Departmental Manual as an Essential Tool for Effective Management of Academic Departments in Nigerian Universities

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Abstract
Most Nigerian universities have policy and faculty manuals that guide the administrative operations of said universities and faculties. Principal officers of the universities and deans of faculties therefore have hands-on manuals they can consult from time to time as they conduct affairs in the universities. Unfortunately, most departments that constitute the smallest academic units in faculties do not have manuals to guide academic heads in their operations. This paper, using the Department of Geography, University of Maiduguri as a case study, sets out the essential contents of what a departmental manual should consist of in Nigerian universities and also includes a discussion on criteria of quality assurance, tactics to approach conflict and of financial management. It provides hands-on information for newly appointed academic heads. This paper is part of my Project Action Plan (PAP), submitted to DAAD during the 3rd part of the International Deans’ Course (IDC) for Africa in Ethiopia.

Keywords: Departmental manual, newly appointed academic head, Nigerian universities

Introduction
Nigerian universities today face many management challenges that impinge on effective implementation of the vision and mission statements establishing such institutions. The quality of education that is imparted depends largely on the quality of leaders at various levels within the university (from the heads of departments to the principal officers) and the determination of all stakeholders in the system to
work towards actualizing the strategic goals that have been set. The question is: How does one switch from being a lecturer and researcher to a head of department without any experience or material to guide him/her in the new managerial role? Yet we hear that experience is the best teacher. Since a newly appointed head of department may not have any experience before assuming office, there is a need for a manual, to which he/she can refer, that gleans on the experiences of previous heads of department and addresses issues such as quality assurance, dealing with conflict and financial management. The focus is on the head of department because it is less likely for someone without leadership experience to be appointed dean or vice chancellor. By contrast, any academician engrossed in his own ‘world’ of teaching and research may be appointed as head of department. In most African universities, the roles of departmental heads are subsumed under faculty or university manuals, and usually little information is given in such manuals on the expectations of a department head.

This department head manual is designed to assist newly appointed department/unit heads who have administrative responsibilities and must ensure quality and assume budgetary duties while also dealing with complex situations involving personnel conflict. This manual is not intended to be a policy manual (for this see Koroma 2004; and Aguolu, 2004). Rather, it is intended to be a procedure manual.

**Basic Information to Know About Your University and Your Department**

You are probably anticipating that someday the burden of headship of your department will fall on you. You don’t need to panic. A handbook such as this is just what you need in order to prepare ahead of time. All that you need to know before assuming the office of departmental head is spelt out here to guide you. It is important that you know the history of your institution, the vision and mission statements and objectives of setting up the institution (and of course, that of your department!). You also need to study and understand the organizational/administrative structure of your institution, as circulars will soon flood your desk from various principal officers requiring you to do one thing or another. You must go the extra mile to meet these deadlines. So, prepare for action!

In the University of Maiduguri, Nigeria, the governance structure of the university and that of the Department of Geography are illustrated in Figures 1 and 2 as examples. These structures may vary depending on whether your institution is privately owned, state owned, or a federally owned. One important note is that as a head, you must acquaint yourself with the administrative structure of your university to help you while administering your department.
Fig. 1: Organizational Structure of the University of Maiduguri, Nigeria

KEY
1. College of Medical Sciences (Provost)
2. Faculty of Agriculture (Dean)
3. Faculty of Arts (Dean)
4. Faculty of Education (Dean)
5. Faculty of Engineering (Dean)
6. Faculty of Law (Dean)
7. Faculty of Pharmacy (Dean)
8. Faculty of Management Sciences (Dean)
9. Faculty of Sciences (Dean)
10. Faculty of Social Sciences (Dean)
11. Faculty of Veterinary Medicine (Dean)

D = Departments (headed by heads of department)
Fig. 2: Organizational Structure of the Department of Geography, University of Maiduguri, Nigeria
The Responsibilities of an Academic Head

The department is under the leadership of a head who supervises the affairs of the department. The department head reports to the dean and is the chief academic administrator at the department level. The department head normally carries less teaching load courses each semester. As a faculty member, the department head continues to assume responsibilities in teaching, in scholarly activities and in service to the institution and the discipline. The department head’s responsibilities in the area of scholarship may relate to the promotion of the scholarly efforts of the faculty as well as to his/her own personal productivity. The department head assumes administrative duties and responsibilities in the areas of department leadership and faculty development, department planning and program assessment, management of department funds and department relationships within and outside the institution.

