

# At the Crossroads of Challenge and Renewal: Reclaiming the Future of Nigerian Universities for National and Global Relevance

## **A Public Lecture in Honour of Professor Ndowa Ekoate Sunday Lale**

### **A. Introduction: A System at the Crossroads**

1. I will like to start by expressing my sincere gratitude to the organizing team led by Dr. Williams .W. Modi, for the honour of inviting me to deliver this public lecture in celebration of my friend and brother, Professor Ndowa Ekoate Sunday Lale. I will say more about him shortly. The theme of my reflection is ***“At The Crossroads of Challenge and Renewal: Reclaiming the Future of Nigerian Universities for National and Global Relevance”***. I do not intend this lecture to dwell on despair. Rather, it is an opportunity to draw meaningful connections between our past and present, in order to better guide the path forward.
2. Nigerian universities stand at a historic crossroads. Once revered as engines of elite formation, social mobility, national consciousness, and intellectual leadership on the African continent, they now confront a convergence of structural, financial, cultural, and philosophical crises that threaten their relevance both nationally and globally. Yet history reminds us that universities are often most transformative precisely when they respond creatively to moments of profound strain.
3. Universities are among the most resilient institutions ever created as they are continually redefining their purpose. From medieval Europe to postcolonial Africa, the university has remained a central site for knowledge production, leadership formation, and societal self-reflection. In Nigeria, the modern university emerged as a national project—conceived to train skilled manpower, foster unity, and provide intellectual leadership for a newly independent state. Institutions such as Ibadan, Nsukka, Ife, Zaria, and Lagos were not merely campuses; they were symbols of national aspiration and possibility.

4. in recent years, however, Nigerian universities have faced layered and persistent crisis marked by declining funding, eroding academic morale, infrastructural decay, recurring labour disputes, weakened research impact, and diminishing global visibility. These challenges are not isolated failures but symptoms of deeper misalignments between scholarship and national development, between institutional autonomy and accountability, and between inherited models of governance and the demands of a rapidly changing global knowledge economy.
5. The retirement of a Vice-Chancellor offers a rare pause in the life of an institution, a moment to reflect not only on individual stewardship exercised under difficult circumstances, but also on the broader institutional and national framework such leadership sought to sustain. To lead a Nigerian University in the last four decades has required extraordinary resilience. Shrinking public funding and heightened social expectations have placed Vice Chancellors in an almost impossible position. In theory, he is the chief intellectual officer of the institution; in practice, his role increasingly has become one of crisis management – mediating between government, staff unions, students, regulators, and the wider public.
6. This lecture, therefore, serves a dual purpose: to honour academic leadership exercised under difficult and often constraining circumstances, and to interrogate how Nigerian universities can reposition themselves for relevance, credibility, and excellence in an increasingly competitive global knowledge economy.
7. Lale is not just my friend and brother; we share much more in common. He served as the 8<sup>th</sup> Vice Chancellor of the University of Port – Harcourt, while I had the privilege of serving as the 8<sup>th</sup> Vice Chancellor of Lagos State University. We are currently privileged to work closely together as members of TETFund National Research Fund. We both have navigated profound experiences in driving reform agendas, with attendant significant hurdles. I am certain that some of these hurdles must have been captured in the Festschriften and Book that will be presented today. Professor Lale is, without a doubt, a man dedicated to duty, visionary leadership, and enduring legacy. As you celebrate seven decades of life, I pray for continued blessings and laughter for you in the years ahead surrounded by your loved ones.
8. My reflection today is on the idea of the university, the burden of leadership, and the possibilities of renewal. It interrogates the persistent misalignment

between intellectual labour and national development imperatives and proposes policy- and law-oriented pathways for reform. The argument advanced here is that reclaiming the future of Nigerian universities will not come from nostalgia for a lost golden age, but from deliberate re-engineering—of funding models, academic culture, research priorities, governance frameworks, and ethical standards—anchored by a clear philosophical vision of what the Nigerian university must become in the twenty-first century.

