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REFORMING NIGERIA'S LEGAL EDUCATION SYSTEM

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Beyond the Call to Scrap the Nigerian Law School



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I have followed the debate from the standpoint of legal practice, legal education and alternative dispute resolution. My concern is not whether the Nigerian Law School should be defended or condemned. It is whether the present structure is giving Nigeria the kind of lawyer that the country now requires.

The answer should be clear. The institution should remain, but the system around it must change.

The Nigerian Law School was established in 1962 and has since developed from its original Lagos base into a multi-campus institution. Its own stated mission is to use skill-based, interactive and clinical methods to prepare graduates for advocacy, solicitorship, advisory work, leadership and public service.

There is therefore a useful irony in the present debate. The institution was created to bridge the gap between academic legal education and professional practice. If that bridge is now under pressure, the answer should be to examine its design, capacity and methods before deciding that the bridge itself must be demolished.

The problem is real, but abolition is not the only answer. I write from my personal experience and latest feedback from colleagues.

There are legitimate concerns about the transition from university law faculties to professional training: the number of graduates seeking admission to professional training, available places, waiting periods, examination performance, cost and the quality of practical exposure.

These issues should be addressed with reliable data rather than slogans.

Abolishing the Nigerian Law School would also not, by itself, solve the underlying problem. If the present difficulty is inadequate capacity, the country still has to create sufficient teachers, facilities, practical training opportunities, assessment mechanisms and professional supervision. If the difficulty is the quality of graduates entering professional training, that problem begins before the student reaches the Law School. The reform must

therefore cover the entire pipeline—from university admission to professional qualification and the first years of practice.

What the ICAN model gets right

The comparison with the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Nigeria (ICAN) is worth considering, but it needs to be made accurately. ICAN has developed a system in which candidates can prepare through tuition centres while the professional institute retains control over its examinations and professional standards. ICAN itself has described its accredited tuition centres as part of its strategy for improving the delivery of preparatory education, including online learning.

That offers Nigeria an important lesson.

A professional body does not necessarily have to own every classroom in which professional education takes place. But that is quite different from saying that legal education should be opened to anybody who wishes to provide it. The useful ICAN principle is distributed delivery with central professional control. That principle could work in legal education.

We should separate regulation from delivery

The Council of Legal Education should remain at the centre of the professional regulatory framework. Its principal responsibility should be to determine what a candidate must know and be able to do before entering practice.

The physical delivery of training, however, can be broadened.

Universities with the necessary capacity could provide professional programmes. Properly structured private legal training institutions could also participate. Existing Law School campuses could continue to operate, but with a more defined role within a wider national system. The point is not to create competing standards. It is to create more routes to the same standard. That distinction matters.

The Nigerian Law School itself already describes its mission in terms of skills, clinical learning and professional preparation. The reform should build on that objective rather than reduce the institution to an examination centre. Passing the Bar is not the



same as being ready to practise. This is where the debate must move beyond numbers.

A lawyer is expected to interview a client properly, identify the real legal issue, conduct research, draft documents, advise responsibly, negotiate where appropriate, appear before a court or tribunal, protect confidential information and understand professional ethics.

In my own work around mediation and dispute resolution, one lesson is particularly clear: knowing the law is not the same thing as knowing what to do with it. A young lawyer may know the rules of evidence and still be unable to conduct a useful client interview. A candidate may understand civil procedure and still struggle to draft a coherent originating process. Someone may pass an examination and yet have little understanding of negotiation, settlement strategy, professional correspondence or the commercial realities of a client's problem.

Professional legal education must address those gaps.

Practical training needs to become measurable.

The traditional idea of spending a prescribed period in court or in a law office is useful, but duration alone cannot establish competence.

A better system would identify the practical skills every candidate must demonstrate.

A professional portfolio could include drafting exercises, legal research, client interviewing, negotiation, advocacy, opinion writing, ethics and case management. Supervising lawyers should certify the work actually undertaken, rather than merely confirming that a candidate was present.

The regulator should also have the ability to inspect training environments and investigate persistent failures. This is not an argument for more bureaucracy. It is an argument for knowing what a newly qualified lawyer can actually do. There are international examples, but Nigeria must adapt them

International practice does not point to one compulsory institutional model.

In New South Wales, for example, the Legal Profession Admission Board accredits academic law courses and practical legal training providers. Its current list includes universities and independent providers of practical legal training. The Board also determines eligibility and suitability for admission.

The United States operates differently again. The American Bar Association's Council establishes standards for approved law schools, while individual jurisdictions determine their own bar admission requirements. The current ABA standards cover matters including the programme of legal education, faculty, admissions, student services, information resources, facilities and technology.

These examples do not mean that Nigeria should copy Australia or the United States.

