LECTURES TO SENIOR STAFF - 1984-85 SESSION
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THE SYSTEM OF UNIVERSITY GOVERNMENT AND ADMINISTRATION

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The source of all of the University's system of government and administration is the University Act or Decree and all our actions should be consistent with the Decree. We are in the present condition of not yet having our substantive Decree and of having to work with a draft one. We do know, however, with fair certainty that Decree when it is made will be very similar to those made in 1979 for the University of Nigeria, Nsukka and the six Universities founded in 1976. There should be some differences as regards the objectives and academic and administrative structures of the Federal Universities of Technology, but for the most part we can safely assume that what applies to those other Universities will also apply to us here.

The University Decree spells out what the University is authorised to do, lays down that there should be a Council and Senate, with defined functions, and provides for all the main officers of the University and the Visitor. It also lays down some principles concerning non-discrimination, powers of discipline, and how committees may be set up and operate. Schedule I attached to the Decree and forming part of it says how the main Officers are to be appointed and for how long. A second Schedule is a largely formal set of provisions to give legal cover to the time before the Decree actually comes into force. Of special interest is the third Schedule, which contains what is called the first "Statutes" of the University. These go into more detail on the composition and operations of the Council, Senate, some main committees, the Schools and School Boards and the appointment of staff.

What is significant about the Statutes is that the Decree provides for ways in which the University itself, through its Council and Senate, can amend the Statutes. In most cases this will need the approval of the Federal Government, but it is not necessary to go through the more complicated procedures of amending legislation by the Supreme Military Council. Under a civilian regime, this would involve an Act of the National Assembly. The University cannot touch the main Decree or the other Schedules which are simply given to it, and the most we could do would be to suggest amendments for the Government to consider. But it can initiate amendments to the Statutes, provided they do not conflict with the main Decree. There is a hierarchy of legal powers, with the Decree governing everything else, next the Statutes and below them internal Regulations, Rules or administrative decisions. If there should be any conflicting provisions between these, then the higher ones will overrule the lower ones.

However, even with the Statutes the Decree only gives a framework and leaves much of the detail to be filled in. The two main governing bodies, the Council and the Senate, are quite fully dealt with, and the functions of the most senior Officers are also set out. But only a few of the main committees are even mentioned or their composition specified, for example the Finance and General Purposes Committee and the Academic Staff Appointments and Promotions Committee establishing other Committees is left for internal decisions. Only a general sketch of the Administrative structure is included.
So we have to examine the position not only as it is in the law, but also how it operates in the general practice of universities.

I believe that we can distinguish three levels of University administration and government:

1. The Governing structure proper, which takes the policy decisions; this consists mainly of the Council and Senate plus their leading committees.

2. The Administration which supports the governing structure and implements its decisions, first viewed in the widest sense - here I would include everyone who has any administrative functions, the Deans, Directors of Programmes in the Schools, senior Technological staff organising laboratories, Heads of service departments, and those running services under them, even part-time administrators like Schools' Examinations Officers, as well as those usually identified as Administrators, headed by the Vice-Chancellor and including the Central Administration, Academic Registry, Student Affairs Department and the Bursary. At this level a great many "filling in" decisions have to be taken, within the scope of the policies laid down by the governing bodies, and a number of "Administrative Committees" are set up to take part in this activity.

3. Within the Administration in this sense we can distinguish the narrower sense of "the Administration", namely the staffs of the departments last-named above, who form what one may call the University's permanent civil service. The specific role of this is to provide a kind of skeleton and nervous system, a structure which can enable the main part of the University, its academic part, to move and act. One may say that the administration provides the skeleton, the academic side the living flesh - neither can do without the other! The permanent administration also provides a memory-bank of records and past decisions, to give continuity to the University's actions.

Since the purpose and objectives of a University are academic ones, it should not be surprising that the academics have a leading place in the governing bodies, especially Senate which consists almost entirely of academics. However, at the level of Council, which is the supreme policy-making body in the University, they are slightly outnumbered by outside persons, often called the "lay members". These are included to voice the concerns of the general community, and to ensure accountability, and they are appointed by Government, including the Chairman of Council, who holds the status of Pro-Chancellor, second in position to the Chancellor. Thus in Council the interests of the academics and those of the outside community meet, trying to evolve policies acceptable to both. By established convention, rather than law, council avoids trying to decide any purely academic matter, such as the courses to be given, or what their content should be, but it may lay down general policy, deciding to lay emphasis here and there. It is also concerned with all matters concerning the University's property, funds and staff conditions of service.
Senate is recognised as the supreme academic authority in the University. The School Boards and Senate Committees dealing with such matters as admissions or examinations are subordinate to it. But where finance would be involved, Senate can only make requests or recommendations to Council. For example we have an Estimates Committee, which is a committee of Senate. It examines the needs and proposals of Schools and Departments, tries to sort out relative priorities and to piece together a balanced budget, but then it has to put what it has worked out as recommendations to the Finance and General Purposes Committee of Council, and ultimately to Council.

