NURTURING EXCELLENCE: THE IMPORTANCE OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND LIFELONG LEARNING IN THE LEGAL FIELD

BY

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INTRODUCTION

1. Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests, faculty members, and most importantly, the esteemed graduates of the Faculty of Law in this prestigious Igbinedion University. I am aware that Igbinedion University has graduated over 3000 law graduates who are practicing successfully around the world, as well as producing the first graduate of a private university to bag first class at the Nigerian law school. This valedictory ceremony marks the culmination of your academic journey, and it is an epic occasion to reflect on the knowledge and skills you have acquired during your time here.
2. Today, I have been honoured with the opportunity to address you on the topic of **PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND CONTINUING LEGAL EDUCATION**. However, after careful consideration, I have decided to modify the topic slightly to better capture the essence of what I wish to convey. Therefore, I will be speaking to you today about **"NURTURING EXCELLENCE: THE IMPORTANCE OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND LIFELONG LEARNING IN THE LEGAL FIELD."**
3. I believe this adjusted topic better reflects the core message I want to share with you. It emphasizes the significance of continuous growth, improvement, and lifelong learning in our journey as legal professionals. It highlights the need to not only acquire knowledge during our formal education but also to actively nurture our skills and expertise throughout our careers.

**DEFINITION AND IMPORTANCE OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND CONTINUING LEGAL EDUCATION**

1. The concept of continuing legal education and professional development are concepts which although are distinct, cannot stand independent of the other. Continuing legal education is synonymous with professional development to the extent that, in order to attain maximum professional development, a law graduate or lawyer must continuously undertake legal education in its various forms. Simply put, continuous legal education is a means to achieving maximum professional development.
2. Legal education can be broadly divided into three phases. The first phase begins when a young person gains admission to study law at a university and concludes with the attainment of the LLB degree upon completion of their university studies, as you have done. The second phase commences when the graduate enters the Nigerian Law School for vocational studies and concludes with their Call to the Bar. The third phase begins after the lawyer is called to the bar and continues throughout their entire professional career. Phase three is often the most important but unfortunately tends to be neglected. It is crucial because it is an ongoing phase that, if disregarded or approached haphazardly, can lead to difficulties throughout a lawyer's practice. In reality, legal education in this phase never truly ends. However, this should not diminish the significance of the preparatory stages. Yet, a young graduate or any lawyer who disregards or fails to prioritize continuous legal education will encounter challenges. In fact, the extent of continuous legal education obtained reflects the overall trajectory of a lawyer's practice. Discussions like this are vital as they equip young graduates for early and optimal professional development.
3. Professional development and continuing legal education are not merely buzzwords; they are essential components of a successful legal career. As legal professionals, we have the responsibility to uphold justice, defend the rule of law, and serve the interests of society. However, the legal landscape is constantly evolving, and the challenges we face require us to adapt and grow continuously. The pursuit of professional development should be a lifelong commitment for every lawyer. It goes beyond the acquisition of a law degree or passing the bar exam. Rather, it involves a commitment to lifelong learning, staying abreast of legal developments, and honing our skills to navigate the complex legal environment effectively.

5.Continuing Legal Education (CLE) is a system or process of professional education of lawyers that takes place after their initial admission to the bar. The CLE helps lawyers in extending their learning beyond the law school studies. While doing the CLE, lawyers attend seminars designed to sharpen lawyering skills or that provide updates on legal developments within particular practice areas.[[2]](#footnote-2) Although the definition above is seemingly restrictive, it captures most of the essential elements which will form the basis of this discourse. An all-encompassing definition, in my opinion, is as follows:

6. Continuing Legal Education sums up the processes and activities designed principally to maintain or advance the professional competence of lawyers and law graduates inclusive. These include educational activities involving the use of classes, seminars, courses, workshops, videos, in-house training, computer-based resources, self-study or reading materials on relevant topics.

