

Innovations

Sustaining Higher Levels of Educational Excellence in Universities as Alma Matri: The Inalienable Role of the Alumni/Alumnae

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Abstract: *This paper examined the role of sustaining higher levels of educational excellence in universities as Alma Matri. Making copious use of secondary sources, it attempted to find out in the existing relevant literature the role and place of the alumni/alumnae in the overall, health and competitiveness of the university alma mater. While employing the expository cum exploration research method, it identified some areas the university alumni can be of help to their Alma Matri in charting and maintaining referenceable excellence in learning engagement and related functions. It also attempted to find out how graduating university students can be seamlessly enlisted in their alma mater associations, identify with these associations, and become active participants in them. It was found that university alumni/alumnae not only abound but are successful actors in different fields of human endeavor. The study further revealed that alumni/alumnae existing as role models for undergraduates not only reserve the capacity and cognate clout to offer financial and material support for the development of their university Alma Matri but also to provide direct skilled labor and intellectual resources that inform and enhance teaching and learning. The study, therefore, suggested that universities must see in their alumni/alumnae inalienable resources to be freely tapped to not only pursue excellence in university education and related involvements but also in extending and sustaining it.*

Keywords: *Alma mater, educational excellence, university education, alumni capacity, alumni resource.*

Introduction

Education indubitably stands at the foundation of any nation's overall sustainable growth and development. This is why it has been repeatedly submitted that no country can climb above the level and quality of its educational system (Ojugo, 2014). Higher education, being a significant expression or component of the education system in Nigeria, is at the third tier or level in the general categorization or structure of the education system in the country (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013). University education according to the categorization is at this level (FGN, 2013). In other words, university education is an expression or component of the general categorization of higher education in Nigeria.

Now, quality and competitive university education with special or specific leaning for notable excellence is, today, in high demand the world over. The relatively higher demand for this type of education and its products is largely informed by the fact that economic and social evolvments and transformation, engagements and practices are increasingly being largely triggered by and founded on innovations and productivity, in terms of quality research outputs and knowledge generation that are inspired and raised there. Also, in today's world, where technology and changing pieces of technological advancement appear to readily shape and inform the pace and mode of almost every aspect of human life and experience, the importance of the role formal quality university education can play in informing and inspiring such knowledge base cannot be underestimated. Hence, the urgent need arises. That is, to ensure that the quality of knowledge and learning engagement obtainable in these formal institutions of higher learning is not only so structured but carefully adapted for the generation of the technical knowledge-based labor force required to meet the increasing need for quality higher education that informs and inspires distinctive growth and technological advancement (Brusoni, Galina, Pol, & Orlanda, 2014).

Experience has shown that delivering on quality graduate education with specific focus on achieving and maintaining desired and competitive productivity in continually changing and expanding cultural environment requires significant capital investment and commitment (Fullan, 2007). Competent and highly experience dhuman resources are required for teaching, research and related academic activities, conducive and enabling environment is needed for effective teaching and learning to take place, and other desired facilities that aid and facilitate effective learning engagement, within which technological facilities are inalienable part, cannot be neglected. All these require huge funds application and capital investment.

It is invariable then that for quality learning to be achieved and sustained and educational excellence effectively pursued and realized in educational institutions of higher learning, these resources must not only be available but functionally and adequately. To insure and assure these means huge capital investment and commitment that may not be easy to come by. This is where, scholars have argued, alumni associations can either bridge the gap or play meaningful or significant role directly or indirectly such the cause of excellence pursuit and realization signed to by their alma mater may be both effectively engaged and sustained in their cherished alma mater (MacAllister, Maclead & Pierrie, 2013).

Besides, unrest among students and strikes among university employees are known factors that disrupt instructional schedules, those of higher or universities not being in anyway an exception. Also, politics and politicking both within the university systems and outside do play critical roles in the direction, functionality and sometimes effectiveness of the university administration. This could be for reason of sought or competing political interests that could have their interactive intrusiveness and interference somehow directly or indirectly impacting and informing the quality and strength of the decisions reached or their effective implementation. Further, quality management mechanisms are also critical in overall efforts at ensuring that universities achieve the objectives for which they were founded. In the face of these intervening factors, Alumni associations, as an interest group, can wield strong political voice that inform and influence the university regulatory councils and policymakers to seek and choose direction and engage resources that would not only impact the university; their alma mater, positively in its quest for and commitment to the pursuit of excellence but also in protecting their vested interest and intention for the university. In this way, the alumni association would be playing critical role in championing, influencing and contributing to enhance and maintain the overall success of their alma mater by coordinated actions (Guzman, 2015).