The department head is responsible for establishing and maintaining an academic environment that motivates the department to achieve personal professional goals and to contribute to achieving departmental and institutional goals. He/she does so by articulating, in concert with the faculty, a vision for the department and its programs and a plan for pursuing that vision. The department head must, therefore, be well versed in the current issues in higher education and the department's disciplines and should be aware of the latest pedagogical theories related to the teaching of these disciplines. The department head must establish and maintain open, effective communication within the department and with other administrative and academic units throughout the institution.

As part of an effective communication plan, the department head must routinely share information with all departmental constituents: faculty, staff, students and the administration. To be effective, the department head must seek to develop consensus within the faculty to effect changes necessary to fulfill the department's goals. The department head must strive to prevent conflict among faculty members and staff members in the department, and, if conflict should occur, the department head must be able to reduce or resolve it.

The department head plays a major role in faculty development, both for new faculty members working toward tenure and promotion and for senior faculty who must fill leadership positions in the department, and continue to function as an excellent lecturer and productive scholar in anticipation of post-tenure review. The department head has primary responsibility for faculty evaluation on an annual basis and in reviews for tenure, promotions and post-tenure (contract) assessment. The department head ensures that the department’s professional standards policy is cur-
rent, is in concert with institutional policies, is widely distributed to all department faculties and is rigorously adhered to.

The department head is the chief facilitator of planning at the department level and is responsible for ensuring that an assessment plan is developed and functioning for all program and activities of the department. The department head is expected to submit annual appraisal reports and annual budgets, which should be prepared in consultation with the faculty. Through these reports, the department documents the quality of each of its programs and the actions taken to preserve that quality; presents to the institution its needs in the areas of personnel, equipment, operating budget, and facilities; and makes the institution’s administrative officers aware of plans for future program development or change. The department head is also charged with planning and directing of all activities related to accreditation and program review.

The department head assigns departmental committees, schedules courses, assigns teaching loads, plans and carries out programs for admission of students, and develops plans for the advising and counselling of students and assesses the success of those plans. He/she administers the departmental budget, sets budget priorities with the advice and counsel of the dean of faculty and ensures that funds are expended in an equitable manner. The department head is responsible for the management of departmental facilities and equipment, including maintenance and control of inventory. In addition, he/she is responsible for monitoring department security and maintenance and for ensuring that the department provides an environment that is conducive to teaching and learning. He/she is also responsible for the supervision and evaluation of technical and administrative staff of the department.

The department head represents the department in relationships within and without the institution. This responsibility most often relates to interdepartmental communications on curricular matters, but is also reflected in the expectations presented for departmental involvement in the life of the university and its students, the local community and the discipline.

**Preparation of a Strategic Department Plan**

You just assumed the responsibility of the head of department. The clock is ticking and there are several deadlines approaching, and you are already asking “where do I begin?” This is the time to develop your own strategic department plan. The following steps are designed to guide you in the process of developing a department plan.
Evaluation of Previous and Current Plans

The temptation is to dive right into the planning phase without having done an evaluation of past performance of your predecessor. The whole purpose for developing a new plan is to address issues that have surfaced in previous departmental meetings. Issues here do not necessarily mean poor performance. Maybe the issue is that your predecessor was so successful, you now must plan how to sustain or improve on the success. The following questions may help you to evaluate the previous year's results:

- What have you observed about the processes that take place in your department?
- How do you feel about the overall performance of your predecessor?
- How do others feel about it?
- Did the department meet its goals? Why or why not?
- What were some of the problems that the department encountered?
- How well did the processes of your department integrate with the other departments of the university?
- What were some of challenges that will have to be addressed by you?
- What do you recommend for future improvements?

Determine the Objectives of Your Department

The second step in the preparation of a department-specific plan, therefore, is to determine the objectives that your department wants to achieve in the next two to four years (assuming you stay on as head for two terms of two years each), with more emphasis being placed on the coming year. The following steps may be helpful in determining your objectives (objective here is defined as "a precise, measurable, time-phased result that supports the achievement of a goal," see Allison and Kaye 1997):

