Strategic Planning and the Nigeria University System Innovation Project

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For potential participants in the Nigeria University System Innovation Project (NUSIP)

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THE NEW AUTONOMY FOR UNIVERSITIES AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

On July 21, 2000 the Federal Ministry of Education announced its intention to propose new legislation that would give substantially more autonomy to the federally funded universities in Nigeria. The highlights of this proposal include:

1. Autonomy is defined as giving universities the freedom to govern themselves, appoint their key officers, determine the conditions of service of their staff, control their student admissions and academic curricula, control their finances and generally regulate themselves as independent legal entities without undue interference from the Federal Government and its agencies.

2. The National University Commission will remain responsible for receiving and disbursing Government funds to universities. However, it will no longer determine whether universities should start or close a particular program or department. It will also no longer be responsible for receiving or disbursing donor funds for universities. Its restructured primary responsibilities will primarily be: (a) to conduct accreditation of academic programs; (b) to advise the Government as to funding allocations to universities; (c) to receive and disburse such allocated funds to the universities; (d) to monitor each institution’s performance in the management of its resources and in the quality of its graduate outputs; and (e) to advise the Government on higher education policy issues.

3. Funding to universities will be based on criteria yet to be approved by Government. Government funding will constitute a guaranteed minimum level of support for a three-year period based on agreements concerning enrolment and growth levels. Extra funds may be awarded to reward excellence or to address specific strategic needs. Some extra funds may also be disbursed on a competitive bidding basis.

If approved, the implications of these changes will be substantial. It will mean that the federally funded universities will no longer be subject to the control of authorities in Abuja. They will be free to determine their own future, individually and collectively, and to head in new directions if they so chose. What might that direction be, and what new pressures on institutional leadership can be expected? These are fundamental questions that arise out of the changing circumstances, which this report seeks to address.
If one looks at higher education in other parts of the world, one sees it heading in directions that are greatly influenced by the local environment. In this context, environment means the range of organizations that look to higher education to produce the inputs (people and ideas) they need to carry out their mission. This definition also includes the organizations and sectors of society that institutions of higher education look to for their inputs—their resources—and with whom they compete for these resources. The environment further includes general rules or policies that control the ways in which organizations interact, and that provide incentives or constraints to their pursuit of resources or their production of goods and services.

Environmental influences on higher education have long been recognized. In his seminal work in the 1960s, Clark Kerr noted that “the university has been embraced and led down a garden path by its environmental suitors” (Kerr: 1963). Since then, this embrace has become much stronger and the garden paths much more diversified. The increased influence of environmental factors on higher education has emerged largely as a result of two factors: (1) a rapid rise in the rate at which new knowledge is now being created and applied to an ever-expanding set of issues and uses, and (2) the growing erosion of the “distances” between cultures, countries and economies as a consequence of new information technologies and a globalizing economy (Task Force: 2000; Gibbons: 1998; Dearing: 1998; Clark; 1998). Because for centuries the principal mission of higher education has been the creation and dissemination of new knowledge, it stands to reason that universities will be heavily impacted by the shift of many of these activities to the environment outside of higher education.

A critical challenge for contemporary higher education, then, is how to create the commitment and capacity to observe, analyze and understand these environmental forces, and to act in response to them. In order to meet this challenge, many institutions of higher education have turned to strategic planning, a tool once found primarily in the private sector within developed countries. In recent years, however, the use of strategic planning by higher education institutions in Africa and elsewhere has become widespread (AAU: 1995; Ekong and Plant: 1996; Fry and Utui: 1999; Task Force: 2000). The reason for this is that many institutions now find themselves in circumstances where old methods of planning and management are no longer effective in dealing with the future. Strategic planning, when properly done, is effective. What is the proper use of strategic planning? It is to provide university stakeholders and managers with a clearer picture of how a rapidly changing environment is shaping the critical decisions that their university faces, and how it is conditioning the resources that the university is likely to have to carry out its decisions.

