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## Re-Prioritization of Education: A Panacea for the Obstacles Challenging Sustainable National Development in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century in Nigeria

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## RE-PRIORITIZATION OF EDUCATION: A PANACEA FOR THE OBSTACLES CHALLENGING SUSTAINABLE NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE 21ST CENTURY NIGERIA

(Text of the Convocation Lecture Delivered at the Combined 46<sup>th</sup> And 47<sup>th</sup> Convocation Lecture of The University of Benin, Edo State, Nigeria, held on 25<sup>th</sup> November 2021)

**Olumide Akpata**

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, I am Olumide Anthony Osaigbovo Akpata with Matriculation No. 88/02343. I was of the Faculty of Law UNIBEN and proud resident of Ekosodin and I am super delighted to be back home.

I consider it a great honour and privilege to stand before you today, on the grand occasion of the combined 46<sup>th</sup> and 47<sup>th</sup> Convocation Lecture of the University of Benin ("UNIBEN") to deliver the combined Convocation Lecture. Indeed, when I consider the calibre of the individuals who have stood on this platform before me to deliver previous Convocation Lectures, I am even more deeply humbled by the significance of this event.

So, the immediate take home lesson for every distinguished graduand or graduate in this assembly, if I may say so myself, is that there would always be scope and opportunity for recognition by your immediate and extended community if you exhibit dedication, hard work and perseverance in the respective fields of endeavour that you ultimately settle in.

Permit me, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, to quickly place on record my profound appreciation to a number of important persons whose contributions made it possible for me to stand before you today. The list is, of course, virtually endless but I must thank the Vice Chancellor of this University, Professor Lilian Salami, and the organisers of this year's Convocation Ceremony for deeming me worthy of this honour. Interestingly, my time in the University of Benin from 1988 - 1992 coincided with the administration of the first female Vice Chancellor of this University, and indeed in Nigeria, Professor Grace Alele-Williams. It is therefore altogether fitting that my return to the school, thirty odd years later, also coincides with the

administration of the second female Vice Chancellor in the person of Professor Salami. Who would then blame me if I should continue to advocate for female leadership of this institution having been so highly favoured by the two that we have been privileged to have!

I must also express my deep gratitude to the organisers for the literary license they have accorded to me to select the topic of today's lecture. For me, this is demonstrative of the freewill and power of choice that the University environment plants and breeds in all its products. This is a theme I will return to in the course of today's Lecture.

I also crave your kind indulgence to acknowledge the role of my family and, in particular, my father, Dr. Henry Ogieva Akpata, as my unwavering support system that ensured my morale remained high through the journey of university education and into a career in legal practice. It was my dad who, after getting over his initial disappointment that I was not going to take after him and study medicine, ultimately guided me towards making a career choice to study law in this University and the rest, as they say, is history. While my dad is unable to be physically present with us here today, I am gratified by the fact that fate has worked it out in such a way that his very good friend, classmate and brother is here to stand, as they say, in loco parentis. I speak of none other than the Pro Chancellor of this great University, Dr. Sonny F. Kuku, OFR.

I must also bless the memory of my dear mother who passed on (in UBTH) almost 30 years ago when I was in my final year in this school. I wish she was here to witness today's occasion but the hurt of her passing did play a role in propelling me to be and do more, and I would like to think that she is looking down from heaven and beaming with pride.

Last but certainly not least, please permit me to specially acknowledge the role played by my teachers at all levels of education in moulding me into who I am today. Again, the list is endless on this one but I remain deeply appreciative of the roles played by Prof Epiphany Azinge, SAN who taught me Jurisprudence at the Faculty of Law of this great University and Prof Lawrence Atsegbua, SAN who taught me Administrative Law. Both have remained my friends, mentors, and some of my staunchest supporters throughout my career. I use them as a point

of contact to represent the other teachers in the Faculty of Law of this great University in whose lectures I was privileged to sit and be taught. To them I say: if there was any doubt regarding the importance of the work that you do as teachers, the mere fact that your student was invited as the Convocation Lecturer of this prestigious University should dispel such doubt. And it is my prayer that you will continue to reap bountifully from all the sacrifices that you make as teachers in shaping the successive generations.

