



Leadership Challenges of Middle-level Academics in Universities in Nigeria

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Abstract

One key issue confronting universities in Nigeria is the leadership challenges facing middle-level academics, especially at the Senior Lecturer cadre. This problem is rooted in a lack of leadership preparation and training for this category of academics. Through primary data sourced from interviews and secondary data, this paper analyses the underlying challenges middle-level academics face that inhibit their effective performance in leadership posts to which they have been appointed. The analysis is with a view to understanding and proffering possible solutions to the leadership challenges of middle-level academics in universities in Nigeria.

Keywords: Leadership, Academics, Universities, Nigeria

Résumé

Un défi majeur auquel sont confrontées les universités au Nigeria est le leadership des universitaires de niveau intermédiaire, en particulier au sein de ses chargés de cours. Ce problème est enraciné dans un manque de préparation au leadership et de formation de cette catégorie d'universitaires. À travers des données primaires provenant d'entretiens et de données secondaires, cet article analyse les défis sous-jacents auxquels sont confrontés les universitaires de niveau intermédiaire, et qui entravent leur performance effective dans les postes de leadership auxquels ils sont nommés. L'analyse tente de comprendre et de proposer des solutions possibles aux défis de leadership des universitaires de niveau intermédiaire dans les universités du Nigeria.

Mots-clés : leadership, universitaires, universités, Nigeria

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Introduction

This article examines the academic and institutional leadership challenges of middle-level academics, especially the Senior Lecturer cadre, in Nigerian universities. This is because middle-level academics in Nigerian universities face challenges that are varied and multi-faceted. These challenges are personal, institutional, and systemic. For instance, at a continental level compared to the Western countries, universities in Zambia, Uganda, Kenya, Ghana, Tanzania, and a host of other African countries confront many challenges (Tarusikirwa & Mafa 2017; Mushemeza 2016; Alemu, *et al.* 2010). This speaks to a general malaise evident in Africa's higher education sector. In a number of African countries, the issue has been the extent of personal commitment of academics to self-development; a lack of institutional support in terms of sponsorship, training, and fellowships; and the length of systemic support through deliberate staff development, academic staff salaries, and encouragement of academic publications (Mushemeza 2016; Materu 2007; Zeleza & Olukoshi 2004). In essence, the issues revolve around how much effort middle-level academics and universities expend to ensure that these categories of academic staff are deliberately prepared for greater responsibilities. Pertinent questions include:

- What are the opportunities for self-development and leadership training?
- Are there mandatory institutional avenues to train these categories of staff?
- Does serving in leadership positions count in promotion and professional mobility?
- Are there other positions consciously thought out as an avenue to train middle-level academics for higher responsibilities?

The crux of the leadership crisis is seen in the increasing number of middle-level academics who have no prior leadership training and are untested in managing leadership positions. At the base level, the reasons for these are many and varied. Some are fresh doctoral degree holders who have spent long years pursuing the degree. Others are those who have not gotten the PhD degree but have been promoted to Senior Lecturer cadre due to long years of service. The problem cuts across different categories of universities. However, it should be pointed out this is more pronounced and, in some cases, worse in many private universities where unqualified and insufficient number of academic staff is the norm rather the exception. Given the level and dimensions of the crisis, the questions above form the issues with which this article is most concerned in view of the crisis of leadership in Nigeria's university system.

The preeminence of universities as centres of learning and the engine room for training higher skilled individuals gives the impression that the higher the number of universities, the more the number of skilled and trained individuals that could take charge of the positions. But less than sixty percent of universities in Nigeria are adequately staffed and well managed by experienced academics to discharge the responsibilities of training the higher cadre of individuals and running the university system, particularly middle-level (National Universities Commission [NUC]-World Bank Report 2012). These are regarded as the engine room of the university because they constitute more than fifty percent of the academic staff in Nigerian public universities (NUC 2016a). However, the creation of new and more universities across the continent, particularly in Nigeria, and especially privately-owned ones, has further exacerbated the problem of untrained and inadequate staff. While many public universities are reasonably staffed but are using unprepared academics, the situation is far more complicated in private universities. In many cases at private universities, academics are hastily, albeit poorly, trained to receive PhDs in order to fill leadership positions. In essence, private universities often do not have enough staff but deploy middle-level academics with no university management experience to fill various positions, including higher level posts in the universities, thus creating a crisis of running a well-established university (FME 2014; NUC-World Bank Report 2012).

