Education

Nigerian Varsities: A Slap on the Dignity of Man

The Federal Government’s plan to charge N10,000 per bed space in its universities has met with stiff resistance from the students who are asking, “Ten thousand Naira for what?” From the University of Nigeria Nsukka, to the University of Calabar, Bayero University, Kano, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria and the University of Lagos.

Bukola Olatunji seeks an answer to the question.

It may not be a patient possession because it is quite cheap. It sells for just about N 40, 00. but it is an indispensable possession of every female student of the University of Nigeria, Nsokka (UNN) resident in the hostels. It is a small, two to three litre plastic bucket with a firm lid. The ladies call it “Slating (pronounced, Shaiting) Bucket. Perhaps one should warn readers at this point that this story may contain some offensive details.

The Federal Government recently announced its plan to charge N10,000 per bed space in its Universities, up from N90, it currently charges. But the students have resisted it with peaceful demonstrations here and there, while the government says N90 is unrealistic, the students say N10,000 is unreasonable.

In the last three weeks, THIS DAY has been to five universities in different parts of the country to see how the students live and seek the views of stakeholders on the matter.

The trip is an eye opener as to why some years ago, no less a personality than Nigeria’s only Nobel laureate in Literature, Prof. Wole Soyinka has reconstruced the closure of all universities in the country for at least one year to make a fresh start. The advice has received condemnation in many quarters and rejection by the government.

Only a couple of months ago, the Register of the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB). Prof Bello Salim was calling on the Federal Government to declare education a disaster area. It will be a great pity if nothing changes after this.

Of the Universities visited, the UNN is simply in a class of its own and so it forms the first of this two-part report.

Founded in Nigeria’s year of independence, 1960, and aptly christened University of Nigeria, Nsukka by the country’s first president, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe; the institution is established, as the motto goes, “To Restore the Dignity of Man”

Today, it is hard to tell if there is any university anywhere that has dealt a heavier slap on the dignity of man. As a matter of fact, human dignity is completely disintegrated there and that is by no means and exaggeration.

Driving through the main gate of the main campus, the first shock that one gets is the unimaginable unfilthness of the environment, which gets worse as the journey progresses.
The refuse at the quadrangle of the Faculty of Science, not a dump site, can fill a pick up van. It is said that the shortaken of that environment does not come out well. A student is asked when last the place was swept and he says, “I cannot remember”.
The story is not different at the Enugu campus. The roads are liaed with all sorts of rubbish and there is a little heap everywhere one turns. Asked what life on campus is like, the spokesman of the Students Union at Enugu and third year student of Management, Mr. Aluya-Alleluya Benison says, “students are already experiencing hell on earth.”

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To be displaced is to be sent away from the hostel. The state of the toilets however, shows that little or no attention is paid the notice. It is as if some poured their faeces away with their eyes closed.

The stench of the drainage, urine and human waste that welcome one to the hostels, again, is unimaginable. It is a wonder how the residents swallow their saliva not to talk of food in that environment.

If the ladies use buckets, what do the men use? Apart from the bush exercise which none of the guys admits to, Mr. Eric Esonu, a 400 level student of Electronic Engineering at the main campus says, you have to be smart in your timing. The toilets are washed (once a day) around 10 a.m, so you first go for your lectures and around that time you rush back to ease yourself and go back to class”.

Esonu who was once resident at Eni Njoku Hall on the main campus but has now moved to town says the toilets get filled to the brim within a few hours and will remain so until the following day.

Eyeye is a bit humorous about it; “freely ye are given” he says “freely give”. Pressed to elaborate on thus, he says many stand over the toilet seats with bated breath and eyes closed.

If the toilets get filled to the brim and sometimes from “mole hills” how do the cleaners get to flush them? Unfortunately, the cleaners are nowhere to be found when THIS DAY called to explain how they do it.

Eyeye reasons that they must pound the content in the toilets with big sticks until it gets to flushable levels.

Away from the toilets, the rooms were originally built to accommodate two students. This has been officially increased to four, with four beds provided for each room. Without increasing the number of beds. Ekeh recalls that the rooms were officially allocated to five students when she was admitted into the school in 2000.

A year later the official figure has risen to six and that has remained the minimum ever since. Some rooms have seven official allottees. Although the Hall Governors protested, nothing came up.

So how do the students share the beds? “We cooperate among ourselves” is how a student put it. Most of the male hostels do not have bunks. The students say they gain more space by just throwing the matresses on the floor. Abandoned bunks litter one corner of Kenneth Dike Hall.

In allocating the rooms at the beginning of every session, priority si given to first and final year students. Unfortunately, some of them pay the accommodation fees but do not get an allocation. Then, there are the many others who are not eligible for accommodation but have nowhere to stay. They become “squatters” in the rooms.