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, greatest Nigerian students, as a final prefatory point before I delve into the substance of today's Lecture, please permit me to say a few words to the University authorities. Earlier, I mentioned the theme of freewill and the power of choice. Let me briefly elaborate on this point. My experience as a student of this great institution was a profound and life changing one, and for which I will remain eternally grateful. But while I probably did not know this at the time, a major factor that contributed to my training and my formation was the power of choice which the University system accorded me. For perhaps the first time in my life, I learnt to take adult decisions and live with the consequences of those decisions.

Obviously, some had the same opportunity and made choices that did not necessarily turn out as they expected. But that is just a fact of life which should not get in the way of free will and consequence-backed choices among members of a university community. When University authorities, in an ostensible bid to instill discipline, deprive their students of the life training of making choices, taking decisions, and dealing with their consequences, it often comes with far-reaching consequences in real life.

I visited one of the private Universities in the South-West (name withheld) and while the physical infrastructure of that institution would probably make public University administrators green with envy, the regimented style of administration made it impossible to leave without the sense that the institution, at best, was just a glorified secondary school.

Universities should accord students the latitude to think creatively. This includes the opportunity to make mistakes. The nature of training and discipline I received in UNIBEN equipped

me to deal with life and to learn from my mistakes. It is my hope that this is also the testimony of our graduands and graduates.

## **2.THE FAMILIAR STORY OF A STRUGGLING NATION**

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, the central theme of my Convocation Lecture is that we must re-prioritise education in this country if we are serious about overcoming the challenges- and they are coming thick and fast-of the twenty- first century. In a bit, I will dig into the logical nexus between flourishing education and a stable nation, but permit me, first, to agitate us all-assuming we are not already super-agitated- with the indices of ignominy of our country, as a necessary backdrop to my humble views on the dire need for re- prioritising education.

The World Poverty Clock records Nigeria as the country with the highest number of persons (nearly 90 million) living in extreme poverty, an unwanted feat that we attained after overtaking India. When you consider the fact that the population of India is almost seven times that of Nigeria, then you can understand the implication of that statistic.

While we chew on that, let us also note that according to data from the government-run National Bureau of Statistics, unemployment rate in Nigeria is at an all-time high of 33.0%, with almost 65% of the country's youth either unemployed or underemployed.

Further, although Nigeria is regarded as the biggest economy in Africa, with a gross domestic product (GDP) of around US\$ 500 million, a closer look at the practical macroeconomic indices reveals that this does not necessarily impact on the bottom-line of the average Nigerian. For instance, Nigeria is not in the top 15 of the highest per capita income in Africa. Further, Nigeria's inflation rate is higher than the average for African and sub-Saharan countries and it is public knowledge that Nigeria's economy has been fluctuating in and out of recession in the past few years.

Earlier this year, Nigeria's Minister of State for Education, Chukwuemeka Nwajiuba, was reported to have said that Nigeria has the highest number of Out-of-School Children (over ten million) in sub-Saharan Africa. Another unwanted statistic comes

from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and it reveals that one in every five of the world's out-of-school children is in Nigeria. UNICEF further claims that even though primary education is officially free and compulsory in Nigeria, about 10.5 million of the country's children aged 5-14 years are not in school; only 61% of 6-11- year-olds regularly attend primary school and only 35.6% of children aged 36-59 months receive early childhood education.

Further still, Nigeria's infrastructure deficit is so high that it is widely accepted to be one of the biggest factors holding back the country's growth and development. While there have been different projections, for the purposes of today's Lecture, let us accept that of Boss Mustapha, Secretary to the Government of the Federation, who stated sometime in June 2021 that about \$2.3 trillion is needed to bridge the infrastructure deficit in Nigeria over the next 22 years.

On top of all these, Nigeria is undoubtedly labouring under the burden of humongous domestic and foreign debts, with the country proposing to spend 36.5% of next year's budget to service debts while still planning to borrow N5.012 trillion to finance its budget deficit in 2022. According to the Debt Management Office, as of December 2020, the total external debt of the Federal Government stood at US\$ 33 billion, out of which the sum of US\$ 3.121 billion is owed to China alone. Indeed, there is a running joke that having regard to the country's population now, every Nigerian owes China about N15,000.00.

Seriously, anyone in this auditorium who is not perturbed by the above numbers must have a very effective shock absorber and must reconsider his or her allegiance to Nigeria. The myriad of other challenges facing Nigeria are also well documented that I need not bore you with them today.