As of December 2019, Nigeria had a total of 174 universities, the breakdown of which shows forty-three federal universities, fifty-two state universities, and seventy-nine private universities (NUC 2019). From one in 1948 to five in 1962, to ninety in 2007, and 174 in 2019, the huge surge in university numbers has not been met with similar production of qualified academic staff. In practice, middle-level academics who mostly consist of Lecturer I and Senior Lecturers form the bulwark of university management. This group of academics are those who may or may not have obtained their doctorate and have between three to six years teaching and research experience. While over nine years is spent by those who do not possess doctoral degree to attain a Senior Lectureship position, the practice of promoting those without doctorates is being phased out by many Nigerian public universities. Some first-generation universities, including the University of Ibadan, Obafemi Awolowo University, and University of Lagos have already implemented this policy (University of Ibadan Promotion Guidelines 2015). The issue has been taken up by the National Universities Commission (NUC) for consideration by all Nigerian universities (NUC 2016b). Furthermore, the justification for categorising Lecturer 1 and Senior Lecturer as middle-level academics is that Associate Professors and

Professors are PhD holders who have spent more years (over ten years post-PhD) in teaching, and research, and thus can be classified as upper-level academics. Lecturer II (LII), Assistant Lecturer (AL), and Graduate Assistant (GA) could be regarded as the lower level of the academic ladder. This group of lower-level academics are mostly without a doctorate and/or with less than three years' teaching and research experience. In Nigerian public universities, this group of academics are regarded as undergoing training, as they are still on post-graduate programmes and lack the requisite experience and knowledge for leadership positions. Middle-level academics are therefore important when discussing the leadership structure of public universities in Nigeria, as they constitute the pool from which appointments are made to different positions. Middle-level academics' role in higher education in Nigeria, on academic issues and policy directions that can secure improved functioning of the university system and deepen cultures of accountability and oversight in higher institutions, rests on their leadership capabilities (Afolabi & Omal 2020). Thus, their role in the higher education leadership structure cannot be over-emphasised. In Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa, many universities lack qualified academics at middle-level (see for instance, De Boer, Geodegebuure & Meek 2009), coupled with the challenges of paucity of funds (Ahunanya & Osakwe 2012), a generally inadequately skilled workforce (Olayinka 2017), constant interference in university administration (Okebukola 2016), and a lack of democratic culture on which the university committee system is built (Afolabi & Omal 2020; Okebukola 2018; Davis, Rensburg & Venter 2016). All these are encapsulated in the quality management challenges facing higher education in Africa (Afolabi & Idowu 2020).

While these issues pre-date the modern university system in Africa, the emerging problem of middle-level academics being overworked and lacking leadership training has posed a threat to the continued relevance and importance of higher education in Africa (Sony, Karingada & Baporikar 2020). The leadership challenges faced by middle-level academics come into bold relief when viewed from the misunderstood role and place of middle-level academics in higher education leadership structures. This confusion is experienced both by middle-level academics and the university management (Okebukola 2018).

Middle-level academics generally provide the middle-level leadership of the university system and are saddled with managing the day-to-day activities and structures of the institutions of higher learning, ranging from being examination coordinators, postgraduate student coordinators, course coordinators, level advisors, faculty members, faculty committee members,

and members of congregation, to holding other academic/administrative positions. They are increasingly serving as heads of department, faculty deans, academic directors, deans of student affairs, provosts of postgraduate colleges, and other officially recognised posts. In Nigeria and elsewhere, lack of leadership training has led to a growing rate of turnover and disenchantment within this middle-level cadre of the academia. Furthermore, while the picture above is reflective of the situation of middle-level academics generally, many universities are actually making use of those without experience and doctoral degrees to fill these posts as more and more universities are established in Nigeria. Therefore, the importance of middle-level academics in Nigerian public universities cannot be over-emphasised.

