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THE TWO FACES OF THE HIGHER NATIONAL DIPLOMA

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Introduction

Two statements purported to have been made by two different public officials regarding the "two faces of the HND" appeared to have ignited the indignation of the Polytechnic students in respect of the status of the Higher National Diploma (HND) Programme. The Executive Secretary of the National Accreditation Board said that "the HND ranks next to a first degree" (Daily Graphic, 23rd June, 1997) while the Minister of Education is of the view that the "HND is a step below first degree", (Ghanaian Times, 16th July, 1997).

The Legal Framework

The Polytechnic Law i.e. PNDC Law 321 which conferred tertiary status on the Polytechnics in Ghana states among other things that "the Polytechnic shall award degrees subject to such conditions as the authority responsible for higher education shall direct".

The Executive Secretary of the National Council on Tertiary Education (NTCE) insists that although the HND will be developed into a degree course, what the Polytechnics are offering now is not the degree programme. He states

clearly that "Polytechnics are tertiary institutions with the clear mandate of offering practically oriented courses and programmes leading to the HND award. Under the law setting up the Polytechnics as tertiary institutions, the Polytechnics were required to eventually offer degree programmes which would also have professional and career-focused content at a high level. He admits that currently the Polytechnics were running programmes leading to the award of various certificates, including the HND, and that the staff at post were competent to teach these programmes. But he declared: "the HND programmes being run by the Polytechnics are not degree programmes. The HND programmes do not have the same orientation as that of traditional university degree programmes" (Daily Graphic, 23rd June 1997).

Crisis

It seems to this writer that the mere passage of PNDC Law 321 signaled to the Polytechnic students that the HND should be called a degree. The students rose in arms and boycotted classes. Even on the request of their leadership of the Ghana National Union of

Polytechnic Students (GNUPS), Polytechnic students in Accra, according to press reports (Daily Graphic, Wednesday, 23rd July, 1997) beat up, heckled and poned their leaders for succumbing to influences and pressure from Parliament. They described the leadership of GNUPS as weak and allowing itself to be manipulated by the authorities.

The agitating students maintained that the call by Parliament on them to return to lectures was not in their interest. They stressed that they preferred to stay at home for the issue to be resolved than to attend lectures whilst the impasse remained unresolved. They reiterated their demand on the Ministry of Education to withdraw the statement: "HND rank next to first degree". The striking students wanted to know whether their Higher National Diploma (HND) was equivalent to a first degree or not. Besides, they did not know their placement on the job market and therefore sought clarification on the matter. When this was not forthcoming they decided to boycott classes until an answer was given.

The Minister of Education did confirm that there existed a dispute between the government and the Polytechnic students on the status of these students on the job market. This issue led to the boycott of classes by these students. According to the Minister, the misunderstanding came about when two letters came from the same Ministry explaining the value of the HND

differently. She said the Ministry in an effort to iron out this contradiction, issued a statement which rather triggered the demonstration.

Parliament was sympathetic, and took up the issue with the Ministry of Education. The Minister was summoned to parliament. The Weekly Spectator (Saturday, July 19, 1997 p. 3) reported that in a rare occurrence on the floor of the House, the Government was taken on by both the Majority and Minority for the display of gross inefficiency in the address of the Polytechnic students crisis. Eventually, Parliament succeeded in convincing the Polytechnic students to call off their 24 day boycott of school.

The students deserved sympathy for two reasons. The confusion had arisen because there had been a problem in the communication chain. Even when they made things known to government, the authorities did not respond till there was fire. What was more disturbing, why should the Polytechnic students be expected to pursue a course when the end qualification was not being made clear.

The Minister had inherited a bad debt; she had taken the posting just a little while ago and trouble was brewing long before she took office. One Member of Parliament put forward evidence which showed that the HND was equivalent to a degree. Another argued that, as an Engineer, he was aware that in the field of Engineering, the HND was not equivalent to a degree.

These two positions must be reconciled to settle the issue once and for all.

HND has an Advantage over the first Degree

It is the candid view of this writer that the Polytechnic Higher National Diploma is not a first degree but it has an advantage over the University first degree.

These are the reasons :

1. The HND Programme is not new under the sun. It has its origin in the United Kingdom. In Ghana it was put forth to replace all analogous technician courses at the Polytechnics, and be recognized for its worth.
2. The HND Programmes are of three years duration and are expected to complete the cycle of technical education and provide capacity for training of a new breed of graduates who can confidently combine theory with practice and conduct practical research.
3. The need for the HND Programme became necessary when it was realized that personnel were needed to fill the vacuum between a qualified engineer, scientist or technologist and the skilled foreman or craftsman. The holder of the HND certificate is a diplomate and not a graduate. The use of the accolade: 'HND

graduate' is ceremonial, eg. 'JSS graduate' and cannot be equated with University graduate.

