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THE
SECOND SENATE MEETING
TAKORADI TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY
2ND NOVEMBER, 2019**

CHALLENGES OF POSTGRADUATE STUDIES IN GHANA

**Madam Chair (Speaker of Senate), the National President of GRASAG,
GRASAG Executives, all protocol observed.**

Thank you for inviting me as the keynote speaker for the 2nd senate meeting of the Graduate Students Association of Ghana. I feel honoured.

INTRODUCTION

Universities the world over are recognized as institutions established for the advancement of knowledge, scholarship and innovation. Postgraduate programmes are considered conduits through which universities develop research capacity and generate the high end skills required for a functional economy and to address complex issues.

Challenges facing nations globally have become complex. For that matter, nations are exploring avenues to cope with issues of environmental degradation, health, climate change, conflicts, over population, cybercrime, illiteracy, poverty, gender inequality, and corruption among others. The situation in Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly, in Ghana is not different.

The continent's ability to cope with such complex challenges depends largely on the extent to which postgraduate education offered by tertiary education institutions meet the demands and aspirations of a particular nation. There is a clarion call for African

universities to consider doing things differently in the area of postgraduate education by offering programmes that meet industry demands. This is because the complex nature of developmental challenges facing the African Sub-region in the 21st century, calls for new ways of delivering postgraduate education.

Most universities in the western world are strongly linking contents of postgraduate programmes and focus of postgraduate research to the needs of industry. There is therefore the need for a paradigm shift to ensure that postgraduate studies have a positive impact on industry.

The status of postgraduate education in the developing world, and particularly, Ghana is not encouraging. This area receives the least attention in developing countries, including Ghana. Access to postgraduate education for many qualified youth is still an issue of concern in Ghana. This is partly because of problems of affordability, since postgraduate education in Ghana has become very expensive in recent times. There is the need for government to assist in responding to student funding in postgraduate education. But even if we discount the problem of affordability, many young, qualified people still find it difficult to find places to study. University enrolments should be expanded, through the resourcing of universities to be able to admit more postgraduate students.

It is questionable whether our system values postgraduate teaching and learning sufficiently. Is it giving equal weight, for example to research when it comes to funding? I believe it is not. This is one of the issues that I hope the National Council on Tertiary Education (NCTE) would pay attention to.

Another important issue has to do with the curricula used for graduate studies in Ghana, which must incorporate innovative methods to expand the intellectual horizons and critical faculties of our students. Most of the curricula used tend to theoretical, and one does not get a sense that the issue of curriculum reforms is being critically examined in our academic institutions. The question that arises out of matters relating to our curricula is whether there are

any interventions needed to support diversification of curricula and promotion of the practical aspect.

It may also mean that we need to adjust our curricula to make them more relevant to student needs. I am not suggesting the lowering of academic standards. However, an institution that does not take its students' needs seriously cannot succeed in training its students.

While I have emphasised the importance of improving our curricula, I also want to stress the importance of research and innovation in post graduate studies. Most research in Ghana is done in universities. Research is a fundamental function of post graduate education and is crucial to transformation as well as to all matters associated with national development. It makes an invaluable contribution to our economic and social development and assists our country to compete internationally and, just as importantly, to collaborate with a variety of international partners. The government must therefore take a particular interest to fund the research of post graduate students. Students must also be encouraged to undertake more action research, geared towards solving specific national problems.

The challenges

Research

Research in most universities in Ghana is poorly coordinated. Often, variations exist in the approach and even requirements for the fulfillment of postgraduate research in the same university, for example in the number of years it takes to complete Masters or Doctoral degrees for full as well as part-time students. On the average, it takes 4-6 years to complete a PhD in most Ghanaian universities because of inadequate resources and bureaucracy in the approval process, which involves departments and faculties.

Most postgraduate research is of a descriptive nature and lacks the empirical rigor that would make any impact on national development. The country has seen little cross-disciplinary research

endeavours, and more often than not, no collaborations between practitioners and academics.

Often, academic research suffers from more time being spent on data collection than on analysis and robust reporting. Findings that are not clearly presented and explained for the end user to understand are of little value in terms of their application. It is also common to find students wanting to cover a number of objectives in a single project, which calls for elaborate data collection and analysis, making it difficult to relate one objective to next. Such research more often than not lacks definite focus.

