce défi pour ouvrir la voie à un leadership académique de niveau intermédiaire efficace au sein de l'administration universitaire.

Mots-clés : cadres, personnel « junior », universitaire, administration, enseignement supérieur

Introduction

Higher education in Africa continues to experience change in its structures and functions (Sawyerr 2004; Zeleza 2004). Traditionally, middle level administration within university systems in Nigeria (as obtains elsewhere) were, in most cases, managed by middle level academics. The reason was to allow them to provide the leadership needed for staff and students and the necessary support for top management. In the present dispensation, the reverse appears to be the case, especially in private and newly established institutions. Freshly minted doctoral degree holders – in some cases new entrants and junior scholars – now play active roles as middle level leadership. They occupy positions as heads of department, deputy deans, programme coordinators, and other middle level management responsibilities. Some factors – namely the dearth of established scholars and the not too financially and socially rewarding status of such positions coupled with the capitalist orientations of some established scholars who are motivated by economic benefits – might be responsible for this development (Deem & Lucas 2007).

The appearance of junior academics within middle level leadership is a reflection of some of the challenges faced by third generation universities in Africa as a whole. They face peculiar circumstances in terms of finance, brain drain, and other teething challenges (Yizengaw 2008). The support they receive relative to their challenges is low and some of these emerging

universities have either resigned to fate or are not doing anything to address the obstacles. By implication, a large number of emerging universities on the continent struggle to survive with the available resources (Deem & Lucas 2007). Nonetheless, this does not numb the negative impact of these survival strategies on middle level leadership and university administration and governance as a whole, hence the need to pay attention to this issue in order to pave the way for a virile middle level leadership.

The place of middle level academic leadership as key actors in the transformation process of higher education administration cannot be ignored (Santiago *et al.* 2006). Therefore, discourses regarding them have centred on their roles (Briggs 2007; Kogan, Khawas & Moses 1994; Leader 2004; Kogan *et al.* 1994); career paths (Wolverton & Gmelch 2002) and their identity as middle line managers (Deem & Lucas 2007). Studies have equally explored the contradictions inherent in their status as middle level managers and as researchers/teachers (Deem & Lucas 2007; Deem & Hillyard 2002; Floyd & Dimmock 2011) coupled with the place of gender in middle level management (Deem, Hillyard & Reed 2007). Without mincing words, these contemporary debates have shed light on the contours surrounding middle level managers. However, a clear and detailed empirical description of the experiences of budding scholars within middle level management appear lacking. This article intends to discuss the realities facing junior academics serving within middle level leadership, and the implications on university administration in Nigeria. In doing justice to this problem, the following questions become pertinent: How did we get here? What does this development portend for the junior scholars in terms of career mobility and academic development? What are the structures put in place by the affected universities to fix appropriate managers into appropriate positions? What are the implications of this development for university administration and management? How can this situation be addressed to pave the way for qualified middle academics in middle level leadership? Providing answers to these questions will involve an analytical and thematic review of literature and interrogation of existing data sets.

The Emergence of Junior Academics within Middle Level Management

From observation over the years of the university system, the advent of junior academics in middle level management may be hinged on a number of factors. One of these is the increasing number of prospective applicants for university education, which has led to the creation of many universities without the required resources in terms of funding, classrooms and personnel, among others. Equally, the continued increase in the number of

tertiary institutions in Nigeria, especially the university education, in the last 15 years is unprecedented. This of course is a reflection of the continued awareness of the need for higher education in the continent, coupled with the dominance of youth within the African population. Consequently, the need to provide tertiary education to teeming youths necessitated the creation of more universities (Obasi & Eboh 2001). United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO] (1998) calculated the number of tertiary education enrolment between 1975 and 1995 and found a ten-fold increase from 181,000 in 1975 to 1,750,000 in 1995 in developing countries. Currently in Nigeria, the total number of universities is 170, comprising 43 federal universities, 48 state universities and 79 private universities. While this may appear large, they are still insufficient, as the number of applicants far outnumber the available space within these universities (*The Guardian* 2018). For instance, the yearly applicants into these universities have been pegged at over 1 million (Nigeria Universities Commission 2019), which is far higher than the available space.