In the next section we will briefly consider the nature of strategic planning, its benefits, risks and some lessons learned from its use by African universities.
STRATEGIC PLANNING: BENEFITS, RISKS AND LESSONS LEARNED

In essence, strategic planning is a systematic process in which an organization assesses its basic reason for being (i.e., its purpose or “mission”), what its strengths and weaknesses are, and what opportunities and threats it might face in the immediate and foreseeable future. The organization then uses this assessment to decide whether to make changes in what it does, how it does it, and with whom it interacts in order to fulfill its purpose. When done well, strategic planning is a highly participatory process, engaging all stakeholders important to an organization’s central purpose.

One of the most important steps an organization takes in carrying out strategic planning is committing itself to understanding its environment fully. The best way to do this is to make sure that it analyzes its environment in an open, honest manner. This is not easy for universities to do. Most universities encounter difficulties in doing this because they have inherited an institutional culture that often excludes meaningful interaction with the environment. A common mistake made by universities engaged in strategic planning, for example, is to define their stakeholders solely as the groups located in the academic community: academic staff, non-academic staff and students. What they consistently fail to include—except perhaps in a token and ineffective way—are the “end-users” of their products: the employers of their graduates, the contractors of their academic staff who sell their services as consultants, the users of their facilities and their intellectual property, and particularly those who provide resources to the higher education sector and who set the policies that govern it.

When these end-users are defined as stakeholders and are systematically included in the process of strategic planning, the results can be dramatically different than if these groups are not given opportunities for meaningful participation. Perhaps the best examples of these dramatic results are found in the rapid evolution of the “entrepreneurial university” in Europe and the United States (Clark: 1998). Closer to Nigeria, universities in South Africa show a range of successes produced by strategic planning in recent years. All South African universities and technikons (i.e., polytechnics) have undertaken strategic planning during the 1990s. But only those that have seriously included their end-users have been able to identify and carry out successful changes in their operations as demonstrated by improvements in financial condition and in the quality of their programs.

Another common outcome of effective strategic engagement with end-users has been the increased awareness by institutions of the need to provide continuing professional education and training to the workforce of key industries (OECD: 1999). Institutions that have responded to this need have been rewarded financially and also found their academic staff more engaged in applied research, with a positive impact on the quality of teaching to traditional, residential students. In the process, many institutions have developed a strong “dual-mode” delivery capacity for their education programs. (Dual mode refers to the institutional capability to provide campus-based instruction to traditional full-time learners as well as distance education programs to part-time learners, often located at work sites or off-campus learning centers.)
The common benefits of effective strategic planning include: (1) more efficient and effective management of institutional resources at all levels; (2) comprehensive revision of staff development programs; (3) the building of partnerships with external organizations for research and development activities; (4) the establishment of internship programs for students and academic staff, and perhaps most importantly, (5) the development of a sense of control over the financial future of an institution—assuming that strategic planning and financial planning are integrated. What makes strategic planning such a necessary tool is the reality of persistently scarce resources combined with the rapidly changing environment within which higher education systems now find themselves. Nigeria is no different than many other developing countries in this respect (Task Force: 2000; Gibbons: 1998; World Bank: 1994). Consequently, it is increasingly recognized that universities must explicitly link their resource allocation process to the outcomes of their strategic planning.

However, embarking on a process of strategic planning is not without risks. These risks include: (1) the unleashing of latent conflicts that may damage working relationships or the operations of departments, faculties or even an entire institution; (2) the revealing of institutional weaknesses for which there may be no easy remedy; (3) the investing of considerable time and energy—at high opportunity costs—with little gain if the strategic planning process is not successfully completed; (4) the short-term introduction of high levels of uncertainty and anxiety into the life of an organization; and (5) the potential loss of programs and staff whose contribution may no longer be justified within a new or re-defined institutional mission.

But there are actions an organization can take to maximize the benefits and to minimize the risks associated with strategic planning. These actions derive from lessons learned by other institutions through their strategic planning experiences. The key lessons are: (1) meet basic prerequisites for strategic planning before starting the process; (2) plan a carefully coordinated process of participation and inclusion, particularly of external stakeholders; (3) collect sufficient information and allow time for processing this information; and (4) provide adequate resources to carry out the process of strategic planning. Each of these lessons will now be discussed in greater detail.