4. At the Polytechnic, the curriculum is career-focused with emphasis on the acquisition of hands-on practical and entrepreneurial skills. Polytechnic HND Programmes are designed to respond to perceived needs of specific sectors of national economy (i.e. to meet the intended purposes of the Vision 2020 for the industrial development of the nation). They may therefore not have exact parallels at the University level..

Explanation

The Principal of Ho Polytechnic (Dr. G. M. Afeti) explains that whereas a student in the university may take a degree in the broad discipline of mechanical engineering, an engineering student at the Polytechnic may study for a higher national diploma in the specific area of engineering, e.g. automotive engineering, production engineering, welding and fabrication, or plant engineering which are all branches of mechanical engineering. He emphasized that only the Polytechnics offer accredited programmes at the tertiary level in career-specific areas in Ghana. Some of these programmes are catering and hotel management, fashion design and modeling, purchasing and supply, furniture design and construction, and dispensing

technology. (Daily Graphic, Wednesday, July 2, 1997 p. 9.)

The Polytechnic should work for a closer co-operation with industry. The reason is obvious. Polytechnic education is career-focused. It stands to reason that Polytechnic programmes can only remain relevant and vibrant and responsive to the dynamic and ever changing manpower needs of industry and the overall national interest if only these programmes are centered within the context of a strong bonding polytechnic industry partnership. This is the sort of bondage or linkage our universities lack over the years.

The Higher National Diploma has always been an acceptable entry qualification into a Masters Programme in very many academic institutions of excellence all over the world depending on the candidate's field of study, superior attainment and personal interest.

Besides, it is envisaged that as the Polytechnics upgrade their learning and teaching facilities, they will be in a better position to offer technical degree courses in the vocations and professions of their interest. This is a matter of course, not subject to negotiation. Polytechnic students will have openings in industry and commerce for practical attachments, supervised practical work to acquire industrial work experience, and holiday wage appointments. Polytechnics

stand the chance of engaging part-time teachers and instructors from industry and commerce. The advantage here is that practical situations and case studies from the world of work will be shared in the lecture rooms and discussion panels.

Polytechnic graduates are better placed to secure or create a job. This is because of the very disposition of the HND Programme. Potential job openings exist in all the sectors of the economy, viz: mining, agriculture, manufacturing, and middle level management, etc. They can also assume responsibilities in financial banking and commercial institutions. The opportunities the HND holder has in establishing a very challenging and most rewarding business in the tourist industry in modern day Ghana is better witnessed than described.

What has happened so far is restated as follows. There has been an impasse over the status, academic profession and placement of HND holders between the GNUPS and the government resulting in the boycott of lectures. A committee was set up to find a lasting solution to the impasse whose recommendations were accepted by Cabinet.

Dissatisfied with the committee's recommendations, the students

resolved to continue with their strike action, vowing to ensure that their demands were met. A second year marketing student of the Accra Polytechnic expressed her feelings this way: "we are not demanding equality with the first degree, what we are asking for is that the value of our certificates must be at par with it". (Daily Graphic, Saturday, February 7, 1998 p. 10).

The National Union of Ghana Students (NUGS) appealed to the HND students in the Polytechnics to return to lectures while awaiting government decision on the status of the HND. The Daily Graphic (No. 14656) reported on January 24, 1998 a statement from the NUGS Executive Committee which expressed its dissatisfaction with the delay in the release of the report on the state, placement and academic progression of HND graduates. NUGS maintained that the delay was not in the interest of the nation especially when there was tension on the Polytechnic campuses.

Protest Position

Meanwhile the Central Committee of the Ghana National Union of Polytechnic Students (GNUPS) had protested against the Cabinet decision. They said Cabinet decision did not address their concerns in totality, and until such time that the issue was fully and properly addressed by the authorities concerned they would continue with the boycott of lectures (Daily Graphic, No. 1443 dated

February 2, 1998).

A statement which was jointly signed by the National Press Co-ordinator and the National Secretary was issued. They said that the committee's latest position was arrived at after a meeting in Accra, where views collated from the various Polytechnics were seriously analysed and considered. The statement made it clear that: "HND students are not asking for a degree, but want the value of the HND to be the same as that of the first degree".

They reiterated that the government must not lose sight of the fact that the preamble of various syllabi of HND programmes state that "Higher National Diploma Courses have been designed to make personnel eligible to pursue post graduate degree programmes". The statement called on government to come out with a properly documented policy to undertake such programmes. The statement further called on government to show definite commitment by way of budgetary allocation for infrastructure improvement and recruitment of personnel to meet the proposed deadline. The statement also stated that "the government, as a matter of urgency, should give Polytechnic lecturers similar conditions of service as their University counterparts in order to attract qualified lecturers into the Polytechnics". Earlier, the students demanded that Cabinet should have given them a hearing since the Minister of Education was in

Cabinet and expressed the same views she had always expressed to the students.