9. It must be acknowledged that the current national administration inherited a higher education system already burdened by deep-seated challenges — chronic underfunding, unstable labour relations, decaying infrastructure, and weakened research ecosystems. These issues, built up over decades, have constrained institutional capacity and undermined teaching, research, and governance.
10. In response, several policy initiatives have been introduced, signaling an effort to stabilize and reform the tertiary sector. These include renewed emphasis on student access through national loan schemes, targeted funding for infrastructure and research, measures to improve staff welfare and remuneration, and a broader policy focus linking higher education to skills development, digital transformation, and economic diversification. Reference can also be made to the Tertiary Institutions Staff Support Fund (TISSF), which program provides interest-free loans of up to ₦10 million to academic and non-academic staff in universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education; release of funds to settle outstanding arrears owed to university staff such as the Earned Academic Allowance and the significant role that the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund) has continued to play in the life of public tertiary institutions in Nigeria.
11. While these initiatives show intent to arrest systemic decline, their real effect will depend less on announcements and more on coherence, consistency, and integrity of implementation. Student loan schemes may expand access and ease short-term funding pressures — but only if they are matched by graduate employability, transparent governance, and sustainable repayment systems. Similarly, infrastructure and welfare interventions can stabilize institutions — yet they remain palliative unless embedded within a framework that restores university autonomy, strengthens accountability, and aligns scholarship with national development priorities.

12. It is within this context — inherited challenges and tentative renewal — that Nigerian universities now stand. Poised between incremental adjustment and the possibility of deeper, enduring reform. Before I proceed to discuss a few of the issues of concern, it is perhaps apposite that I briefly consider the philosophical essence of Nigerian universities.

## **B. Philosophical Drift: What Is the Nigerian University For?**

13. At the core of Nigeria's tertiary education challenges lies a philosophical drift. Are universities primarily instruments of mass access, elite formation, workforce preparation, or global knowledge production? In the absence of a clearly articulated purpose, reforms tend to be fragmented, reactive, and sometimes contradictory, undermining both quality and relevance.
14. A differentiated system offers a sustainable way forward. In such a system, institutions are intentionally designed to pursue distinct but complementary missions: research-intensive universities focus on global knowledge production and innovation; teaching-focused institutions prioritize high-quality undergraduate education; polytechnics and technical colleges drive vocational training and applied skills; and specialized institutes address sector-specific or regional development needs. Each institution operates within a clearly defined role while contributing to a coherent national tertiary education ecosystem.
15. In Nigeria, this differentiation is undermined by overlapping mandates, political interference, uniform regulatory expectations, and a cultural bias that elevates universities over technical and vocational institutions. As a result, resources are spread thin, institutional identity is weakened, and the system struggles to meet both domestic and global expectations.
16. Moving forward, Nigeria should pursue deliberate policy frameworks that clarify institutional missions, align funding and accreditation standards with these missions, and incentivize collaboration rather than competition among complementary institutions. By embracing differentiation, the higher education system can optimize resource use, improve quality and relevance, and enhance global competitiveness, while ensuring that each institution contributes meaningfully to national development goals.