In his 1995 paper on strategic planning and Nigerian universities, John Fielden suggested various prerequisites for beginning a strategic planning process. The “external” prerequisites included: a willingness by government to accept the results of strategic planning and associated innovations; the provision by government of broad policy guidelines as to what government expects from universities; and the abandonment by government of tight controls over universities. The “internal” prerequisites included: strong backing from institutional leadership; clear understanding of what is required for strategic planning in terms of time commitments, resources, needed information, technical support, and a well-designed planning process (agreed beforehand) that involves the community of university stakeholders (Fielden: 1995). When the government’s proposed autonomy legislation is approved, it would appear that these external prerequisites will have been met. But much remains to be done in order to fulfill the internal prerequisites. These needs will be addressed in the last section of this report.
Strategic planning is an important yet complex process. For this reason it must be carefully planned, and all essential stakeholders need to be included. As mentioned above, the failure to include all essential stakeholders will cause an erroneous assessment of the environment, thus invalidating subsequent decisions and plans. Inadequate planning and coordination of all elements of the process can cause delays, suspicion, and a withholding of commitment that may ultimately cause the effort to fail. For example, Fry and Utui (1999) describe how a multi-year strategic planning process at Eduardo Mondlane University in Mozambique almost failed because of the lack of coordination and communication between two powerful planning groups, each “commissioned” to do what management saw as complementary tasks, but which the groups themselves viewed as competing tasks.

Relevant timely information is essential to the strategic planning process. Information about availability and predictability of financial resources, about labor market needs; about institutional efficiency at a program level; about perceptions concerning the quality of instruction, staff and facilities; about recent trends in the national and regional economy—these are examples of the types of information which, if available, will greatly help the process of judging whether an institution is doing what it should be doing, and whether identified opportunities and threats are likely to have a significant impact on the institution. Information is needed not only for planning and decision-making, but also to monitor the implementation of a strategic plan. Institutions lacking such data will need to generate it during the planning process, and consider actions to develop an appropriate management information system. Without such information, one person’s beliefs and assumptions as a good as another’s, and decisions may turn on factors other than sound, well-informed judgment.

The last lesson referred to above is the need for appropriate resources to carry out and implement strategic planning. In their study of six experiences with strategic planning in African universities, Ekong and Plante (1996) conclude that this was probably the single most important factor in determining the success of strategic planning. Fielden (1995) similarly underscores the importance of a well-resourced effort. Ideally, a university should have access to resources sufficient to dedicate a small, technically competent team (at least one full-time professional person) to managing the process and keeping all parties informed and on track.

These lessons provide a basic starting point for response to the question of whether or not strategic planning has any more relevance in Nigeria today than it did when it was first considered in 1995. In the next section this question will be considered in the light of the government’s autonomy proposal for universities as well as the possible Nigeria University System Innovation Project (NUSIP).
STRATEGIC PLANNING: THE CURRENT SITUATION IN NIGERIA

In 1995 Fielden observed the following limitations to the use of strategic planning in Nigerian universities:

1. Universities saw little point in undertaking strategic planning since the National Universities Commission effectively determined what their budget would be and how it would be spent. This was done on the basis of three guidelines: (i) the *1990 Revised Parameters for Allocation of Recurrent Grants to Federally Funded Universities*; (ii) the age or “generation” of the institutions, and (iii) a desire to treat equally all institutions within the same age category regardless of individual circumstances. If universities were to undertake meaningful strategic planning, a necessary pre-condition would have to be changes in the NUC’s scope of authority vis-à-vis budget use by the universities.

2. Universities possessed virtually no discretionary funding, given the tight financial situation prevailing throughout the public sector for more than a decade. In an earlier era, universities had operated under quinquennial and later triennial rolling budgets. But as the economy of the country deteriorated, government was frequently unable to provide the funds indicated in these budgets. This created an environment of great funding uncertainty, which undercut the validity of planning activities. Planning subsequently became viewed as an activity applicable only to “extra funds.” Since extra funds were seldom forthcoming, the value of planning became less apparent. However, it must be noted that this view was not shared by all institutions or Vice Chancellors.

3. Extensive training regarding the value and methods of strategic planning would have been needed in 1995 in order for this activity to move forward. This training would have been required by all who were likely to be responsible for developing and implementing strategic plans. However, two serious constraints limited the possibilities for such training. First, it was not clear that academic staff were willing to undergo such training, given their low state of morale and lack of belief in the possibilities for institutional change. Second, it appeared that Nigeria lacked competent, experienced trainers in the area of strategic planning.