Cabinet Action

Cabinet appointed specialised committee to examine the placement level for HND holders in the public and civil services. After deliberations and consultation, the committee put forth its recommendations. Consequently, Cabinet explained that the Higher National Diploma (HND) is not equivalent to a first University Degree. The Secretary to Cabinet referred to the the Polytechnic Law 431 which states that Polytechnic may award degrees in addition to the HND, and pointed out that the law puts the matter beyond doubt that the HND was NOT equivalent to a First Degree.

There had been some doubts created by the Government White Paper of August 6, 1990 which was issued on the reforms in tertiary education. It was conceded that the White Paper created the impression that the HND was the equivalent of a first degree. But the Cabinet statement was quick to point out that the matter was resolved by the polytechnic Law which supersedes the White Paper. There was no clear evidence in sight why the Polytechnic students held dogmatically to the White Paper to their own detriment of ignoring what the laws says. The law did not say that the HND was equivalent to the First Degree. There is nowhere in the world where a diploma, higher or low, is

equivalent to a degree. Cabinet also acknowledged that the programme to upgrade the Polytechnics to enable them award degrees had delayed and directed that the Ministry of Education should work conscientiously toward the year 2000 to commence the degree programme.

Cabinet further conceded that before the Polytechnics could begin the award of their own degrees, they needed to be upgraded in a variety of ways. Any cursory management audit on a Polytechnic campus reveals areas of Polytechnic life that needed to be upgraded from the diploma status to the degree level. These areas include admission requirements, programmes and course content, teaching infrastructure, including physical facilities and science laboratories, teaching and support staff, and demonstrators, etc.

Academic Progression and Placement

The statement said Cabinet took note of the concern expressed by the Polytechnic students regarding their academic progression, meaning the inability of HND holders to enter post-graduate programmes, such as Masters Degree Programmes. It, however, stressed the essential role of the Polytechnics as that of training practical, career-oriented students for the middle-level manpower needs of the country. The statement emphasised that the academic

progression of Polytechnic students should not be used to replicate the academic programmes of the Universities, thereby eroding the key role of the Polytechnic in the training of students to acquire practical and employable skills rather than mere academic knowledge.

To the relief of all stakeholders in the Polytechnic drama, Cabinet spelt out the scale of entry of HND graduates in various subject areas in the civil and public services. These are as follows :

Holders of HND Marketing, Purchasing and Supply, Hotel Catering and Institutional Management, Statistics, Fashion, Designing and Modelling, Commercial Arts and others would enter the scale at A40 instead of the present range A38, 43 with an entry point at scale 38.

HND Engineering diplomates employed mostly by the Ghana Highways Authority, Volta River Authority (VRA) and the Electricity Company of Ghana, will now be on salary range A43 and 48 and enter at the point of scale 46 instead of the present range A38, 43.

All other certificate holders, in the Grade of Technician Engineers will now enter the Scale at A43.

HND Accounting holders employed mostly by the Controller and Accountant General's Department and the Internal Revenue Service, will

continue to be on salary range A52, 54, starting on scale 52, likewise HND Science Laboratory Technology and Dispensing Technology holders employed mostly by the Ministry of Health who will continue to be on range A53, 55 starting on scale A53.

There is also the possibility that, within the framework of these ranges, where market forces create a high demand for certain skills, some HND holders will have a higher placement level and indeed higher remuneration than some newly qualified first-degree holders

Boycott Subsides

Members of the Ghana National Union of Polytechnic Students (GNUPS) called off their boycott of lectures on Friday, February 1998. The boycott had lasted for three weeks during which time they pressed home their demand for a redefinition of the status, academic progression and placement of the HND graduates.

The GNUPS organised a forum which resolved that lectures were to resume at the various Polytechnic campuses the following Monday "pending the intervention of the Council of Polytechnic Principals to take up the issue" (Daily Graphic No. 1466 Saturday February 7, 1998 p. 10). The Principals had taken it upon themselves to find a lasting solution to the issue which had crippled academic life on the Polytechnic campuses. A source close to the Central Executive Committee of the

GNUPS expressed confidence in their Principals as being capable of handling the situation. "We need to respect our principals, we have trust in them and so far as they have promised to pursue the issue, we need to give them that respect".

