

OVERVIEW OF THE FIRST INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF NIGERIAN STUDENTS (ICONS 2007)

The first International Conference of Nigerian Students (ICONS 2007) held as scheduled on the 3rd and 4th of February at the Great hall of Lancaster University. It was attended by three distinguished guest speakers: Mr. Ben Wallace (MP House of Commons, Councillor Afolasade Bright, Speaker of Hackney, London Borough of Hackney and Mr. John McGovern, Director of International Office, Lancaster University. The opening address was by Mrs. Adeola Obileye, the Minister of Consular and Welfare, Nigerian High Commission, London, representing His Excellency, Dr. Christopher Kolade, the High Commissioner of Nigeria to the UK while the welcome address was given by Mr. Mark Cullinan, the Chief Executive of Lancaster City Council. There were other distinguished presenters including Dr. Mark Abani, the Chairman of the Central Association of Nigerians in the UK (CANUK), Prof. Kevin Jones, the Director of one of the largest research groups in Europe, Mrs. Sade Sangowawa, a cultural awareness expert and CEO of Inspirational Arts Limited, UK to mention but a few.

The Host and Convener, Akanimo Odon, an ambassador of Lancaster University and the Chair of the conference spoke about the mission and vision of the Xⁿ Foundation, its programmes and projects and the journey of its beginning to date. Xⁿ Foundation is the charity organisation who organised the conference co-founded by Akanimo Odon (International Award winning Poet and Author) and Benedict Okhumale (Secretary of the Advisory Board of the Pat Utomi Annual Book Prize).

Akanimo emphasized the need for an umbrella forum for the Nigerian International student population which is estimated at over 8,000 in the UK alone. He commended the efforts of the organising committee Chaired by Bamidele Adebisi (Director of Protocols and Logistics, Xⁿ Foundation) who worked tirelessly in making sure the event was a success. Also principal was the role of the Executive Secretary for Xⁿ Foundation, Dr. Ifeolu Akintunde, who effectively managed the correspondence for the conference, directed the proceedings as the Master of Ceremony (MC) and gave a talk on one of the projects of Xⁿ Foundation, Programme for Awareness and Intervention for the Disabled, a project dear to his heart.

There were about 150 student delegates from different universities of the country including Imperial College, Middlesex University, University of Hull, Manchester, Bradford, Liverpool, Leeds, Aberdeen, Salford, Central Lancashire, Nottingham, London Business School, Newcastle and the host University, Lancaster etc. However, there present as well were representatives of different bodies and organisation who have the interest of the Nigerian international students close to heart. These included the London Academy for Higher Education, a representative of the National Union of Students to mention but a few.

The speeches were outstanding, academic, inspirational and focused a great deal on the objectives of the conference which principally was the Networking of the Nigerian International Student body for sustainable national development. It addressed the challenges faced by the average student and advised on the ways these challenges could be used as a stepping stone for academic prowess. Key amongst the addresses was the focus on how much the Nigerian High Commission is interested in the needs and Welfare of Students and an encouragement from Mrs Adeola Obileye for the students to emulate good role models and strive hard for greater achievements.

The highlight of the day section of the conference was the inauguration of the Nigerian International Student Agenda by the cutting of the NISA CAKE by Mrs Adeola Obileye with photographs taken with the various representatives of UK universities as she did. There were student presentations by four students: Kanayo Onyekwere of Middlesex University, Ife Bello of the University of Hull, Valentine Oruruka of Lancaster University and Tolulope Adekoya of the University of Salford.

There was an amazing exhibition/networking session at the end of the first day's proceedings in which everyone exchanged pleasantries, addresses, contacts etc.

The evening session of the conference was well attended and left open to non-Nigerians as well because of the need to show case the beauty of Nigerian Delicacies during the Buffet Dinner.

There were musical performances, cultural and poetry performances by different student delegates. Interestingly, all the performers were amateurs/students and this was important because the conference encouraged talent building

The highlight of the evening was the awards in which five distinguished students were awarded based on their performances, outstanding achievements and academic successes. The awardees were: Afolabi Obembe of London Metropolitan University, Kanayo Onyekwere of Middlesex University, Ife Bello of University of Hull, Dupe Nihinlola Saka of Lancaster University and Tolulope Adekoya of the University of Salford. The ICONS Award plaque was presented to all of them and others were encouraged to strive to be the winners of next year's ICONS AWARDS.

The Sunday morning session was crucial being the first official forum of the Nigerian International Student Agenda (NISA) that was inaugurated the day before.

At the NISA forum, the objectives of NISA were outlined. It would act as an umbrella forum for every Nigerian International Student.

All student delegates agreed that NISA required an official/physical address of some sort for administrative purposes. They also agreed that at least three workshops should be organised this year to maintain the heat and enthusiasm of all the students and to encourage further networking and academic advancement especially towards national development. The next workshop was agreed to be an entrepreneurial workshop to encourage students of funding and investment opportunities and how they can set up business in Nigeria, their fatherland.

The conference was sponsored by the British Council, Nigerian and Education UK, Lancaster University, University of Hull, Inspirational Arts Limited, Nigerian High Commission, UK, Lancaster City Council, Central Association of Nigerians in the UK (CANUK) and these bodies were ably recognised and acknowledged before, during and after the conference.