4. Successful implementation of strategic plans by institutions requires both a long-term commitment to the on-going process of updating the plans, and to the collection and use of data necessary to monitor progress in the implementation of these plans. In 1995 few institutions possessed the capability of generating such data on a timely and reliable basis.
Since the Fielden report was written, several important changes have taken place in the general environment for Nigerian universities. Clearly, the proposed new policies on university autonomy address the first two points above. They do so by reducing the budget-setting and management authority of the National Universities Commission and putting these responsibilities back into the hands of the institutions. While Government will remain as the primary source of funding, universities would be provided with block grants, and University Councils would be responsible for their internal allocation. In this way, the lack of university discretion over the use of their own funds, noted in the second point above, is addressed by specifically requiring Councils to make these choices. Furthermore, the proposed university autonomy policy encourages institutions to generate additional revenues and employ them at their own discretion.

The third point above concerns the need for staff training to impart an understanding of strategic planning and to foster the capacities needed for its implementation. This need appears to remain valid, particularly at staffing levels below that of the Vice-Chancellor. What may change the most, as the result of the proposed university autonomy measures, is the attitude of university administrators and academic staff about the value of the effort. If universities will now have greater control over their governance and use of budget resources, then planning as a whole will become more highly regarded. However, the issue of apathy among academic staff still needs to be addressed. In my earlier NUSIP discussion paper concerning a framework for introducing sustainable innovations into the Nigerian university system, a model for institutional change is discussed. It focuses on creating the conditions needed to move an institution from a state of apathy to a wide-spread awareness of the necessity for and benefits of changes. It also presents this awareness as a prerequisite for strategic planning (Fehnel: 2000).

Fielden’s observation concerning the lack of skilled practitioners of strategic planning in Nigeria is probably still pertinent. Yet this may be changing. There are reports of increasing use of strategic planning within Nigeria’s private sector (e.g., from the Lagos Business School). These initiatives may increase the local resources for the provision of training and technical assistance to universities. In any case, the need for training, both as a means to move people from apathy to awareness and as a means to impart implementation skills, remains as a general prerequisite for successful strategic planning by universities. NUSIP could constitute one means of addressing this need.

With NUSIP support, together with the possibility of funding from other donors, it may be possible for Nigerian universities to draw upon the extensive pool of international talent in the area of strategic planning for higher education institutions. Several higher education associations maintain technical assistance units specifically skilled in strategic planning. One example is the American Council on Education, which provided assistance to 16 universities and technikons in South Africa and Namibia. Another is the Commonwealth Higher Education Management Service (CHEMS), a technical assistance arm of the Association of Commonwealth Universities that possesses extensive experience and capacity in this area. A third is the Association of African Universities,
which has placed the development of strategic planning capacities in member institutions as a top priority. The Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS) at the University of Twente, Netherlands, is a fourth organization with ample technical capability in this area. Similar organizations also exist in Canada, Scotland, Germany and elsewhere in England and the United States. In addition, a number of international management consulting firms maintain divisions that focus on assisting universities, including support for strategic planning. In sum, a wide range of specialized resources exist that could be drawn on for direct technical assistance to Nigerian universities, or to assist Nigeria in building its own capacity to provide this technical support to its universities.

The fourth point above concerns the need for a long-term university commitment to the strategic planning process and the associated requirement for timely and relevant information. This observation seems to be as valid now as it was in 1995. The issue of commitment is inherently tied to the matter of autonomy and the likelihood that institutions can actually determine their own course and future. It is also tied to the question of whether additional funds will be provided to implement strategic plans. While the proposed NUSIP project could provide some funding for this purpose, it should be recognized that universities would also need to become more creative in generating additional resources.

This is where the value of a well-planned process of strategic planning can be demonstrated. Through an assessment of internal operations, universities can identify steps to improve their efficiency, thereby enabling existing funding to go farther. Through an assessment of external opportunities—and the meaningful inclusion of end-users in the strategic planning process—universities can lay the foundation for partnerships with the private sector and other agencies of government that would provide additional resources. As indicated in my discussion paper on university innovation, many models exist for building such partnerships (e.g., Oni: 1999). The time may be right to explore these opportunities.

