Attaining Academic Excellence in the Nigerian Law School: a mirage or reality

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By

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“Law school taught me one thing; how to take two situations that are exactly the same and show how they are different.”

Pomerantz Hart

The students of the faculty of law BUK want me to present a paper on the above mentioned ‘disingenuous’ topic. Objectively speaking, when I first look at the request of the law students, I understand it to be expecting me to literally say whether it is possible for them to achieve ‘academic’ distinction in the Nigerian Law School. It seems they want hear from me if their dream of doing extremely well ‘academically’ in the law school, can become reality. Subjectively however, from the law school perspective, the topic ought to have been couched as simple as this: “How to Simply Pass Law School”. Take note that there is nothing academic in the law school because law school is not an ‘academic institution’. Law school, not only of Nigeria, but in many countries has always been a vocational training school. Although there is no clear legal definition of the terms ‘academic’ and ‘vocational’ or legal recognition of their differences, generally speaking, vocational schools train professionals and award professional certificates and degrees. Academic institutions on other hand, train in diverse fields for the award of conventional certificates and degrees. In many countries, in the pursuit of knowledge, one starts with academic institution and proceeds upon graduation, if ‘one wishes’, to a vocational training school to acquire a ‘professional training’ on the specific aspect of one’s interest.
Well after you successfully finish with all the legal theories, assumptions, conjectures, imaginations, you the law school to apply these theories to a given practical situation. You learn the academic in the universities and you go to law school as your ‘workshop’ for testing the ‘raw law’ learnt. Therefore, the first step towards passing law school is in the understanding of these differences. No one will ask you anything about elements of a valid contract or anything like historical development of Nigerian legal system. These as part of substantive law, were taught in the university. The law school teaches you the application of substantive law to a given real life situation. In the university, you learn about the components of a bicycle for instance, the types of it, who are entitle to ride one etc. In the law school, you will taught how to safely ride on the bicycle, how to ‘operate’ control and maneuver the bicycle. So if this is law school, what is the myth about it or about passing it? But don’t forget that, your education as a lawyer starts with the university. For you to achieve any success or excel in the law school, you have to start it from your university. When you are certified ‘good’ in the university, the law school will recertify that when you find yourself there. Studies have shown that, those who excel in the university repeat same in the law school.

Another way of passing law school is in understanding how it operates and what you are expected to do or not to do in the law school. So how does law school operate? Permit me to state it here that, Nigerian Law School is one of the highly efficient schools and agencies, not only in Nigeria but in Africa. For more than 45 years of its establishment there was never a strike by either the lecturers or other staff. The law school system has ‘perfectly’ been working well. The so called ‘Nigerian factor’ has not tremendously affected the school. From registration, students will know everything about the school’s calendar with dates of doing everything – from the date of first lecture, dates for cocktail parties and law dinners to the dates for marking,
publication of results and call to the Nigerian Bar. There is no room for any excuse or absenteeism, either for the lecturers and other staff or for the students. Having this at one’s mind before enrolling into the program will tremendously help one to excel and pass with flying colors.

_The main thing in the law school is to keep the main thing, the main thing!_

_What is the main thing and how can one keep it the main thing?_

Permit me at this juncture to state the main objectives for establishing law school. These are:

1. To educate and ‘train law graduates in vocational skills’ that would enable them function optimally as barristers and solicitors;
2. To adopt ‘skills-based, interactive and clinical methods of learning’ that would adequately prepare the graduates for their roles as lawyers to function as teachers, advocates, and solicitors, advisers, leaders in private enterprise and public service;
3. To train students to conform to the ethics and traditions of the legal profession and exhibit the highest sense of integrity and candor in the discharge of their professional calling; and to inculcate in its graduates the ideals of rule of law, social justice and community service such as providing free legal services to the indigent and encouraging the development of opportunities for access to justice.

Recently, the curriculum of the law school has been ‘updated’ to incorporate some current trends for training lawyers throughout the world, based on best international
practices. The new curriculum seeks to make the students the centre of the learning process. By this, students must be ready to prepare for lessons, by undertaking reading assignments, exercises, tasks, role plays, etc as would be indicated by the tutors from time to time.

Training in the law school takes at least 38 weeks of compulsory rigorous exercises, lectures, presentations etc. There would be:

(i) 2 weeks of induction (including a week of case studies and mock trials);
(ii) 20 weeks lecture contact
(iii) 1 week mock trials
(iv) 1 week of private revision before bar examination
(v) 10 weeks of Court and Law Firm attachment (Placement clinic)
(vi) 3 weeks of Attachment portfolio assessment and evaluation
(vii) 1 week of bar final examination

All these and any other thing mentioned to be carried out during the training are compulsory - including cocktail parties and dinners. It is only in the law school that one is invited to a dinner which one must attend.

There would be a maximum of 4 hours teaching time per day of 5 days of the week. Each day would be devoted to a specific module. In the law school, lessons take the form of interactive framework teaching, discussions, simulation clinics and activities, role plays, video demonstrations, mock trials, drafting exercises, assignments, quizzes and tests, presentation by guests etc in which students are expected to actively participate. Students are given before any lesson, materials and exercises or given instructions on the materials that need to be seen before any class. Lectures at the law school start by 9:00 – attendance is compulsory. In fact, a student must have at least 70% attendance to be eligible to sit for bar final exams. There would be three compulsory dinners and two cocktail
parties. Although one is allowed to ‘misbehave’ a little during the cocktails because the the requirement of ‘fit and proper’ is to be temporarily lifted, one must always remember – it is law school cocktail party. During the training, all students are to be placed or sent out for compulsory attachment to law firms and courts throughout the federation. The whole essence of placement is to ensure that students have achieved a defined minimum level of skill, attitude, ethical understanding and knowledge before commencing practice as lawyers. Each student is for required to bring two confidential reports from the principal of the law firm and the judge of the court he is attached to, on his attitude, attendance and general participation.

Is there requirement for continuous assessment in the law school? Well there is, but not similar to what is obtained in the university. In addition to bar final examination, there would be continuous assessment throughout the course in form of special portfolio assessment of the court and law office attachment (placement clinic). This takes place immediately students resume from the attachment. All students must make presentations before a panel on what they learn during the attachment.

A student must score not less than 70% at the portfolio assessment to be eligible for call to the bar irrespective of the candidate’s score at the bar examination. All students must also participate in two moot/mock trials at the beginning and end of the programme. Students are expected to demonstrate the legal scenarios given to them as if they were called to the bar. The second moot, which takes place in the third term is being presided by judges of Kano State High Court. It is a whole week of rigorous students ‘legal practice’.

Compliance with law school dress code is also compulsory. In fact, no student would be allowed to take lectures without dressing dressing the law school way. One must therefore be ready to wear black suit, white shirt, black tie, black sucks and black shoe
Mondays – Fridays; though on Fridays one can dress corporately or decently traditionally.

From the above, you will agree with me that, passing law school does not start or stop at passing the exams. One can pass the exams well, but if one does not meet other statutory requirements, one may not necessarily join this noble profession.