

## STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES AND WELFARE: SHARING THE NARRATIVE OF OUR GROWTH AND SUCCESS

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### *Abstract*

*Competition is the battle for acceptability between and amongst organizations for customers' patronages. Competition has crept into Nigeria's higher education sector given the huge number of licensed private and public universities by the National Universities Commission (NUC) in all nooks and crannies of the country. Given the level of competition amongst these universities in scouting for new students, the universities, especially those in the private sub-sector, are left without choice other than to devise some ingenious strategies of wooing students and parents to apply for admissions. The establishment of well-managed student support services and welfare is one of such ingenious ways of beating competitors. Students support services are a cluster of facilities that are provided to make the learning process easier and more attractive. Such support services serve as an interface between the learners and the institution. This paper chronicles the various student support services and welfare in Godfrey Okoye University to make the learning process easier and interesting. It is the view of this paper that supporting student welfare in universities would accelerate student's completion rates and encourage them to have positive learning experiences, amongst others. The paper recommends the urgent need to radically reappraise the personal tutor system and that the university should know the limits it can go in providing support services. This is because no university can provide everything on campus for her students.*

## Introduction

Competition in the Nigerian's education sector is something that is real considering the large number of licensed private and public universities in all nooks and crannies of Nigeria's landscape. Competition is the battle for acceptability between and among these private and public universities for students' intake.

This inherent competition no doubt must be viewed from different points of view to maximize competitive advantage especially in this era of dwindling students' enrollment whereby only the strongest survive in the murky waters of Nigeria's business environment. Consequently, universities must be able to face the challenges of globalization especially in the education sector and produce graduates who can compete anywhere in the world. Competition not only occurs among private universities in Nigeria but also within state and federal funded universities, as well. This has an impact on the increasing challenges of private universities to maintain the exited number of students and get new students in the coming year. Thus, the survival of private universities in Nigeria still depends to a large extent on the number of students' enrollment. The above scenario has been exacerbated by the dwindling fortunes of the national economy.

Currently, the competition among the private universities in scouting for new students is increasing at cut-throat dimensions. The universities are left without choice except to device some ingenious ways of wooing students and parents to apply for admissions in their institutions. Assauri (2013) asserts that the competitive advantage of a company from its competitors can be generated from technological sophistication or from the distribution network owned by the organizations. In

addition, people are more intelligent in choosing educational institutions especially those owned and run by faith-based organizations. In making these choices, the universities' names no doubt would be of immense considerations. Furthermore, the facilities cum services provided by the universities become a competing variable. Without mincing words, a good image and reputation will generate a greater appraisal to positive surprises and smaller market penalties for negative surprises than any other organization (Pfarrer, Pollock and Rindova (2010)).

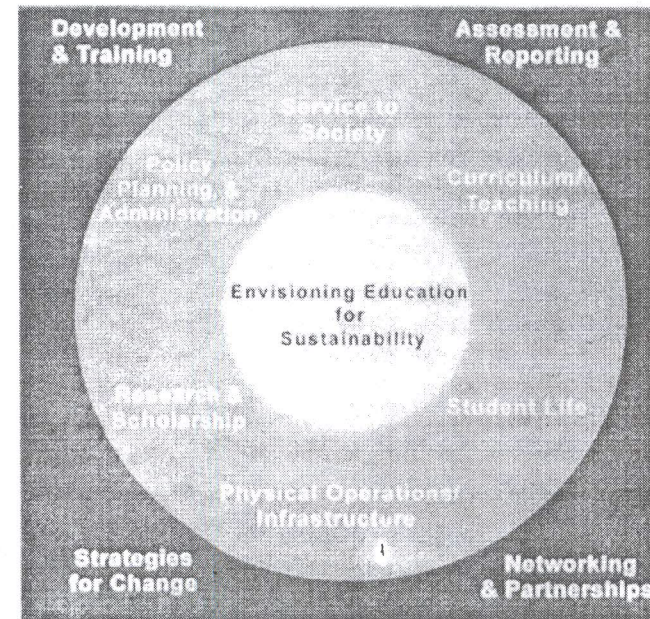
Lupiyoadi (2008) states that the marketing of services is any action offered by one of the parties, which is principally intangible and does not cause any transfer of ownership. Service marketing has become a major part of the current economic activity. One of them is in the education sector. Based on the World Trade Organization (WTO) classification, in accordance with the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS)/WTO-Central Product Classification/MTN.GNS/W/120, education services are included in one of the service business classifications (Realize, Brahmasari and Panjaitan (2007). Lupiyoadi (2008) states that there are some characteristics of services at universities:

- Universities belong to pure service groups, where the provision of service, is supported by work tools or supporting facilities only.
- Services provided require the presence of service users (students) in the universities to get the desired services.
- High contact system. here, the customer must be part of the service system.
- Relationship with customers based on a membership relationship.



