

Town And Gown Relationship: A Synergy For National Development In Nigeria

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Abstract

Town and gown relationship is beneficial to both the university and community. Cordial relationship of the university and its community results in peace, stability, security and progress. Whereas the community benefits from the university in terms of economic gains, social and community services, the community provides the university with the needed peace and security to operate. This paper attempts to explore critical areas of collaboration and linkages between the duo. The paper discovers that town and gown have of recent become increasingly connected in common use of facilities such as electricity, telephone, transportation and road network. In order to sustain this synergy the paper recommends that university programmes and policies should be planned according to the needs of their communities, a forum for friends of the university should be established, and that for universities to accomplish their missions, adequate funding should be provided.

Introduction

Town and gown Relationship

The relationship between town and gown is as old as the history of the university system. Most historians have revealed that universities of Timbuktu and Alexandria among others predated those of continental Europe (Okoko, 2012). In spite of the overwhelming evidence in support of this claim, however, western scholars still trace the origin of the university system to the Academy, founded by a Greek philosopher, Plato in 389 BC. Plato's 'the Academy' is said to have been founded as a sacred sanctuary of learning outside the city walls of Athens where it flourished for nine centuries until the year 527 AD when it was closed down along with other 'pagan' schools by Emperor Justinian (Wikipedia, the free Encyclopedia, 2011). The academy provided the foundation or character of the modern university system, particularly the individual centres of learning which sprang up in the 12th century AD beginning from Italy. They all existed outside the city walls and had little or no contact with town people. The medieval universities were structured as guilds of masters (scholars) and students operated along the same pattern with the European medieval guilds. Once a scholar or master was able to obtain charter which served as a form of licence for him to operate a university or centre of higher learning, he was granted a municipal authority for a space outside the city wall or a lecture facility. He attracted students from far and near and became independent financially and legally of municipal authorities.

He was exempted from any kind of taxation and no other authority interfered with the operations of the universities. The universities thus enjoyed relative autonomy and a range of privileges. According to Okoko (2012), students were exempted from the jurisdiction of municipal authorities and resumed studies whenever or if ever they so desired. These privileges constituted grounds for conflicts with the local people who saw the scholars and students as arrogant. The relationship between town and gown was not however, always conflictual. There were periods of relative peace. That peace was sustained after the 15th century until the municipal authorities took the responsibility for payment of salaries of university workers. Indeed, within a short period of time, municipal authorities took the responsibility to establish and run universities, thereby gradually bridging the gap between town and gown. As a result, there appeared a tendency for co-operation to replace conflict. According to Wikipedia (2011), in the United States of America,

Municipalities and universities continue to negotiate police jurisdiction on and near campuses. Today, many universities and colleges maintain their own police forces. In cities where students live on campus, university police may be allowed to patrol these neighbourhoods to provide an extra measure of security. Meanwhile, civil libertarians argue that school officials should only call on local law enforcement agencies to intervene when it is necessary to protect the safety of people on campus. Such intrusion is legally mandated in some jurisdiction when school officials have reasonable suspicion to believe that a student is breaking the law

This trend appears to have assumed global dimensions. For instance, in Nigeria, universities and municipal authorities are increasing collaboration on security matters. This has become imperative in view of the large number of staff and students who now live off campus. It is also necessary due to the increasing proximity of a number of university campuses to town people. Partnership between universities and town people has also become imperative due to the changing character of the university system. Today, most universities in the developing countries are owned, managed and funded by municipal authorities (Okoko, 2012). For instance, in Nigeria, until recently, universities were exclusively owned by the regional, state and federal governments. Consequently, pro-chancellors and other principal officers of the universities were appointees of government.

It should be noted that the average university student is no longer, the 'foreigner' in Plato's 'The Academy' or the medieval guild centres of learning. He, may be a local student or 'foreigner' still under parental tutelage or on government sponsorship. This means that the welfare of the student is not the exclusive responsibility of parents or guardian or sponsor as the case may be, and the need for them to co-operate and collaborate respectively has become very necessary. The student can also be a local folk who works in a municipal department, a corporation or a local businessman who works and goes to school at the close of work to get education and up-date his skills. There is thus the need for collaboration involving the employers and the university system. Interestingly, however, universities now utilize long distance learning opportunities offered by efficient postal services and electronic devices to reach students far and near without using conventional classroom facilities. This needs to be sustained and strengthened through increased contact and collaboration. Moreover, universities, host towns and communities have of recent become increasingly connected through the use of common facilities like electricity, telephone, road network and common transportation facilities. These networks need to be strengthened through negotiations and other forms of collaboration and linkages. These have become common forms of town and gown relationship.