Understanding Leadership and University Development in Africa

At the heart of the debate on higher education in Africa is the question as to whether higher education was brought to Africa or had existed before colonialism (Ajayi, Goma & Johnson 1996). One's perspective on this question determines the kind of response and analysis of the nature of the issues of higher education in Africa (Sawyer 2004). The creation of universities during the colonial period should be seen in the context of coloniality and decolonisation which occurred between the conclusion of the Second World War in 1945 and 1960. In the absence of an indigenous bureaucratic elite who could have ensured that the newly independent nations would continue to remain within the West's sphere of influence, the colonial powers turned to university education as a platform for creating such an elite cadre (Bassey 2009; Lloyd 1966). However, since they did not have indigenous models of university education within the colonies, they tried to replicate models from their respective countries (Betts 2004; Duara 2004). It was basically a Western conception of higher education. Beyond this, however, the universities were intended to be self-reproducing, self-regenerating, and self-sustaining while serving the larger society. How well these objectives have been achieved is open to debate. But what is not debatable is the ill-preparedness of many middle academics thrust into leadership positions from the inception of the university system.

I argue that in modern times, the 'imported' Western higher education's insidious presence is seen in the modules and curriculum of Nigerian cum African universities. Even pedagogies are distinctly Western. The modules and curriculum conversely have not achieved the goals of self-reproduction, self-generation, and self-sustenance in Africa. This failure is mostly felt in the ivory towers and is seen in the leadership vacuum and crisis that has attended universities in Nigeria in particular, and higher education generally in Africa.

The assumption at the heart of the establishment of these early universities was that 'imported' higher education would produce graduates who would solve Africa's emerging problems. But this has not worked due to many historical, economic, political, and social factors (Woldegiorgis & Doevenspeck 2013). The mandate of the vice chancellors and governing councils in the colonial universities was to ensure the continuation of colonial policies (Lulat 2005). At independence, there was a debate about the need for higher education to be changed to respond to the needs of the post-colonial state (Afolabi & Omal 2020; Mamdani 2007; Teferra & Altbach 2004). But the debate became untenable over time and higher education had to be decolonised. But the decolonisation agenda have not achieved much and remained paralysed on the altar of western liberal political and economic policies in Africa. Within the university system itself, it is instructive that at the helm of affairs of the universities, most if not all early and subsequent university leaders were trained in the West and had Western notions of how to run universities, creating and sustaining the Western model of university administration in Africa (Afolabi 2019a; Zeleza & Olukoshi 2004). Therefore, post-colonial university leadership and administration has not fundamentally changed since colonisation, except that Africa's university vice chancellors are now Africans. Hence, there remains a social disconnect between the universities and their social environment, which leads to the notion of the university as an 'ivory tower' wherein reflection becomes an end in itself (Craig & Spear 1982), notably divorced from social realities of its environment and people. Instead of providing social services, the university and its leadership structure became distinct and alienated from both its staff and the society it was meant to serve. Central to this alienation in the universities is a widespread situation where academics, particularly the middle-level, were neither catered nor trained for leadership positions. University leadership during the colonial period was meant to serve the interest of the metropole in an African setting, laying the foundation for the continued disconnect between the leadership and the university community, particularly its academic staff. The university leadership structure at all levels is still far removed from the majority of the staff and is reflective of the problem of middle-level academics' low management skills as well as lack of administrative and general experience, including poignant lack of leadership ethos and training (Onukwugha 2018). Indeed, lack of mentorship is also part of the leadership challenge that middle-level academics contend with (Okurame 2008).

Furthermore, it must be pointed out that African universities underwent a period of crisis distinct from the immediate post-independence era. While the immediate post-colonial era was devoted to decolonisation issues (still relevant today and ongoing in South African universities), the post-1990s

era saw the problems of higher education in terms of leadership vacuum as well as lack of experience and training for academics, especially middle-level academics entering leadership positions (Mushemeza 2016). According to the University World News (2013), the leadership vacuum and challenges confronting middle-level academics who are being increasingly saddled with leadership positions and responsibilities could be addressed in three ways. These include a continental summit on higher education; adoption of open data policy by higher education; and strengthening the role and effectiveness of higher education councils.

