# ROLE OF THE PRESS IN DEVELOPING HIGHER EDUCATION IN AFRICA

**A position paper delivered by Rotimi Lawrence Oyekanmi at the 3rd International Conference on The Future of Higher Education holding at Babcock University on August 26, 2015.**

## PROTOCOLS

I want begin by sincerely thanking the organisers of this laudable conference for finding me worthy to stand before this distinguished audience to present a position paper on this very important and timely topic. It is quite interesting for me to be switching roles, because, for about 18 years, I had covered many incisive lectures, especially inaugural lectures, delivered by eminent professors throughout the length and breadth of this country. It would then be my duty to interpret such lectures, to enable a layman understand the complicated contents, depending on the field – from the social sciences, Liberal Arts, Medicine to all other branches of science.

I am especially happy to be back home, here at Babcock University. I witnessed the presentation of the operating licence to its proprietors in the National Universities Commission's auditorium in Abuja back in 1999, and I was also here, on this beautiful campus, to cover the university's maiden convocation ceremony. I was to come back again and again, to cover two more convocations and other events, until I moved up the ladder at my former office, *The Guardian.*

## DEFINITIONS

Various scholars, especially political scientists, have proffered their own definitions of what they think the role of the press should be. The encyclopedia of the new American nation, for example, stated that the roles of the press, among others, include the "three I's – Information, Interpretation and Interest.

But for *English for students.com,* "press is more than a media of information. It plays an important role in a democratic country. It can make or break the governments. It can calm down the people or play up their passions. It can help the party in power to strengthen its position or make the opposition to get the upper hand. Press not only leaves its impact on political life but also affects our social and economic life. It can help in tracing out the criminals. It can give expression to the grievance of the people and it can help the people to attain their ends."

Roger Hilsman, an American political scientist, identified "the gathering and dissemination of information" as the major function of the press. Another political scientist, Doris Graber observed: "By suggesting the cause and relationships of various events, the media may shape opinions even without telling their audiences what to believe or think."

And for Dmitry Fadeyev, "the purpose of the press is to keep in public spotlight every deliberation and decision that the government makes, since everything the government does is to be done on the people's behalf. This constant spotlight will no doubt exert continuous pressure on public office holders, and it is exactly this pressure that keeps their role as public representatives; fulfilling the interests of the public, above fulfilling personal interests."

So, in general terms, people tend to look at and have hope in the press, that way they look at and have high hope in an ideal judiciary. Apart from disseminating information, the voiceless often look up to the press to defend their interests. The rich and powerful often loathe journalists, because they know it is only the press that can expose their misdeeds. However, these roles have often come at a high price. All over the world, journalists get killed and maimed in large numbers every year, because of their objective reports, while some are forced into exile.

And of course, I will not forget the definition of a gun-wielding military man, who stopped me at a checkpoint under the Lagos Mile 2 bridge one evening in March 1997 and asked me to identify myself. When I told him I was a journalist, he said, '*hen hen*, you are a journalist? *Oya*, come down. Is that why you *no wan* stop?" I remembered what the Great Zik of Africa said about the danger of arguing with a man with a gun. So I quickly obeyed his order and walked up to him with a smile. "Oga," I said sheepishly,

"we journalists are your friends." He took one cynical look at me and barked: "Friend? You ne be my friend o! Na busy body you be, all of una. Una go dey put eye, put mouth for matter wey no concern you." Of course, Gen. Sani Abacha was still in power at that time, so you can understand why I had to take it really easy.

**ASPECTS OF THE AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM**

At the Conference of Rectors, Vice Chancellors and Presidents (COREViP) of African Universities, held in Kigali, Rwanda between June 2 and 6, eminent Nigerian scholar, Prof. Peter Okebukola described Africa's higher education system as the most diverse in the world.

With about 2,450 post secondary institutions spread across the continent, 65 per cent of which are universities, such diversities, which exist even in institutional and language categories, show very clearly.