The extraordinary interest in university education compared to other institutions of higher learning in the country, in recent times, is intriguing (Ademola, Ogundipe & Babatunde 2014). This has further fuelled the continued pressure on university admissions in Nigeria. Young people seeking admission into tertiary institutions prefer university degrees, irrespective of the conditions associated with it. Non-degree-awarding institutions are usually considered as the last resort, and holders of diplomas from these institutions are equally eager to obtain university degrees to validate their diploma certificates (Ademola *et al.* 2014). Currently, a number of third generation universities have created conversion programmes for holders of diplomas to meet this demand. Having qualified personnel to manage this surge becomes problematic.

Another major factor responsible for the emergence of junior academics in middle level leadership is brain drain. The dearth of qualified personnel has always been a challenge in Nigeria as far back as early 1960s, as pointed out by the Nigerian Universities Commission (Nwachukwu 1977). The emigration of scholars from Nigerian universities began as far back as the Lagos University Crisis of 1965 (Nwachukwu 1977). The replacement of the incumbent vice chancellor during that period did not go well with a group of scholars and this eventually led to the mass exodus of academics from Nigeria to other parts of the world (Aliyu 2005). Since that period, university scholars have bemoaned the decay of the university system. The problem became aggravated due to funding issues and incessant military attacks on university intellectuals during the military era (Aliyu 2005). The

financial crises that hit higher education in Africa took their toll on Nigeria. Teferra (2007) summarised the causes to include the pressure relating to expansion and 'massification', leading to an outburst of student population within higher education; economic challenges in Africa; the activities of lending agencies like World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF); and poor management of limited available resources within the higher education sector. The overall effect of these issues led to brain drain in which qualified academic personnel sought greener pastures in developed countries and other African countries where their services were appreciated (Aliyu 2005). The nation witnessed the exit of qualified hands that could facilitate the training and mentoring of younger academics (Aliyu 2005). Between September 1987 and November 1998 for instance, more than 4,500 senior staff members left a university, primarily due to transfer of services, resignations and non-renewal of appointments (Aliyu 2005). The Academic Staff Union of Nigerian Universities (ASUU), the umbrella body of academics in the country, condemned the dearth of university lecturers and reported that universities in Nigeria had 37,504 academics out of an estimated necessary 70,000 lecturers (*Vanguard* 2016). The president of the union further remarked that out of the available lecturers as at 2012, only 40 per cent had PhDs. He further attributed this to brain drain, which became rampant in the 1980s because of poor pay, military interference and, most importantly, poor funding of these universities (*Vanguard* 2016). A series of industrial strike actions were embarked upon by university teachers to protest these anomalies; it has been said that the union has been on strike for a cumulative period of over three years since 1999 (*Vanguard* 2016). The implication of this on the regular academic calendar, coupled with the existing challenges, further challenged the production of PhD graduates. The NEEDS assessment of the staff-to-student ratio revealed that it was high (Federal Government of Nigeria 2012). In the National Open University for instance, the ratio in 2012 was 1:363; Lagos State University was 1:144; and the University of Abuja was 1:122. Newer universities like Kano State University, which was eleven years old in 2012, had only one professor and twenty-five lecturers with PhDs in the whole university; Kebbi State university had two professors and five lecturers with PhDs (Federal Government of Nigeria 2012). Aside from this, the percentage of unqualified lecturers across the nation during that period was put at fifty-seven (National Commission for Colleges of Education [NCCE] 2011). While more recent data are unavailable, evidence still suggests a deficiency of academic personnel in these universities, especially in many of the third generation universities (Ademola *et al.* 2014).