As regards the availability of necessary planning information, it would seem that most universities are now in a somewhat better position to provide much of the needed data. While these data may not be as complete as one might like, and may still present a challenge for some institutions, the situation appears to have improved since 1995.

**OTHER ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS**

In addition to these considerations, several other environmental factors that affect the current climate for thinking about strategic planning in Nigerian universities need to be mentioned. They include:

- The return of democracy to Nigeria, and with it, an expected resurgence in the economy of the country;
- The emergence of private universities in Nigeria;
Growing pressures to develop greater information and communication technology capacities in universities;

- Moves by several major employers to launch their own training programs for “top talent” human resources.

These changes will have profound effects on universities. They represent significant shifts in the higher education environment that will have an impact on the resources available to universities, the mission of universities, and the ways in which universities operate. They constitute challenges—and opportunities—for the federally funded universities at the dawn of a new era. The return of democracy brings with it the likely increase in a general attitude of hopefulness and creativity. This has been the experience in many other countries following long periods of anti-democratic rule. There is no reason why Nigeria should not experience this same phenomenon, and this could help to dispel the cloud of apathy hanging over many campuses.

The emergence of private universities in Nigeria, together with the opening of “corporate universities” or high talent training programs, should cause administrators and academic staff in public universities to take notice. Competition is emerging in the sphere of higher education. Public universities can no longer take their preferential position for granted and continue to operate as they possess a national monopoly on higher education. To the extent that private universities operate with foreign support, this represents an infusion of new ideas and operating practices. These precedents may well assist those in federally funded universities to obtain the support they need for similar innovations. Likewise, the rise of corporate training programs, initiated by foreign corporations, will press Nigerian corporations in the same sector to search for ways to match such efforts.

Growing diversity in approaches to specialized instruction will provide opportunities for departments and faculties in public universities to build partnerships. But it also increases the likelihood that many of these departments and faculties will need new staff development programs before they will be seen as having something of value to bring to a partnership. In a study of the labor market for university graduates commissioned by the NUC and the World Bank in mid-2000, substantial evidence was found that many Nigerian firms view university staff as horribly out-of-date and their students ill-prepared to work in the demanding environment of today’s competitive, productivity-oriented marketplace (Dabalen and Oni: 2000). Staff development programs planned and implemented in collaboration with end-users will be important in changing these views.

Pressures for more information and communication technology on campuses will also stimulate institutional changes. Use of the Internet by students and staff will reveal the extent to which Nigerian higher education has become outdated in recent years, and will motivate stakeholders to push for modernization. These pressures will need to be considered carefully and strategically to assure that university responses will, in fact, lead to enhanced local capacities and not just imitations of advances elsewhere in the world.
In summary, current circumstances in Nigeria suggest that the environment has become more conducive to strategic planning activities by universities than it was five years ago. Strategic planning is a tool that Nigerian university leaders could use, in the light of the proposed new policies for university autonomy, to plot a viable course towards greater accomplishments in the decade to come. Strategic planning methods also provide assurance that universities can turn away from the present path of institutional paralysis and decline reported to characterize most institutions without involving themselves in reckless adventures driven by political expediency and the lure of short-term gains. In this context, the Nigeria University System Innovation Project presents a significant opportunity for those university leaders who wish to consider strategic planning. In the next section we will look more closely at these possibilities.

➢ STRATEGIC PLANNING AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO NUSIP

The objectives of NUSIP, although still in a formative stage pending on-going consultation with higher education stakeholders, are generally seen to be the following:

- To improve staff teaching and student learning practices in federal universities;

- To strengthen the capacity of institutions to manage their human and financial resources more effectively and efficiently;

- To increase the responsiveness of the federal university system to the human resource needs of the country, as part of a larger goal of reducing poverty in Nigeria through increased economic performance;

- To expand the information and communication technologies available within the university system and, through it, to the country as a whole.

