

**“FOSTERING A CULTURE OF SUPPORT: A SHARED COMMITMENT
BETWEEN MANAGEMENT AND STAFF TO STUDENTS’ SUCCESS”**

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PROTOCOLS.

Assalam alaykum warahmatullahi wabarakatuhu.

It is with a great sense of honour and humility that I stand before you to discuss the topic of support for students. I would like to thank the Director, Career Service Centre, the amiable Professor Aisha Madawaki Isa, MFR, for initiating this timely programme and considering me worthy of being one of the Resource Persons.

In the study of organizations, scholars have identified what is called the technical core or production subsystem of an organization - i.e. – the part of the organization where the **primary** work is done. In a University, the technical core includes the academic and research staff and all teaching, assessment and research processes, including curriculum delivery, mentoring and supervision of students.

The two stakeholders in this technical core are the teaching staff and the students. The overall effectiveness and success of the University depend on how effective and efficient the teaching/learning process is and the amount of satisfaction the stakeholders derive from the process.

Studies of organizations also teach us that all social systems - groups, organizations and societies – have two prerequisites that they must meet in-order to survive. These are adaptation and integration. While adaptation has to do with the relationship between the system and its environment, integration has to do with the connectedness between the elements that make up the system. From this point of view, the efficiency, effectiveness and overall success of the university depend in large part on **(a)** the degree of commitment to the teaching/learning process by the teachers and

the students and **(b)** the degree of social integration within each group and between the two group, with the between - group integration manifesting in support for students.

The Rationale for Student Support

The reasons for the need for support for students seem obvious. First, there is an asymmetrical relationship between the lecturers who are (or are expected to be) more learned, more matured, more exposed, more responsible than the students.

Second, over the years, the Nigerian higher education system has experienced a lot of challenges which include reduced funding, infrastructural decays, low morale on the part of the teachers, incessant strikes, etc.

Third, the age of entry into the system has also reduced, compared with say twenty or thirty years ago. Today, we see youngsters of sixteen and seventeen years of age, some of them accompanied to the university by their parents, usually their mothers. When I was on sabbatical in ABU, Zaria some years ago, I saw some university students going around with feeding bottles which they use to drink water or in most cases Coca cola and Fanta and quite a number of them going around with teddy bears around Amina, Ribadu and Alexander Halls of residence.

Fourth, with particular reference to our university, most of our new students are not only younger than they used to be but are also apparently from relatively poor socio-economic backgrounds.

Finally, in spite of the foregoing – i.e. – the increasing financial and infrastructural challenges, the declining age of entry by students and therefore, their apparent immaturity, etc., the Nigerian society and the regulatory bodies in the

education sector expect the universities to produce educated, skilled, readily employable, morally upright and socially responsible graduates.

For the universities to meet this societal expectation - i.e. – to function effectively, they need to obtain necessary resources from the relevant quarters and they need to create and maintain a culture of support for their students.

Students need support to succeed academically and to have a satisfactory experience and fond memories of university life.

To create and maintain healthy support for students require a great deal of commitment on the part of the university Management and the staff.

On the part of Management, there is need for clearly formulated and implemented support policies with regard to accommodation, transportation, security, grievance and disciplinary procedures and students' welfare and wellbeing services.

The Management should appoint competent people to take charge of the Students' Affairs Division, give them clear mandates and fund the division adequately.

On-campus accommodation provided by the university should be based not on favouratism but clearly spelt out criteria. The Management, through the Students' Affairs Division, should assist those who are unable or unwilling to have university provided accommodation to secure reasonably comfortable and affordable accommodation so as to save the students from the exploitative tendencies of shylock landlords. For such students, adequate arrangements for safe and affordable transportation needs to be made.

The Management should have in place some mechanisms for the early detection of grievances, dissatisfaction, problem of adjustment, mental and other health concerns and the guidelines and procedures to deal with them. In this regard, periodic surveys of students lived experience can be institutionalized.

University Health Department and Counselling Unit should be adequately funded and equipped and should have qualified, competent and motivated staff to work in them.

One way in which students get integrated into the institution and connected to it is through their various organizations and unions, including the Students' Union. The Students' Affairs Division and the relevant Heads of Departments should sensitize and support the students to organize free, fair and credible elections and ensure that the elected officials are transparent and accountable in their handling of the affairs of the unions and organizations. All elected officials should be mandated to render an account of their stewardship at least two months before the expiration of their tenure and clearly specified sanctions should be meted out where/when necessary.

Students' experience at the point of entry is as important as their stay in evaluating the level and kind of support that they receive and their perception of and attitude towards their alma mater. Many of our students come from diverse, ethnic, religious and socio-economic backgrounds. Many come from long distances, arrive late at night and are at sea as to where to go and/or what to do. Many students also experience difficulties with registration procedures either at the university or Faculty/Department levels. The Students' Affairs Division and the Academic Units should have simplified procedures as well as designated personnels to assist students at these points of entry.

Management should organize periodic capacity building workshops for relevant officials in the hostels, the Registry and the academic units with the aim of inculcating the right attitudes and behavior towards students and creating an overall institutional environment in which students are seen and treated not as burdens or inferior elements but as valued and respected partners of an academic community. Ultimately, we are university staff only because there are university students.