## C. The Issues of Concern

### (i) Funding, Autonomy, and the Question of Sustainability

17. Few issues have shaped the trajectory of Nigerian universities as profoundly as chronic underfunding. Public universities remain heavily dependent on government subventions that are insufficient, unpredictable, and often disconnected from institutional performance or strategic priorities. The consequences are visible across the system: deteriorating infrastructure, outdated laboratories, under-resourced libraries, stalled capital projects, and a persistent culture of emergency repairs rather than long-term planning.
18. Yet funding challenges cannot be meaningfully discussed without confronting the parallel crisis of transparency and accountability. A March 2025 survey by the *Athena Centre for Policy and Leadership*, covering 64 federal, state, and private universities, found that a significant number of Nigerian tertiary institutions were unable to publish their budgets or audited financial statements on publicly accessible platforms. This opacity weakens public trust, complicates performance-based funding, and blurs the line between genuine financial distress and poor financial governance. In response, the Federal Government launched the *Federal Tertiary Institutions Governance and Transparency Portal (FTIGTP)* to centralize financial disclosures and improve oversight. While this initiative is, in principle, a positive step, it raises a deeper institutional question: why did existing oversight mechanisms, particularly the offices of the Auditor-General and the relevant committees of the National Assembly, fail to enforce transparency before such a platform became necessary?
19. A sustainable future for Nigerian universities demands a recalibration of the funding compact between the state and the academy. Public investment must be predictable, performance-sensitive, and protected by law. At the same time, institutions must be empowered—and compelled—to generate and manage both public investment and alternative revenue streams under governance frameworks that guarantee transparency, ethical stewardship, and rigorous disclosure standards. It is only then that Nigerian universities can move from survival to sustainability.

## **(ii) Academic Labour, Distraction, and the Erosion of Vacation**

20. At the heart of any university is its academic staff. Teaching, research, and mentorship constitute the core functions through which universities justify their social contract with society. Yet across Nigerian campuses, the academic vocation has been steadily undermined by economic precarity. Inadequate remuneration, and weak welfare systems have compelled many academics to seek multiple external engagements simply to meet basic needs. This diversion of time and energy erodes sustained intellectual engagement and diminishes the overall quality of scholarship. In practice, many faculty members serve as full-time staff in one institution while holding associate roles in several others, further dispersing effort and reducing productivity.
21. This challenge has global parallels. Universities worldwide contend with casualization, performance pressures, and the corporatization of academic life. What distinguishes the Nigerian context, however, is the intensity of economic hardship, which has produced a profound crisis in academic vocation. Faculty members are constrained in their ability to engage deeply in research, innovate curricula, or mentor students effectively.
22. In Australia, universities provide structured professional development funds, housing support, and performance-linked bonuses that are legally guaranteed and integrated into institutional HR policies. In the United Kingdom, schemes such as salary supplements, sabbaticals, and dedicated research support are tied to career progression and formal evaluation metrics. Similarly, universities in Canada and Germany combine transparent pension schemes, competitive salaries, and comprehensive welfare packages, ensuring that academic staff can focus on teaching and research without economic distraction.
23. Reclaiming academic vocation in Nigeria will require deliberate policy and institutional strategies. Competitive remuneration for instance can be structured through a combination of base salary realignment, performance-linked incentives, and legally protected allowances. Welfare frameworks must encompass realistic housing, healthcare, retirement benefits, and professional development support, implemented transparently and anchored in review processes that ensure fairness and compliance.

### **(iii) Research Culture and the Problem of Relevance**

24. Research is the lifeblood of a modern university. Yet in Nigeria, research output has often remained disconnected from pressing societal challenges. Much academic work is undertaken primarily to satisfy promotion requirements, with limited expectation of translation into policy, technological innovation, or tangible social impact. The situation is so bad that universities are now having to battle a flurry of predatory journals. Yet, Nigeria faces urgent and complex problems — energy insecurity, food system vulnerability, public health crises, environmental degradation, urbanization pressures, digital exclusion, and governance deficits. Universities should be at the forefront of interrogating and addressing these challenges.
25. The Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund) has been playing a critical role in attempting to bridge this gap. In recent years, TETFund has increasingly emphasized practical, solution-oriented research through its intervention research initiatives. By encouraging projects with direct societal applications, TETFund, through its National Research Fund is helping to shift the focus from purely theoretical work to studies that can inform policy, drive innovation, and support national development.
26. To deepen this approach, universities must integrate research relevance into their institutional frameworks. This can include establishing interdisciplinary problem-solving clusters, linking research funding to national priority sectors, incentivizing collaboration with industry and government, and embedding mechanisms for knowledge transfer and commercialization. Metrics of academic excellence should expand beyond publication counts to include policy impact, innovation outcomes, and social value. In this way, TETFund's and other similar initiatives can catalyze a research culture where scholarship is not only intellectually rigorous but also socially and economically transformative.