According to Okebukola, "specialised universities have continued to thrive in response to societal demand for specific skills. Of the 141 universities in Nigeria, 10 are specialised universities of technology and five are universities of agriculture. Ghana has a specialised University of Development Studies and one, which specialises in telecommunication. Both Nigeria and Ghana have specialised universities of education. Ivory Coast has a University of Science and Technology. In Kenya, there is the Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology. Namibia has a University of Management. Somalia has the Somaliland University of Technology."

Although, the growth of Africa's higher education system has been slowed down by various impediments, deliberate efforts are now being made by various countries to improve on all fronts.

The African Union (AU) has been leading in this regard. Just last year, Agenda 2063, aimed at driving the continent's economic development was launched and subsequently described as "a call to all Africans to take responsibility for the continent's destiny." Part of the agenda is the establishment of the Pan African e-university.

Already, "15 networks involving 72 universities are implementing academic mobility; involving 798 individuals; consisting of 465 masters, 259 PhD students and 74 staff from 39 African countries. The mobility programme is (being) managed by the EC Executive

Agency, in collaboration with the African Union Commission."

The agenda "represents the clear articulation of the future Africa wants and an opportunity for collective mobilisation of actions and actors. It also anticipates the inclusion of every African, sector and relevant partners, just as it identifies the centrality of science and technology, education and human resource development as essential elements."

On the recent developments at the Pan African University, Dr Beatrice Njenga, the Head, Education Division of the African Union Commission has revealed that " a President and Vice President for the PAU Council were elected by the AU Summit in January 2015. The first Council meeting is scheduled for June 2015. A new call for students was issued for the 2015-2016 academic year, which attracted 5629 applicants. In November 2014, the PAU graduated its 54 pioneer masters students from PAUSTI in Kenya. An interim Rectorate has been established at the African Union Commission's (AUC) headquarters, with staff to oversee the smooth running of the PAU, pending the establishment of a permanent Rectorate in Yaoundé, Cameroon."

With regard to Africa's quality assurance efforts, the African Union Commission has developed what it calls the African Quality Rating Mechanism (AQRM) and it is working with the Association of African Universities (AAU) to produce the Pan African Quality Assurance Accreditation Framework.

The objectives are to support the development of institutional culture of and commitment to quality; ensure that the performance of African Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) could be compared against a set of criteria; foster comparability among qualifications and facilitate academic mobility; improve the quality of delivery in African HEIs; and enhance the means of identifying Centres of Excellence.

The AQRM, according to Dr Yohannes Woldetensae, African Union's Senior Education Expert, was developed through extensive dialogue by the African academic community, adopted by the COMEDAF III in 2007 and validated by stakeholders at a meeting co-hosted by the AAU in Accra, Ghana in March 2008. Its pilot self-rating was conducted in 2010, with 32 institutions from 11 countries participating. The AUC, he said, published the results of the exercise.

Following the pilot survey, a revised AQRM questionnaire was designed, using a five-

point scale scoring sheet, consisting of 84 standards (49 Institution-level and 35 Programme-level). In February 2014, a call was made for universities to participate in the AQRM self-rating exercise. Nine universities were selected to validate the results of institutions' self-rating, through onsite visits, with external reviewers of quality experts. Fifteen quality experts undertook the AQRM validation missions and prepared assessment reports.

These nine universities were: Addis Ababa University (Ethiopia), Dar es Salaam University (Tanzania), Strathmore University (Kenya), University of Yaounde II (Cameroon) and Botho University (Botswana). Also included were Kwazulu-Nathal University (South Africa), Institute of Water, 2IE (Burkina Faso), Cape Coast University (Ghana) and the University of Tlemcen (Algeria).