Scholars have observed that a host of ways exist through which a university can benefit greatly from strong alumni ties (Sikander, Ahmad & Nath, 2022; Romina, 2015). They noted that alumni may help the institution from which they graduated by providing non-monetary or monetary assistance and so, form an impactful reference resource for their former institutions of higher learning. It has also been observed that university students can also benefit from alumni's involvement and participation in the different aspects of the university life and operations. To this effect, it was noted that with alumni's involvement in the university learning activities and processes students would benefit immensely by drawing from their wealth of experiences, diverse areas of specializations and vastness of their exposure to better understand the relevance and applicability of their learning curricular and effectively clarify their desired career paths and prospects (Ebert et al. 2015).

Other ways alumni and alumnae can play a role in university education, scholars have identified include collaborating with higher education agencies for the creation and delivery of quality instruction, encouraging companies to not only contribute to impact the education of the potential worker in the university student but also to interact with him/her during their university journey to have a proper and clear handle on what their career may demand, involve or entail. Still other areas of possible alumni and alumnae involvement and investment financial sponsorship, internships placement and intern supervision, guest lectures, and membership on advisory boards (Ebert, Axelsson, & Harbor, 2015).

Alumni can be major stakeholders in higher education institutions (Sikander, Ahmad & Nath, 2022; Snijder et al., 2019; Romina, 2015). For the possible extent and impact alumni and alumnae involvement and investment can have on their alma mater, the idea of alumni has in the relatively recent past times grown in importance as a strategic theme in university education (Ebert, Axelsson,, & Harbor, 2015). Alumni's non-monetary and monetary encouragement for educational achievement and concomitant commitment may also be considered a core consideration for higher education institutions' longevity and growth (Guzman, 2015).

In higher education, it is important to find many and contrasting perspectives on excellence. Whereas 'excellence' is documented as an abstract and ambiguous term, it is often considered a "normative concept" as well as an expectation to be followed and assumed as a central principle of higher education (Skari, 2013). Two big conclusions can be taken from this. First, when dealing with excellence, one should always be mindful of the term's dual sense. Excellence is often evaluated in contrast to another, which implies a sense of competitiveness. Second, the standards for excellence as well as the operational time from which those criteria are chosen are at stake in the pursuit of excellence in every sector. As a result, they must be designed with care and in collaboration with all stakeholders.

There are several descriptions of what alumni or an alumni group of a university is. Despite the possible different descriptions of university alumni or alumni group or association, one thing remains almost constant or certain and runs through every possible description. It is that it is about former students of universities. Alumni or alumnae associations are invariably organizations that bring together former students of a college or university. They can be found around the world for many educational institutions (Farrow, & Yuan, 2011). The fundamental idea behind an "Alumni Association" is to provide a network for shared support for members and their former educational institutions, in this case, universities that are viewed and related with as their alma mater. In other words, alumni of universities are former university students, and alumni associations are associations of those former students.

Now, by way of support, investment, involvement and commitment, alumni and alumnae assist their alma mater by planning social activities and collecting funds to support their universities by direct contributions or taking up projects that are considered to be of benefit to not only the university but to all who are trained or work there. Also many have a range of incentives and programs that are directed at assisting the alumni association as a body to being continual touch with their alma mater and her graduate members. Imoke (2011) corroborating this posture of many alumni and alumni association, noted that alumni are a large and vocal constituency in the university community.

Individuals who regularly identify and/or serve in the alumni association proudly display the close and solid bond between themselves and the alma mater that shaped them. Given the level and quality of the association's relationship and closeness with their alma mater, the alumni association can wield and sustain a clear and influential voice that can have significant impact not only on the course of the school reforms but the overall life and processes of their alma mater. By so doing, alumni association's activities and involvement in the alma mater, if well harnessed and properly directed, can make serve meaningful and reference resource for the effective engagement and pursuit of the course of excellence and higher levels of competitiveness for their alma mater.

It is largely within this connection that the alumni or alumnae associations are becoming increasingly regarded as a meaningful and almost indispensable stakeholder in the overall quality of life, engagements and pursuits of their universities or schools. In other words, with the increasing importance of the value of alumni association's contributions and involvements in the overall health, life, pursuits and competitiveness of schools and universities, such pursuit of or search for excellence might not be complete or be wholly engaged without the involvement and incorporation of the alumni contribution and possible impact. It is against this backdrop, that the researchers seek to engage this review, analysis and examination. That is attempt an assessment of the place and role of the alumni and the association in whole of effort of universities in Nigeria effectively pursuing, achieving and sustaining educational excellence in the alma mater of the alumni and alumni association.