7. The purpose of continuing legal education is to maintain or sharpen the skills of licensed attorneys and judges.[[3]](#footnote-3) CLE also aims to expand an appreciation and understanding of the ethical and professional responsibility of lawyers. It is a cornerstone of professional development for legal careers. Participating in CLE programs allows legal professionals to deepen their knowledge, stay updated on changes in laws and regulations, and enhance their legal skills. Whether through attending seminars, webinars, workshops, or pursuing advanced legal degrees, CLE provides valuable opportunities to expand expertise and remain at the forefront of legal developments. In the same vein, CLE helps lawyers reflect, review and document their learning process, and also develop and update their legal knowledge and skills. From a personal point of view, it can:

1. Provide an overview of your development so far.
2. Act as a reminder of lawyers’ achievements and the extent of their progress.
3. Aid in career direction and help sharpen the focus on one’s goals.
4. Highlight gaps in lawyers’ skills and capabilities, thereby allowing lawyers to channel their improvements efforts to the needed areas.
5. Demonstrates value to both clients and stakeholders.
6. Help you develop or even change your career path.
7. Owing to its significance, Continuing Legal Education has been absorbed and forms part of the tenets of legal practice in Nigeria. This is manifest in the fact that it is mandatory under the Rules of Professional Conduct (RPC) for legal professionals in Nigeria. Particularly, Rule 11 of the RPC, prescribes that a lawyer who wishes to carry on practice as a legal practitioner shall participate in and satisfy the requirements of the mandatory Continuing Legal Education (MCLE) Programme operated by the Nigerian Bar Association. The provisions of Rule 11 further outlines examples of activities which a lawyer is required to participate for the purpose of the Continuing Legal Education Programme of the NBA, they include:
8. Attendance and participation in accredited courses
9. Lectures, seminars, workshops and conferences on law approved by the Nigerian Bar Association
10. Writing on the law and its practice in books or journals and newspapers approved by the NBA
11. Study towards professional qualifications approved by the Nigerian Bar Association and
12. Other approved means of acquiring legal professional knowledge and experience.
13. The essence of CLE cannot be overemphasised because, it serves to benefit not just the individual lawyer but the clients such a lawyer will be exposed to and the legal profession in general. Accordingly, progress or otherwise in legal education directly impacts the legal profession because failure in the former would seriously hinder progress, effectiveness and continued relevance of the lawyers in the country. Legal education therefore needs to continually and consistently develop to remain relevant to the needs of a dynamic society.
14. Now, it is important to state that CLE is not exclusively reserved for lawyers who have been called to the bar. It applies to young graduates at this phase. It is common to find young graduates assuming that by virtue of their graduation from the university, they are finally free and upon getting called to the bar, legal education comes to an end. Well, as highlighted above, it is only at this point that true legal education begins and it is a continuous process. Prior to getting called to the bar, young graduates must understand that they owe themselves a responsibility to make themselves available to undertake activities that will sharpen their skills and boost their professional relevance and development. A young graduate who undertakes CLE from the earliest point such as from now will advance and be outstanding amongst their peers. As a young graduate therefore, you must engage in activities such as attending seminars, lectures, workshops and conferences, participating in accredited courses and getting certifications, undertake the writing of essays and articles on areas of interest of the law and its practice and so many other activities which constitute legal education.

**ACTIVITIES WHICH FOSTER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

1. Professional development is important because generally, it can help you to forge a successful career, it equally has the potential to open you up to more opportunities. It can assist you in honing existing skills and in learning new ones. It can also help you stand out in a pool of applicants; showing that you have completed professional development programs or have acquired certifications which can go a long way in showing your expertise in your field. Other benefits of professional development broadly include; learning additional skills, it serves as a tool to boost confidence and credibility, helps to build leadership skills and finally it aids in building your network. The very hard truth is that the legal profession is competitive and it is only through deliberate and intentional professional development that a young graduate will stand out. The responsibility therefore rests on young graduates such as yourselves to be personally responsible to the extent that you must seek out and engage in activities that will bring about professional development. Some of these activities are[[4]](#footnote-4)
2. Continuing Legal Education (CLE):

Recall that it had been earlier established that undertaking continuing legal education is a cornerstone of professional development in the legal career. Participating in CLE programs therefore allows law graduates and legal professionals to deepen their knowledge, stay updated on changes in laws and regulations, and enhance their legal skills. Whether through attending seminars, webinars, workshops, or pursuing advanced legal degrees, CLE provides valuable opportunities to expand expertise and remain at the forefront of legal developments.

1. Networking:

Networking plays a vital role in professional growth within the legal field. Building a strong professional network allows legal professionals to connect with peers, mentors, potential clients, and industry leaders. Attending legal conferences, joining professional associations, and actively engaging in online communities provide opportunities to share insights, exchange ideas, and form valuable relationships that can lead to career advancement and new opportunities.