On leadership and academics, the University World News (2013) report specifically emphasised that many academics entering leadership positions in higher education, especially middle-level academics, have little or no leadership training or background in management. Thus, it was noted that support was needed in the area of academic leadership and policy research in African universities. However, this crisis has been exacerbated by the proliferation of universities – both public and private – without a commensurate increase in the number of skilled academics and middle-level academics, many of whom are promoted and/or given assignments and positions they are ill-equipped to handle.

Historical Background to University Development in Africa: Focus on Nigeria

To argue that universities in Africa, including Nigeria, have undergone various stages of development is to state the obvious. As earlier noted, from its colonial origin to its contemporary form, the university has witnessed changes that have more or less domesticated the idea of the university in Africa. The model of university education used by the colonial powers emerged out of a model heavily influenced by religious institutions, specifically medieval European Christian churches. During the Middle Ages, Western Europe was confronted with problems of underdevelopment and social fragmentation (Ajayi, Goma & Johnson 1996). Even so, the religious groups that founded and shaped European universities did not articulate a clear societal mission to address these problems. Martin *et al.* (2002:20) argue that the first colonial universities established in Africa – such as the South African College, the University of the Cape of Good Hope, and the University College – were dependent on the University of London for their emerging university governance structures whose modes of organisation were influenced by Scottish universities. However, in colonial South Africa, the British colonial state prior to World War II considered higher education to be a privilege exclusive to white settler society (CHE

2004). The governing bodies of the first colonial universities were purely white and this was replicated across African countries (Lulat 2005). The continued denial of higher education to Africans made it an important demand during the broader struggle against colonial domination (Ajayi, Goma & Johnson 1996). In South Africa, during the initial decades of colonial rule, the colonial state refused to provide education for Africans (McKeever 2017). Christian missions established primary schools, and later high schools, which explains why the European missionaries in South Africa – especially in Vendaleland – could not initially envision opening up any of the universities (Essack & Hindle 2019; Fiske & Ladd 2004). Some missionary-dominated schools continue to operate in African countries and questions have begun to emerge as to their continued relevance in the age of decolonisation and globalisation: two extremes in the struggle for the soul of higher education in Africa (Afolabi 2019b). In South Africa, at the higher education level, it is important to emphasise that institutional governance changes reflected colonial higher education institutions which continued under the apartheid regime, as these institutions relied on the Western universities for their model of university organisational leadership and management (Afolabi & Omal 2020; Heleta 2016; Badat 2008; DOE 1997). In Nigeria, the first university was the University College at Ibadan, established as a college of the University of London in 1948. It is presently known as the University of Ibadan, which became fully autonomous in 1962. Other universities like Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife; University of Nigeria, Nsukka; University of Lagos, Lagos; and Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria were the first generation of universities in Nigeria. All the above listed universities were established after Nigeria's independence, while others were established over time. As noted earlier, as of 2019, the number of universities in Nigeria stands at 174, with similar governing philosophies. At inception, the colonial university was meant to provide the needed workforce for the colonial civil service, and later for emerging industry as well as for other areas where educated and skilled labour were needed after independence. Now, universities are being established for various purposes that cover a whole spectrum, including political, personal, religious, ethnic, and economic reasons, whether public or private. It is debatable whether these universities are fulfilling their mandates and becoming self-reproductive, self-regenerative, and self-sustainable.

Methodology

This study used primary and secondary data. The primary data were derived from participatory observation and the experience of middle-level

academics from three diverse universities in southwestern Nigeria, for a thorough data gathering and analysis of the leadership challenges facing middle-level academics in Nigerian universities. The group of respondents purposively selected consisted of those serving as heads of departments, directors, examination officers, postgraduate (PG) coordinators, deans, and cognate deans of various faculties. The experiences shared were inclusive of other departmental, faculty and university appointments.