To achieve this intent the following research questions were raised to guide the investigation

Research Questions

1. What is Educational Excellence in the Nigerian context
2. What constitute the alma mater or matri
3. Who are the alumni and the alumnae of the alma mater of the Nigerian universities

4. What are the useful and helpful resources that the alumna/alumnus of the Nigerian universities may bring in to aid effective pursuit of excellence by the Nigerian universities
5. To what extent does the involvement of the alumna/alumnus contribute to inform and influence the effective pursuit of excellence by the Nigerian universities
6. In what ways may the vast resources the alumna/alumnus that has and brings into the equation contribute to help to inform and influence the trajectory of the pursuit of educational excellence by Nigerian universities

Methodology

To effectively engage this investigation, the researchers adopted the exploratory cum expository search methodology. By which means, the researchers engaged in vigorous pore and search of available data and pieces of relevant information that deal not only on alumnae/alumni matters but also on educational excellence in the universities as Alma matri. The intent was to carefully expose what were found with a bid to employing them to serve not just as a basis for the effective consideration of how alumni and alma matri of universities may align or properly associate to meaningfully contribute to assure educational excellence in universities as alma matri but also to maintain and sustain them competitively to be continuously relevant and positively impactful on the people and environment the universities are set up to serve.

To do this, the researchers visited libraries and consulted online data basis such as ebschost, google scholar, resarchgate, and other related platforms for directly connected data and other pieces of information that were helpful for the investigation. Knowing that research works of this kind would require a great deal of data for both trangulation and meaningful decision making, the researchers also consulted alumnae and alumni as well as experts who are have not just peripheral understanding of the issues of discourse but who are well grounded in them. These persons, the researchers interviewed and sometimes required to provide submissions and deposition which were carefully incorporated in the study. In order that the tripod for effective triangulation of the pieces of data retrieved for the study was created, the researcher also visited some of the universities in the different six geopolitical zones of the country. The selection of the universities was done in such a way that all the different representations of existing universities in Nigeria; viz, public and private, state owned, faith based and privately owned and run universities were captured.

This done, the researchers carefully organized and collated the pieces of data in such a way that proper coding of the significant themes and pieces in the data was done. Thereafter, the researchers painstakingly identified both the running threads

in the data as exposed by the codes employed and the significant points and indicators emerging from the data. To this extent, the researchers reasoned that with the available data before them and the handling of them that it was ripe for the action of triangulation of the data to be done. Thus, the researchers did the triangulation. In so doing, careful attention was paid to not just the significant pieces and the running threads in the data but also the emerging themes. This done, the researchers considered what pieces that rose from the data and on the basis of them arrived at concrete decisions. On these decisions a greater part of the submission of this research report was reached and hinged.

Educational Excellence in the Nigerian Context

Excellence is currently used as a relative concept to describe what is superior as against what is adjudged or valued as inferior. It points largely to "exclusivity," and it is often deployed to describe, identify or qualify an entity or a phenomenon in reality in some actual or fictitious rating. It is readily employed or elicited for use in education for rating purposes; placing one item or thing or quality over or under another in comparison for superior or inferior quality or value. This concept of excellence, as imported, deployed or even elicited in education, is proportional to the success of others.

For individual actors in education it implies superiority in the quality of output or outcome in the value of the products submitted or presented for assessment and placement in terms of value and quality. For institutions, it largely implies competitiveness and health jostle for and attainment for more superior positive position. In this context, the word "excellence" is used not only to assert a place in a hierarchy, but also to illustrate specific programs aimed at improving international competitiveness. The concept is often used to emphasize the value of certain facets of higher education that are not commonly associated with excellence.

At the educational level, the word excellence is often used in an aspirational context, associated with statements of improving students' performance and delivering a high-quality education through the pursuit of excellence in teaching and learning. While the achievement of excellence can be the expectation of success in higher education classes, teaching personnel believe that they can do little to develop excellence in a pupil if there is little opportunity at all. The workers observed a large number of unmotivated, mediocre, and definitely non-excellent students among them. Many faculty members believe that higher education is primarily a learning environment in which the meaning is found in student learning. However many students believe that higher education is primarily a teaching environment in which nothing can be achieved to improve the teaching (Pedro, Pereira, & Carrasqueira, 2018; Romina, 2015).

Excellence is described as achieving consistent levels of comparable performance that meet expectations and are better than rivals can achieve. Academic excellence is described as the ability to practice with self-assurance, put in a strong effort, and earn a high grade in academic activities. Achieving outstanding academic achievement starts with the parents, who are the child's first point of contact. Academic achievement is not accomplished individually, but through the greatest assistance available along the way from guardians, teachers/instructors, guidance counselors, and coaches who have shared their God-given gifts. Any portion of a stakeholder's collaborative efforts in teaching/training/educating a child must count for celebrated result-excellence. Excellence in national growth, political, and technical advancements will only occur if the content and goods of Nigeria's educational system increase functionally (Bola, 2015). Technological advancement and breakthrough necessitate a corresponding orientation and shift in attitudes among parents and students toward pure science courses.