- List the organizational goals that pertain directly to your department.
- List any additional goals that are specific to your department.
- As you look at this list, ask yourself, "What major objectives should my department attempt to achieve that might contribute directly to one or more of these goals?" In the development of objectives, it may help to break them down into three categories: (a) those that have to do with conceptual clarity, (b) those that have to do with commitment and (c) those that have to do with skill capabilities. Another way to say this is: What concepts or ideas will people need to learn this coming planning phase? What kinds of attitudes will they need to develop? And, what kind of new skills will they need to develop? Any of these three questions may help you to develop your objectives.
- Once you have your list of objectives, prioritize them by identifying the ones you feel provide the most potential for improving your department.
Decide What Will be the Criteria by Which You Will Measure Success

Criteria should be established for measuring the success or failure of your overall plan. For some objectives, you may want a 100% increase in some measurable item, such as a 100% increase in income, or a 100% (full) accreditation if you have a denied or an interim status. For other objectives, you may feel that 100% is unrealistic. Instead, you would like to endeavour for 90%, 75% or just 10%. In other situations, a simple increase of any level may be satisfactory. The important point here is that you need criteria to measure the degree to which you have accomplished your objectives.

Find or Create Tools to Measure Progress Toward your Objectives

Criteria will mean nothing if you don’t have a way to measure them. So, the fourth step is to find or create a tool (or tools) to measure progress toward your departmental objectives. Assessment tools should be selected based on their appropriateness for the criteria of success. In some cases, more than one tool may be used to assess a project or program. Measures may be direct or indirect. In direct measures, the department demonstrates the accomplishment of an objective through some numerical or otherwise palpable representation. Indirect measures are those that report people’s perceptions (such as a staff survey, student interviews, etc.). Ideally, both types of measures will be used. If you’re not already familiar with the concepts of quantitative versus qualitative research, you might want to do some reading on these two different ways to do research (see Creswell 1994).

Identify the Action Steps that Will Lead to the Accomplishment of Your Objectives

You will notice that we are moving from extremely general “goals” toward evermore specificity. Now we are talking about the concrete actions that must be taken to achieve each of your objectives. Action steps should be listed for each objective. For instance, you desire every academic staff in your department to be computer literate. The following guidelines may be helpful as you work through this process.

1. Stages are generally stated as nouns and action steps as verbs. For example, your plan may include a “training stage” that looks like this: Training Stage
   a. Research the subject
   b. Prepare the presentations
   c. Consult with your staff and determine training dates
   d. Gather materials
e. Give first training presentation  
f. Give second training presentation  
g. Evaluate training effectiveness

2. Every action step should have a start and end date.  
3. Make sure to take into consideration your organizational calendar, special events, holidays, etc.  
4. Your action steps should be listed in sequential order.  
5. Note that ongoing processes are not action steps. In other words, something like, "Continue meeting with parents of students in the department to discuss their support of the department," is not an action step. But to "Meet with the CEO of Coca-Cola Plc, in November of 2009" is an action step.

Assign Responsibility for the Different Parts of Your Plan

The sixth step in the process of developing a department plan is to assign responsibility for the different action steps of your plan. Remember, "every task needs to be owned by someone, not a group, not a department and certainly not a 'to be determined.' Work only gets done when someone takes ownership of it" (Black 2004, p148). This concept is known as "single-point responsibility" (Black 2004, p147). Make sure that someone is willing to be accountable for each and every task that is involved in carrying out the plan. It is best to establish these assignments through a process of consensus rather than trying to simply assign them to people. In this way, your plan will have a better chance of success. Try to think of all the people whose buy-in will be essential for the accomplishment of your objectives. Do not proceed with the plan until you have acquired this essential buy-in. In many situations, detailed control is not needed. The department head needs only to ensure that responsibility for every task is clearly owned by someone.

Estimate the Cost

Step number seven is to estimate the cost of your plan. You can do this by reviewing your budget from last year and comparing the estimated budget with the actual figures, estimating the costs required to achieve your objectives, and by comparing the income and expense projections.
Decide What You Will Do With the Information You Will Gather During the Implementation Phase

Decide ahead of time what will be done with the knowledge that is gathered through the process of implementing your plan. Remember, your goal is not simply to have a smooth-running machine, but to grow in knowledge about how to continuously improve your department. Even if the plan fails, there is valuable learning to be acquired from the experience.

It is important, however, to capture, disseminate and use the knowledge you have acquired. The idea in this step is to determine beforehand what you plan to do with the knowledge once you obtain it. It is important to establish a consensus beforehand. In particular, how will you apply your learning to your policies regarding strategy, structures, processes, incentives and people?

