

UNIBEN VC saga: A critical analysis

The vice-chancellor is the principal officer of any university and is responsible to the Governing Council of a university.

The vice-chancellor sits on the University Governing Council and chairs the Collegiate Council. He can be called the President or the Chief Academic and Administrative Officer of the University. As such, he is accountable to the governing body, the Senate, for the organisation and management of the university.

The vice-chancellor chairs the university's management board, which is responsible for developing the university's corporate plan, and the development of approved strategies to support its delivery, and also he presides over the academic council. He is the university's principal ambassador as well as its designated accounting officer, responsible for the university's use of public funds.

The vice-chancellor is assisted by the deputy vice-chancellors who play a key role in supporting him in the academic leadership and management of the university and individually take special responsibility for academic leadership and the development; formulation and co-ordination of policy in the following areas: academic planning and resources; education; research; outreach and economic development.

The leadership of universities today, especially large, complex and transforming institutions, is hugely demanding. To succeed, experts say, a vice-chancellor, principal, rector or president must be a strategic visionary, a change-manager and negotiator, fund-raiser, public figure and the bold, jet-setting workaholic chief executive of an unwieldy organisation staffed with critical minds and big egos. Ideally, he or she should also be a respected academic.

Not surprisingly, a combination of such qualities in one individual is difficult to come by. So universities have become head-hunters and the world in their search for leaders for what are, in reality, major corporations that spend billions of naira, employ thousands of staff, have a high public profile and operate in a competitive global environment.

Gone are the days of crusty academics in ivory towers cutting up a generous public funding pie over high tea. Higher education institutions are highly complex businesses with an annual turnover of several billions of naira and are now operating in an increasingly competitive national market.

The talents and skills identified in recent years by vice-chancellors as critical to their work are strategic leadership, management experience, the ability to understand and operate effectively in local, national and international environments, and the academic credentials and experience needed to understand a university and earn the respect of its scholars.

Presently, the University of Benin is searching for a VC. It is looking for someone who can lead with conviction and skill; a person with an exceptional record of delivery and change management, a non-tribalist or ethnicist with communication and team-working skills, who will demonstrate strategic thinking, a strong intellect and personal track record that will command the respect of all stakeholders. The process has, however, been

bedevilled by politics. In keeping with the tradition of appointing a VC, the Acting VC set up a search group called an Appointment Panel, with members from diverse backgrounds to give the appointment panel a federal look as the University of Benin is a federal institution and must show that federal character.

Armed with the adopted criteria for selection, they were about going to commence the onerous process of selecting the next VC when it was detected that the federal character that existed in the panel had been altered in favour of some applicants from a section of the country. Students and other Nigerians were not happy with such a development, and reacted by a demonstration and subsequently, a petition to the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The alteration of membership of the panel to favour a particular tribe was seen as distasteful to other Nigerians, in particular, the Benins from Edo State. The alteration of the VC Appointment Panel was an unsavoury political intervention in a process that should be done on merit and in a transparent manner, as the VC should represent the interest of the university community.

The reasons given were puerile; for instance, that some members of council did not have a university degree. When has it become compulsory for all council members to have university degrees? Some members of council represent the interest of everyday Nigerians what some columnists call the common Nigerians. In every board a round the world, there are always representatives who represent the interests of the public. Why should the University of Benin be different? Secondly, at whose instance were the members of the appointment panel changed? Thirdly, was it done at the National Universities Commission or at the Federal Ministry of Education? The fourth question is how do we remove politics in the selection process of university vice chancellors? Those who were involved in this fraudulent change of the appointment panel have done a disservice to the great Uniben heritage.

This fraud that has been perpetrated in the appointment process of the Uniben VC is due to the fraudulent environment of our nation. This behaviour amounts to infantile dominance of “me, me, me, or I or myself” without consideration for the others, who also have the right to what is on offer. The desire of one politician to edge out all else and place his kinsman in the position cannot be right and cannot be the way forward.

As in the business sector, university leaders need to have a long antennae with which they scan the environment, understanding how internal and external environments are changing and how best their institution might respond to problems, which is to what happens in the appointments of the CEO of major companies. A VC that is chosen based on politicisation of the appointment process cannot have that lure amongst his peers and may be a lame duck VC from the beginning to the end and, in effect, slow down the steady growth of the University of Benin. This is why the Federal Government should act decisively on this issue to keep within the laws that established the university.

In an economic downturn, investment in research, development and higher-level education by government and private enterprises are more important than ever. Higher education is ideally placed to deliver the workforce needed for a highly skilled knowledge-based economy. As the economy continues to shift towards knowledge-based activities, it is likely that a larger percentage of the workforce will need higher-level skills. It is for the above reasons that the process of selecting a VC should not be influenced by politicians because a rightfully selected VC will ultimately contribute to the academic and socio-economic growth of the nation.

We, as alumni of the University of Benin, wish the best VC for the institution, but the selection process must be transparent and without any politicisation.

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