The universities in southwestern Nigeria selected consisted of one federally owned university, one state-owned university, and one privately owned university. The universities are Obafemi Awolowo University (federal); Olabisi Onabanjo University (state); and Oduduwa University (private). One official of the National Universities Commission (NUC) was interviewed to obtain information on government perspective on the issue. In all, thirteen respondents were interviewed. The target individuals included the three Directors of Academic Affairs in the identified universities, nine (three each) from middle-level academics (Lecturer 1 & Senior Lecturer) in the three universities, and a Director at NUC, Abuja. Secondary data was sourced from the university statutes/laws in each university, archival records, official government policy and publications on higher education, books, journals, newspapers, magazines, the Nigerian Constitution, and informed publications on higher education. The process of data collection involved the use of semi-structured interviews to obtain in-depth responses (Afolabi 2020; O’Leary 2005). The process of data analysis was drawn from the analytical framework by Miles and Huberman (1994); Smith and Dunworth (2003) were used in the analysis of qualitative data to argue for systematic procedures in qualitative analysis. In general, data was analysed using descriptive method and thematic content analysis.

The qualitative data sourced is important and the contributions is of tremendous use going forward. This, it is hoped, will positively influence higher education policy frameworks in Nigeria. These then can be translated into ‘governance and management philosophy’ for a clearly defined role and training in leadership for middle-level academics, as they serve as emerging leaders in Nigeria’s universities and higher education in Africa generally.

Discussion: Challenges of Middle-level Academics in Nigeria

Given the realities of leadership and absence of adequate preparation of middle-level academics, it would be simplistic and unsatisfactory to offer a monolithic explanation for the challenges middle-level academics face. The following section therefore discusses the leadership challenges faced by middle-level academics.

Inadequate Remuneration

Across Africa, inadequate remuneration remains a principal challenge faced by middle-level academics (Mushemeza 2016). Poor salary schemes attest to why, in Nigeria, some of these lecturers are allowed by governing laws of their respective institutions to take up other employment opportunities (what is also known as ‘adjunct’ or ‘moonlighting’); that is, a full-time lecturer at a public institution could also be a part-time staff at another public or a private institution.¹ This has led to increased absenteeism from work and has negatively impacted the quality of lectures delivered to students. Furthermore, complaints about being short paid or underpaid have been expressed through strike actions embarked upon by academic staff unions. Most of the middle-level academics in Nigeria receive far lower pay than their counterparts elsewhere. Their take-home pay usually does not ‘take them home’ as it is insufficient to meet personal, research and family needs.² This is often discouraging and depressing for middle-level academics, to the extent that the motivation and zeal to work and provide the right leadership in the university is often missing. This factor could also, arguably, be linked to the elements of corruption now noticeable in Nigerian universities, in the form of collecting monetary and property gift items from students as bribes towards passing certain courses. Middle-level academics are usually ‘victims’ of inadequate remuneration, since they need other sources of income to meet personal, research and family needs.³ This also affects their leadership abilities, as they are no longer able to provide the charismatic, responsible, and honourable leadership required of them.

Inadequate Systemic Support for Staff Development

One of the prerequisites for the promotion and development of staff is the ability of middle-level academics to carry out research on topical issues and publish the results of such studies to provide solutions to societal problems. Nevertheless, owing to poor research funding, improper management of funds by universities, and inadequate research infrastructure, middle-level academics have been left frustrated and unable to pursue their academic development goals.⁴ They are regularly denied the opportunity to go on sabbatical leave because of heavy workloads. Of course, it is a given that these people are also humans and not machines, and by overburdening them, they obviously have little time left to pursue academic development which is required for their promotion and career advancement.⁵ It is also a given that the system is corrupt and largely driven by bias in the promotion of middle-level academics. Davis *et al.* (2016) have demonstrated the negative effects of system bureaucracies and managerialism on the effectiveness

of middle-level academics in South Africa. This situation is the same in Nigerian universities, where management's bottlenecks negatively impact the activities, training, and benefits of middle-level academics. In addition, middle-level academics in Nigerian universities often do not have access to grants that could enable them utilise the opportunity to carry out thorough empiric research activities. Also, the exposure that international academic leadership conferences provide, by extension, often eludes Nigerian middle-level academics because they do not usually have the funding to attend such meetings.⁶ Owing to the cost-intensive nature of these research and international conferences, and the meagre amount of wages that middle-level academics earn in Nigeria, they are often unable to sponsor themselves to attend such gatherings where they can acquire university leadership skills.