Necessary for the accomplishment of these objectives is the capacity to plan and implement activities in a highly strategic manner. In the absence of a strategic framework, any hint of external funding will likely produce a profusion of “wish lists” to address the gigantic backlog of needs that all universities face. Under such pressures university administrators and government officials will need criteria in order to prioritize requests and link them to a vision of where universities should be headed. Which units or departments should receive priority in terms of access to support for strengthening the quality of their programs? Which management or support centers are more critical to achieving greater efficiency in the use of institution resources? Should a university seek to build partnerships with private sector organizations and other line agencies of federal and state governments, and if so, what is the long term goal of these partnerships and what will a university need to do to add value to what it brings to such partnerships? What is the relationship between enhancing information and communication technology on a campus and its priorities for improving teaching and learning practices? Will it have a realistic financial plan to maintain and advance these technological gains?
Will universities need to consider fundamental restructuring in order for the possible achievements of NUSIP to be sustainable? This is an essential question that has not yet been raised in Nigeria. George Keller, an American educationist long associated with deep insights into the nature of fundamental change within educational institutions, argues that planning for structural change in institutions constitutes an emerging new “third trend” in higher education (Keller: 1999).\(^1\) He associates the development of this trend with the growing diversity in types of higher education institutions. What he means by “structures” are the familiar characteristics of higher education in traditional settings: a year-long academic calendar that effectively offers only eight months of instruction; a program of degree studies requiring three to five years to complete; curricula organized around single disciplines that are reflected in a pattern of insular departments and faculties; lifetime tenure for academic staff; isolation of institutions from the communities in which they are located; etc.

These are precisely the types of structural changes that have been under active review in many of the South African universities since the beginning of educational reforms in 1994.\(^2\) In some cases their structural reforms have been driven as much by a need to become more efficient as by a need to develop their comparative advantages in the face of growing competition from the emerging private higher education sector. Closely associated with this trend in undertaking structural changes has been the recomposition of many higher education systems into functionally differentiated types, with different types pursuing different missions and serving different “markets.” This pattern of increasing functional differentiation can also be observed in the higher education reforms of the United States, Australia, and Europe. Consequently, it seems likely that the issue of structural differentiation will sooner or later come to public attention in Nigeria. When it does, those institutions with competence in strategic planning will be better prepared to handle this issue than those lacking in such competence.

In conclusion, the need to foster strategic planning capacities in Nigerian universities at the present time seems evident, and NUSIP offers an opportunity for institutions to become proficient in the use of this tool of modern management. In the next section we will look at options for moving in this direction.

#### OPTIONS FOR NEXT STEPS

The Fielden report of 1995 proposed a three-stage process for introducing and using strategic planning within the federal university system. In the first stage, all university Vice-Chancellors were to receive an orientation to strategic planning in the form of a workshop provided by a team of international experts. In the second stage, a selected

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\(^1\) The first two planning trends focused on enrollment growth and physical infrastructure in the 1960s and 1970s, and on strategic orientation and efficiency gains in the cost-conscious period of the 1980s and 1990s.

\(^2\) Recommendations concerning the future size and scope of South African higher education were presented in August 2000.
number of universities were to receive funding for starting strategic planning activities on
the basis of proposals supported by certain prerequisites (e.g., approval by the University
Council; a willingness to share its experiences with other institutions). In the third stage,
a second group of universities were to be chosen for strategic planning support. In both
the second and third stages, strategic planning support was to have included both funding
and technical assistance, with the latter provided either by the same international team
that conducted the orientation for the Vice-Chancellors, or by local trainers assisted by
international experts.

Is this three-stage approach still viable, given the recently proposed policies of university
autonomy? Are prerequisites still needed? Should the notion of voluntary participation
by universities in strategic planning activities still hold? Are international experts still
needed, or does an adequate pool of experienced strategic planners who can meet these
needs now exist in Nigeria?

At a recent meeting of the NUSIP Project Preparation Team, whose members include six
Vice-Chancellors representing the various types of federally universities, a strong sense
of needing an update to the rationale for strategic planning was expressed. Even though
an introductory workshop for Vice-Chancellors was held several years ago by the NUC,
the general feeling was that sufficient changes of Vice-Chancellors and higher education
circumstances have occurred to justify another general orientation for university leaders
and council members.

Two options could be considered for such a workshop. In one, participation by
institutions might be voluntary, but with the understanding that any institution that
wished to access NUSIP funds for its strategic planning efforts would need to participate.
In the other, institutional representatives in this orientation workshop might be expanded
to include Pro-Chancellors and perhaps a key member of Senate, in addition to the Vice-
Chancellor. Expanded participation might construct a broader base of support and
commitment upon which to mount a strategic planning effort. This might increase the
likelihood of success in contrast to the case where strategic planning is seen primarily or
exclusively as an initiative of the Vice Chancellor.