### **3.RECOGNISING OUR CHALLENGES AS THE CONSEQUENCE OF OUR CHOICES ON EDUCATION**

When one considers some of the stark realities of our challenges as a nation, one invariably begins to ask critical questions. Why are we seemingly trapped in an unending downward spiral in most of the indices that matter to a country? Why does our productive

economy lag while our youth population swells? In my humble assessment, part of the clearer answer to these questions is that Nigeria, for far too long, chose to 'de-prioritise' education. As I expatiate below, we have allowed education to lose its pride of place as a critical element of nation building and of national development in Nigeria.

Globally, it is recognised that education has transformative impact which, when applied effectively, is capable of tremendously improving the fortunes of any nation and its people. Nelson Mandela once perceptively noted that "education is the most powerful tool which can be used to change the world". In the same vein, the Vice President, Prof Yemi Osinbajo, SAN, while delivering the 23rd Lagos State University Convocation lecture in May 2019 stated that "education is the most powerful force for socio-economic change in the world."

As a country, we once held education in similar high esteem but, gradually, lost that enthusiasm for educational excellence. Perhaps, only a few of the graduands and graduates present today would know that there was a time in this same country that it was commonplace for families and communities, including illiterate elderly folks, to contribute and sacrifice virtually everything they had to send their children to school because they strongly believed that education was the means to success and progress in life. There was also a time when all tiers of government in Nigeria had viable scholarship programmes for their citizens to attend the best Nigerian and foreign schools. These days we hear of the sordid tales of Nigerians sent abroad on national or state scholarship and abandoned by the government.

In their early glory days, Nigerian universities competed favourably with some of the best tertiary institutions in the world. With time, the standards of Nigerian universities have not just fallen from international to national, today some Universities in Nigeria are of sub-national standards. Unfortunately, the rot is not limited to tertiary institutions. The unity schools which were once the bastion of quality education in Nigeria and set the standards for others to emulate are now wallowing in derelict states across the country.

Sometimes, people feel personally attacked when I say that the state of the education system in Nigeria has deteriorated to the

point that it is now considered a limitation to be described as 'Nigerian-trained.' Hence, it has now become fashionable nay, almost imperative to whitewash our qualifications with foreign-obtained second degrees. And this, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, brings me to how different facets of the Nigerian society, deliberately or inadvertently, have contributed to relegate the value of quality education in the grand scheme of things.

Let me start, as I should, with government. In this same country, the government used to be dead serious about education and regularly devoted significant portions of its resources to build and equip some of the best schools in the country, including the University of Lagos, University of Ibadan, University of Nigeria, Nsukka and, of course, the great University of Benin, to mention only a few. In this regard, we must single out the Late Chief Obafemi Jeremiah Oyeniyi Awolowo whose enduring legacy to Western Nigeria and, by extension, the entire Federation of Nigeria was his contribution to most of the progressive social legislation that transformed Nigeria, especially in the area of education.

At that time when education firmly held the attention of the government, and as I am sure that majority of the guests here would probably recall, Nigerian universities were able to attract their best graduates and retain them to teach the next generations, and it was indeed a thing of pride to be a lecturer or teacher in Nigerian schools. Today, it almost looks like successive governments, including one that was headed by someone from the academia, get a special thrill from playing cat and mouse with universities' academic staff unions.

Need we even talk about the relegation of meritocracy in all spheres of the education system? The moment we allowed quota system to replace merit was the moment we laid the foundation for the collapse of the education system in Nigeria. Rather than be guided by the best standards and principles with which other education systems are administered, the Nigerian factors of ethnicity and "son of the soil" crept in and now hold sway.

Look at the composition of Vice Chancellors of the first set of Universities in Nigeria and compare that with the current Vice Chancellors of all the Federal Universities in Nigeria. For instance, the first indigenous Vice-Chancellor of University of



Lagos ("UNILAG") was Prof. Eni Njoku (1962-65) from the South Eastern part of Nigeria. The same school was also led by Prof. B. Kwaku Adadevoh (1978-80) who was born to a Ghanaian father. The first indigenous Vice-Chancellor of the premier University of Ibadan was Professor Kenneth Onwuka Dike, born in Awka in present day Anambra State. Prof. Oladipo Akinkugbe, from Ondo State, was Vice-Chancellor of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria (1978-1979). There are many other examples.<sup>1</sup> I am certain that all of these would sound like fiction to many of our graduands and graduates today, and who can blame them? In Federal universities in Nigeria, most of the current Vice Chancellors hail from the State or geopolitical zone where the University is situated.