Another aspect about the concept, education excellence in Nigeria, is that it has become a catchphrase freely used by political agitators, especially when delivering their parties' manifestos. As such, the term tends sometimes to lose its real and persuasive meaning in the web or gibber of political calculations and shenanigans. According to Sikander, Ahmad and Nath (2022) if quality is used too liberally and vaguely in educational debate, then there is a very real risk that the term will lose its very significance, and that there will be reduced ability to recognize pupils achievements that are truly excellent. Also, in applying the term to success or attainment in the general teaching and learning engagement in schools, it is observed that, teachers' sometimes skewed attitudes toward different success abilities of boys and girls do have direct impact on their individual outcomes couched in excellence rating or delineation.

For instance, according to Romina (2015) teachers award boys more credit for ingenuity and individuality, while girls are seen as more conforming behaviorally. The widespread yet incorrect belief among pupils, parents, and even teachers is that math and physics are not simple subjects for girls. So excellence or even acceptance to do or be enrolled in these subject areas is more readily expected in boys than in girls. This is such that if girls are found to opt for these subjects or to excel in them, it is almost traditionally perceived and dealt with as an abnormal or at best unusual occurrence. However, Sikander, Ahmad and Nath (2022) refute this idea, stating that girls' loyalty emerges as responding to teachers' orders about how to read, while boys are more independent in their choice of research methods. Girls will also solve mathematical problems faster than boys because they have internalized the learning methods suggested by their teachers. This statement, however, contradicts findings from some Nigerian reports. Awofala (2007), for example, notes that "more females

than males display pessimistic attitudes toward mathematics." This perspective stems from the negative influence of indigenous schooling, which is male-centered and thereby offers males an unfair advantage over their female counterparts (Romina, 2015).

With the scenarios outlined above, objectively defining what excellence is in schools in Nigeria, devoid of any coloration related biases, becomes a bit of challenge. The concern may not necessarily be that excellence in Nigerian education will be difficult to achieve, as individuals and institutions that have the resources to effectively pursue, attain and maintain excellence in education and in teaching and learning exist in numbers. But the existent concern is recognizing and identifying excellence in education in Nigeria without being influenced or shaped by strongly held beliefs and basic biases that may color or inform what is discovered and chosen as excellence in education. However, the existence or possible interference of these nuances in the identification and selection of what is excellent in education in Nigeria, the fact remains, school and individuals in education in Nigeria continue to commit to and strive for the attainment and maintenance of excellence in not only education in general but in teaching and learning and the outcomes there from.

The Alma Mater-Etymology and Applicative Understanding

The term "alma mater" is derived from two Latin terms that mean "nourishing or bountiful mother." It was originally used by the ancient Romans to identify such goddesses as Ceres and Cybele. With the passage of time there was increased liberation with the usage of the term. As Christianity, especially Catholicism, grew stronger and spread in Europe the term was deployed to identify the Virgin Mary or a significant quality or prerogative of her. The fast expansion of the usage of the term did not end there. In no distant time it became a common term in many schools especially in the old Roman Empire. In this way, it was quickly transformed and held as an academic concept in many western languages and employed for various identification and expressions in schools. In some instance it was used to refer to the school, college, or university from which a person has graduated or attended, and is typically the one from which one has earned a bachelor's degree or associate's degree, that is, the one from which one is called an alumnus/alumna. In some other, it could be used to designate a song or hymn affiliated with a school or some specific delineation of an educational institution.

Alma matris today are no longer just regarded as a place to seek and engage learning and so acquire knowledge but they are also fast being perceived and in fact becoming an avenue to prepare graduates to be job-ready and skilled for roles in different sectors of the national economy. This apparently emerging model understanding and recognition of the alma mater or alma matris is invariably more

closely linked with institutions of higher learning alternative lytertiary institutions which in most cases take on the role of training and raising leaders and skilled personnel for various fields of human endeavors and which also engage in cutting-edge research which findings or outcomes benefit governments, businesses and in fact society in general.

The Alumni and the Alumnae Vis a Vis the Alma Mater

Generally, alumni and alumnae are usually expected and motivated have to consistent commitment to and furtherance of the interests of their alma mater at heart. The collection or formation of alumnae and alumni into legal bodies births the alumnae or alumni association. As such its membership is understandably limited to only alumnae or alumni or both, who by virtue of their identity must have been students of their alma mater. In the case of universities, the eligibility is not majorly different. The constitution or composition of the membership of universities alumnae or alumni association is usually and invariably limited to ex-students of their specific universities, in which case, their alma maters or matri.

