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FOCUS LEARNING SUPPORT: RISING TO EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES

Introduction

This paper discusses the operations of Focus Learning Support (FLS), an organisation that provides educational support for overseas students, in particularly, Nigerians who are desirous of pursuing academic courses at universities and colleges in the United Kingdom (UK). In highlighting the vital role that education plays in the national development of Nigeria, the paper looks at the main educational activities that took place from 1960 to present. It explains how globalisation and its related processes, together with the rapid advancement in technologies, have impacted on national development and general education progress. National economic development, social development in relation to aspirations, resources and equipment, the rising emphasis of Information Communication Technology (ICT) in the classroom and ‘migration for education’ trends are identified as the major challenges that young people face. The paper shows FLS as the mechanism for effectively addressing the challenges overseas students face. It strongly asserts that the delivery of constructive, educational activities in a safe and user-friendly environment will not only motivate students to positive action, but will also assist them to make sound educational progress. This, it argues, should be done in collaboration with various community groups and organisations. To date, the progress that FLS has made via its seminars and training and development programmes has been shown to be productive. The paper utilises a number of case studies to support this claim.

The Context

Three related educational situations provide the context for this paper – the effects of corruption on education from a Nigerian perspective, the UK experience and FLS’ agenda. The authors see these contexts as useful because they give the reader a deeper understanding of what FLS represents.

A Nigerian Perspective: It is not unusual to hear ‘Nigeria’ and ‘corruption’ mentioned in the same sentence. Stories of scam, deception and fraudulent practices are well documented (Smith, 2010; Osaba, 2007). Evidently, any sort of corruption will impact negatively on the education system. In commenting on how the corrosive effect of corruption affects education, Torulagha (undated) hypothesises:

- There is a relationship between corruption and lack of infrastructural development, modernization and rehabilitation of Nigerian educational institutions.
- There is a relationship between corruption and lack of concern for student services.
- There is a relationship between corruption and the poor state of academic standards.

- There is a relationship between corruption and the increasing lack of professionalism and ethical standards by administrators and teachers/instructors/lecturers/professors in secondary schools and institutions of higher education.

Torulagha concludes that the high standard of education that Nigeria experienced from the 1960s to the 1980s decade had declined and “the most likely factor contributing to the retrogressive trend in education, at all levels, is corruption”. This does not mean however that generally, education is not valued and has been placed ‘on the back burner’. Education is still viewed as the key to success and national development.

The rapid growth and expansion of education programmes and activities in Nigeria since its independence in 1960, demonstrate the value that the country has placed on education. This is not just a pastime for political leaders who are trying to attract voters. It is a genuine desire of most, if not all members of the Nigerian community to acquire the knowledge and skills that are necessary for nation building. It is generally accepted that education plays a very significant role in the social and economic development of the country. It is also the tool that can keep the country in step with what is happening around the world, and can help it to develop regional and international partnerships that are able to benefit the overall growth of the country.

Fifty one years after independence, the need for a sound education has not decreased. In fact, it is reasonable to assert that the need is much greater for approximately twenty years into independence, research reports were showing that in spite of the economic progress made as a result of the oil industry, there was a general sense of dissatisfaction with the progress made in education and other sectors (Brownsberger, 1983; Joseph, 1983). The need to bring education standards in line with commendable international standards was dire. The government of Nigeria recently initiated higher education policy reforms intended to bring its university system more in line with international good practices. The reforms promote increased institutional autonomy, greater system differentiation, strengthened governance, and mechanisms for quality assurance. They seek to create a more flexible and responsive system of university teaching and research that, over time, will contribute increasingly to national innovation capacities, productivity gains, and economic growth.

Given that the above policy reform will make a valuable contribution to national development, it seems practical for all Nigerian students to avail themselves of situations that provide opportunities that will help them to increase knowledge and improve skills and capabilities. National and overseas-based educational institutions and organisations such as FLS are therefore crucial in helping Nigerian students to achieve their fullest potential.

The UK Experience: Over the decades, students from around the globe have been coming to the UK to study in colleges and universities. According to Universities & Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), the organisation responsible for managing applications to almost all full-time undergraduate degree programmes at UK universities and colleges, in 2011, of the 1.8 million full-time undergraduate students in Higher Education (HE), over 104 000 of them are international students (UCAS, 2012). Evans (2011) reports that “UK universities educate about 2.5 million

students annually, with a 28% increase in student numbers overall in the past 10 years". These data suggest that studying in the UK is a popular choice for international students.