Perhaps, the most palpable indicator of the de-prioritisation of education at the government/policy making level is seen in the area of funding. How well funded is the education sector in Nigeria? What is the national budget for education? Unfortunately, we all know the answer. The Nigerian education sector has been poorly funded over the years, and its level of funding has consistently fallen far below the recommendation of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). According to the UNESCO report titled, 'Education for All, EFA, 2000-2015: Achievement and Challenges' and the World Education Forum 2015 Final Report, the Dakar framework recommended governments to take the lead in increasing financial commitments to education for all, by proposing a budgetary benchmark of 15% to 20% of annual budgets to be earmarked for education to enable nations to adequately cater to rising education demands. A Premium Times report reveals that the 2021 budgetary allocation to the education sector, at 5.68%, was the lowest in 10 years.<sup>2</sup> This situation has come with far-reaching adverse but completely predictable consequences for the country. A poorly funded education section will invariably produce a sizeable population of poorly trained graduates who are unemployable into a skilled workforce from the outset. Some commentators have even suggested that the poor

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.tekedia.com/special-report-appointing-vice-chancellors-for-nigerian-oldestuniversities-questions-of-federal-character-and-gender-imbalance/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/422829-buharis-2021-budgetshare-foreducation-is-nigerias-lowest-in-10-years.html>

funding of the education sector has a correlation with the rising spate of insecurity and violence in Nigeria, and one has to admit that their argument is plausible. Indeed, because of that vicious cycle of a poorly funded education system tending to produce poorly trained graduates who are then unable to get anything better than a poorly paying job or none at all, the thirst for education has almost given way to betting, advance fee fraud, and all other illicit means of quick money.

At your convenience, I challenge you to undertake a comparative analysis of the modules offered in UK Universities at the undergraduate level with those offered by Nigerian Universities. You can simply do this by browsing the Websites of the UK Universities. Courses like entrepreneurship, innovation, and technology are now commonplace. Here, we struggle to fund instructions on basic courses, let alone developing new areas.

Our academia also appears to be increasingly losing its cutting edge, perhaps because of the demoralising impact of government's waning commitment to the education sector. We live in challenging and extraordinary times, in a world which is complex, dynamic, and ever changing. The expectation, therefore, is that the nation's academia, especially the academic administrators of our tertiary institutions, would likewise show dynamism in the structure and content of our education system.

To be certain, I have seen first-hand, in the legal profession where I operate, how non-dynamic education systems can hamper national economic progress. The most important role of the legal profession in every country is to service that country's economy, and not necessarily to resolve conflicts. In truth, dispute resolution is only an aspect of the legal profession. Unfortunately, for a long time, we made the choice to stay in a little corner called 'dispute resolution', and litigation in particular, with practically insignificant incursions now and then into niche areas of legal practice. This is the primary reason for the erroneous impression that we have too many lawyers in Nigeria, particularly because our universities produce about 5,000 law graduates every year.

Yet, nothing could be further from the truth. According to the world-renowned statistics portal, [statista.com](https://www.statista.com), in the United Kingdom with a population of about 67 million, there were about 143,000 persons currently practising as solicitors alone as of the

fourth quarter of 2020. This figure is exclusive of the barristers. The same website states that there were about 1.33 million lawyers in the United States America as of August 2020. In Nigeria, the total number of persons called to the Nigerian Bar since 1960 (dead and alive) do not exceed 200,000. This figure includes a sizable portion who do not practice law and the equally significant number of lawyers that have since emigrated.

The quality of legal education that we were exposed to as law students, which was predominantly focused on dispute resolution is partly to blame for this state of affairs. This would probably not go down well with some, but the truth remains that the curriculum of Faculties of Laws of Nigerian universities has largely remained the same in the past thirty years. It was wrong but probably understandable for the curricula of Faculties of Laws of Nigerian universities to have been litigation centric in the 1980s. It is however now unacceptable for us to persist with that situation in the 21st Century.