Many students do experience financial difficulties while in school. Many students have difficulties returning to school as at when due, focusing on their studies while in school and completing their studies within the shortest possible time. In fact, many do not graduate and have to hope for amnesty to be able to complete their studies. The Management should explore ways of providing emergency funds that can be used to assist students in difficulty. A long time ago, the late Chief M.K.O. Abiola made some money available to this university for such a purpose. The Management can approach public-spirited individuals to donate money for the sole purpose of assisting such students and lay down the procedures for accessing such monies.

In addition, work-study schemes can also be institutionalized as a means of assisting students experiencing financial hardships. The mechanism or procedure for evaluating the claims of hardship and, therefore, identifying those truly in need should be developed by the Students' Affairs Division which should also have the responsibility of obtaining and keeping the data of such students so as to provide timely assistance to them.

Furthermore, extracurricular activities are an important aspect of students' lives on campus. They aid academic success, develop in the students the spirit of cooperation,

peer-mentoring, competition and sense of achievement and by so doing, serve a means of integration among students and their connectedness to the university. Management should therefore encourage and mainstream extra-curricular activities into the teaching and learning activities of the university.

Finally, the quality of a university is often determined in part by the quality of its library and the quality of a student by his/her use of the library. Perhaps, the greatest support that a university can offer its student (and staff) is a well-stocked, adequately staffed (in terms of quantity and quality) and user-friendly library conducive for intellectual work in all its ramifications.

The Staff

Much of students' success in the university and after graduation depends on their experience in their faculties and departments. Academic support, as manifested in the lecturer's behaviour and relationships with the students, remain the core of that experience. It determines whether they turn out to be people of learning and character – i.e. – educated, skilled, ethical and socially responsible people. The teaching staff in the Faculties and Departments have a great role to play in shaping that experience.

First, a comprehensive orientation programme is necessary. Presently, many faculties and departments do not conduct orientation programmes. Those that do wait until the middle or end of the semester when its purpose is to ease the transition into a new environment and kind of life. A comprehensive orientation programme should not be a one-day affair. It should include lectures/talks on university education in general, use of the library, university rules and regulations and the rationale behind them,

grievance and disciplinary issues, help-seeking, when necessary, the reciprocal expectation of the university and the students, etc.

Second, academic advising and mentoring are critical in shaping students experience. Observationally, only staff of the rank of assistant lecturers and lecturer II are appointed as level coordinators and/or as advisers and they do little advising or mentoring beyond registration. It is necessary to appoint matured and experienced staff who should be mandated and incentivized to devote specified period of time to advising and mentoring students on a continuous basis rather than at the point of registration.

Third, teaching staff should be trained and mandated to adopt student-centered approach to their teaching responsibility. This approach entails punctuality and regularity in teaching, encouraging critical thinking and questioning attitude on the part of the students, prompt return of students' continuous assessment works and making themselves approachable and responsive to the needs of their students.

It is sad to observe that many lecturers do not start teaching until the fourth or fifth week into the semester, many go to class twice or thrice in the semester, many do not return the results of continuous assessment exercise to the students and some do not mark examination scripts.

Deans and Heads of Departments must ensure that their staffs are alive to their responsibilities and serve as role models for their students. The Management on its part should consider constituting a lecture attendance monitoring committee and a whistle-blower system in which the students can report absentee lecturers without the fear of being victimized.

Fourth, Faculties and Departments need to institutionalize continuous monitoring of their students both while in the university and after graduation as part of quality assurance. Data should be kept on the rates of attrition, progression and graduation as well as post-graduation labour market experience. This is in line with NUC's quality assurance and accreditation requirements. They should also conduct periodic surveys of students' satisfaction with their courses, their lecturers and their experience in the faculty/department. The analyses and results of such surveys will help tremendously in curriculum review as well as the review of teaching methods and the teachers. In some institutions, students' evaluation of their lecturers is part of the requirements to promotion.

To complement the efforts of the university, faculties and departments should constitute students' welfare and students advisory/counselling committees. Presently, the practice is to appoint one advisor for each level. Faculty and Departmental Boards should deliberate on the terms of reference of these committees and the membership but the membership should include representatives of the students.

Finally, recognition should be part of a culture of support. Students who excel in terms of academics and character – those who display exemplary sense of responsibility, cooperation, selflessness, etc, should be so recognised. A plaque, a letter of commendation, appearance on the Dean's List, etc. all of these go a long way in showing the awardees that their efforts are recognized and in motivating others to aspire to excel.

To summarize, a culture of support for students require clearly stated policies with regard to students' needs for accommodation, transportation, health services, etc., It requires the qualitative staffing and funding of departments and units such as the

Students Affairs Division, the Counselling Unit, the University Health Directorate and others which provide services directly to students.

Furthermore, it requires financial support for students in need as well as strengthening and monitoring students' organizations which are essential mechanisms for fostering student integration.

Given the primary purpose of the university and the primary goal of the students, a culture of support entails ensuring the existence of a well-staffed and well-equipped library, faculties and departments with dedicated staff who prioritize student-centred learning, are alive to their responsibility of teaching, evaluating, monitoring and mentoring the students with an attitude of collaboration, care, love and respect.

In conclusion, a supportive institution is one in which Management and staff view students' learning and development as a collective responsibility and commit themselves to enunciating relevant inclusive policies, creating and strengthening necessary units and taking needed actions that ensure that the products of the institution will always be found worthy in character and in learning.