Lackadaisical Attitudes of Middle-level Academics Toward Personal Development

Some academics lack the volition to further academic development. They didn't choose to be academics; 'they have only found themselves at that point employed as academic because of their high performance during their undergraduate days'.⁷ The absence of personal drive to attain career advancement poses serious challenges, as such lecturers could compromise the learning standards and seek help to be added to publications. Such begging and compromises foster substandard academic output and delivery. These category of academics who are prone to taking bribes from students in order to pass them.⁸ They are also the ones who exaggerate the numbers of their publications in order to get promotion. While this is more of a personal problem, some academics have tied their inadequacies to a lack of systemic support to pursue academic development; others attribute theirs to financial impediments such as lack of access to grants or funded fellowships.

Increased Educational Challenges

Middle-level academics are burdened with heavy workloads but are often part of various committees and attend meetings – whether relevant or otherwise – at their own expense. This poses serious challenges to the effectiveness of this set of academics.⁹ Despite a yearly increase in intake in the number students, , there is no commensurate provision of facilities and other supporting teaching aids to facilitate the teaching process, consequently further burdening the lecturers.

This challenge has also been echoed by Sawyer (2004) as a challenge equally facing several other African universities. The working conditions are also not good enough, and in some cases, academic materials are

unavailable, disallowing innovative research or teaching.¹⁰ There also exists the absence of modern technological equipment that can effectively aid the teaching process. Middle-level academics in Nigerian universities are often overburdened with numerous roles assigned to them (De Boer *et al.* 2009). With more than two courses assigned to each person, coupled with myriad leadership roles either at the department, faculty, or broader university management level, Nigerian middle-level academics are usually overwhelmed.¹¹ The result of this, oftentimes, is poor delivery, whether in terms of the quality of the teaching given to students or in terms of the quality of the leadership they provide.

Problems of Excessive Activism

Middle-level academics in Nigeria are entangled in unionism by being automatic members of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU). This often results in the decisions of the union taking precedence over that of individual members as their views are articulated through this body. The activities of the ASUU in Nigeria are 'quite aggressive and might not be logical at times as they vehemently embark on strike action at the slightest provocation'.¹² Even when decisions are not favourable to individual members, those members are still bound by them.

Brain Drain

It is commonplace that some of Nigeria's best minds have found their way to other countries where they are offered more money for their labour.¹³ Countries like Canada, Saudi Arabia, United States, Europe and South Africa are now homes to many of Nigeria's finest academics. This remains a challenge, affecting middle-level academics as those who could mentor and have a positive impact on the academic environment are gone in search of greener pastures. Also, when those who remain see that their fellow colleagues are doing better than they are, they are tempted to leave Nigeria.

Issues of Biases and Coloration

It is quite unfortunate that in Nigerian higher institutions, middle-level academics who form the bulk of academic staff are polarised and belong to different academic caucuses. This behavioural tendency have become entrenched and intensified due to the politics of 'who gets what' and how in Nigerian universities; academic positions are now becoming avenues to reward supporters and/or recruit new members. This is seen particularly when the office of the vice chancellor becomes contested and when the eventual winner

emerges. Most of the positions are then given to those who are his/her supporters, whether qualified or unqualified. This trend pose a serious challenge to merit, objectivity and fairness in terms of promotion into leadership positions, as the peer review mechanism put in place to guarantee academic transparency is compromised through a system of godfatherism.¹⁴ The consequence of this issue of bias is quite lamentable as it has led to the production and duplication of incompetent individuals and mediocre handling sensitive affairs at the topmost administrative positions in higher education institutions.

Lack of Requisite Training

One of the most prevalent challenges that middle-level academics continue to face in Nigerian universities is that of inadequate leadership training. Most middle-level academics lack the leadership know-how and experience to serve as leaders in various capacities within the university.¹⁵ Often, necessary trainings are not organised for them before they are given these leadership roles. Where such trainings are available, they are often inadequate. The importance of adequate training for middle-level academics has been stressed by De Boer *et al.* (2009:231), who posit that 'the most effective academic middle-level managers have at least average competency in leadership skills... Effective leaders possess the ability to perform well'. Unfortunately, most middle-level academics in Nigeria lack this basic requirement.