Now, Alumni/Alumnae associations are typically supported and sustained by their members. Their programs are funded by registration, fines, dues, and emergency funds; which are invariably the means by which most alumni associations, universities types or expression not excluded, fund their programs. As part of their commitment and interest, these associations aim to influence relevant major laws or policies in favor of their alma mater. Alumni associations no doubt exert some impact and sometimes color the university policies. This they often do through their representation on the University Governing Council. Aside tactically trying to influence university policies and operations modes they also get engage and involved in the other aspects and expressions of their universities life and operations.

According to Jumpa (2003) and Lorenzen (2010), school alumni associations, inclusive of universities alumni associations, usually aim to do the following: i) uphold the legal and moral values of their alma mater ii) participate in their alma mater's educational success by including infrastructure, services, and teaching materials. iii) take part in productive projects that can positively lead to national development, iv) establish and retain market contactsand v) provide career prospects for participants. This is why Snijder et al., (2019) and Wunava and Okunade (2013) note that management in the Alma mater cannot adequately accomplish its goal without mobilizing capital. As a result, resource generation and proper use is an important part of alumni contributions to their alma mater.

These resources include but not limited to financial and general socioeconomic resources. The ability to successfully use these services is, however, largely dependent on their availability and accessibility. This means that if these

resources are either short supply or simply inadequate or in the wrong quality, the management process would not only be significantly hampered or simply be impossible to achieve and maintain. While the availability and the accessibility of these resources are important and inalienable in their overall management processes, their availability and accessibility, however, not wholly sufficient for the entire process.

What this means then is that if these resources are so available, management mechanisms for their efficient use must be devised for the effectiveness of their management to be realized and the benefits there from experienced and garnered. But it is clear that the management of resources in general administration is not restricted to material resources. Material resource control and/or management is just an aspect of resource management. Personnel or human resource is involved and human resources are often viewed as the most valuable resources to handle and properly manage at any alma mater. This is where it is being argued especially university education that the invaluable input and involvement of the alumni and alumnae and in fact the membership of the association can play special role and make significant contribution. It is believed that such pressing managerial concerns as recruiting, personnel welfare maintenance, and personnel professional development needs incentivization for great productivity and the like can areas in the management of resources that the membership of their alma mater alumni association can easily step to not only make a great difference in their alma mater but to inspire noticeable stable commitment to the pursuance of academic excellence in their universities.

Now, the substance of management is the determination, initiation, and execution of specific and purposeful action to accomplish a predetermined goal (Wunava & Okunade, 2013). Management includes basic roles such as preparing, coordinating, enabling, steering, and controlling of available resources. The effective use of these resources is largely the function and responsibility of management. Hence when there is effective management there is likely to be effective and efficient application and engagement of lean available resources. Such quality of management adjudged to be effective and efficient is only possible with the existence and engagement of skilled management personnel. It is believed and expected, that, depending on their background and exposure, the alumnae or alumni association involvement at this level could make not just appreciable contribution but have a larger effect in both the management quality in their alma mater and the entire university operations at large.

In a study carried out by Bola (2015), on the involvement of alumni in their universities alma maters/matri, it was found that participants reported a variety of personal benefits from their and contributions and philanthropy. These include a sense of giving back, a sense of obligation or accountability, networking, retaining

their bond with the organization, keeping updated about the institution, a sense of home, and a sense of pride in the institution. They also felt that their donation would favor their alma mater. They also reported that their contributions in marketing the institution and the alumni community, assisting in the recruitment of new students, acting as a sounding board for young alumni involvement, increasing young alumni engagement, and financially supporting students and university programs are the key ways in which their alma mater profits. The study also revealed that alumni have explored some of the costs or obstacles they encountered as a result of their philanthropic support. The difficulties, they identified included a sense of not being able to devote adequate time or resources, trouble seeking meaningful areas to volunteer, a sense that their job is not appreciated, and a sense that fundraiser strategies are disrespectful.

The Place of the Alumni and Alumnae in the Alma Mater

Alumni and alumnae in today's world make up a sizable and vocal constituency of their university – alma mater world. Most alumni and alumnae who seek not only to be identified but actively involved in their alumni or alumnae associations do not only feel some sense of connection and debt to their alma mater but also lifelong commitment to them. There is a bond that they recognize is between them and their alma mater. Individuals who regularly serve in the alumni association publicly demonstrate the ethereal bond between themselves and the organization that shaped them, that is their alma mater, their universities, their schools. They do not just get invested in this bond as passive or disinterested persons but often exert and carry a clear and influential voice that has the potential to have a significant impact on the legislative course of education reforms for both their alma maters and others in the educational system.