### **(iv) Scholarship and National Development: A Broken Conversation**

27. In high-performing university systems, institutions, the state, and industry operate in a dynamic, mutually reinforcing relationship. Academic expertise informs policy and drives innovation, while national development strategies and market realities shape research priorities and curricula. In Nigeria, however, this conversation remains weak, episodic, and largely uncoordinated. Policymakers often make decisions without sustained

engagement with academic research, while universities frequently design curricula and research agendas in isolation from both national priorities and industry needs. Recently, the National Universities Commission (NUC) implemented the Core Curriculum and Minimum Academic Standards (CCMAS), representing a significant effort to modernise curricula in collaboration with industry and other stakeholders. While a welcome step, the effectiveness of this initiative will ultimately depend on sustained engagement, regular review, and alignment with both national development objectives and the evolving demands of the labour market.

28. Further deliberate strategies to foster a true partnership between universities, government, and industry are: Institutionalized platforms for knowledge exchange such as joint research councils, innovation hubs, and sector-specific advisory boards — where academics and business leaders co-create projects that address real-world challenges. Incentive structures can encourage industry engagement, for example through tax breaks for research collaborations, shared intellectual property arrangements, co-funded laboratories, or embedded internship and fellowship programs.
29. When universities actively collaborate with industry, research is translated into tangible solutions, students gain practical skills, and knowledge resources are mobilized to stimulate economic development. Conversely, a university system disconnected from national and industrial priorities risks undermining its own relevance and legitimacy, producing scholarship that exists in theory but has little real-world impact.

#### **(v) Access, Equity, and the Promise of Student Loan Schemes**

30. The introduction of a national tertiary education loan scheme represents an important step toward addressing the persistent access challenge in Nigerian higher education. In principle, such schemes have the potential to democratize access, reduce immediate financial barriers, and diversify funding sources. International experience offers both encouragement and caution. For example, countries like Australia and the United Kingdom have successfully implemented income-contingent loan systems that allow students to defer repayment until they reach a defined income threshold. These schemes have expanded access without placing undue financial burden on graduates, while maintaining sustainable funding flows for institutions.

31. Conversely, poorly designed student loan programmes in some jurisdictions, such as parts of the United States, illustrate potential pitfalls. High-interest rates, rigid repayment schedules, and lack of alignment with local labour market realities have led to widespread debt distress, default, and social inequity, effectively transferring systemic failures onto young citizens.
32. For Nigeria, the success of its loan initiative will depend on several critical factors. Transparency in administration, equitable access for students across regions and income levels, income-contingent repayment mechanisms, and integration with broader employment and economic policies are essential. Moreover, careful attention must be paid to matching graduates' skills with market needs, ensuring that loans do not simply finance education in a vacuum but contribute to meaningful human capital development. By learning from both the successes and failures of other systems, Nigeria can implement a tertiary loan framework that truly expands opportunity while protecting both students and the sustainability of the higher education system.

#### **(vi) Academic Welfare, Brain Drain, and Global Competition**

33. The global market for academic talent is intensely competitive. Nigerian universities, constrained by uncompetitive salaries, limited research funding, and challenging working conditions, continue to lose experienced scholars and promising early-career academics to foreign institutions and alternative sectors. This outflow — commonly referred to as brain drain — is not merely a loss of personnel; it erodes institutional memory, mentorship capacity, research leadership, and the continuity of scholarship.
34. Yet brain drain is not an unmitigated disadvantage. When managed strategically, it can become a source of national benefit. Returning scholars, diaspora networks, and transnational collaborations can introduce new knowledge, global-best practices, research partnerships, and access to international funding. To leverage these advantages, Nigeria needs policies that combine retention and engagement. Competitive remuneration packages, robust welfare frameworks encompassing housing, healthcare, and professional development, and well-resourced research infrastructure are essential to retain talent. Simultaneously, programmes that encourage diaspora engagement — such as visiting professorships, collaborative research grants, virtual teaching initiatives, and technology transfer schemes — can amortize the benefits of scholars' international experience.