In terms of access, many African countries are also opening their higher education spaces up. According to Okebukola, beginning from the 1990s, the African higher education space opened to greater private participation. The diversity in public-private ownership has now become a distinguishing feature of the system. In many countries, private higher education institutions range in proportion of total from 15% in Ghana and Ethiopia, through 20% in Kenya to 40% in Nigeria. While private higher education institutions have maintained high numbers, enrolment in these institutions is relatively low compared with public institutions.

He also revealed that linguistic diversity, in terms of the language of instruction, has become another enduring characteristic of African higher education. "In Anglophone countries (e.g. Ghana, Nigeria and Sierra Leone), English is the medium of instruction while French is used in higher education institutions in francophone countries such as Cote d'Ivoire, Mali and Senegal. Lusophone countries - Angola, Mozambique and Cape Verde apply Portuguese in teaching and learning in higher education. This linguistic diversity comes with curriculum diversity fashioned along the lines of institutions in English, French and Portuguese higher education institutions.

The famous ARUSHA Convention, originally propounded in 1981, when African countries met and agreed to establish a mechanism through which diploma and certificates from different institutions and countries would be harmonized, would have been very helpful had it been followed through.

The convention the aims at:

- strengthening and promoting inter-regional and international co-operation in the field of recognition of studies, certificates, diplomas, degrees or other academic qualifications;
- defining and putting in place effective quality assurance and accreditation mechanisms at the national and regional level;
- encouraging and promoting the widest and most effective possible use of human resources available in Africa and of the diaspora in order to speed up the development of their respective countries and to limit African brain-drain;
- facilitating the exchange and greater mobility of students, teachers and researchers of the region and the diaspora, by the recognition of studies, diplomas, degrees or qualifications delivered by another Contracting State in order to follow or continue higher education studies;
- furthering the setting up of high level joint training and research programmes between higher education institutions and supporting the award of joint degrees;
- improving and reinforcing the collection and exchange of information for the purpose of implementing this Convention; and
- contributing to the harmonisation of diplomas, taking into account the current global trend aiming at generalising the Licence Master's Doctorate (LMD) system. (Okebukola, 2015).

However, African leaders have been accused of not implementing the provisions of this convention, although, 41 countries recently met at a conference where a revised one was launched. Some 16 countries out of the total signed this revised version.

Other measures aimed at promoting quality in Africa currently in place include: the introduction of the African Credit Transfer System and the creation of regional Africa Centres of Excellence among others.

Nigeria has had its own fair share of challenges. Our country's higher education system started on a very good note, with the establishment of the University of Ibadan in 1948. The first generation universities were established in the early 60s, followed by the second generation in the 70s. That was a glorious era when foreign institutions accepted Nigerian graduates without doubts.

But the 80s brought the university system to its knees. Everything went down and many distinguished Nigerian scholars left for greener pasture in what is famously referred to as brain drain. Efforts to bring back the glory of our university system in the last 10 years have helped, but there is still along way to go.

**CHALLENGES REMAIN**

In the latest ranking (2015) of World Universities by the Times Higher Education, the following 10 institutions were rated the best:

1.  California Institute of Technology – 94.3% (USA)
2.  Harvard University – 93.3% (USA)
3.  University of Oxford – 93.2 (UK)
4.  Stanford University – 92.9 (USA)
5.  University of Cambridge – 92% (UK)
6.  Massachusetts Institute of Technology – 91.9 (USA)
7.  Princeton University - 90.9 ((USA)
8.  University of California, Berkeley – 89.5 (USA)
9.  **Imperial College, London -  87.5 (UK)**
9   **Yale University – 87.5 (USA)**

The **13 performance indicators used were grouped into five areas:**
• Teaching: the learning environment (worth 30 per cent of the overall ranking score)
• Research: volume, income and reputation (worth 30 per cent)
• Citations: research influence (worth 30 per cent)
• Industry income: innovation (worth 2.5 per cent)
• International outlook: staff, students and research (worth 7.5 per cent)

In Africa, of the 30 best universities listed, South Africa had the highest number (12) followed by Egypt (6). Nigeria was among the fist six in the following order:

1.  University of Cape Town (South Africa) 99.90
2.  University of the Witwatersrand (South Africa) 99.76

3. Makerere University (Uganda) 99.72

4. Stellenbosch University (South Africa) 95.58

5. University of Kwazulu-Natal (South Africa) 89.41

6. University of Port Harcourt (Nigeria) 88.92


According to UNESCO, higher education in Africa faces difficult challenges, including:

•        a rapid increase in the number of students

•        brain drain

•        low course quality

•        difficulties in governance structures

•        financial constraints


But there is another more fundamental one: the commitment of African political leaders to higher education. In my recent interview with Prof. Ishaq Oloyede, a former vice chancellor of the University of Ilorin, he described the situation this way:

   "I have watched them (African political leaders) over the years. Talk of the best commitment in terms of speech, you'll get it from Africa. Our governments will go to events and they would make profound statements about the importance and centrality of higher education, their commitment to higher education, but that's where it ends."


**WHAT ROLE FOR THE PRESS?**

   While it is all right for the press to play its primary role of reporting events and disseminating information, what is at stake at the moment demands much more. In view of the centrality of higher education to the overall development of the African continent, the press is obliged to watch political leaders closely and nudge them into action when they fail to accord higher education its rightful place. Without the political will and the right policies, higher education systems are bound to suffer.

   Not only that, the press should also watch the managers of the higher education system closely and ensure that they do the right things at all times, since this involves public trust.

   It should be able to identify what works and what does not though thorough analysis

based on facts.  The press can, for instance, look at the challenges facing the African Higher education system and compare situations with those of other climes.

The press should also be able to point the way forward. For instance, if Nigeria has produced so many electrical engineers, why is the country still having challenges with its electricity? With so many mechanical engineers, why have we not made our own cars, rather than just setting up assembly plants on behalf of foreign players? If we say our hospitals don't have enough doctors, the press owes it a duty to, through investigation, reveal how many doctors the country has so far produced, in what specialization and where exactly they are.

If the political leaders are playing politics with the budget for education, the press should expose the underlying factors. If, for instance, the federal government purchases 15 bullet proof SUVs for political office holders when universities don't have enough money to buy reagents for their laboratories, the press can estimate how much of the problems the money spent purchasing each SUV can solve in the higher education system.

In recent time, there has been a lot of clamour for the equalization of Higher National Diploma and the Bachelor's degree. The press can, through empirical evidence, show Nigerians whether the so called discrimination between holder of the HND and BSc or Bachelor of Art degree holders makes any sense.

The press (in Nigeria) can also ask - why have Nigerian universities not produced more than one Nobel Laureate since independence? We have so many professors, what are they doing? What kind of research activities are going on in the university system, and if there are none, why is this so?

We also have a government agency concerned with National Planning. So, why are things not properly planned in Nigeria?  If, for instance, you have 100,000 pupils in primary schools in Year A, it shouldn't be that difficult to know the number of secondary schools needed to accommodate them in six years, and by extension, the number of higher institutions needed in 12 years. Who is failing in his or her responsibilities and why?

**FACTORS THAT PROMOTE THE ROLE OF THE PRESS**

The press can only play its expected roles if the atmosphere is conducive. Some of the factors to consider are:

1. **Conditions of Service**: Journalists will be able to perform their roles effectively if their conditions of service are favourable.

2. **Capacity building:** Journalists need to be trained and re-trained at regular intervals. The rate at which changes occur in the media world demands constant updating. A journalist immersed in yesterday's way of doing things will be ineffective in today's dynamics.

3. **Press Freedom**: The constitution must guarantee freedom of the press to enable journalists practice their profession without fear or favour. Unrestricted access to information that does not compromise national security is also necessary.

4. **Specialisation**: The longer a journalist spends on a beat, the more experienced he or she becomes. Specialisation is good for journalism as it gives the journalist the room to expand his or her knowledge over a long period. The current practice in some media houses, where journalist are posted to several beats within short periods tend to make them jack of all trades and master of none.