Universities must also be able to become a superior organizational institution to maintain the continuity of the teaching and learning process. Martinez, Smith and Humphery (2013) advised that staff supervisors and administrators in universities should focus on service to customers (students) because of its close relationships to the administrative functions of universities. This assertion was supported by Fadeeva and Mochizuki (2010) in (see figure 1) which states that in order to be able to maintain the continuity of their vision; a college must pay attention to the service to society, curriculum/teaching, students' life and support services, physical infrastructure, research and scholarships, policy and administration planning (Sama, Brahmasari: and Ratih (2017). This discourse of sustainable development in the world that has always been written in various media has also gained political and social momentum as well as the economy, as a reflection of the era of university modernization in the world. There is no doubt that this sustainable development can start from both developed and developing countries.

**Figure 1: Sustainability project for Resource Cooperation for Universities**



**Source:** Fadeeva, Z and Mochizuki, Y (2010) Higher Education for Today and Tomorrow: University Appraisal for Diversity, Innovation and Change Towards Sustainable Development, *"Integrated Research System for Sustainability Science"*, pp. 249-256.

It is against this backdrop that this paper discusses students' support services and welfare as



espoused and managed in Godfrey Okoye University Enugu, sharing the narrative of our growth and success.

The paper is organized into seven (7) sections. The introductory section is immediately followed by the conceptual framework which highlights the various definitions encapsulated around the topic. Section three presents the literature on issues facing private universities in Nigeria, available students support services and welfare in Godfrey Okoye University. Section four presents the methodology adopted by the paper. Section five examines the benefits of supporting students' welfare and well-being in universities. Sections six and seven respectively conclude the paper and offer salient suggestions on the improvement of students' support services and welfare.

### Conceptual Framework

Students' support services are a cluster of facilities and activities that are provided to make the learning process easier and more interesting (Kaur, 2016). They serve as the interface between the institution and the learner. There is no doubt that the quality of university education depends to some extent on the availability of students' support services that are prevalent in such universities. Dhilloni, McGowan and Wang (2006) are of the view that students' support services include the provision of university-wide student support and guidance services as well as the more localized study skills, academic and personal support provided by lecturers in the universities. The inherent provision of student support services including personal and financial counselling, careers guidance and immense support is an established fact of the support services available to students in all private universities including Godfrey Okoye University. The

increasing diversity of students' entering our university has resulted in additional support being provided to support the academic and personal development of students including study skills to assist them in academic writing skills and course-specific support to fill up gaps in knowledge and understanding. This support offered, no doubt contributes immensely to the quality of the students' learning experience and their educational achievements. In their survey of student's perceptions of quality in higher education, Hill, Lomas and McGregor, (2003) found that the most influential factors in the provision of quality education are the quality of the lecturers and students support systems. This evidence of the benefits of students' support is attracting attention but it should be noted also that it is becoming very challenging to manage as a growing number of students need access to high-quality support.

This challenge may not be unconnected with the dwindling revenue sources available to university, especially private universities. This has resulted in university administrators becoming adept at creating ingenious ways of overcoming such emerging challenges. Students need support in all forms of education, formal or non-formal. Students do not require support in the academic side of education only, but also in the emotional and social aspects of education of individuals (Kaur, 2016). According to Bridges (2008), students support services are still the neglected areas in university education and come to focus only when protests prevail in the universities. Dhanappa (2014) pointed out that lack of awareness of the rights and responsibilities of the present-day learners are hampering the quality of education. It is against this backdrop that this paper is of the view that enhanced students support services and welfare would improve the public images of universities especially



privately funded ones and act as a lever of competitive advantages.

Hasan, Shamsuddin and Azati (2013) remarked that an image is a series of tangible and intangible characteristics such as the ideas, beliefs, values, interests and features that make them unique. An image is an impression which is achieved from the knowledge and understanding of facts or reality. The image is formed based on knowledge and information received by someone. Image shows the impression of an object toward another object formed in processing information every time from various reliable sources in accordance with one's knowledge and experience about something (Alma, 2013).