According to Amucheazi (2012), the charter of the first university in Bologna in 1088 was to address the societal problems; to come up with appropriate technology and mode of governance for the advancement of the society. These have been accepted as the main essence of the university education even if not always so clearly stated. Galileo invented his telescope, as a result of the demands by Italian sailors who desperately needed the instrument to give them wider coverage and farther view of the vast ocean they sailed in small sea vehicles available in those days. The British universities were involved in the colonization campaigns of their governments, including production of administrators for the colonial government overseas. It was from Cambridge Universities that G.I. Jones, an anthropologist came to advice on the status of traditional rulers among Ndigbo in 1957/58 (Jones, 1957). A host of anthropologists were infact deployed to the colonies to study the indigenes people and advice the colonial government on how to administer the colonies. The American universities focused on the conquest of the 'wild, wild west' and realization of the American dream, while the German and the French focused on technology, medicine and philosophical theories. For example the National Aeronautical and Space Administration (NASA) of the USA came into existence at the prompting of the American government as a counterpoise to the USSR feat on space exploration. Within ten years, NASA was able to stand shoulder to shoulder with the Soviet science outfit.

The town-gown relationship in Biafra, the defunct breakaway part of Nigeria, during the civil war (1967-1970) can further illustrate the benefit of good understanding and co-operation. The then Head of State, General Ojukwu challenged the University of Nsukka and intellectuals in Biafra to come up with the necessary armament with which to prosecute the war in the absence of or lack of foreign support and arms supply. The accomplishments of Biafran Research and Production (RAP) which are common knowledge today according to Udenwa (2011), were outstanding and astounding. These include rockets, anti-aircraft guns, landmines (Ogbunigwe), bullets, crude oil refineries, wine etc. It was with these inventions that Biafra was able to fight for 30 months against an enemy with an army large in number, equipped with sophisticated arms and ammunition and highly motivated with money and booties of war. The Nigerian society is faced with challenges of developing marine and agricultural technologies, of control of erosion and of mechanical and engineering concerns and evolving a stable system of governance, like most societies in developing countries. The universities cannot be expected to find solutions to these problems except there is a proper synergy with governments and the larger society.

Most of the state universities are cited in local communities that do not have water, light or roads. The houses that provide accommodation for spill-over students are like shanties. Lack of facilities and amenities exert strong pressures on those of the university campus. Certainly, the university cannot just "live in splendid isolation" if it will not incur the wrath and hostilities of the indigenes. What some universities – such as universities of Nigeria Nsukka, and Anambra state university (ANSU) Uli did according to Amucheazi (2012) was to convince the state government on the danger to the university community of the denial of these amenities to these communities. In the interim, the communities were allowed to share whatever facilities that existed on campus.

At Nsukka for example, particularly as from 1970, immediately after the civil war (1967–1970), the government of East Central State on invitation initiated and embarked on provision of portable water, electrification of Nsukka and even creating a housing layout in the town to encourage university staff to build their own houses. At Uli and

Igbariam campuses of ANSU, villagers were engaged in meaningful relationship and agreement reached over rent charges to student-tenants, in order to combat campus cultism and protect university properties.

Staff recruitment is one area that affects town-gown relationship and over which the vice chancellor must exercise some caution. The “over localization” of the university appointments according to Amucheazi (2012) certainly affects the quality of the products of the institutions and the vice chancellor ought to guard against this. The host communities usually applies too much pressures on the university management over staff recruitment and even demands appointments into key management positions, regardless of the qualifications of the indigenes. The problem is that some vice-chancellors encourage this kind of demand rather than resist it and this leads to unmerited appointments and unnecessary patronage.