Some of us have begun to create awareness regarding the disservice that we are doing to ourselves by not updating our curricula and general education content and structure to grow capacity in grossly underutilized practice areas. Despite our best efforts, there remains a dearth of Nigerian lawyers who are actively participating in the emerging areas of the economy. The worrying reality, however, is that while many lawyers in Nigeria now wallow in clearly ignorant bliss, there are ongoing moves to open the borders and allow foreign lawyers to provide legal services in Nigeria. In truth, this is already happening in diverse informal ways, and a complete breakdown of the trade barriers might catch many Nigerian lawyers unaware and unprepared, with the resulting competition sweeping most of them away. Our saving grace so far are the statutory barriers that forbid foreign lawyers from practising law in Nigeria, which has left some lawyers with a false sense of security. But we cannot ignore globalisation and, more specifically, the coming into force of the Agreement establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). Unless we re-prioritise education in a meaningful and dynamic way, we may well be driving head-long to more, rather than less, challenges in our national development.

Please note that I have used the legal profession and legal education, which I am familiar with, only as a representative

example to make the point that our academia and the administrators of our tertiary institutions should tailor our education system to sync with the dynamism of global trends. In 2021, all the talk is about the technological revolution, the information age and one global rave of the moment, for instance, is cryptocurrency. The CBN has also recently launched the e-Naira. Yet, and I stand to be corrected, I do not believe that there is a single Nigerian school that offers blockchain technology-related courses, artificial intelligence, etc. Meanwhile, while preparing for this Lecture, I took some time to browse through the website of this my cherished alma mata, UNIBEN. It was disappointing to see that nothing in the website provided a definite answer to the question of what courses are on offer in this great University. We need to sort this out ASAP.

Last but not least, we-and by we, I refer to the regular members of the Nigerian society, including the graduands and graduates here and their family members and every other member of the audience-have also de-prioritised education in a way that may be subtle but nonetheless devastating. In years past, parents and even schools encouraged youngsters to venture into fields that play to their strengths, passion, and interest. Hence, we had both universities and other vocational and technical institutions co-existing and co-flourishing. Today, it seems to be all about the certificate - at least until one is confronted with the real-life job market. That child who is clearly gifted with his hands but cannot endure the rigours of extensive brainwork is nonetheless bundled to the university to study a 'professional course' rather than be enrolled in a crafts school to further hone her/his gift and contribute to our creative and productive economy. In this way, as some school of thought put it, we focus on (and thus prioritise) schooling while overlooking (and thus de-prioritising) education. To any graduands or graduates here who was a victim of such cajole into studying courses that do not align with your interest and natural talent, be reassured by the fact that now you are done with university, you remain free to follow what you know to be your true calling.

#### **4. COURSE-CORRECTING OUR EDUCATION PRIORITIES**

I endorse wholeheartedly the views of the Nigerian renowned educationist, Ujunwa Atueyi, that education is the antidote to the

challenges in the entire constituent sectors of the country. Certainly, the panacea for the myriad of challenges that Nigeria is currently battling with must involve the urgent restoration of education as a critical element of nation building in Nigeria and the recognition of education as a veritable tool for unlocking the binding constraints to national development in the 21st Century Nigeria. There are no short-cuts. We must return to the vision and mission of our founding fathers.

In preparing for this Lecture, I took time to refresh my memory on the vision and mission of the University of Benin and I must of necessity reproduce them here.

**Vision:** To establish a model Institution of Higher Learning which ranks among the best in the world and responsive to the creative and innovative abilities of the Nigerian people.

**Mission:** To develop the human mind to be creative, innovative, competent in areas of specialisation, knowledgeable in entrepreneurship and dedicated to service.

I could not have put either of these any better. From the vision, I have singled out the words, "responsive to the creative and innovative abilities of the Nigerian people" and from the mission, I urge you to pay particular attention to the words: creativity, innovation, specialisation, and entrepreneurship. The next question may be how and to what extent have these vision and mission been actualised? It is not for me to answer that question, but it is enough for me if this Lecture has succeeded in refocusing our minds to what our schools were established for.