As alumnae/alumni, they have at the foundation of their participation in the association an avowed concern for their institution's future, sustainability, longevity and excellence. In terms of partnership, these partnerships can be trust-based or contractual. Trust-oriented relationships are based on the belief and desire that each individual will fulfill their responsibilities. Although contract-based partnerships are legally governed and all arrangements are explicitly spelled out in the two cross-collaborations or joint partnerships, both partners may be engaged in designing and executing programs for the cause of the body or institution to which they are freely committed, in their case their alma mater and their alumni association. This action is often readily possible because the parties have a shared goal, common interest, which leads to complementary behavior (Banka, 2019). Extrapolating this for the universities alumni associations, members do not only see themselves to be legally bound to their alumni association in relation to their alma maters, the universities but get invested and immersed at the level of trust and unflinching belief

that every other in the membership would assured exercise same or similar levels of commitment and investment and corresponding involvement.

In today's competitive higher education marketplace, college and university leaders increasingly rely on the influence and service of their alumni to further institutional goals. Alumni donors are frequently enlisted to serve important roles as volunteers and political advocates as a result of their demonstrated financial commitment to the institution (Weerts and Ronca, 2008). According to Skari (2013), alumni are the largest untapped pool of prospective donors, and the success of alumni giving at four-year institutions demonstrates the potential for universities. To create effective fundraising strategies, 2-year colleges must first understand what factors influence alumni giving.

Corroborating Ogbonnaya (2012) informs that for universities to meet their huge financial burden that the nature of the system and its requirements impose they must not fail to explore and effectively tap into the great potential reserve that are available in their effective and well organized alumni associations. In which way, according to him (Ogbonnaya, 2012), financing university education in today's Nigeria is an onerous task for not only the universities but also the government and all relevant stakeholders but effectively turning the direction of the alumni window of help that is too often ignored or neglected much of the difficulty in financing university education would be significantly addressed. Arguing in a similar line, Romina (2015) contends that the political, social, and economic factors that are currently having a significant impact on the global economy have necessitated the need to diversify the sources of funding university education, primarily because reliance on only one source of revenue will inhibit educational growth. Hence, according to them, the alumni association is one most probable angle to turn for this possible funding source or alternative.

Sustained Higher Level Academic Excellence in the Alma Mater: The Role of the Alumni and Alumnae

Many colleges around the world as well as in Nigeria increasingly perceive the quality of their product as more of a special challenge than even the burden of financing them imposes. This is because more and more universities are coming to the realization that the quality of products in terms of their graduates goes a long way to define and shape efficiency, credibility, and popularity. For this redirect interest and concern universities, even in Nigeria, are redirecting and refocusing more of their attention now from dousing financial issues and to engaging and improving their productivity and viability in terms of the quality and versatility of the their graduates and products (Snijder et al., 2019; Sikander, Ahmad & Nath, 2022).

The alumni of a given academic institution especially the university plays an important role in the level of exposure that the alma mater wields and in the

marketing of the alma mater. This is because they not only showcase in their effectiveness and competencies the quality of learning engagement that is available in their alma mater but also they clearly reflect the amount of intellectual and formative investment that their alma mater have had in them. For this reason, scholars contend, several universities have established or encouraged the establishment of alumni associations in order to capitalize on this opportunity and to have an ordered and well organized platform to project and sustain it (Weerts & Ronca, 2008).

Alumni also serve as mentors to prospective students and first-year students. As Maina, Burrell, and Hampton (2011, p. 13) point out, leaving home to attend university is exhausting and difficult, and one can need the assistance of alumni who can provide survival advice.

Graduates of universities as alumni also serve as advocates, influencers, and shapers of public opinion (Simonetti, 2013). In so doing, they can exist and function as opinion makers and shapers for not only younger alumni but also the universities, that is, their alma mater at large. Furthermore, graduates who automatically become alumni of their alma mater do contribute to higher education through philanthropic, volunteer, and lobbying efforts. It is argued that the main motivation for their effort in this regard is the whole philosophy captured in the social capital theory and social capital transitions according to Zhimin, Chunlian, and Xian (2016), that states that the *homo socios* has the natural inclination to either replicated himself in the progeny or to leave a noticeable legacy with or for those that take after or coming after him/herself.