It is generally acknowledged by educators and researchers that the wide range of courses offered, the practical experiences gained, the new skills learned, the opportunity to study in a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural setting and pursuing courses of study in English, an international language, are some of the factors that attract overseas students to UK universities and colleges. Besides, English is often referred to as 'the language of business', and if business is to drive economic growth, then it is vital for overseas students to have 'English' qualifications.

Additionally, the UK's quality assurance practices in HE ensure that students are exposed to the most efficient teaching learning environment possible. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), an independent body, is responsible for safeguarding standards and improving the quality of HE in the UK. For 2011 – 2014, QAA aims to:

- meet students' needs and be valued by them;
- safeguard standards in an increasingly diverse UK and international context;
- drive improvements in UK higher education; and
- improve public understanding of higher education standards and quality (QAA, 2012).

The reason for mentioning the above strategic aims is to highlight what guides quality assurance standards in HE in the UK, rather than to debate the impact of the standards. It is these very same guidelines that guide the operations of higher education activities that FLS promote.

FLS' Agenda: Taking into consideration the 'Nigerian perspective' and the 'UK experience' noted above, FLS purposes to assist Nigerian students to gain 'the UK experience' that would allow them to make meaningful contributions to their homeland, and thus support the government's national development programmes.

Mission Statement:

Focus Learning Support (FLS) purposes to educate and empower students, families and interested persons by bridging the educational gaps that prevent them from realising their fullest potential. FLS emphasises that educational development is a lifelong learning venture that merits continuous support from various societal organisation and institutions. To this end, FLS, with assistance from community alliances, embarks on a variety of teaching and learning activities to help it to fulfil its aims.

Core Objectives:

- Encourage learners to pursue educational goals.
- Provide all students with the guidance they need to pursue specific courses of study.
- Incorporate current educational philosophies and initiatives into all learning programmes.
- Revise content, objectives and resources if necessary, to keep in line with educational trends.
- Build on what students have already achieved.
- Imitate good practice.
- Strive to maintain a quality 'culture'.

- Establish learner-friendly environments.

Main Activities:

- Recruitment of international students
- Saturday School
- Educational TV Programmes
- Panel discussions
- Tutorials and supervision
- Seminars and conferences

FLS operates within the framework of the above objectives and activities. It recognises that it is impossible to be efficient and productive without assistance from members of the Nigeria community in the UK, support from concerned members of the UK society and community organisations from both communities. FLS is therefore making 'selected' individuals and community groups and organisation an integral part of its activities. In this way it places itself in a better position to contribute to the regaining of high educational standards in Nigeria and eventually to national development that will give the nation political, economic and socio-cultural significance in a competitive world.

Past Educational Activities

This section highlights how education was valued in the three decades after the independence. Some of the activities that were directly responsible for the high academic standards that Nigeria experienced from the 1960s to the 1980s are shown below:

- Regular federal and state government scholarships for home and overseas studies.
- Easy school access from north to south and vice versa.
- Organised extra-curricular activities.
- Healthy peer-group 'academic competitions'.
- A clear commitment from school administrators and teachers/instructors/professors to students' academic success and overall development.
- Intercollegiate sports were well-funded (Torulagha, undated).

As noted earlier, the corruption with which Nigeria has come to be associated has a corrosive effect on education. While FLS cannot eliminate the corruption, it is committed to contributing to the raising of the current levels of educational standards that reflect the high levels that the country experienced in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, by employing up-to-date educational trends.

Globalisation, Technology and Education

It is difficult to discuss globalisation without mentioning communication technologies. Jeffery (2002) asserts that it is modern communications that makes globalisation possible. Rycroft (2002) sees technology and globalisation as feeding off each other and Iyer, Rambaldi and Tang (2006, p. 21) inform that the area of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) is one the major technological advances under the influence of globalisation processes. Advantages and disadvantages aside, these perspectives suggest that the processes of globalisation

are capable of influencing most of man's activities, including education. This is a two-way connection because the enlightening nature of education also suggests that it does affect globalisation processes. For example, a look at migratory movements reveal that a "significant amount of students from developing countries seek education abroad". In terms of trade, "education services are increasingly traded" between developed and developing countries (Velde, 2005, p. 8).

Given that education is at the heart of nation building, a focus on improving a country's overall standards via globalisation processes seems justified. Evidently, education is the key to profitable trade practices and economic growth; and this means a clear communication of purposes between countries and/or trading partners. However, this is only made possible via an educated and professional workforce, hence the need to educate students to the standards that effect change and promote growth. This recognition is central to FLS operations. In giving a focussed attention to helping Nigerian students to gain knowledge and skills, especially ICT related, can go a long way in narrowing the gaps in educational opportunities that can affect change.