Following from my views on how we de-prioritised education at the government and policy level in the first place, it is not possible for me to discuss how to reprioritize education without discussing funding again. As the saying goes: "you put your money where your mouth is." There is also that other aphorism which is to the effect that "you pay peanuts and you get monkeys". As some of us may recall, earlier this year, President Muhammadu Buhari attended the 2021 edition of the global summit on education in London which was co-hosted by the British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta. At the event,

President, Buhari committed to ensuring that Nigeria meets the UNESCO international benchmark after years of failure. In particular, the President pledged as follows:

"We fully endorse the call for more efficient use of resources and to significantly increase investment in education by strengthening institutions, promoting greater adoption of technology, building the capacities of our teachers, and mobilising additional financial resources through legal frameworks and deliberate intervention on a sustainable basis. In this regard, we commit to progressively increase our annual domestic education expenditure by 50 per cent over the next two years and up to 100 per cent by 2025 beyond the 20 per cent global benchmark. Let us, therefore, raise our hands in solidarity to build a more secure and prosperous future for our children."<sup>3</sup>

A close scrutiny of the 2022 budget proposal presented to the National Assembly by the President reveals that out of N16.39 trillion proposed for next year, the sum of N1.29 trillion, amounting to 7.9%, was allocated to education. While this is still a far cry from the 50% increase from the 2021 budget promised by the President, it is nevertheless an improvement from the 5.68% in the 2021 budget. The proverbial ball is now in the court of the National Assembly to match this commitment to increased spending in the education sector.

Despite the above, it must also be said that the Government in Nigeria or indeed anywhere in the world cannot be totally responsible for funding education especially the Universities. It is simply not feasible. For context, please consider this: On 14 October 2021, the Harvard Management Company of Harvard University, the world's wealthiest University, announced that the University's endowment, the Harvard Fund, made a 33.2% gain and has now swelled to \$53.2 Billion. You can compare this with Nigeria's entire budget for 2021 for size. There are similar endowments for schools such as University of Cambridge,

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/491888-2022-budget-thought-far-from-unesco-enchmark-buhari-inches-towards-fulfilling-education-funding-pledge.html>

University of Oxford etc.

These are examples of how premier universities in the world are run and there is no reason why Nigerian Universities should not strive to operate along these models of internally generated revenue, endowments, grants, contributions from alumni, tuition, etc. Universities have to think outside the box to generate revenue to fulfil their objectives. Research and Development should be prioritized so that inventions can be commercialized. For example, the most accessible vaccine against COVID-19 is the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine which emerged from a collaboration between Oxford University's Jenner Institute and Vaccitech, a private company spun off from the university.

To this end, I must also implore governments at the federal and state levels to give to universities the required autonomy to function effectively and efficiently. Political institutions must allow the educational institutions to function without interference. Universities are not and should not be considered as revenue generating entities for government or for the federation.

Our schools must also do more to offer courses and modules that are relevant to the 21st century, and to ensure that only persons who have the intellectual stamina to withstand academic rigours remain in school. We must put an end to the issue and stigma around being 'Nigerian-trained.' In the mid- to long- term, this should mean that heads of faculties and the academic management of our universities should revise curricula across board to introduce courses and modules that are fit for purpose in the 21st century. In the immediate, this should mean that examination malpractice and compromises, along with plagiarism and academic theft, must be taken seriously. If we do not fight examination malpractice, plagiarism, and academic theft today, the ill-equipped lawyers, doctors, engineers, accountants, educationists, business managers etc. that the education system produces today will be the ones in charge of different sectors of our economy in the next twenty years. The result, which is already self-evident in the spate of professional misconduct, medical malpractice, quack services, defective buildings, increasing number of collapsed buildings, etc, will be even more dire than our current poor state of national development.

As for every Nigerian, we must realise that emphasis has shifted

globally from certificates and degrees to skillset. That is why, for instance, one can see disappointing instances of so-called expatriates with no university degree effectively supervising their Nigerian colleagues with double engineering degrees. Education must transcend mere schooling and we must reorientate ourselves to appreciate that it is more honourable and rewarding to acquire and be proficient in other skills and learning outside of the formal university system than to ride the university system on mediocrity and corruption and emerge a graduate who cannot defend her/his calling.

And now, let me speak directly to the graduands and graduates, especially those who just earned their first degrees, please understand that the reason that I make the foregoing points is to remind and prepare you for life after convocation. This distinguished institution has found you worthy in character and in learning to confer different degrees upon you, but there will be a more consequential test of both character and learning out there. Therefore if there were any learning and skills development that were missed in school, please do well to explore remedial avenues to make up for them. Then, join us on this side to demand and work for improvements in the education experience in whatever fields that you may ultimately be. And, please, be the generation of alumni that will remember and give back to their and my alma mata, UNIBEN. We must do the little that we can while sustaining the pressure on government and school administrators to return us to the days of education priority.