They demonstrate something more modest and more useful: professional legal education can involve several institutions

without abandoning a common professional standard. Nigeria can develop a model suited to its own legal system, economy, infrastructure and professional realities.

The Nigerian Law School has another possible future. Instead of asking whether the Law School should exist, we should ask what it should become. The NLS could increasingly function as a national centre for professional legal education and standards. It could take a stronger role in curriculum design, national assessment, advocacy training, continuing professional development, research into legal education and training of legal educators.

Its campuses could remain important centres of professional instruction while other institutions, under the national framework, help carry the volume.

This would change the NLS from being principally a destination that every candidate must pass through physically into an institution that sets, protects and advances professional standards across the system.

That is a more sustainable role. Universities cannot be left out of the conversation. There is another side to this debate that receives less attention. Universities must accept responsibility for the quality and number of students they admit into law.

No professional system can indefinitely absorb unlimited numbers of graduates. Where a faculty's staffing, library, teaching facilities, clinical opportunities or academic resources cannot support additional students, admission should reflect that reality. But quotas should also be transparent and regularly reviewed.

The public deserves to know why a particular institution is permitted to admit a particular number of students and what evidence supports that decision. We need better data. Much of the public argument about legal education is conducted through isolated figures, personal experiences and institutional statements. That is not enough for a national reform programme.

The Council of Legal Education and the Nigerian Law School should publish an annual legal education report containing, as far as practicable:

- the number of law graduates;
- applications for professional training;
- available places;
- waiting periods;
- institutional capacity;
- examination results and resit rates;
- practical-training outcomes;
- complaints and disciplinary data;
- staffing and infrastructure indicators; and
- relevant employment or early-career information.

With that information, policymakers, universities, students and the profession can see where the pressure actually lies. Without it, reforms risk being driven by the loudest argument rather than the strongest evidence. Cost also requires evidence

The financial argument for restructuring deserves proper examination.

If the existing system is expensive, government should know exactly where the money goes. The cost of training a candidate under the present arrangement should be compared with the cost of credible alternative models.

But decentralisation should not be sold as an automatic reduction in cost.

Private tuition, accommodation, technology, professional fees and other expenses may simply move the financial burden from the institution to the student. The test should therefore be value for money, not simply whether a particular institutional model appears cheaper. The transition into practice deserves reform too.

There is a further opportunity that should not be overlooked.

Nigeria could consider a structured period of supervised early practice for newly called lawyers. Such a scheme could operate through law firms, public institutions, legal aid organisations and other approved practice environments.

The purpose would be straightforward: give newly qualified lawyers meaningful exposure to professional responsibility before they are expected to operate entirely on their own.

This would also create room for stronger mentorship in the early years of practice.

The profession should be asking not only, “Has this person passed the Bar?” but also, “What professional responsibilities can this person safely undertake?”

A five-year reform programme.

A serious reform should be phased.

Year One: undertake an independent assessment of the entire legal-education pipeline, including university capacity, Law School capacity, costs, examination outcomes and practical training.

Year Two: introduce pilot professional-training programmes through selected institutions that can demonstrate the required facilities, faculty and practical capacity.

Year Three: move more deliberately towards competency-based practical assessment and standardised professional portfolios.

Year Four: expand the model on the basis of evidence from the pilot institutions.

Year Five: conduct an independent evaluation and determine which elements should become permanent. This approach would allow reform to be tested before it is imposed nationally.

The real question before the profession

The debate over the Nigerian Law School should not be reduced to whether the institution is old, expensive, centralised or inconvenient. The deeper issue is whether the architecture of legal education still corresponds with the demands of modern legal practice.

A lawyer entering practice today may encounter complex commercial transactions, cross-border disputes, arbitration, mediation, data protection, financial technology, artificial intelligence, environmental regulation, corporate restructuring and increasingly sophisticated clients.

Professional education must prepare lawyers for that reality.

It must also prepare them for the less glamorous but equally important work of representing ordinary Nigerians who need competent advice, proper documentation, fair dispute resolution and access to justice.

That is why I would be cautious about the proposition that the Nigerian Law School should simply be scrapped. There is a stronger case for reforming the architecture around it.

Keep a national professional standard. Broaden the institutions capable of delivering training. Make practical competence measurable. Use technology where it improves access. Require universities to account for the quality and volume of their admissions. Publish the data on which major decisions are based. Give the regulator the tools to intervene when standards fall.

The issue is not whether Nigeria should have a Nigerian Law School.

The issue is whether Nigeria should continue to operate legal education as though the demands placed on the profession have remained unchanged since the system was designed. They have not. The country needs more lawyers who can think, draft, negotiate, advocate, advise and exercise sound professional judgment—not merely more people who have obtained the right certificate. That is the reform worth pursuing.

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