Town-Gown Relationship as synergy for National Development:

The most immediate impact of the university on its local community is in its role as an employer of labour. Government policy that university recruits majority of junior employees from the immediate locality has further ensured closer and mutual relations with the community. In some cases, universities are the largest employer of labour in their immediate environment. Quite an appreciable proportion of staff in some of these institutions reside in the immediate community. The presence of universities in communities has facilitated provision of infrastructure in their immediate community, including industries and economic activities (Ojo, 2006). As of today for example, the University of Port Harcourt according to Koko (2012) has a population of more than 35,000 students and almost 2000 teaching, non-teaching and casual staff. As the university grows and expands, so do the host communities. This development has led to the economic transformation of the hitherto, Aluu, Rumuosi and Rumuekini communities from rural villages to urban and semi-urban towns. Take for instance, the rural choba market, which now competes with the big markets in Port Harcourt, attracting suppliers from as far as Aba and Onitsha, all targeting the huge population of students and staff of the university.

The demand on housing and accommodation facilities as was earlier discussed is high particularly as the institution is expanding its students and staff intakes and the internal facilities can no longer cope. For instance, in university of Port Harcourt according to Koko (2012), only about one percent of staff and students are offered residential accommodation on campus, while the rest are scattered in the neighborhood. While some members of staff have been able to buy land and build their own houses amongst the host communities, majority of staff and students live in rented apartments. The trickle down effects of this is the increase in the economic value of residential properties. To cope with the new demand for accommodation, there has been massive investment on residential facilities and the consequent multiplier effect on other sectors of the local economy is better imagined.

Universities by virtue of their mission are expected to produce middle and high level manpower. Infact, the university is an industry that consumes its own products. With this thinking, universities are perceived as possessing all the diverse expertise and skills that are of immense value to the society. They have departments of engineering, finance and accounts, business school, marketing departments and have the highest level of skills on performing and creative arts. The rural communities have taking advantage of the numerous academic programmes offered by the university to up-date themselves. The beneficiaries cut across social strata. By upgrading themselves academically, their income improves which has implications for the prosperity of these communities. For instance, they aspire and indeed are able to build better houses and automatically become landlords. They will be able to train their children and contribute to the provision of utilities in the towns and communities. Most host communities have also taken advantage of the pre-nursery, nursery, primary, post-primary and tertiary education facilities provided by the university. This holds true in all university communities in Nigeria. Of greater significance is the University College of Continuing Education (UNIPORT) located at the heart of Port Harcourt. The college was designed to take education to workers in the city. It started with diploma programmes in management and social sciences and now runs degree programmes in management science, social science and humanities. As at 2006/2007 academic session according to Koko (2012), the college had enrolled more than 10,000 students into its various programmes in its Port harcourt centre. It was estimated that by 2008/2009 the number would climb to between 12,500 and 13,000. As at date, the student population in the part-time programme which drives the town-gown is well over 20,000 students (Koko, 2012).

Universities draw enormous financial resources from its programmes and the Colleges of Continuing Education can easily serve as a significant resources base of the university. It can improve its internal revenue base if it targets the non-formal sector of the economy. It can for example, organize programmes for market women and artisans. It can also organize training programmes on governance for village heads and traditional rulers, community development committee members (CDC); and training programmes for drivers, automechanics and electricians among others. The university has the requisite reservoir of resource persons in its engineering and

physics departments who can be mobilized to tackle the perennial energy crises which confronts it and its host communities for a fee. Something can equally be done about sewage and sanitation as well as fixing of roads and bridges. These are all avenues for collaborations between town and gown.

Universities play significant role in the social and economic life of their communities. Concessionary admission and recruitment policies are provided as social service to these communities. Other areas where the community could enjoy social services include; (a) use of library and classroom for reading (b) access to sporting facilities (c) stage film shows organized by student union (d) volunteer work by students union, for e.g AIDs awareness campaign (e) use of halls, mosques and churches for social functions.

Conclusion

The promotion of cordial town and gown relationship is mutually beneficial for both the university and the community. The institution has a lot to gain in terms of peace, stability and security whereas the communities benefit in terms of economic gains, social and community services. University administrators are therefore expected to carry the host communities along in same critical policies and programmes of their universities. This will help to provide cordial relationship and the needed peace and stability on campus. They should however be very conscious and alert when the 'handshake apparently goes beyond the elbow'. They should strive to resist the inevitable pressure on them to compromise standards.

Recommendations

- 1)University administrators and other stakeholders should use the university – community relationship as a vehicle for egalitarianism.
- 2)A forum for friends of the university should be established where grievances from stakeholders are discussed and addressed.
- 3)Students and other university communities should be active participants in decisions affecting them.
- 4)Universities should draw programmes based on the needs of their immediate communities.
- 5)Universities should be properly funded by government to creatively accomplish their mission.

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