## **5. THE NIGERIAN BAR ASSOCIATION IS PLAYING ITS PART**

I know that one person in the audience is probably wondering what I am doing with my office and platform towards the critical role of solving Nigeria's problems. I must say with all sense of humility that the Nigerian Bar Association under my administration has been contributing its quota. While we are doing quite a lot, let me narrow it down to the education sector which is what we are discussing today. To understand the issue of legal education in Nigeria, it is critical to look at it from two divisions: legal education of students and intending lawyers which is the statutory responsibility of the Council of Legal Education through the Nigerian Law School and the various Faculties of Law and continuing legal education of lawyers after their call to



the Nigerian Bar. It is the latter that is squarely within the jurisdictional competence of the NBA. This is not to suggest that the NBA has no role in the legal education of prospective lawyers. Indeed, the promotion and advancement of Legal Education in Nigeria is part of the aims and objectives of the NBA as contained in Section 3 of our Constitution. It is a mandate that we take very seriously.

As I have consistently told Nigerian lawyers, especially the Young Lawyers, my idea of welfare for the young lawyer does not lie in providing hand-outs to them, rather it is about equipping them with modern skills and tools to provide for themselves. It is for this reason that we have revitalized our Institute of Continuing Legal Education (ICLE) to empower Nigerian lawyers, especially the young lawyers, to learn, unlearn, and relearn the critical and relevant skills that will enable them to carve a niche for themselves, and this the ICLE has already started to do through its robust practice-based training sessions that have been highly acclaimed.

We have also set up a Career Development Centre at the NBA which, among other things, provides career guidance to our members and acts as a statistical centre regarding career deficiency and development of members. We are also launching a mentoring programme under which senior practitioners who have made a name for themselves will act as mentors to young lawyers.

For legal education proper, I have consistently maintained that the NBA is also well placed to tackle the problems in that space, seeing that the Director General and all the lecturers at the Nigerian Law School are lawyers and members of the NBA. The Chairman of the Council of Legal Education is also a lawyer. Accordingly, our Legal Education Committee has been set up and equipped to partner with these distinguished members to effect a transformational change to the legal training that prospective lawyers in Nigeria receive.

Some of their specific mandates include to achieve a review and upgrade on the structure and content of courses being taught in our universities and at the Law School. We owe ourselves the duty to develop and introduce new modules on emerging areas of the law- technology, Fin Tech, information technology, environmental law, E-commerce, power, entertainment, sports,

etc-and ensure that these, together with existing courses, especially the commercial/business law courses, are taught in a practical manner that reflects contemporary realities.

Indeed, it does not speak well of the education system that after spending a minimum of six years to qualify as a legal practitioner, many employers still expend considerable resources to send their new employees to undertake practical and skills based trainings before they are deemed ready to solve clients' problems. When I say these things, they are not intended to bring down the education system. Instead, I say them as an employer of labour and because these constructive feedbacks are necessary for growth and progress.

Having said this, we must nevertheless concede that even with the best education system, there will always be one or two things that the schools cannot teach, and we must therefore consistently seek to learn those things and equip ourselves with the requisite skills to survive the revolution that is sure to come.

It is also for this reason that I call on you not to forget to contribute your own quota to solving the many problems of this country. A country gets better when everyone does his/her bit by making his/her corner of the world better. You can start by ensuring that you contribute to the continuous development of this great institution and that you do not turn your back on her after this Convocation ceremony. The alumni of Universities all over the world have a critical role to play in sustaining their Universities for the next generations.

Still on how you can contribute, and I am concluding now, all the best ideas in the world on how to improve the quality of education in Nigeria will come to naught if we continue to allow ourselves to be governed by leaders across all tiers of government that do not believe in education. You must therefore come out from your comfort zones and get involved in deciding the future direction of this country. We saw what transpired in Anambra State a few weeks ago, where less than 250,000 persons, out of an estimated population of 6,350,000 people, turned out to vote and therefore decided the fate and direction of the State for the next four years. Without taking anything away from the winner of the election, Professor Chukwuma Soludo, it is not a formula that we can afford for the rest of the country. You must all go out and register

to vote and begin the process of retaking the destiny of your country in your own hands. This is the only way that Nigeria's problems will be gradually and effectively solved.

Thank you for listening.