It will be seen that some matters are of concern to both Council and Senate, but on the whole clashes are avoided by observing the principles that Council has the final overall responsibility, especially in matters of finance, while Senate has the last word on academic matters. In this, we follow more or less the present-day British pattern, but it is interesting to note that, like other systems, change is inescapable. Not much more than 100 years ago, in the then-British Universities, all important decisions were taken by entirely lay Councils, on which not even the Vice-Chancellor was a member. Senates were only established later, and it was well into the present century before they got beyond being just advisory to their Councils.

I recall that in the first Law establishing the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, the Senate was made advisory to Council, although that is not the position now. So we may expect the system to continue evolving over time and being adapted to Nigerian needs, and we must not suppose that what we have is immutable.

As I said before, Council and Senate committees may also be considered to be part of the governing structure. Their leading members come from those bodies themselves, but where the interests of other parties make it appropriate members may be drawn from those parties. An example is the Senior Staff Training Committee, which is a Senate Committee, but which now includes some non-academic members to cover the concerns of the non-academic staff affected by the work of the committee. In some cases where both Council and Senate have an interest in a topic, a Joint Council-Senate Committee is established, drawing members from both. Examples are the Honorary Degrees Committee and the Senior Staff Disciplinary Committee.

Now let us come to consider the Administration which, as I have said, is less fully treated in the Decree. However, the Decree leaves no doubt that the whole administration hinges round the Vice-Chancellor. It says that he has “the general function of directing the activities of the University, and shall be the chief executive and academic officer of the University and ex-officio chairman of Senate.” The last part of this provides a link between the Administration as such and the academic governing body, the Senate. Indeed, the Vice-Chancellor is also a member of Council. Thus the different sides of the structure are linked together, and the distinctions I drew between the governing structure and the Administration in both a wider and a narrower sense are more a matter of analysis, of identifying roles, rather than of parcelling out members of the University with some entirely “governors”, other “administrators” and other different things again. It does not work quite so neatly as that, and there are considerable overlaps between the three levels that I distinguished. The largest such overlap is seen in the multiple role of the Vice-Chancellor, not forgetting that he is also the “chief academic officer of the University.”
Even when I was in Oxford, the whole central administration (insofar as I was aware of it at all) worked in a building that I would not reckon as being larger than our Multi-Purpose Hall basement. Not only have professional administrative staff grown up from almost nothing in say 50 years, but the scope of administrative has also multiplied. For example, it is less than 40 years since systematic salary scales were established in British universities under pressure from the Treasury on one side and the staff unions on the other side. Again, up to the 1960’s among the academics only the professors had any large say in what was done. So the whole system has undergone considerable change within this century, some gradual and with little fuss, some with much noise and argument. If we do not find everything just as we think it should be, we should recognise that things are amenable to change, provided that is approached in the right way.

In his opening address the Vice-Chancellor explained the levels of School organisation that apply in this University. I do not intend to go over again what he said, but I may amplify it a little. As compared with the Faculties in older universities and the Departments that they contain, our system of Programme Areas and Programmes differs in that the latter do not have separate staffing, separate budgets and separate administrations as do the older style Departments. Our Programme Areas are much more integral parts of the School, not separate entities federated into Faculties. I believe the trend in the older Nigerian Universities has been to move to a limited extent in the same direction, giving more powers to the Faculty rather than the Departments, or setting up wider “Colleges” to bring them closer together.

I cannot comment on the strictly academic aspects of this, but certainly as an Administrator I find it makes the whole organisation work better. Where you have 60, 80, perhaps 100 separate departments, simply getting accurate information, whether on finance, staffing, students or anything else, becomes very complicated and slow. We have 4 Schools and about 8 non-academic Departments, and it is much easier to assemble such information and keep it up to date, so that decisions can be taken on a much better-informed basis. Planning and budgeting are more streamlined too. Then, when it comes to setting up committees, when there are large numbers of separate units, so many want to be represented, and committees become too large to be effective. There are also so many people reporting separately to central organs, whether Senate, the Registry or the Vice-Chancellor, that it is very difficult for anyone to keep an overall picture before him. While administrative considerations are not the only ones that matter – especially in an academic institution – I hope that the advantages I have indicated will be weighed at any future time when the University might review its structure. The proliferation of separate units is common in universities, but the drawbacks of doing so are commonly not appreciated, or only too late to do much about them.

I will just briefly touch on some aspects of the University organisation not mentioned above, starting with the Visitor and the Chancellor. The Visitor is not an Officer of the University, but stands outside it. He is essentially a final court of appeal if the University authorities are deadlocked, and a means of instituting a visitation if things are clearly amiss. The Chancellor’s role is mainly ceremonial, presiding over the conferment of degrees, but he can also be Chairman of Convocation.
That is a body of alumni and teaching staff plus some of the Officers, with a mainly advisory role, plus electing a member of Council; it does not exist here as yet as we have no alumni. Congregation is again advisory and elects a representative to Council. It consists of the academic staff and those other staff with degrees. It has also been given the role of electing members to a number of committees.

Finally, I want to remind you that the organisation of a University is not an end in itself, but is there to serve the academic ends of the University. In all that we do, we must try to keep that in mind, and not let administrative considerations dominate and obscure the academic objectives. The administration exists to serve and facilitate the working of the whole University especially in its teaching and research functions. At the same time, the academics need to accept that a good administration is essential, and to respect those who are there to provide it. Each is essential to the other, and mutual respect and cooperation should be the order of the day.