35. Ultimately, addressing brain drain requires a dual approach: retain where possible, connect where external mobility occurs, and integrate the benefits of global exposure into domestic institutional development. By adopting such policies, Nigerian universities can stabilize academic labour, nurture institutional resilience, and harness the global circulation of knowledge to strengthen national higher education and development objectives.

#### **(vii) Innovation, Creativity, and the University as an Ecosystem**

36. Globally, universities are increasingly evaluated not just by the number of degrees they award or papers they publish, but by their impact within broader innovation ecosystems. Leading institutions incubate startups, generate patents, influence industry practices, and produce solutions that respond to societal challenges.
37. In Nigeria, universities remain largely peripheral players in this space. Weak industry linkages, rigid curricula, undue extreme attachment to the publish or perish culture (which prioritizes mere act of publishing to meaningful contribution of the publication), limited seed funding, and bureaucratic constraints have stifled creativity and entrepreneurship. Reimagining the university as an innovation ecosystem requires a multi-pronged approach. Direct policies could include embedding entrepreneurship education and innovation modules into undergraduate and postgraduate curricula, establishing technology creation and commercialization offices, creating seed funds for student and faculty startups, and facilitating protected intellectual property arrangements.
38. Indirect policies are equally important. Reference has been made earlier to incentivizing industry partnerships through tax breaks or co-funding arrangements. Others include streamlining bureaucratic procedures to allow agile project development and promoting research grants that reward collaboration between universities and the private sector. Creating structured platforms for co-creation — such as innovation hubs, and incubator-accelerator networks — can catalyze knowledge exchange, foster experiential learning, and translate academic research into commercially viable and socially impactful solutions.
39. By integrating these measures, Nigerian universities can transition from passive knowledge producers to dynamic nodes within national and global

innovation ecosystems — generating economic value, nurturing entrepreneurial talent, and addressing real-world challenges in a sustainable and socially responsive manner.

#### **(viii) Regulation, Accreditation, Quality Assurance, and the Challenge of Sustainable Expansion**

40. Persistent over-admission, inadequate facilities, and repeated violations of regulatory standards have significantly compromised the quality of education in Nigerian universities. Overcrowded lecture halls, overstretched academic staff, insufficient accommodation, and weak student support services undermine learning outcomes and student welfare, while steadily eroding public confidence in the higher education system.
41. Accreditation exercises, led primarily by the National Universities Commission (NUC), have long formed the backbone of Nigeria's quality assurance framework. These processes have helped establish baseline compliance and curb the most egregious lapses in standards. However, their impact on deeper indicators of quality—such as teaching effectiveness, research depth, graduate competence, employability, and societal impact—remains uneven. This gap reflects a regulatory approach that has historically prioritized procedural compliance over substantive outcomes.
42. To deepen accountability and enhance global competitiveness, regulatory oversight must evolve toward outcomes-based quality assurance. This requires assessing not only whether institutions meet minimum requirements, but whether they deliver measurable results: strong student learning outcomes, relevant skills acquisition, research that informs policy or innovation, and graduates who are employable and socially productive. Practical strategies include integrating external peer review and industry input into accreditation processes, conducting periodic institutional performance audits, and linking accreditation outcomes to funding access, enrolment quotas, and policy support.
43. Transparency must also become central to quality assurance. Public disclosure of institutional performance indicators—covering teaching quality, staffing adequacy, research output, and graduate outcomes—can strengthen accountability to students, parents, employers, and government alike. Continuous professional development for faculty, alongside benchmarking

programmes against credible international standards, would further entrench a culture of improvement rather than episodic compliance.