With respect to the second phase and the notion that only a limited number of institutions
should be selected for initial strategic planning support, it may be necessary to
reconsider this approach if the proposed changes in university autonomy are approved.
In fact, some institutions have already begun strategic planning, e.g., the universities at
Ibadan, Jos and Lagos among others. In such cases, additional support may accelerate
their efforts. In other cases, universities are reportedly ready to get started, e.g., the
University of Abuja. And in still other cases universities may to be willing to consider
strategic planning, but are uncertain as to whether or not they are “ready” to begin this
undertaking. In light of these circumstances, it may be appropriate to consider a more
flexible approach, still based on voluntary involvement and on meeting essential
prerequisites. The basic operating principle of this approach would be to support those
institutions willing to make an effort, regardless of whether they are all at the same level
of readiness and capacity for strategic planning.
Concerning the possible prerequisite of universities being willing to share their experiences, the experiences of a group of historically disadvantaged institutions in South Africa might be worth considering. They were very reluctant during the first few years of a program to build their strategic planning capacities to go beyond a certain point of innocuous generality in sharing their experiences. There was a general concern that while they all shared a common history, they all nevertheless shared a common destiny of competing against each other for funding, students and staff. As a result, the assumption that universities would be willing to “share experiences” had to be greatly altered. This raised project costs considerably because technical expertise now had to be given to institutions on a one-to-one basis rather than provided collectively through common training workshops.

The matter of technical assistance also requires thought and discussion. Although a growing pool of Nigerian expertise in strategic planning may be emerging that could and should be utilized, a strong case nevertheless exists for making use of international experts. The role of these international experts would be to lead the general workshops and guide the development of local expertise. The painful reality is that Nigeria has suffered from a degree of intellectual isolation in recent years, causing it to fall somewhat “behind the times.” This isolation is not limited to the academic community, though perhaps it is worse there than in other spheres due in part to pervasive brain drain and to the weak state of information and communication connectivity in the universities. Under these circumstances, the involvement of international experts familiar with the use of strategic planning in other higher education settings would be essential to ensure that Nigerian university experiences would be based on “state of the art” knowledge. International involvement might also help to overcome the natural reluctance of institutions to share with local experts certain information that might be used to the disadvantage of these institutions if it became known to other institutions. In the South African example, universities were willing to be more open to foreign technical specialists if it was certain that they would not be working with other institutions.

An important option to be considered regarding the use of international experts was alluded to in an earlier section. This concerns whether such expertise should be focused directly on individual institutions, as in the South African case, or whether it should be used to build a national training and support capacity within a specific organization such as the National Universities Commission. Some combination of these two options could also be considered. A case can be made for each option. Nigerians will need to consider what is best for them in the short term—in order to get strategic planning processes underway at some institutions—as well as in the long term, when the use of strategic planning might extend into fundamental issues of structural change and might also broaden to embrace the rest of the tertiary education sector in Nigeria.
CONCLUSIONS

Circumstances in Nigeria have changed sufficiently in the past year that many Vice-Chancellors now appear willing to consider the use of strategic planning as an important tool in determining how best to revitalize and modernize their institutions.

A fundamental requirement for institutional success in any strategic planning process is the need to engage the end-users of university products and services in a more systematic way. It seems that few institutions have realized the extent to which Nigerian employers have become concerned about the declining value of undergraduate education as provided by the federal universities. Nor do these institutions seem to comprehend fully the potential value that developing partnerships with their end-users could bring to them. The initiation of strategic planning provides an instructive opportunity for involving end-users in the process of determining how institutions can best be revitalized.

The processes of strategic planning require a certain degree of organizational readiness before they should be undertaken. Consequently, NUSIP should consider the provision of training and technical guidance in strategic planning as a way of permitting federal universities to assess their readiness for this undertaking. Such capacity building would prepare the universities for their participation in other proposed NUSIP activities. It might also provide institutions with the understanding that possession of a strategic planning capability will serve their needs in numerous ways that transcend the more immediate NUSIP activities.
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