According to Romina (2015), public higher education institutions were facing extreme storms of financial crises as a result of weak economic conditions. As a result, these institutions were increasingly pushed to pursue new funding streams, one of which is the alumni associations for they found in them not only reliable platform of resort for financial assistance but uncommon interest and commitment to the judicious application and utilization of their contribution to meet and serve needs of their alma mater that are judged to have far reaching effects. For the difficulties that universities face, there is need universities to consistently maintain their bond with their alumni associations and membership, promoting and enhancing the partnership that would naturally ensue to serve as a ready and reliable resource reference, whether financial or otherwise to not only keep the universities afloat but relatively very competitive. Grants from alumni can be used for a variety of purposes, including improving instructional services, supporting research, improving student life, offering more infrastructures, and assisting with institutional initiatives (Snijder et al., 2019).

It has also been strongly advocated there is urgent need for higher education institutions, of which universities are a part, to build large alumni networks. This is

for purpose of capitalizing on a potentially large pool of prospective contributors that these alumni networks may create. In order then that universities benefit immensely for this potential large resource base and resort, they must implement services to identify, help, and bind alumni, thus converting ex-students into alumni donors. To this end, Skariand Ullman (2012) identified six main areas where the universities can help alumni associations to build good network platforms; (1) institutional support, (2) student socialization to become alumni donors, (3) correct alumni contact information, (4) ensuring touch with alumni, (5) creating ways to meet alumni, and (6) entertaining demands.

In a study conducted by Pedro, Pereira and Carrasqueira (2018) on the associations between alumni participation in university alumni activities, previous university interactions (motivation), and monetary donations (alumni giving) it was revealed that the factors of alumni participation in universities alumni activities, previous university motivation and monetary donations by alumni significantly associated with universities growth and attendant success and so the study suggested that universities develop policies and practices to satisfy university students, who are potential alumni.

It has been observed that students' learning experiences while students in their alma mater are also important factor in informing their desire and zest to enter into relationship with their universities upon graduation, and thereby with their alma mater. It is in this regard it was noted that students' cumulative experiences influence their subsequent expectations and feelings about their institution, though favorable experiences do not always result in faithful attitudes and behaviors (Koenig et al., 2016). This means that how students are treated when pursuing a university degree has both short and long-term consequences for their future interaction with the university.

It is in view of this submission that Naboth and Nwogu (2015) stated that the strongest and most dynamic alumni association members, as well as those who made significant contributions to the institution, were university graduates who were interested in a variety of extracurricular activities. In similar line of thought, Ogbonnanya (2012) argued that, in addition to scientific expertise, higher education should provide students with leadership skills. Jakayinfa et al. (2010) noted that it is in recognition of the significant level of impact students experiences could have on their identification and association with their universities vide their alma maters, many colleges have already begun to educate their students about what awaits them in their alumni years after graduation. The motivation behind the practice is to give these students hints for progress in life after studies, to get them motivated and experienced, and also to instill in a lifelong unforgettable university memory that would always stimulate them to return to and be identified with their universities, their alma mater, as a veritable cause of commitment and interest.

Another area that the alumni and alumnae association can make huge impact is in the area of establishing and assuring discipline mechanisms in the alma mater according to Gbenda (2008). Discipline whether by the students or in the staff or personnel of the educational institution like the universities, whether it is conventional, non-formal, or formal, is essential for the educational institution live up to its fundamental role of imparting valuable information for social order and progress. Discipline in a school can be shaped and informed by a variety of factors that include but not limited to the environment in which the school is located, government policy, the level of teachers, how students are administered, and the physical infrastructure of the school.

It has then been strongly advocated that a well-disciplined school in terms of its students and personnel is often a product of well-articulated and applied policies amongst other things. This is why it is repeatedly encouraged that management invests meaningfully in the course of reaching and retaining disciplined learning environment. It is thus suggested that management can readily do this by educating and counseling teachers on disciplinary practices and also and perhaps more importantly encouraging teachers to participate in seminars conducted by the Alumni association. It is in the light of this that Ampofo et al. (2015), reasons that some disciplinary proceedings are outside the jurisdiction of the school administration. As a result, he proposed that in such cases, the school's principal and in this case, university chief executive can request the assistance and intervention of parents, the Old Student Association, alternative, the alumni associations.

Furthermore, it has also be strongly submitted that apart from the contributions of alumni and alumnae as well as their associations helping to insure and assure sustained effectiveness of their alma mater they can be of great, significant and inalienable resource in the pursuance and attainment as well as retention of excellence in higher education within which or one of which expressions is the universities. It is in recognition of the place, role and effective involvement of the alumni/alumnae associations that Akpochafo (2007) gave a number of examples of these approaches, including student recruiting, retention, and job growth. Asking alumni to hold student recruiting activities in their residences, supplying alumni with student recruitment resources to share with prospective students and guidance counselors in their fields, engaging in university mentoring and career services for students, and providing internship and work selection assistance to students are some of these approaches. For Simoneti (2013) it is in the areas that include empowering job resources departments to collaborate with alumni and provide students with internships and placement support, including alumni in new student and orientation programs, and welcoming alumni to partake in convocations, award and scholarship receptions, and other events. She also recommends inviting graduates to act as mentors to student groups or learning societies.

