

Tertiary Education Trust Fund

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TETFund's RESPONSE: 2013 -2017 TETFUND SPONSORED STRANDED SCHOLARS

Our attention has been drawn to the open letter captioned "Open Appeal to Tertiary Education Trust Fund" by one Dr. Muhammed Sanusi Ibrahim of Abubakar Tatari Ali Polytechnic, Bauchi, purportedly writing on behalf of "2013 -2017 TETFund sponsored stranded scholars" and published in the Daily Trust Newspaper of April 14, 2020.

The article, and some other misrepresentations are mostly mischievous and poorly aimed at discrediting an organisation lately re-energized and refocused for better performance and relevance by its Executive Secretary, Professor Suleiman Elias Bogoro.

We note that TETFund has been subjected to different descriptions and colorations, regardless of how Prof. Bogoro has over an unfortunately interrupted period of headship, refocused the organisation from a mere funding organisation to a purposeful one, determined to implement its mission and vision. This is aside his painstaking effort of enhancing research and innovation for the good of the nation's tertiary educational system, and the nation at large.

The said letter, amongst other misinformation, referred to a certain cohort of 2013 and 2017 foreign scholars of TETFund Scholarship for Academic Staff (TSAS) Intervention program for public tertiary institutions in Nigeria, alleging hardships because of improper administration of funding, and the vagaries of exchange rates. They also alluded to the manipulation of a list of scholars by their beneficiary institutions, when the Fund tried to remedy the alleged anomalies asking that the Fund should rather deal directly with scholars, rather than their beneficiary institutions which is inconsistent with the Funds guidelines for TETFund's Scholarship for Training of Academic Staff (TSAS).

Ordinarily, the Fund would not have responded as there are established protocols that address challenges that may arise in the course of implementation of the TSAS intervention, and indeed any of our intervention lines.

In choosing to respond publicly, the Fund hopes to bring to the fore the commitment, efforts and challenges it faces in addressing this issue.

The TETFund Scholarship for Academic Staff (TSAS) was established for the training of academic staff of public tertiary institutions for post-graduate programmes in local and foreign institutions.

TETFund does not nominate scholars for this program but rather the beneficiary institutions do. The Fund only interfaces with the beneficiary institutions through vetting of their submissions and thereafter conveying approvals to scholars through their beneficiary institutions.

Relevant finances for the entire duration of the study are thereafter released in full to their institutions, well before the commencement of study.

The beneficiary institutions by the Fund's guidelines are to disburse the funds in installments to the scholars as they progress in their studies. If the period of study is over 12 months, disbursements are made after the initial one to scholars depending on a favorable progress report from their training institutions. For ease of remittance of funds for foreign-based scholars, beneficiary institutions are expected to have domiciliary account where such disbursed funds are kept to avoid issues relating to Naira devaluation and forex fluctuation.

Over the years, most benefitting institutions have consistently breached this critical guideline and the implications of this breach are very glaring and has birthed the stranded scholar issue considering the fluctuation of the exchange rate. If funds remitted to institutions were deposited in domiciliary accounts the value will not depreciate. It is pertinent to note that all remittances made to the home institutions of scholars studying abroad are done at the existing exchange rates.

Beyond the exchange rate fluctuation, there are also issues that the stranded scholars have not been very forthright with the Fund which has tended to hinder the Fund's efforts on resolving this challenge. Some key ones are listed:

- i. Scholars who were deemed stranded were those whose study commencement dates were limited to the year 2015, 2016 and 2017. There are scholars who were included in the lists that ought not to be;
- ii. There are scholars who are qualified for additional payments but had not yet submitted invoice for remittance of tuition based on approval;
- iii. There are scholars who claimed to have borrowed money to pay their tuition but are yet to forward supporting documents to validate their claims;
- iv. There are scholars whose tuition had actually been fully paid by their beneficiary institutions, yet they still forwarded same request to the Fund without recourse to their employers;
- v. There are scholars who may have somewhat hiked the tuition fees on approval, but at the point of payment, the invoices submitted were found to be less than sums approved for them yet they are requesting that the difference be paid to them in Naira;
- vi. There are scholars that changed their institutions of study without approval from the Fund and without cognizance to the fact that approvals for the scholarship are based on the original institution of study. Therefore, the invoice submitted for payment of tuition from a new institution of study cannot be tenable;
- vii. There are scholars that had approval for institutions of study in Europe for instance, yet changed their institutions of study to Africa or Far East Asia;
- viii. Some applicants do not wait to confirm receipt of approval (and other clearances), from the Fund before they proceed overseas and they turn out to claim being stranded scholars;
- ix. Some scholars unilaterally deferred their admission or resumption and expecting to begin at their preferred time, failing to understand that the Fund strategically plans its interventions and sponsorship of candidates are done in batches and cannot not be pay attention to whimsical decisions by prospective scholars at the expense of others;
- x. Scholars clamoring to personally handle the payment of their fees, as against Fund's guidelines of paying directly to the training institutions, in a credible, transparent and accountable manner, through statutory institutions like the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN); and
- xi. Some scholars raise fake invoices for fees, contrary to those presented by their training institutions' record of fees, and pushing and blackmailing TETFund to honor their requests, irrespective of an avalanche of evidence proving such as false.

Dealing with these issues have somewhat made what should have been a simple exercise complex. Overall, the Fund cannot consider those not willing to submit verifiable invoices for remittance of tuition and those seeking reimbursement only on an imaginary claim of borrowing to pay tuition fees, without supporting documents. Those whose tuition fees have been confirmed but without further approvals from their employers cannot also be considered.

Other than these are those who deliberately inflated their tuition fees, but where further checks revealed lesser amounts. Those requesting that TETFund release the difference of fees to them in Naira, cannot also be factored in, just as those that did not travel at all, and claim to be stranded, even when their parent institutions are yet to process their requests.

Finally, those that changed foreign institutions (within the same country), without approval, whereas tuition had been approved for an original foreign institution, but sent invoice from another institution, and those that have approval for one country but went to another without approval, cannot also be considered.

To be sure, TETFund administers government allocations with the strict adherence to transparency and accountability. The Prof. Suleiman Elias Bogoro led Management of TETFund is committed to improving the capacity of academic staff of public tertiary institutions and is passionate about addressing the challenges faced by foreign-based scholars. This is being done by application of the Fund's Guidelines on scholarship through fairness and equity and not because of interest groups, cronyism or connection by intending scholars.

TETFund has gone this far to explain the challenges it faces in addressing the issue of Stranded Scholars. The Fund is hopeful that this explanation would serve as sift. Let the stranded scholars sift through our sieve. That way, the real stranded scholars will stand out and their issues fully addressed.

The Fund's response has been very objective to the open letter. However, there is a need to be a little bit subjective. The real stranded scholars should have routed their appeals through their beneficiary institutions. Dr. Muhammed Sanusi Ibrahim and those he claims to represent seem to have breached this procedure. Our records show that the writers' scholarship was awarded in 2014 and not in the range years of 2015 -2017. He is therefore not qualified or eligible to be considered a stranded scholar. Besides, having completed his PhD programme, fully paid and has since returned to Nigeria to resume work in his institution, it may be assumed that he falls in the class of beneficiaries who seek one form of reimbursement or the other, with no supporting document as evidence of the claimed extra-expenditure.

TETFund has consistently invited those with veritable documents to forward them through their home institutions. Those that merited a reimbursement received approvals and were paid.

Finally, what the Fund expects from returnee scholars like Dr Ibrahim is to articulate frameworks that would streamline the TSAS programme, ventilate academic discussions and not embarrassing the Fund and by extension the Federal Government of Nigeria.