The last fifteen years also marked the mushrooming of private universities in the country. Political and religious elites took interest in higher education for socio-economic and religious gains. Establishment of private institutions thus became competitive among different strata of political and religious elites; more especially considering the loss of interest and trust in public universities among middle class and upper class members due to incessant strike action, and the unbearable cost of overseas education. While many of these elites picked up interest in setting up private institutions, a large number of them could not meet up with the demands of higher education (Ademola *et al.*, Babatunde 2014). The competition among elites to establish private universities numbered many of them to the realities surrounding university funding. For example, some less popular courses floated in these universities and which did not get the required patronage in terms of students' admission to keep the departments running were either scrambled or merged with other departments; some institutions even resorted to downsizing their workforce, all in a bid to cut the running cost (Omoriegie 2011). Consequently, for many of these third generation private universities, securing the services of young academics to carry out the role of middle level management became cost effective and less demanding, compared to the cost implications of securing the services of experienced middle level scholars.

Emergence of Junior Academics in Middle Level Management: Some Implications

The accumulation of junior academics within middle level management has a number of implications for young scholars, students and the entire university community. As a matter of fact, their emergence within these areas may further create new challenges and also compound existing ones. One of the major challenges this development portends for the emerging university is the gradual loss of academic culture. Academic culture has been defined as communication channels and interaction among members of the university community (Sabaghian 2009). It is the sum total of the beliefs and attitudes held by members of the academic community. It shapes members' perceptions, thoughts and feelings regarding the university, and is usually the core of any university (Shein 1992). The impact of culture on the social behaviours of the organisation is usually strong, whether on a short- or long-term basis (Robins 2006). This can be said of any university system in terms of its culture. The presence/absence of it has a strong influence on the collegial, bureaucratic, social, economic and political life of the academic community. When this is not well developed and shared by members of the community, the academic

quality of both staff and students will be in jeopardy, and management suffers. A number of these twenty-first century universities are gradually becoming 'glorified secondary schools', lacking the distinct identifiable culture shared by members of the university community. The values of discipline, academic rigour in teaching and research, and tolerance, among others that has come to be associated with first generation universities are gradually becoming extinct and lacking in some of these new generation universities. The reasons for this are simple: the middle level managers who are supposed to have been socialised into these lifestyles and also serve as the custodians of these ideals are not available in some of these universities. Young scholars who have found themselves within middle level management and who are products of different universities, and were socialised into different university lifestyles and experiences, usually see these new positions as opportunities to display their long-held personal idiosyncrasies on the students and colleagues. In most instances, the result is usually a clash of ideas among middle level managers with different academic backgrounds.

While poor structural defects as a result of indistinctive academic culture connotes a disaster for the university system in terms of academic quality and administrative value and dispensation, its impact on the victims cannot be overlooked. The victims in this sense are the pre-tenure academics within middle level management. The university tradition across the globe is that early career academics undergo a series of training and mentoring at that stage of their careers as a precursor to the academic and administrative responsibilities awaiting them as they mature in their career. A situation in which the larger part of their budding lives is spent on middle level management makes it difficult for them to acquire the necessary skills and training at this stage of their careers. Exposing them to middle level management may make a number of them susceptible to academic lethargy and mediocrity, power drunkenness and other pitfalls. A large number of them have to combine huge teaching workloads with these responsibilities. While statistics may not be available to understand the career progression of these young people, promotion within such settings may be based on patronage rather than academic productivity. This is because the demands of administrative responsibilities may be daunting due to the difficulty in combining teaching and research with these administrative responsibilities. Currently, one of the challenges facing academics relates to the issue of quality in terms of teaching and research. Apart from that, this trend is creating a set of impatient and mobile young academics whose sole aim is to reach the top of their career ladders within the shortest time. A number of these youngsters keep transferring their services from one university to

the other, brandishing their 'administrative and publication experience' to bargain for promotion. This may not augur well for the future of university education and academic culture.