1. Mentorship:

Engaging in mentorship relationships is a valuable way to enhance professional development in the legal profession. Mentors offer guidance, share their experiences, and provide insights that can accelerate career growth. Seeking out experienced legal professionals who can serve as mentors can provide valuable advice, expand professional networks, and offer support in navigating the complexities of legal careers.

1. Specialization:

Specializing in a specific area of law can enhance career prospects and professional growth. By focusing on a niche area, legal professionals can develop deep expertise and become sought-after specialists. Specialization offers opportunities for advancement, higher compensation, and the ability to tackle complex and challenging legal issues. Acquiring specialized certifications or joining practice groups related to the chosen field can further solidify expertise and credibility. Young graduates must take time to find out areas of interest and passion as this can guide them to an area of specialisation.

1. Embracing Technology:

Technological advancements have transformed the legal profession, making it essential for legal professionals to embrace and leverage technology. Developing proficiency in legal software, e-discovery tools, and other relevant technologies enhances efficiency and effectiveness in legal practice. Legal professionals should proactively seek opportunities to learn and adapt to emerging technologies to streamline workflows and deliver better client service. Also, young graduates must be able to leverage on social media to stay abreast of trends in the legal profession.

1. Continuous Self-Assessment and Improvement:

Regularly assessing strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement is vital for professional growth in the legal field. Engaging in self-reflection, seeking feedback from peers and supervisors, and setting goals for development help legal professionals identify areas where additional skills or knowledge may be needed. Engaging in self-improvement activities, such as attending workshops or seeking out challenging assignments, enables professionals to continuously enhance their skill set and remain competitive.

1. Staying Abreast of Legal Trends:

In the fast-paced legal industry, staying informed about emerging trends and changes is crucial for professional development. Legal professionals should regularly update their knowledge about new legislation, landmark cases, evolving regulations, and advancements in legal technology. Subscribing to legal publications, participating in webinars or podcasts, and attending industry events help professionals remain knowledgeable and adaptable in an ever-changing legal landscape.

1. Reading Legal Professional Books

Legal professional development doesn’t always have to be in a formal setting – it can be reading helpful books on your own. There are several books that you can read or listen to, all from experienced lawyers and legal industry veterans, to save you years of missteps.

**CONCLUSION**

1. During the 2022 Valedictory Session, My Learned Brother Silk **Prince (Dr.) Richard Oma Ahonaruogho SAN**, who was your Guest Lecturer said in his address to the valedictorians that “Lawyers are confronted with a unique challenge of both adding positive value to the society by using their daily professional exertions as instruments of so-called social engineering, and passively, by being seen to be above-board in all their interactions and engagements, either professional or otherwise. In other words, they are expected to be both Saints and Warriors. Whether this is feasible or, even humanly possible, is moot. Suffice it to say, that the verdict for failure (particularly in respect of the former) has always been harsh. Whether this has proved to be enough to deter deviant (or unprofessional) behavior is an open question. The same, arguably, is the case with the latter (sentinels and guardians of our common values). To what extent will you keep faith with that high ideal? Will you live up to expectations? It is up to you. Just ensure that whatever choices you make for actualizing your career as a Legal Practitioner, you are guided by the right values, topmost of which is our professional ethics. You breach them at your peril.”[[5]](#footnote-5)
2. It therefore follows that maximum professional development is achievable while still maintaining the standard required. Young graduates and aspiring legal professionals such as yourselves must understand that legal education does not come to an end after graduation from the university or at the point of getting called to the bar. There is no shortcut to getting to the peak. It is a process that as the name connotes, continues throughout the lifetime of a lawyer as continuing legal education is necessary for professional development.
3. As you embark on your legal careers, I urge you to embrace the value of ongoing education, seek out opportunities to expand your knowledge and skills, and remain dedicated to the pursuit of excellence. Remember that the knowledge you have gained during your time in this University is just the beginning of your journey, and the path to becoming exceptional legal professionals lies in your continued commitment to professional development. Congratulations once again on your remarkable achievements, and I wish you all the best in your future endeavours. Thank you.

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2. https://definitions.uslegal.com/c/continuing-legal-education/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://legal-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/Continuing+Legal+Education [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. https://www.jcwresourcing.com/insights/blog/professional-development-for-legal-careers--continuous-growth-and-skill-enhancement/ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2022/07/igbinedion-varsity-has-produced-over-3000-law-graduates-prof-lawrence-ikechukwu-ezemonye/> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)