Other questions that might help:
- How will your learning feed into the decision-making process?
- Who will need to see the data gathered through the implementation of this plan?
- How should the data obtained affect your management style? Future projects? Scheduling?
- What will be the process of review and evaluation of any data that you acquire?
- Who will be involved in the follow-up?

Launch Your Plan and Monitor Progress

In this phase of your planning, you will determine the processes whereby you will monitor, control and report on the progress of the plan. Here, you must be realistic about your abilities. You can’t solve all the problems in the department. Two concepts are very important here:

Follow Through on Your Plan

The most important point of all: Now that you have a plan, do it! Don't just toss the plan into file xyz and forget it. This becomes a living document that you and your team will review frequently as you follow through on your plan.
Quality Assurance

The national policy on university education sets out the cardinal goals as follows (Federal Ministry of Education Report, 2003):

- To provide self-reliant, high-level manpower for national development.
- To develop Nigeria as a united nation with an enlightened, ethical citizenry.
- To promote the cause of knowledge through research and scholarship.

The available evidence is that university education in Nigeria had a good beginning from the colonial times and was effective up to the 1970s as an instrument for national development, until its nature changed by mass admission from the 1980s. In 1980, total enrolment in universities was 73,425, but by 1990, enrolment had grown to 180,871, an increase of 246%. Quality fell as an effect of greater numbers of students in the face of diminishing resource input due to worsening economic recession. The other factors responsible for the dwindling quality of university education were:

- Introduction of Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) in 1986 which led to the devaluation of the local currency, high inflation and decrease in real terms of budgetary allocations to the universities.
- Severe academic staff shortage due to the flight of some lecturers from existing universities to the newly established ones or to universities abroad in search of better prospects.

All these are gradually changing as a result of increased interventions by government at all levels.

Professor Peter Mayer at the International Deans’ Course for Africa 2009/10 in Germany said “quality is difficult to describe, but when you see quality, you can’t deny it.” Admissions into your department should take into consideration the philosophy of the program, facilities available, student-staff ratio and budgetary allocations. Most often, academic heads only consider the total number of students and the amount to be generated through their registration. The result is that quality is compromised.

You will have to determine the criteria that define quality for your department. These could be in the area of accreditation, students’ admission, quality in terms of teaching, quality of teaching staff and tenure and in quality of facilities, amongst others. For me, accreditation covers virtually all these aspects, so I will focus attention on this. Accreditation of programs and departments has been an essential aspect of Nigerian universities since the establishment of such universities. The goal of accreditation is to ensure that education provided by a department or an institution of higher education meets acceptable levels of quality. The National Universi-
tities Commission (NUC), a parastatal organization under the Federal Ministry of Education (FME), is charged with the responsibility of ensuring quality assurance of all academic programs offered in Nigerian universities. The NUC accredits programs, departments and institutions in Nigerian Universities usually in cycles of two to five years, depending on the initial status of the program/department/institution.

The period shortly before the program accreditation exercise puts a lot of pressure on the academic head. It therefore makes sense for the academic head to regularly review processes and to have internal quality management systems in place before the accreditation exercise. As head, one way to do this is to measure the program/department in line with the evaluation criteria (also referred to as “self-study document”) developed by the NUC. Try to fill in this document as honestly as you can before the accreditation. This document helps you ascertain areas that require improvement before the accreditation exercise. A typical self-study form will include the title of program/discipline to be accredited, history of your department, description of how your department is administered, academic content of your program, staff strength, quality of teaching staff, graduates and facilities and the staff-student ratio in the department. There are over one hundred questions to be answered, and sample questions in this self-study form include:

- Indicate the type of accreditation required.
- Has any NUC accreditation panel visited your university to determine if the program/sub-discipline/discipline can be accredited?
- If yes please, attach a photocopy of main decision and recommendations of the commission.
- What is the name and qualification(s) of head of department offering the program to be accredited?
- Describe how the program/sub-discipline/discipline is administered.
- Appraise the adequacy of the operating funds for the department.
- Appraisal of standard of examination.

**Conflict Management**

Conflict is an integral part of life and may occur within an individual, between individuals, between an individual and a group or between groups. Conflict is when two or more values, perspectives and/or opinions are contradictory in nature and haven’t been aligned or agreed about yet. Conflict is a problem when it:

- Hampers productivity.
- Lowers morale.
• Causes more and continued conflicts.
• Causes inappropriate behaviours.