44. The challenge of institutional proliferation—driven by federal, state, and private initiatives—adds a critical layer of complexity. Licensing new institutions must be strictly contingent on demonstrable capacity to deliver quality education, including adequate infrastructure, sustainable funding models, and, crucially, a sufficient pool of qualified full-time academic staff. In practice, many institutions struggle to meet staffing requirements, leading to a system in which academics serve as full-time staff in one university while simultaneously holding associate appointments in multiple others. This dispersal of intellectual effort contributes to overwork, weakens research productivity, dilutes teaching quality, and undermines institutional coherence.
45. Addressing these challenges demands firmer regulatory discipline. The NUC and other oversight bodies must enforce licensing standards rigorously and introduce mechanisms for rationalization, including periodic audits of staffing levels, infrastructure, governance, and institutional performance. Where minimum standards are persistently unmet, corrective options such as targeted interventions, institutional mergers, enrolment caps, or—where necessary—closures should be considered. Expansion without capacity merely redistributes scarcity and accelerates systemic decline.
46. Global experience offers instructive lessons. In Australia and Canada, regulatory bodies require evidence-based proposals for new institutions, supported by detailed financial models, staffing plans, and long-term student demand projections before approval is granted. In Germany and Switzerland, institutional expansion is tightly linked to regional labour market needs and subject to continuous monitoring to ensure alignment with national development priorities. Conversely, poorly regulated expansion in parts of sub-Saharan Africa has produced overcapacity, under-resourced campuses, and declining academic standards.
47. For Nigeria, the path forward lies in pairing strategic expansion with sustained investment in infrastructure, staffing, and student services, reinforced by continuous monitoring, performance-linked accountability mechanisms, and transparent public reporting. Embedding these practices within a legally supported, data-driven regulatory framework will ensure that growth strengthens—rather than erodes—the quality, credibility, and relevance of

higher education, while aligning institutional development with national socio-economic objectives.

#### **(ix) Ethics, Power, and the Moral Community of the University**

48. Universities are not value-neutral spaces. Rising concerns around dress codes, sexual harassment, and abuse of power point to deeper questions about institutional culture, ethics, and governance. While tertiary institutions are adult environments that encourage individuality, autonomy, and self-expression, they also bear responsibility for fostering decorum, professionalism, safety, and mutual respect within a shared learning community. It is within this tension that debates around dress codes have become particularly pronounced.
49. Proponents of dress regulations argue that clear standards promote professionalism, reduce distractions, enhance personal safety, and help cultivate a sense of unity and academic purpose. From this perspective, universities are formative spaces where students are prepared for professional and civic life, and expectations around appearance are seen as part of that socialization process. Opponents, however, contend that dress codes are often inconsistently applied, gendered, or culturally insensitive, disproportionately affecting women and students from particular cultural or religious backgrounds. They argue that such policies can reinforce discrimination, police bodies unfairly, and divert attention from more substantive academic and institutional challenges.
50. The challenge, therefore, is not whether universities should have standards, but how those standards are defined, implemented, and enforced. A balanced approach requires dress guidelines that are clear, reasonable, inclusive, and anchored in principles of dignity rather than moral surveillance. Policies must avoid arbitrariness and bias, respect cultural and religious diversity, and be framed in ways that support a conducive learning environment without unnecessarily constraining personal identity or expression.
51. More broadly, effective ethical governance requires more than well-intentioned policy statements. It demands fair and consistent enforcement mechanisms, independent reporting structures that protect members from harassment and abuse, and sustained ethical and civic education that reinforces responsibility, consent, respect for power boundaries and awareness of the university's social mission. A university that cannot uphold

these standards - safeguarding the dignity, safety, and rights of its members — while modelling fairness and inclusion — undermines its moral authority and weakens its claim to serve as a model for society.