This makes the average population in each room 10. some go as high as 14. if one multiplies this number by 10 or 12 rooms on each wing of the hostels, one gets a minimum of 100 students having to use six toilets that have no water, some of them completely blocked and out of use.

Aside from the squatters, there are also the “fliers” whose plight is worse that that of the squatters. They do not have anywhere to call their own, so they just look for any little space to put their luggage and books.
They go to the room at random to see if there is a free bed to lie on for a couple of hours before the owner(s) come(s). But more often than not, they sleep in classrooms and corridors of the hostels.

At Lady Eudorah Ibiam Hall in Enugu, ladies mostly fliers wait until 11.00 p.m when the last visitor on campus is expected to leave and then bring out their mats, blankets and mere wrappers to spread on corridors (turned black with grime) to pass the night. A little space at the entrance of what used to be the lounge has been converted to the fliers Box room.

*The lounge itself is a study in chaos.* Converted into a room two years ago, more than 80 students, excluding fliers, sleep in the room every night, although it is officially allocated to less than half that number. Students, desperate to rest their backs occupy every little space between the beds.

One of the inmates, Fidelia says “as I was coming back from class yesterday (around midnight), I saw a girl sitting on that chair (pointing at a chair by the entrance, close to a booming plastic bin without a lid) sleeping.” (The photo of the fliers corner shows the chair).

A group of five female students and others outside the group, who chip in a word every now and all agree that life in the room is to say the least, brutish. But for the fact that hostel rules forbid fighting, that room would have witnessed regular bouts. There are lots of disagreements, even as students miss their thugs every now and then.

Perhaps more tragic is the laundry sandwiches between two of the toilets earlier described. These laundries have been converted to rooms on every floor. With only 13 beds, the students confirm that 36 allotees and squatters as well four fliers dwell in the room; but for the wonderful gift of nature called “adaptation” it is a wonder how anyone can breath, let alone cat in any of those rooms that the students in something akin to a sick joke have chosen to call “Palace”.

What used to be the reading room is now home to 67 students, excluding fliers, about 40 of them official allotees. A law student who simply gives her name as Udodirim and two Accounting students, Chi-Chi and Chinyere Njoku variously say “we are dying here o.” “Do you see how we live”. Etc.

But fighting is only half the problem. There are health problems too. Benison alleges that there was an outbreak of Chicken Pox, which within a week spread like a wild fire at Eudorah Ibiam Hall about a month ago. Other students confirm it, but THIS DAY is unable to get an official confirmation of this.

Referring to those in government, the information Officer of the students’ Parliament says “how many of their children are subjected to this hardship? Bought will the new charges not make the difference? Benison says “N10.000 for a bed space in the poorly ventilated rooms is not acceptable to Nigerian students. Our sponsors are not capable of paying.

It is reminded that these students who cannot pay N10.000 buy the same for much than N10.000 from fellow students whom they know paid only N90 for it. But Benison responds by pointing towards the gate. “he asks THISDAY. “Ten Naira” the reporter answers “You see those people trekking to the gate in the scorching sun” he goes on, they are students. They cannot afford to pay that N10 because they may
have to go to the gate more than once a day. To say that students sell their bed spaces exorbitantly is a faulty generalisation “he says contemptuously.”

Chairman of the students House Committee on Welfare and a third year student of management Mr. Hassan Okwoli says maybe only about one per cent of the student population is comfortable. “Most of those who sell their bed spaces are children of the rich who go to town because they cannot bear the mess in the hostels. The sale of bed space is more common among the girls and sometimes you find two, three people teaming up to buy a space and take run to sleep.”

He also writes off the claim that many students pay many times the proposed charges for poorer accommodation off-campus as another faulty generalisation.

But students except excellent services when they pay only N90 for a whole year? Everywhere THIS DAY puts this question, the students speak excitedly at the same, they cannot remember when they ever paid only N90 as accommodation fee. The reporter demands their receipts of payments and at both campuses, they read the same for “Accommodation and Service Charges” N2, 340 although only N90 is charged for the bed space. The balance covers sundry items, including “Kitchen Charges”.

“Since 2000 when I came here, I have never paid less than N2000 for accommodation. I pay kitchen charges when we do not have kitchenette”, retorts Ma Ekeh, who stays at Mary Slessor Hall on the main campus. “It is only Okpara Hostel that has a kitchenette”, she adds.

Asked why her hostel and the surrounding are so filthy she says “the cleaners are trying. But look around, we don’t have any dustbin outside.”