In defining competitive advantage, Porter (2008) explains it as how a company can make the selection and implementation of a common strategy for achieving and maintaining its superiority. David (2011) defines competitive advantage as anything an organization can do best compared to its competitors. A time when an organization, (a private university) can do something that cannot be done by competitors (other private universities) could be said to be the competitive advantage of that university. In research conducted by Stimac and Simic (2012), they mentioned that the most dangerous threat to the university market position is competition especially from universities that appear to be more flexible and market-oriented. Thus, understanding the value and importance of applying marketing concepts to education in the field of higher education is a prerequisite for successful market performance due to the dynamic changes in the needs, requirements and values of all stakeholders.

Besanko, Dranove and Shanley (2013) argue that a company's competitive advantage is when a

company/organization gets a higher profit economically than the average profit of another organization - competitor in the same market. Reinforcing these definitions, (Armstrong and Kotler, 2015) remark that competitive advantage as a greater advantage over competitors is earned by offering superior customer value, either at a cheaper price or providing more benefits than the price.

Welfare for this paper is a help that is provided by an organization for people with social or financial challenges. It is against this background that the paper brings to all stakeholders and the general public what the Godfrey Okoye University has done and is still doing to improve the various support services offered to students as part of the tenth-anniversary celebration of the foundation of the University.

### **Issues Facing Private Universities Education in Nigeria**

The emergence of student support as a major issue for private university could be linked to two major factors; first is the rate of students' withdrawal from private university education and the second factor has to do with increasing student diversity (Dhillon, Mc Gowan and Wang (2006). There is a serious concern about students who dropped out of the university before completing their degree programme and the accumulated cost of a non-completion (Yorke, 2000). Cassey, Quinn, Slack and Thomas (2013) claim that the growth in the diversity of students attending Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) has been very striking, especially in post-1992 universities in the UK. In terms of home student, the diversity relates to the academic background and previous experience of the students who are entering higher education with a



much broader range of qualifications including vocational and technical qualifications which differ from more traditional students' requirements in the programmes. Consequently, many aspects of students' life including academic, social support and pastoral care have become harder to understand and manage in a growing and diverse population (Audin and Davy, 2003). This experience is no less different from what is happening in private universities in Nigeria where the economic quagmire is inflicting serious wounds on the management of universities.

Other issues that are hurting education in private universities in Nigeria are discussed as follows:

- ***The craze for university certificates:*** Every family has suddenly realized that university degree is the surest pathway to a better life. Nigerian parents believe that a bachelor's degree is the pathway to establishing core cognitive and non-cognitive executive skills that could fetch employment in corporate organizations. Consequently, there is an avalanche increase in the chase for admission for students without minding whether such students have the mental capacity to go through university education. The aftermath of this craze is all sorts of pressure at university management for students' support services and other infrastructure/facilities for learning actualization.
- ***Corporate Organization appetite for credentials:*** Nigerian employers especially banks, oil and gas organizations insist on First degree and even Master's degree as prerequisites for hiring, even when such positions do not require such certificates.
- ***The use of wrong metrics to measure the value of education attained:*** Nowadays, many well-to-do

parents are busy looking for admissions for their wards in universities across the Atlantic with the hope of future guaranteed. They do not do due diligence on the choice of universities. They rely on distance travelled as a better metric for value-added education (Craig, 2017). This has given much impetus to the desire to go to UK, USA, Australia, China for students' admission.

- ***The rising cost of university education:*** One of the major issues facing university education is the spiralling rise in the cost of acquiring education in Nigeria. As valuable as a university certificate may be, the cost of acquisition is the first and most important factor people face in making a decision as per the value of universities. This has led to the emergence of high profile fee-charging universities in the country.
- ***Growing privatization of university education:*** As at 5th June 2019, the statistics of universities in Nigeria are depicted as Federal Government: 43; State Government: 48; and private universities: 79 (NUC, 2019). This rising trend is bound to continue. As funding is the main issue, some of these private universities need to think outside the box to survive. They have made some of their high profile programmes like Business Schools, and law faculties to attract funds through a combination of flexible students' tuition, businesses and other private sources.
- ***The issue of new method of teaching and curricula:*** The recent changes in teaching methods and curricula have replaced the long-time old-fashioned model of lecture delivery aimed at passive students. These days, students are more comfortable in the interactive and self-guided



approaches to learning. With so much information available online for free, universities are compelled to think of re-engineering their curricula in line with the new trends. Again, it is only the most competitive that are trailblazers.