#### **(x) Conflict, Governance, and Industrial Relations**

52. Frequent conflicts between government, university management, and staff unions have long destabilized academic calendars, disrupted learning, and weakened public confidence in the university system. These tensions often stem not only from unmet demands, but also from the absence of continuous dialogue, unrealistic or poorly costed agreements, weak implementation capacity, and structural funding constraints that make compliance difficult even when agreements are reached.
53. Experience from other jurisdictions demonstrates that sustainable conflict management depends on institutionalized dialogue, empowered negotiation teams, and credible funding frameworks. In countries such as Germany and the Nordic states, regular tripartite engagement between government, university leadership, and staff representatives is embedded within governance systems, ensuring that grievances are addressed early and agreements are grounded in fiscal reality. In the United Kingdom and Australia, collective bargaining is supported by independent mediation bodies and legally enforceable agreements, reducing cycles of industrial action.
54. Towards the end of December, 2025, it was announced that ASUU has concluded renegotiations of the 2009 agreement, with the new deal set to take effect from January 1st, 2026. This outcome is heartwarming, reflecting what can be achieved when dialogue, negotiation, and commitment are prioritized. One can only hope that all parties adhere to the terms of the agreement and use it as a foundation for building a more stable, predictable, and cooperative framework for university governance.

#### **(xi) Artificial Intelligence, Digital Divide, and the Future University**

55. Artificial intelligence and digital technologies are rapidly transforming knowledge production, pedagogy, and research collaboration across the world. Universities that fail to adapt to this transformation risk strategic marginalization. Nigerian tertiary institutions face a compounded challenge: limited digital infrastructure, uneven levels of digital literacy among staff and

students, fragmented data systems, and unresolved ethical and governance concerns around the deployment of emerging technologies.

56. Responding effectively requires a deliberate shift from ad hoc digital adoption to strategic prioritization of high-impact applications. Appropriate strategies include building robust institutional data foundations to support learning analytics, research management, and administrative efficiency; investing in continuous faculty and staff capacity development in digital and AI competencies; and establishing clear ethical governance frameworks to guide responsible use. An effective action plan would involve phased investment in digital infrastructure, well guided integration of AI and data literacy into curricula and staff training, creation of interdisciplinary digital innovation units, and alignment of technology deployment with institutional and national development goals.
57. In this context, digital transformation is no longer optional. The future university will be digital, hybrid, ethically governed, and globally connected.

#### **(xii) Technical Education and the Hierarchy of Prestige**

58. Nigeria's long-standing preference for university degrees has contributed to the marginalization of technical and vocational education, despite its critical importance to national productivity and employment. In recent years, steps have been taken to address this imbalance, including the revitalization of technical colleges, curriculum reforms emphasizing competency-based training, and increased involvement of agencies responsible for skills development. However, these efforts continue to be undermined by inconsistent policies, and persistent social perceptions that regard technical education as inferior to university pathways.
59. Global experience offers clear evidence that well-designed technical education systems can transform national productivity and labour markets. In Germany, the Dual Vocational Training System (Duales Ausbildungssystem) stands as one of the most successful models worldwide. Students split their time between classroom instruction in vocational schools and paid apprenticeships in companies such as Siemens, Bosch, and Volkswagen. This system is jointly governed by the state, chambers of commerce, and industry, ensuring that curricula remain aligned with labour market needs. As a result, Germany consistently records one of the lowest youth unemployment rates in

Europe, and technical careers enjoy high social prestige and strong wage prospects.