THISDAY however gets a pleasant surprise while the chat with Ekeh lasts. There has been a power outage and the room is stifling hot. Suddenly, a power generator comes on and there is light everywhere. The reporter looks at her incredulously. “Yes, We have a standby generator” she says. “I think it was provided by the ETF (Education Tax Fund). So when there is no light, they put it on at 7.30 p.m “Thereporter glances at her wristwatch and indeed it is 7.35 p.m.

She explains further that the generator works for about three hours. Power may be restored within that period, otherwise, the students have to endure the darkness and heat thereafter.

At both campuses, students do the wring of their rooms, those who can afford to bring their fans and often mattresses and pillow. Although the school supplies mattresses, “there is not a single pillow in this school”. Eyeye says. So those who need it bring theirs from home.

Students do not believe that government does not have money to fund education. According to Benison, “if it can afford the kind of money it is paying legislators, sponsor COJA and CHOGM and is planning to sponsor the Nigeria University Games (NUGA), it can put more into the running of universities. Even state governments have no excuse if they can send local government chairmen abroad” he submits.

Throwing questions and their positions at THIS DAY from all sides the female students say “N10,000 is too much.” How much are they paying our parents? They have not paid my father for the past nine months” “How are you sure that if we pay N10,000, the hostels will improve even five years from now? Government should
build more hostels first before charging higher fees. Even then N10.000 will be too much.”

The Dean, faculty of Arts at the university, Prof Emeka Nwabueze says the accommodation issue “is more serious than people see it.” His position: “Unless the idea is to charge (N10.000) to improve the conditions of the hostels, it is unrealistic. “It has to go with improved infrastructure. The students say the infrastructure should be improved upon before government can charge more and I tend to agree with them.”

All efforts to reach the Vice Chancellor, Prof. Ginigene Mbanefo and the Deans of students Affairs at both campuses yield no fruits.

Justifying the N10.000, Minister of Education, Prof Fabian Osuji tells the reporter in an exclusive interview before the trip that “How can you in 2004 accept that anybody should pay N90 for a bed space? That was less than what I paid as an undergraduate in the 60s. A student gets the bed space for N90; he sells it to a fellow student for N20.000. but they are the ones saying, “don’t charge any fees” They want to be making all the money and creating all the problems. N20.000 is quite normal to pay even outside the campus, people across the road in the town rent out accommodation and charge far more than that. All we say is that the universities reasonable fee that enables them to keep the hostels clean and habitable. To make them decent places for our students to live in. They have to be properly managed. Then they will not get crowded. It is not for them to get other people. That is what the students don’t want. They don’t want this thing to be managed properly because they are taking advantage of it.

But it is not all tales of woe at UNN. Again, the reporter is pleasantly surprised to find students at the College of Medicine in Enugu receiving lectures in air-conditioned generally tidy.

Perhaps one should not expect any legs of a hospital. Medical students are also known to be fewer in number, so one should not expect to see overcrowded halls of residence.

But the entire Enugu anNsukka campuses can and should be the same. Provost of the College since 2000, Prof. Martin Aghaji tells THIS DAY, “this College has received no money from the Federal Government since 2001”.

But he has tried to get the people he knows to come forward and help the college. “ABC Orjiako gave us four cars and some money in 2001. Peter Odili (Governor of Rivers State and an Alumnus of the College) is putting up some buildings. A network of friends supplied those air conditioners. The roof of this administration block was leaking. Ibeto Group roofed it.

“There is the need to get the private sector into education the more. Even if you blame government from now till kingdom come, they won’t do anything.

On practical ways of doing this he tells the story of how the 20 beds in the Intensive CareUnit (ICU) of the hospital where he trained in the donated by different families before the attached ventilators and monitors are forever maintained by the trustees of those families. We can do the same thing here”, he says

Back to the issue at hand. Should students pay N10.000 for bed space, a political economistant lecturer atABU, Dr. Paul Mutfwang says, “Why should they not? N90 per year is welfarism. You must produce sufficiently to be welfarist.”
A student at the same institution, Miss Victoria Adejo says, “We are not negotiating. It is N90 per bed space. The people who are asking us to pay N10,000 went to school free.”

Dean of students’ Affairs Bayero University, Kano, Dr. Mohammed Ibrahim Yakassi says “This is not an official position. Talking as an individual, there is no justification for N10,000 taking into consideration the situation of the hostels, as they are inadequate water supply, electricity, congestion etc. There is need for improvement.”

This counterpart at UNILAG, Prof. Dele Olowokudejo says, “Students will have to pay more if they want to live decently. University funding has declined terribly. UNILAG pays electricity bill of about N12 million monthly. This drops to between N6 and N8 million when students are on holidays.”

A parent who has two students in the universities, Mrs Olufunmilayo Kusimo says, “what benefits do students get from the Federal Government? They buy their own books, food and now it wants them to pay N10,000 for a bed space.”