While expressing faith in their Principals, the students passed a vote of no confidence on the President of GNUPS, Mr Kamel Ford, for accepting Cabinet's decision on the recommendations. Some members of GNUPS said Mr Ford was wrong to have unilaterally accepted Cabinet's position. Whilst majority of the students who attended the forum agreed to resume lectures and to await the negotiations by the heads, some vowed to stay away from the lecture halls until demands were met in full. Mr Ford had seriously advocated for the former option.

In another spectacular event to conclude the HND episode, the Deputy Minister of Education (Dr. Mohammed Ibn Chambas) cautioned Polytechnic students against acts that could negatively affect the HND Programme. Dr. Chambas believed that the much respected HND which is career-oriented would make it easy for holders to fit into the competitive job market. He urged the students not to allow the few amongst them who are oriented towards university education to destroy the good foundation laid for them (Daily

Graphic No. 14681 ; February 23, 1998).

Lessons

The episode surrounding the HND students boycott has surfaced some lessons which are relevant to educational administrators and business communicators. Some of these lessons are as follows :

1. There should be established mechanisms of communication in the education business between consumers, stakeholders, clients, subordinates and superordinates. Where these channels and mechanisms already exist they should be used to maximum advantage.
2. Policy statements should be made by only accredited officers as in this case. These statements should be timely and unambiguous. Contradictions and distortions create uneasiness and undue speculations, prejudices and mistrust.
3. Policy formulation, implementation and control are vital integral aspects of the management process. It is safer for the administration to build very quickly a policy around a set of events and keep to it rather than offer personal renditions. Two important officials of the same

organization saying two different things on the same issue at the same time is fertile ground for misconception and confusion leading to unconsidered disruption of school business.

4. Information passing from senders to receivers of wide generation gap should be more carefully parcelled and handled. Students are students and will always remain students. Superior authorities should be mindful of how they handle student concerns.
5. Excessive bureaucracy and red tape should give way to prompt action and realistic resolution of issues involving school authorities and students. In the episode under review, there is conclusive evidence that the authorities did not respond till there was fire. Even Parliament did not move fast enough to avert the crisis as promised.
6. The behaviour of tertiary students in some situations need refinement. These students should be educated on the uniqueness of forum as a means of group communication designed to reach consensus and positive thinking. The student forum is organised by the leadership to clarify issues and roles, and to seek new mandate from the rank and file. Parochial cleavages in thought and action produce

negative results to the common cause.

7. There are so many contradictions in the thought process and behaviour of the students in the HND issue.
 - (a) The HND can never be equated to a first degree. There is no single precedence in the whole world for Ghana to follow. A diploma has its unique advantage over an academic degree. The admission letter to the Polytechnic states clearly a diploma not a degree. A bird in hand is better worth ten in the bush.
 - (b) The call on government to come out with a properly documented policy on the kind of degrees it wishes to introduce and the category of people who qualify to undertake such programmes is tantamount to muddled thinking or thinking to no purpose. If anything at all, this is the business for the Polytechnic Council
 - (c) Students must learn to respect authority. They should acknowledge their position as students, and not unilaterally elevate their position to that of cabinet status. Their demand that Cabinet should have given them a hearing "since the Minister of Education was in Cabinet and

- expressed the same views she had always expressed to the students" was to say the least, ridiculous and undeserving.
- (d) When it comes to utilisation of study time by students, common sense becomes very rare and expensive. Some students are not serious. They can afford to waste three precious weeks of lecture time to idle about and indulge in unprofitable arguments.
- (e) Similarly, reasoning deserts the idle and extravagant student. The level of reasoning and maturity differs widely in these students. The majority is not always right, nor the minority always wrong. Kamel Ford's position has been vindicated. But his reward was humiliation. The innocents sometimes suffer for the ruffians.
8. After all said and done, the greatest lesson of it all is for government to pay heed to the call by students (and all stakeholders) to take prompt measures to upgrade and update the Polytechnic in all its spheres, viz., programmes, in frastructure, personnel, equipment and finance.

9 Finally, in a democracy every citizen or a group of individuals has the right to be heard. In our case, the dissenting students were granted this civil right by the Executive, Parliament and the Press. The Judiciary would have been too willing to entertain them if the case had reached them. This was good showing for this country

Conclusion

There is this lamentation that for far too long in this country, industry has not had that controlling voice in the shaping and conduct of academic preparation and professional training programmes in our tertiary institutions of science, technology and industry. The beginning must come now, with the Polytechnic. When this is done the HND graduate who has a guaranteed job position in industry and commerce is worth a million dollar value more than a University first degree holder in the arts or social sciences who may have the street as his/her work place or join the unenviable brigade of graduate unemployment. The only difference then is that a graduate is a graduate, so he must accept the fact that *kenkey* is different from *yakayake*.