Another major implication of junior scholars within middle level management relates to undue expectations regarding junior academics. There are usually high hopes and expectations from pre-tenure scholars in institutions of higher learning in terms of strength and performance. Literature regarding young scholars in higher education has pointed out that university administrators and established scholars usually expect much from them. Consequently, as soon as they take up appointments, the expectation is that they will become functional in administration, teaching and research (Whitt 1991). Sometimes, due to the belief that they have got all the training required to be fully-fledged scholars, they may serve to provide relief from activities which have become stressful and monotonous to established scholars within the system. These assumptions serve as a justification for introducing these scholars into activities like middle level management, for which they are not prepared. Austin (2002, 2003) and Menges (1999) have attributed unrealistic expectations about what can be accomplished in the given time as one of the major challenges they face. However, the emergence of junior academics within middle level management may create a new form of tyranny within the university system. Traditionally, middle level managers within universities are experienced and established scholars who, by virtue of their training and exposure, can check the excesses of top management through established rules and regulations governing the university system. Curtailing such excesses may be lacking or difficult on the part of the young academics occupying middle level management, as they rarely enjoy the expected autonomy in decision making due to their level of experience. They may therefore become the instrument for the perpetration of dictatorial tendencies of top managers. Apart from this, participating actively in the Senate and other statutory meetings where important decisions affecting the university are taken is difficult. When they do so, the situation may make them feel intimidated because of the wide gap (in terms of experience and rank) that exists between them and their senior colleagues.

Conclusions: Addressing the Issue

This section explores why urgent steps must be taken to ensure that middle level academics occupy their rightful position as an impetus for effective middle level academic leadership on the continent. Providing a straightforward answer to the challenges of pre-tenure faculty members in

middle level management may be difficult. This is because the challenges are multi-dimensional and cut across different stages. Aside from this, it is an expression of the realities around the university system as a result of a long period of neglect. Notwithstanding, this is an issue that must be addressed to pave the way for a virile middle level management in the continent without jeopardising the future of earlier career scholars. The first step in addressing this is to acknowledge its existence and to address it with urgency. Currently, it appears that the affected institutions do not regard installing earlier career academics in middle level management positions as a temporary measure, and which must be done away with as soon as possible. A number of the new generation universities appear to regard this development as a way of cutting costs and running the university within their available, meagre resources. A change in the attitude regarding this, therefore, is paramount.

The regulatory and advisory bodies on university matters must come together and enact rules that discourage this practice. Currently, pre-tenure academics with such administrative responsibilities in the country occupying the position of head of department are referred to as 'coordinators' and their tenure usually lasts a year, renewable for another year. This is a laudable practice. However, outside of this nomenclature and tenure of office, they enjoy every other privilege applicable to a substantive head of department. Privileges and opportunities outside of the main responsibilities can be reviewed with the aim of making the position less attractive to the occupants. Aside from this, there should be a mentoring framework where the activities of these early career academics are monitored by senior colleagues. In the same vein, the regulatory body must ensure that approval/licenses of operation are contingent upon availability of staff. New universities must be mentored by the old generation of universities. The process must follow a strict mentor-mentee arrangement, tracked by regular submission of reports on the realities around such emerging universities. Any erring universities must be sanctioned within the ambit of the reached agreement. The unbridled appetite for new programmes by these emerging universities, without a commensurate capacity to handle these programmes should be discouraged by the appropriate regulatory bodies. This can be achieved by firming up and reviewing the existing accreditation programmes put in place by the country's regulatory bodies.

Beyond that, there is still the dearth of qualified hands within the academy due to the prevailing socio-economic realities within the country, coupled with the attitude of the policy makers on university education. The commitment of the government to education in terms of funding is still

one of the lowest in the continent, and this in itself is an impetus for the emigration of qualified hands to greener pastures. Brain drain may continue to be a challenge if the government does not adequately fund education. Facilities are lacking and, where available, have become moribund. There is a proliferation of tertiary institutions without commensurate quality. Institutions must be made attractive for teaching and research. A situation where this is not properly addressed will not augur well for the retention of sound and quality staff in academia. Private institutions which should have addressed some of these structural gaps have not been able to do so. Many of them are also battling with the challenge of relevant facilities due to lack of funds. Leading private institutions in developed climes are privately owned and one would have thought that such notable developments would have been replicated in Africa. University education needs funding; where this is lacking, the implications are enormous. Private universities do not enjoy the financial interventions from the government, and this should be further explored. The government can collaborate with these institutions in the areas of training, grants and other human capacity building programmes that will better equip the personnel.

Further research regarding the realities within higher education in the country is still needed. Studies investigating the dynamics surrounding quality, early career academics, and so on are needed to dismantle the realities around these themes for a virile academia in Nigeria.

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