
What is a University?

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I should like to thank the authorities of this new University, and particularly its Chairman of the Board of Trustees, Professor Emeritus Ladipo Akinkugbe, for this honour of addressing the first ever Matriculation Ceremony of this University. I should also like to thank the proprietor of the institution, Chief Kola Daisi, a close friend of many years, for this outstanding gift to the nation. The value of the gift can be realised when one considers how much it costs to run a university in spite of, and beyond, student fees. My prayer is that the nation may benefit in perpetuity from this magnificent endeavour, and that Chief Daisi's vision may be fully realized.

This being the first ever Matriculation Ceremony, I thought it might be worthwhile to devote the few minutes of this address to trying to answer the all-important question: What is a University? Specifically, what does this institution stand for, and what were you, privileged students, hoping to gain from it by coming here?

Let me hazard a guess. Some of you may be here because you thought that, after a brilliant career at the secondary school, the university is naturally the next destination. They may not have given much thought to what to do with the education they get from the university unless, of course, they have been admitted for one of the professional courses, like Medicine, Law or Engineering. This explains why some students change courses if they are not admitted for the course of their first choice. The important thing, for them, is simply to be enrolled at the university.

Some of you are here to improve your chances in life, and this is a legitimate expectation. Most employers these days ask for a university degree, even a good university degree. It is therefore important to have a university degree. Things have even got so difficult, and jobs for first degree holders have become so scarce that many students go on to enrol for Masters degrees. As a result, there are hordes of students enrolled for Masters degrees with the wrong motive and orientation. Eventually, perhaps, students will enrol for the PhD *en masse* because they have nothing else to do. I shudder to think what would be the value of such PhD's.

A very small percentage of entrants come to the university, of course, because it has become a family tradition - both parents may already be graduates.

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But if students are not very sure of why exactly they are admitted to a university, it is the duty of the university itself to be clear about what benefits it intends to give the students - what life-long changes it intends to make to their lives. Perhaps at this point, we should take a quick look at the evolution of universities globally.

It turns out that the earliest universities were established for none of the reasons discussed above. Rather, the motivation would appear to have been the love of learning. Students with inquiring minds attached themselves to scholars, at that time called Masters, to have their minds improved in all kinds of ways. There was a certain degree of informality about it, and when Masters went on from one location to another, their pupils, the equivalents of today's undergraduates, simply followed them and were joined by new students.

The first university in Western Europe was established Bologna, Italy, in 1088. The Masters, followed by their students, later went out from there to Paris, France, where the University of Paris was founded in 1150, and were joined by new students. From Paris, some of the Masters moved on to Oxford in England and established the university there in 1167. After Oxford came Cambridge in 1209. By this time, the universities had evolved a sedentary structure and tradition, and the next set of universities were established in Scotland - St Andrews University in 1410, University of Glasgow, 1453 and the University of Edinburgh, 1582.

Soon, Britain was covered by a network of municipal universities, and the university idea emigrated with English-speaking migrants to the United States of America and the rest of the English-speaking world. In 1948, the successors of the Masters came out from the University of London, this time without any students in tow, and founded University College Ibadan, which later metamorphosed into the University of Ibadan. Masters, now designated professors, later went out from Ibadan to establish the Universities of Jos, Ilorin, Port Harcourt and Calabar. But by this time the kind of mentorship offered by the Masters had become attenuated, and universities have since sprouted without the very strong influence of older universities, and with hardly any international complexion, - the 'universe' that you can see in the word 'university'.

Above in brief, is the genealogy of Kola Daisi University. You can trace your origins all the way back to Bologna, and if you wish to go even further back, your original progenitor is Plato's grove in Athens, Greece, where he gathered young men around him to exercise their minds in all kinds of directions.

The earliest universities were strongly influenced by Plato's practice in his academy of approaching all enquiries from a philosophical angle. Indeed, for a long time, the only professional courses on offer in the ancient universities was Medicine. It is also significant that today, the highest degree that anyone can work for at a university, whether in the Humanities or the Sciences is the PhD - Doctor of Philosophy- reflecting

the original preoccupations of a university, and the ultimate end of all intellectual enquiries, right from Plato's day.