Challenges Students Face and FLS Response

The recruited students face numerous challenges – political, economic and social, ranging from mild to severe. Some of them are identified below:

- ICT skills
- Financial barriers
- Institutional issues
- Culture shock
- Integration into a new academic environment
- Racial discrimination
- Personal problems
- Family issues

In every instance where students report pockets of problems, FLS has responded positively in dealing with individual cases. For example, with regards to funding and other financial issues, FLS has approached sponsors directly on students' behalf. Another example comes from the area of ICT. FLS has collaborated with colleges and universities to give additional support to students to improve students' ICT skills. Similar support is given in FLS' Saturday School.

What Students Say: Some Case Studies

From data collected over time, three examples are cited to demonstrate how students' have responded to the assistance received from FLS.

Case Study 1: Student X

Like every other student that has just arrived from Africa for the first time, I faced many challenges. These challenges were mainly centred on adapting to both social and educational life here in the United Kingdom. This was mainly as a result of the wide difference between the African and the British society... The challenges I faced was very much reduced when I was introduced to the Focus Learning Support Limited. This company was already established in the UK and was noted to have helped Nigerian students to adapt to life in the UK. My meeting FLS was a

dream come true... FLS ensured that I received my allowances from my state Government when due. After I had finished my university foundation programme, they helped to secure admission in the University of East London... I have benefitted immensely from FLS.

Case Study 2: Student Y

I came from Nigeria as a mature student with no ICT skills. I found it rather difficult to cope with my studies because I had to use computers to do my assignments and class presentations. In fact, everything I did revolve around ICT. This made me very unhappy. FLS came to my rescue by giving me extra support at its Saturday School and the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) from the University of East London.

Case Study 3: Student Z

FLS has been very helpful to me. When I came to the UK, I got frustrated because I needed financial help and academic advice. I thank God I met a friend who requested I should contact FLS. I then checked online and eventually had contact with Dr. Elizabeth, whom I fondly call "Helper" because of how she salvaged the situation. Since then I have never failed to contact FLS whenever I face any challenge. I recommend that Nigerian students take my advice and contact FLS for any academic problems or to get other advice that they may require.

Implications for FLS

The rapid rise in technological advancement, together with the changes in educational systems and those brought about by globalisation, are likely to have implications for FLS. The operations of FLS are cost intensive, and to be effective, it is necessary for FLS to ensure that mechanisms are in place to run, as well as maintain its undertakings. This means that FLS should 'cut its cloth according to its garments', while focusing on quality assurance. Cost is also an issue for maintenance of premises, resources, equipment, consultancy, wages, 'rewards' and incidentals. In no way should FLS compromise students' success by 'watering down' the knowledge and skills that students need to make them contributing and productive citizens in their homeland.

The twenty first century has brought with it many new paradigms for innovation and the advancement of knowledge with regards to socio-political and socio-economic activities. Many of these are country specific and culture sensitive. It is imperative that FLS retain a Nigerian cultural orientation in deciding which ideas to adapt into its operations, so that it does not lose its focus on national development.

Successive Educational For All (EFA) Monitoring Reports have reported on the high levels of gender disparity in many countries around the world (United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI), 2011). Although admitting that there has been considerable improvement in gender disparity in the Nigerian society, Umezulike and Afemikhe (2007), there is still much work to be done in this area. In delivering a vital service, FLS should endure that there is no disparity in its dealings with the students whom it recruited to study in the UK.

Conclusion

A look into what FLS represents and how it is organised as an educational organisation is the main focus of this paper. It relates how FLS provides educational support for Nigerian students who wish to study at colleges and universities in the UK. To put the discussion in context, it looks at three main areas - the effects of corruption on education from a Nigerian perspective, the UK experience and FLS' agenda. The paper acknowledges that during the 1960s to the 1980s decade there were high standards of education in Nigeria, and sees FLS as instrumental in restoring, at the very least, a sizeable degree of those high standards. Working with community organisations and groups, use of the latest innovations in ICT, links to global partners and the impact that both have on education, are seen as channels through which this can be attained.

The recruited students face numerous challenges in the UK. The paper outlines how these are dealt with. Selected case studies demonstrate that FLS has been making a positive impact on some students' educational progress. To continue to make meaningful gains, FLS should consider all costs, avoid gender disparity and retain a Nigerian cultural direction in all its dealings.

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