- ***The proper role for students' union government and campus civility:*** The Nigeria population consists of over forty per cent of young people. The university has always been seen as a citadel of learning, an oasis of freedom of speech and expression through the formation of strong and active Student Union Government. Without much ado, the current political climate and invidious security challenges which culminate in abuse of drugs by young people on campus have continued to escalate. All these pose a tremendous threat to the peace on campus in private universities. University must be abreast in creating a strong students union government and the maintenance of a secure and safe environment in such universities through both private and public security arrangements.
- ***The galvanizing effect of private universities alumni:*** The universities alumni especially those from the private universities should brace up worthy efforts to save the universities they attended. This is because, with the economic conditions around the nation, university enrolment into these private institutions is bound to shift downwards, culminating in declining revenue sources. The alumni must strive to initiate survival strategies for their universities to maintain a global presence through collaborations and motivations with high net-worth performing alumni around the world.

## Available Students Support Services and Welfare in Godfrey Okoye University

Every university orbits in a spatio-temporal context. This context, on one hand, shapes the social and academic colours of a university. On the other hand, the setting of a university is influenced by a myriad of its activities. A good university must be looking at the face of its context, no matter how craggy or wrinkled it appears and must be working very hard to give it a desirable pattern (Anieke, 2017). As the university celebrates the tenth year of its foundation day, the students support services and welfare are part of the context this university should be looking at in order to get the desirable pattern for success to be achieved.

Part of the success should mean the ability to provide an atmosphere for learning and research. It is the ability to build a centre of excellence where human capital development and high academic attainment anchored on the fear of God could be achieved. It is the ability to produce globally relevant, competitive and entrepreneurship-minded graduates whose strong personalities will ensure the promotion of religious, cultural and epistemological dialogues (Okeke, 2017). It is against the aforementioned facts by the Vice-Chancellor and the Pro-Chancellor respectively that this paper chronicles the various students support services and welfare as provided by this great citadel of learning. These are discussed as follows:

- ***Pastoral Care:*** Godfrey Okoye University is a faith-based university, owned wholly by the Catholic Diocese of Enugu. The pastoral care as exhibited by the amiable Vice-Chancellor is unparalleled. The Vice-Chancellor creates time to interact with the students on Sundays. During the



interaction, the students have the privilege of discussing challenges confronting them in the university. There are regular prayer sessions every day in the morning, afternoon and evening for every denomination. Godfrey Okoye University is a praying university with intent to moulding the character of our students.

- **Competitive Scholarship Support for Intelligent but Indigent Students:** According to the Vice-Chancellor, Godfrey Okoye University recognizes that education is not the exclusive preserve of the rich. The social teaching of the Church emphasizes strongly the "option for the poor." Every institution of the Catholic Church works hard to serve both the poor and the rich. This explains why the university has continued to offer scholarships to indigent students from all parts of Nigeria after a competitive supervised examination. The university has offered over fifty scholarships to students since inception. To promote national unity and diversity, a scholarship was offered to one person from each of the nineteen (19) Northern States of Nigeria (Anieke, 2018).
- **Library Support Services:** The University management understands the relevance of well-equipped library. The books are current and the students are allowed to make use of the library even at night and weekends. The University e-library is equally functional and helpful in allowing students to have access to journals and textbooks' resources across the globe.
- **Existence of Mentors and Mentees:** It was Sir Isaac Newton who retorted that: "If I have seen further than people, it is because I stood on the

shoulders of giants." It is in support of this statement that the University thought it wise to establish mentors for every student (mentees). This cuts across the academic and non-academic staff who always stand in loco-parentis to these students assigned to them. This is different from known academic advisers prevalent in other universities. The mentors are there to guide the students both emotionally and academically.

- **Employment Service to Students while on Campus:** The University offers temporary employment to students who distinguished themselves in character, honesty and social etiquettes to encourage good role models and mannerism.
- **Compulsory Research Ethics for 300 level Students:** This is a support service to prepare them emotionally and mentally for research projects at 400L. Without this certification, no student is allowed to embark on any project work in the final year.
- **Town-and-Gown Assembly:** To express our sense of community service, the University had its first Town-and-Gown Assembly in May 2016 to underscore the symbolic relationship between the university and its community. The main objective was to get the industrialists, security officers, clergymen, media workers, bankers, technocrats of all categories, politicians, civil servants and all types of entrepreneurs to come to the university, discuss their expectations of university education and university graduates, new trends in their fields, all challenges they want the university to address in their research and training of students. The