Supervisor-student relationship

The supervisor-student relationship as seen in the following: Delays in receiving feedback; Lack of guidelines stipulating supervision; Poor supervision (no schedule for meetings, no records of discussions etc.); No mechanisms for redress; Supervisors always too busy to meet students; Inadequate preparation for postgraduate study on the part of faculties; Heavy teaching loads for faculty members, among others.

In situations where there is more than one supervisor, there are delays in getting feedback because one has to wait for both parties to agree. And often there are conflicting views or opinions, thus confusing students, especially with PhD candidates.

Timely completion of postgraduate degrees

Timely completion of postgraduate degrees, due to factors such as the following: commitment on the part of both supervisor and candidate; lack of facilities - equipment, software, chemicals; problems of combining studies and work/occupations (for part-time students); inadequate financial support; inadequate guidelines for writing theses/dissertations; inadequate supervision; the change of project focus midway; students' delays in submitting their work; laziness on the part of candidates, among others.

Stress

Another challenge of postgraduate studies is dealing with stress. With looming deadlines and a huge amount of personal investment, postgraduate studies is extremely stressful especially with PhD. It has been found that PhD students have high levels of mental

disorders - likely related to high levels of stress they have to endure. For this reason, it is imperative that one finds healthy ways to release some tension, whether through exercise, meditation, arts, or anything else.

Funding issues

There is the general perpetual issue of funding to support postgraduate studies. Some students are fortunate to secure external funding. Unfortunately, this too can be a source of concern, because it has been known, for example, for funding to be reduced or even cut off completely, while still in the middle of the programme. This is a precarious position to be left in and it can be extremely stressful to secure new funding. Ideally, supervisors should be on hand to help with this. One should never think twice about approaching them for advice, it is what they are there for. Still, it is also recommended that students ensure that they are financially secure themselves, or at least have some money saved in case of emergency.

Time management

So much to do, so little time to do it! This is probably the mantra of our age... Learning when to jump at new opportunities and when to say no to extra tasks is a skill which every academic should develop if they are to avoid going mad. This can be honed by knowing how to prioritise.

Work/life balance

It sometimes seems like post graduate students are expected to study all the time; to be in the office every weekend and to work late every day. But this is not sustainable; you also need time for hobbies, friends, and family in order to function at peak level. A healthy social life, regular exercise, and cultural activities will be stimulating, fun, and are likely to make you happier and more relaxed.

Lack of institutional support

Some universities are better than others at supporting postgraduate students. The best universities have extensive programmes for helping them, through mentoring, workshops, and social events, while at other universities students are left to fend for themselves.

Lack of personal support

Another challenge for postgraduate students is dealing with a lack of personal support. Friends, partners, and family members may not understand the worth of a PhD, and may not be supportive of the choice to pursue one. Many PhD students have been distressed by a well-meaning relative asking when they will be finished with their PhD and get a real job. This is another reason to get in contact with other PhD students, who can understand the stress you are experiencing and give you the support you need. Sharing these concerns also helps to lighten them.

Concerns about the future

In addition to worrying about their theses, many postgraduate students feel concerned about their future too. In this uncertain job market, and academic jobs being intensely competitive, there is no guarantee that getting a PhD for instance, will lead to a desirable job. That said, research does show that having a PhD hugely increases your chances of not only getting a job, but also being paid better, and enjoying greater job satisfaction.

Problems with motivation

With a PhD typically taking at least three years (at the very least), it is hard for anyone to maintain motivation throughout their whole project. Feeling fed up, bored, or dissatisfied with one's project is a very common experience! When things are not going so well, and motivation is low, you should consider giving yourself a break. A few days, or even a week away from your project can sometimes be really helpful, allowing you to come back to your project invigorated and able to look at it from a fresh perspective.

Challenges of postgraduate studies at TTU

The graduate school of TTU is a rather young one, barely three years old, with a few teething problems. We are also affected by some of the already discussed challenges: funding, lack of needed resources, curricula reforms, lack of e-resources, poor internet connectivity, and insufficient internet access.

Conclusion

Universities in Ghana are faced with a number of challenges that hamper effective postgraduate studies, especially the issue of funding for postgraduate research. Consequently, only a few students are able to attain higher degrees. Universities must try and find alternative ways of generating funds to support postgraduate education. The government must find more resources to tackle the problems of postgraduate studies. Universities, too, must intensify their efforts to improve the situation.

Thank you very much for your attention.

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