With the Enlightenment in Europe in the eighteenth century, more professional courses came in, accelerated by developments in the United States of America, and the idea of a university as an instrument of national development gained grounds. But the best universities never allowed themselves to forget the original legitimate preoccupations of a university.

The matter was brought to a head in the middle of the nineteenth century by the writings of a great British scholar and cleric, Cardinal John Henry Newman, the Anglican Oxford don who converted to Catholicism, became a Cardinal and was beatified in 2010 by Pope Benedict XVI. His major publication, entitled *The Idea of a University* has had a profound influence on universities in the past one and a half centuries. Newman argues that it is not the primary business of a university to be utilitarian by providing graduates with narrow specializations to run their countries' economies. He talks about the 'soul of a university' and asserts that 'the ideal university is a community of thinkers engaging in intellectual pursuits not for any external purpose but as an end in itself.' This may sound shocking to you, as it certainly does to the governments of many developing countries such as Nigeria.

In place of narrow specializations, Newman insists that a university should give students 'a perfection of the intellect...a clear, calm and accurate vision and comprehension of all things.' This is what differentiates a university, in essence, from a mere apprenticeship or even a polytechnic. The utilitarian value of a university, both to the community and the individual, tends today to be more strongly stressed than what Newman advocates, although the concern for the holistic development of the individual is contained in the famous convocation formula that states that degrees are awarded 'for character and learning' without emphasizing the specific specializations which Newman would regard as of inferior consequence. I wonder what Newman would have thought of the seemingly contradictory terms: University of Technology, University of Agriculture, etc. He would, I expect, have said that narrow specializations have clearly been given the upper hand in these institutions, thus robbing them of their souls.

Newman's idea of a university may sound to us today rather utopian, but his argument is that a mind that is thoroughly trained in a rounded way has little difficulty in directing itself to a narrow specialization of the individual's choice. Newman's ideas have influenced the course offerings in many universities, particularly in the United States of America. In Britain, it has perhaps affected universities in Scotland more than in England. In England, a Bachelors degree is earned in three years after good 'A' levels. The student has two subjects outside his area of specialization. In Scotland, however, with good 'A' levels, the student spends four years, and is exposed to a total of four subjects outside his area of specialization. For example, the present speaker offered,

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at the University of Glasgow, English, Latin and History in his first year; English and Philosophy in his second year; English and Political Economy in his third year; and then concentrated on English in his final year. Thus he is not a complete illiterate in Latin, History, Philosophy and Political Economy, in addition to his specialization in English Language and Literature. Admittedly, the first degree in the Humanities in a Scottish University is an M.A. New universities like Kola Daisi University have an opportunity of devising curricula which, they consider, take care of specializations within an exposure to as many other disciplines as possible.

In answer to the question: What is the soul of a university? Sophia Deboick, writing in the British Guardian newspaper recently, says: 'A university's soul lies in the mark it leaves on students.' This is another way of expressing the notion which you may already be aware of, to the effect that some students pass through the university without the university passing through them. I am sure that this university is prepared to do its part, but you students must be maximally hospitable to experience, using every opportunity to sharpen your intelligence, knowing that, as Deboick says, 'Narrow specializations produce narrow minds.'

How can you make the most of this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity of university education? Let me use this admittedly startling illustration. In primary school, and to some extent in secondary school, as you look back at what happened to your mind there, it can be described in terms of an empty receptacle into which knowledge, as content, was poured. You did your best to understand that content, and particularly to remember, for purposes of examination. Now at university, your mind can no longer be regarded as an empty receptacle but as an active reactor to every content to which it comes in contact. You must always react by analysing and questioning that content. At university, you are at liberty to argue even with your teachers, and they will praise you for it.

Every university tries its best to provide an environment that is conducive to prolonged meditation, and it is the duty of the student, for his own part, to look out for ways of stimulating his intellect. He can do this, for example, by joining clubs, attending public lectures and participating in debates, as well as attending theatrical and musical productions. But above all, he does this by being a lover of books - not only the books pertaining to his area of specialization, but also books in the periphery of that specialization, and indeed, all the books he can lay his hands on.

I congratulate you on your good fortune in being admitted to this university, and do wish all of you a most rewarding and fulfilling career at the university.