60. Similarly, Switzerland's dual-track vocational education and training (VET) system integrates technical colleges with private-sector apprenticeships across sectors including engineering, healthcare, hospitality, and advanced manufacturing. Over two-thirds of Swiss secondary school students opt for vocational pathways, many of whom later progress to applied universities of science. The system's success lies in its permeability—students can transition seamlessly between vocational and academic routes, thereby eliminating the stigma often associated with technical education while supplying industry with highly skilled labour.
61. In South Korea, sustained investment in Meister High Schools and specialized polytechnics has strengthened technical capacity in strategic sectors such as electronics, robotics, shipbuilding, and automotive manufacturing. These institutions are closely linked to industrial clusters and national development plans, producing graduates who move directly into highly skilled employment. The alignment of technical education with industrial policy has been a key contributor to South Korea's rapid technological advancement and export competitiveness.
62. The common lesson across these jurisdictions is that technical education thrives when it is industry-integrated, well-funded, socially valued, and institutionally linked to national economic strategy. For Nigeria, adopting elements of these models—such as structured apprenticeships, employer-led curriculum design, clear progression pathways, and strong certification frameworks—could significantly boost enrolment, relevance, and outcomes in technical education, while addressing skills shortages and youth unemployment in a sustainable manner.

### **(xiii) Global Visibility and International Performance**

63. Current assessments place most Nigerian universities outside the top echelons of global rankings, with only a handful appearing in regional or subject-specific indices. That said, Nigeria and indeed, Africa must approach global rankings with caution, as the metrics they emphasize, such as citation volume and international faculty presence, often favour Western institutional models without sufficient regard for local contexts, realities and constraints.

64. Notwithstanding the foregoing, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that the underlying purpose of global rankings is to encourage our universities to adopt appropriately and relevant best practices. What this means is that the participation of Nigerian universities should therefore be approached primarily as a tool for benchmarking and driving continuous improvement – one that can strengthen our local systems rather than merely chasing external validation. It is in this context that the Nigerian University Ranking Advisory Committee of the NUC becomes particularly relevant. The Committee can serve as a credible vehicle for institutionalizing quality assurance standards that enhance global recognition, improve performance and attract meaningful international collaboration.

#### **D. Policy and Legal Pathways for Renewal**

65. Reclaiming the future of Nigerian universities requires deliberate, legally grounded policy reforms, informed by lessons from higher-performing higher education systems. Across successful jurisdictions, several essentials recur. First is the existence of statutory, predictable funding frameworks that protect core public investment in universities while rewarding performance. Countries such as Germany, Canada, and Australia embed multi-year funding commitments in law, enabling institutions to plan strategically rather than operate in perpetual crisis mode.

66. Second, these systems combine strong institutional autonomy with rigorous accountability. Universities are legally empowered to manage finances, define academic priorities, and enter partnerships, but are held accountable through performance contracts, independent audits, and transparent public reporting. Third, effective systems operate within clearly differentiated institutional architectures, where research universities, teaching-focused institutions, polytechnics, and technical colleges have distinct missions supported by tailored funding and regulatory frameworks.

67. Fourth, structured research–industry linkages are enabled by enabling legislation on intellectual property, tax incentives for private-sector collaboration, and publicly co-funded innovation platforms. Fifth, stable welfare and career frameworks for academic staff, often protected by collective agreements and law, ensure talent retention and sustained intellectual engagement. Finally, digital transformation strategies, anchored

in national policy and ethical governance standards, support data-driven teaching, research, and administration.

68. These essentials: predictable funding, autonomy with accountability, system differentiation, industry-embedded research, protected academic welfare, and digitally enabled governance, have consistently underpinned university renewal in other jurisdictions. Their absence explains many of Nigeria's current challenges; their deliberate adoption offers a credible pathway to institutional renewal, national relevance, and global competitiveness.

## **E. Conclusion: Leadership, Legacy, and Renewal**

69. As we honour Professor Ndowa Ekoate Sunday Lale, we are reminded that institutions outlive individuals, but leadership shapes trajectories. The Nigerian university stands at a crossroads not merely of crisis, but of possibility. Renewal is achievable—but only through deliberate choices, sustained investment, and a recommitment to the idea of the university as a public good.
70. The future of Nigerian universities will be determined not by nostalgia for past glory, but by the courage to rethink structures, realign incentives, and restore purpose. In doing so, we honour not only those who have led before us, but generations yet to come.
71. Once again, happy birthday to my dear brother.

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