Lack of/Inadequate Mentorship

The mentorship quality in most Nigerian universities is very poor. Middle-level academics who are supposed to undergo mentorship under senior academics, so as to tap their wealth of experience both in terms of leadership and teaching, often do not have the opportunity. In addition is the unwillingness of junior and middle refusal and in some cases, lackadaisical attitude to mentorship. Some middle-level academics are not willing to learn, and/or demonstrate the capacity to imbibe leadership skills.¹⁶ Furthermore, the senior academics themselves are often not willing to take the responsibility of mentorship upon themselves. Even where the mentorship exists, sometimes there is a dearth of quality mentorship as well as lack of enthusiasm on the part of the mentees (Okurame 2008).

Conclusion

The problems confronting higher education in Africa cannot be wished away. This is most apparent, given the crises of leadership among middle-level academics in Nigerian universities. These challenges have been

enumerated and explained in the body of this article and are linked to, and indicative of, the systemic problems in higher education in Nigeria. The low ratings of Nigerian universities can be argued to be part the symptom of these challenges. Addressing these challenges through a deliberate higher education policy that gives prominence to leadership training for all academics (middle-level in particular), and re-orientation of newly employed and middle academics, would be the first steps in addressing the challenges. Re-evaluation of Africa's higher education philosophy, redefinition/reworking of university curricula through a conscious decoloniality framework, and re-engineering of university governing structure that emphasises leadership training, are all fundamental to the continued relevance of higher education in Nigeria.

While there are many challenges common to African universities including that of middle-level leadership crisis, there might be differences and variations in the socio-historical circumstances of each particular university/ country. A comparative research analysis of the challenges would help in sharing the experiences of middle-level academics across Africa. The research output would help understand the issues, challenges, and prospects for middle-level academics within the overall management structure. Information sourced from personal experiences of middle-level academics would help to codify and build a working philosophy of the challenges and solutions of middle-level leadership in the running and management of higher education centres in Africa. More importantly, the research project would go beyond individual university/country experiences, to gathering qualitative data from the academics in these universities, across diverse ownership structures. The focus on public and private universities, is meant to help understand similarities and differences among universities in Nigeria. From the research fieldwork and data gathered, it is evident that the challenges are more acute in private universities where qualified academics are grossly inadequate. As in Nigeria, universities in other African countries operate on the lines chosen in this research work in terms of government/ public and private owned. It is believed that this article on the leadership challenges of middle-level academics in Nigeria would help raise awareness of these challenges and provoke solutions toward addressing them. As said, further engagement with the issues on a comparative basis in Africa would help to attract and codify relevant data that can be used to address this endemic problem in higher education across the African continent.

Notes

1. Interview with a Lecturer 1, Obafemi Awolowo University.
2. Interview with a Senior Lecturer, Oduduwa University.
3. Interview with Director of Academics, Obafemi Awolowo University; Interview with an official of the National Universities Commission.
4. Interview with the Director of Academics, Olabisi Onabanjo University.
5. Interview with the Director of Academics, Oduduwa University; Interview with a Senior Lecturer, Olabisi Onabanjo University.
6. Interview with an official of the National Universities Commission.
7. Ibid.
8. Interview with Senior Lecturers, Obafemi Awolowo University and Oduduwa University.
9. Interview with a Senior Lecturer, Obafemi Awolowo University; Interview with a Lecturer 1, Oduduwa University.
10. Interview with a Lecturer 1, Olabisi Onabanjo University.
11. Interview with a Senior Lecturer, Oduduwa University; Interview with an official of the National Universities Commission.
12. Interview with an official of the National Universities Commission.
13. Interview with a Senior Lecturer, Obafemi Awolowo University.
14. Interview with the Directors of Academics, Olabisi Onabanjo University and Obafemi Awolowo University; Interview with an official of the National Universities Commission.
15. Interview with the Director of Academics, Oduduwa University.
16. Interview with the Director of Academics, Obafemi Awolowo University; Interview with a Senior Lecturer, Olabisi Onabanjo University.

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