5. **Self Development**: A journalist covering the education beat should be deeply knowledgeable about the education sector. He should read extensively and consult widely. He should have facts at his fingertips and also possess good analytical skills. With respect to the university system, he or she must well-informed about how it functions.

6. **Integrity**: Integrity is an essential part of journalism. Where a journalist lacks integrity, he or she cannot protect the public interest. Receiving bribe to bury a good story of public interest is a grievous sin in journalism. Journalists must be disciplined, fearless, hardworking and incorruptible. If any of these elements is missing, the public interest would automatically be at stake.

**CONSTRAINTS**

To be able to perform his or her expected roles conscientiously, a journalist also needs to be well motivated. Unfortunately, many media houses don't pay good salary. At the

moment, many are owing their staff several months of salary arrears.

Lack of promotion can also be very discouraging. Hardworking journalists deserve recognition.

Besides, the orientation of many media outlets and their treatment of education stories leave so much to be desired.  Most newspapers focus more on political and business stories. If the Senate President is quarelling with the President for instance, newspapers prefer to put that on the front page. But if you have a good analysis of why students have consistently failed the Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME) in large numbers over many years, newspapers will put the story on any but the front page. The sub editors may even tell you to publish it on the education page, which appears once a week.


**CONCLUSION**

This position paper began by examining some definitions of the role of the press; some aspects of the African higher education system and some constraints associated with it. It also attempted to define a path for the press to perform its expected role effectively and the factors needed to bring this about. It identified certain constraints that could jeopardise this role and what could be done to prevent pitfalls.

In all of this, one fact remains constant: the press has a very important role to play in the advancement of the African higher education system. But in order to play this role successfully, the press must put its house in order, with integrity as its hallmark.


**SHORT BIO**

**ROTIMI LAWRENCE OYEKANMI** joined *The Guardian* newspaper as a reporter in December 1996.  He rose to the position of Correspondent/Head, Education Desk in 2003; Acting News Editor in 2011 and was Head, Features Desk until September 2014 when he resigned and reinvented *The Intellectual* magazine.

During his over 18 years of reporting on Education, Oyekanmi effectively covered the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), primary, secondary, vocational and tertiary levels. He also covered development issues, specializing in poverty in Africa.

He collaborated with several regional, national, international and non-governmental organisations, including but not limited to: UNESCO, UNICEF, UNDP, CSACEFA (Civil Society Action Coalition for Education for All), ACTIONAID, the British Council and Exam Ethics International (EEI) on all aspects of education.

Widely travelled and respected, he has also covered major international conferences

in numerous countries spread across five continents, including the biennial UNESCO General and Commonwealth of Learning conferences.

He is the first Nigerian journalist to interview the incumbent Director General of UNESCO, Mrs. Irina Bokova and the current Commonwealth Secretary General, Mr. Kamalesh Sharma.

Among other achievements, Oyekanmi spent five months (January to May 2000) at the Post Graduate Journalism School, University of California, Berkeley, under the auspices of the reputable Freedom Forum fellowship.

He also participated in the 2007 version of the prestigious United States' Department of State's International Visitors' Leadership Programme (IVLP). Besides, he has, at various times, been bestowed with distinguished awards by schools and organizations, including the EEI and the Civil Society Coalition on Education for All (CSACEFA) for extensive coverage of the education sector.

Oyekanmi obtained both his Bachelor of Art and Master's degrees in Christian Religious Studies and Public Administration (MPA) from the Lagos State University in 1992 and 1999 respectively. He also holds a Post Graduate Diploma in Journalism, acquired from the Nigerian Institute of Journalism in 1996. He is an Associate member of the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR). He is also a member of the Tertiary Education Trust Fund's (TETFUND) Technical Advisory Group (TAG) on Book Development.