The current view is that if there is no conflict, the issue has not been thoroughly examined. When faced with a conflict as an academic head, instead of feeling averse to it, try to resolve it, applying various techniques. There are three basic categories of responses to deal with conflicting situations. In a conflict-avoidance response, one or all concerned parties keep the conflict from coming to a head. When you are criticized, you ignore it. In a conflict-diffusion response, the party concerned may try to cool the situation. It is basically a delaying tactic and it is possible to delay the flare-up indefinitely.

In a conflict-confrontations response, problem-solving methods are applied where both parties discuss the problem and try to find mutually agreeable solutions. Maya Pilkington, author of Test Your Business Skills (Pilkington 1993), describes the following styles that people adopt to resolve conflict:

• The brick wall approach: When a conflict looms, the brick wall type withdraws behind personal defences, refusing to get involved.
• The ramrod approach: The ramrod type builds up steam to force the issue. He fights and tries to dominate the situation because he will feel weak if he loses an argument.
• The feather-bed approach: The feather-bed type gets out the metaphorical oil to pour on the troubled waters. He hates to see anyone in conflict and tries to smooth ruffled feathers and makes soothing noises.
• The compromise approach: The compromiser hates extremes. He looks for the middle ground and expects to give up something in order to gain something.
• The wise, old bird approach: The wise one spends time to resolve conflicts, confronting all the issues with courage and the clear intention of learning something in the process.

Carter McNamara, in the Field Guide to Leadership and Supervision, gave the following key managerial actions/structures to minimize conflicts (Mc Namara 2006):

• Regularly review job descriptions. Get your employees’ input on them. Write down and date job descriptions. Ensure that job roles don’t conflict, and no tasks “fall in a crack.”
• Intentionally build relationships with all subordinates: Meet at least once a month alone with them in the office and ask about accomplishments, challenges and issues.
• Get regular, written status reports and include accomplishments, current issues, needs from management and plans for the upcoming period.
• Conduct basic training about interpersonal communications, conflict management and delegation.
• Develop procedures for routine tasks and include the employees' input: have employees write procedures when possible and appropriate, get employees' review of the procedures, distribute the procedures and train employees about the procedures.
• Regularly hold management meetings, for example every month, to communicate new initiatives and the status of current programs.
• Consider an anonymous suggestion box, in which employees can provide suggestions.

Avoiding unproductive conflicts

The following strategies are recommended by M. Robert, author of Conflict Management Style Survey, to avoid unproductive conflicts:

• Avoid being judgmental.
• Deal with the present problem rather than past or potential injustices. Pay attention to the nonverbal content of communication.
• Use 'I' messages to describe behaviours, feelings and effects. For example, "When I did not receive a call from you, I feared the deal was off," rather than, "you never return calls."
• Practice strategic openness about feelings.
• Choose your words carefully.
• Allow the other party to withhold information about feelings. This will, paradoxically, allow for the revelation of withheld feelings.
• Restate what the other party says.
• Actively listen to the other party.
• Use questions of clarification and avoid accusatory questions.
• Break the interruption habit by using silence and delayed response.
• Do not fear to tell others that they are correct about something.
• Avoid interpreting others' motives.
• Refrain from giving advice.

Financial Management and the Budgeting Process

As head, you are administratively responsible for the department. This means, among other things, that you are responsible for the unit’s budget. You have to develop at least some basic skills in financial management. Expecting others in the department to manage finances is clearly asking for trouble. Basic skills in financial
management start in the critical areas of cash management and bookkeeping, which should be done according to university financial regulations to ensure integrity in the bookkeeping process. This calls for prudent financial management, as the money is never sufficient to meet departmental needs.

In executing the budget for a financial year, you will be handed the budget form for your department/unit for the current year. In filling out the budget form, you will need to be guided by the following:

- There should be wide consultation within the department.
- Be sure your department is eligible for DTLC.
- You should make projections based on expected number of students.
- Academic departments are expected to have a balance or surplus budget (i.e., operate within the projected revenue and not to have deficit budget within a financial year).
- You may be required to defend your departmental budget before the budget committee.

**Conclusion**

Any staff that is given the necessary skills and tools beforehand will be better prepared to assume the responsibilities associated with that office. Having the necessary qualifications or even being able to teach and conduct research are not sufficient to make one a good academic head. In addition, a hands-on manual (such as this one), that gleans on the experiences of previous academic heads could provide a good starting point for a newly appointed head.

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education in Nigeria and Africa be qualitatively developed and sustained for future
generations to benefit from. May future heads of department benefit from this
manual.

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