Besides, alumni giving, as observed earlier, are essential for institutional development. While multiple studies have shown that establishing relationships with alumni is linked to giving, none of these studies directly concentrate on young alumni. In their research, Pedro, Mendes, and Periera (2020) found that the factors of direct contact policies with an emphasis on overall consistency, the critical role of students in co-creation, techniques for including students in campus life, solicitation actions, and the benefits alumni can reap from their participation directly and indirectly predicted the willingness, promptness and commitment of higher education alumni giving and contribution.

Conclusion

The fact that Western education has been introduced in Nigeria for over two decades, she has yet to establish a strong foothold in the educational landscape, despite numerous attempts and policy initiatives. Genuine excellence in university education will continue to elude Nigeria until education is politicization and rhetoric are divorced from the true intentions of government and political actors whose activities, policies and pronouncement directly or indirectly affect and impact the educational system in the country.

While excellence in university education in Nigeria is no doubt possible and achievable and can be effectively re-enthroned as Nigeria has in the past had a good taste an experience true excellence of and in university education, the resources and tools needed to embark on this task and possibly re-achieve it is unquestionably enormous and can even be daunting. This is why any effort or intent to seek and attempt to effectively pursue and realistically enthrone excellence in the quality of education; especially public university, in the Nigerian state must not fail to explore and engage all the sources of support and resources possible and available. The reason is simply that the weight and demands of pursuing, achieving and maintaining excellence in the quality of university education anywhere in the world today especially in Nigeria require huge and extensive amount of resources that a single source or highly limited avenue of resource generation and application will not assuredly not suffice. Various and diverse resource sources and involvement and applicability approaches are invariably needed.

It is in recognition of the dual need of the university education in Nigeria to attain excellence and also of the huge resources that are required to pursue and achieve the desired excellence that the authors/researchers identified the alumni and the alumnae and the consequent alumnae and alumni associations of universities in Nigeria as not only a veritable avenue or source of resource generation for the universities to strive and eventually thrive in success and excellence but also a reliable resource references for the effective application and engagement of the resources available to the universities to effectively pursue and truly attain and

maintain the desired excellence levels that the Nigerian universities currently need. It is to this extent that the researchers contended that if university education in Nigeria must strive for excellence and so re-ascend that height of recognition that have apparently for so long eluded the system the association and engagement with the alumni and alumnae and invariably their associations scattered all the over the world is inevitable. For, in researchers reasoning, the alumni and alumnae and their associations possess and reserve great resource both financial and otherwise in great numbers and quality that would be immensely helpful and enriching for the universities.

To this end, the researchers submitted and strongly suggested that alumni and alumnae and their associations are not only important and necessary for the effective functioning of the universities as their *almamatri* but also for the attainment and sustainability of the universities in excellence. In so doing, the researchers in the paper noted that if the university education system in the country must continue to be meaningful and be about the mission for which they was established and exist it must not only encourage their graduating students to transform into effective alumni and alumnae of the universities but also must ensure that these students on graduation must see their universities as no less than a veritable and worthy *alma mater* for which they can proud and effectively invested in and committed to.

Suggestions

Based on the findings of the study, the following suggestions were offered

1. That universities existing as *almamatri*, must be conscious of their status and position as *alma matri* to the number of graduates that graduates from them each year since their inception.
2. That universities as *almamatri* must not fail to initiate and maintain an enduring symbiotic relationships with their graduates who exist and relate with them as *alumnae* and *alumni* and vice versa.
3. That universities should ensure that they do not underestimate the rich resources resident in and possessed by their teeming *alumni* and *alumnae*
4. That universities, existing as *alma matri*, should not only encourage the establishment of *alumni/alumnae* associations of their institutions but also provide for the easy entry and integration of newer and young graduates into such associations
5. That universities in Nigeria, should, apart from valuing the wealthy resources in their *alumni/alumnae*, endeavor to create meaningful platforms for productive collaboration with *alumni/alumnae* to pursue and assure the universities educational excellence.

6. That in the pursuit of educational excellence, universities as alma mater, should not neglect that importance and inalienable role and contribution of their alumni/alumnae
7. That alumnae/alumni be effectively engaged and encouraged, using varied means, to invest in their alma matri and contribute meaningfully to support the attainment and maintenance of their educational excellence.

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