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## **Executive Opinion**

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An Interview with

**Professor Abednego Feehi Okoe Amartey**

*Vice Chancellor*

*The University of Professional Studies*

*Accra, GHANA*

Interviewer

**Nnamdi O. Madichie**

*Former Editor-In-Chief, AJBER*

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Dear Professor Okoe Amartey, thanks for availing yourself for this interview considering the current ongoing crisis and the implications for Universities in Africa.

**AJBER: May I start by asking you a few questions regarding the background of the University of Professional Studies (including its launch year, gaps in the markets and the challenges).**

The University of Professional Studies, Accra (UPSA) is a progressive

public university that provides both academic and professional higher education in Ghana. With more than fifty (50) years of experience, UPSA has achieved the reputation as the oldest Ghanaian human resource development institution in professional Accountancy and Management with many of its products in key leadership positions in Ghana and abroad.

The University of Professional Studies, (UPSA) formerly the Institute of Professional Studies (IPS) was birthed out of a dream of a young man in 1965 as a private business professional institution. By dint of hard work, the founder, Nana J.K. Opoku Ampomah successfully carved a niche for the Institute as the only tertiary educational institution to train professional accountants and administrators in the whole of West Africa at the time. The institution has undergone a lot of restructuring over the years through to where it is today. From a humble beginning as a Private Tutorial College in 1965, the Institution was taken over by government in 1978 by the Institute of Professional Studies Decree, 1979 (SMCD 200). Subsequently, on 22 April 1999, the Institute of Professional Studies (IPS) Act, Act 566 was passed to establish the Institute as a tertiary institution with the responsibility of providing tertiary education in the academic disciplines of Accountancy and Management.

With great fortitude and hard work, the Presidential Charter was granted to the Institute in September 2008 making it a fully-fledged university capable of awarding its own certificates, diplomas and degrees for its accredited programmes. In 2012, the University of Professional Studies Act 2012, Act 850 was passed to change the name of the Institution from Institute of Professional Studies to University of Professional Studies.

Repositioned as a fully-fledged public university, with its unique mandate to provide academic and professional education, the University is poised towards attaining scholarship, professionalism and entrepreneurship; offering professional, postgraduate, bachelors and diploma programmes. From an initial enrolment of five students in 1967, the University currently boasts of almost 15,000 students. UPSA is fully accredited by the Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programmes (ACBSP) in USA.

**AJBER: I see you are still going about business as usual in a time of crisis. Does this have anything to do with your leadership and/ or management experience in crisis situations both as an individual leader and as an institution generally?**

It is a combination of resilient institutional systems, the appropriate governance structures, and strong leadership/management experience. Universities are typically highly structured institutions, with governance structures that ensure adherence to policies and procedures.

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In some universities, these structures can hinder rather than support change. This is not the same at UPSA. Imbedded in our structures is our readiness and expectation for change, allowing us the agility and flexibility to adapt quickly to the ever-changing educational landscape that lies ahead.

In terms of management and leadership, I am a firm believer in being forward looking, anticipating changing needs or situations and with my team, predicting their potential impact and influence on how we operate. To that end, distance education has been an area that we have long understood could transform how we further expand our reach to students and deliver courses and programmes.

This level of preparedness allowed us to respond to the sudden closure of all universities in a very prompt and structured manner. So on March 18, three days after the President of the Republic of Ghana directed that all universities close and deliver learning online, all our courses and programmes had been transitioned online and we resumed classes, offering our students a seamless transition.

**AJBER: Kindly shed some light on what the expectations of leaders and/ or managers should be in times of crisis such as these?**

Crisis management is a skill all leaders must possess because in the midst of a crisis, it can define your tenure rather quickly. Prevention is a part of crisis management, however, as we witnessed with this pandemic, sometimes prevention is not an option. In those instances, the level of preparedness and response of leaders come the most critical elements in

times of crises. During a crisis, many look to leaders to mitigate the effect and make them feel less uncertain. How leaders manage and deliver on those expectations becomes what many rely on in formulating performance decisions.

No one expects miracles from us. However, the unseen flaws in our institutions and our leadership and management ability tend to be magnified when crises occur. Our task as leaders is not simply to manage a crisis, but to work diligently on building systems and structures that will allow our institutions to withstand the many threats that accompany a crisis.

**AJBER: In relation to the above, can the same be said about leadership in the HE (higher education) sector? How and why?**

As institutions of higher learning, we need to predict and react promptly and efficiently to changes, ensuring our continued commitment to providing the high level of teaching and learning that our students deserve, and our community and nation expect. If we truly believe that our youth are the future, then anything less will be shortchanging our future. Forecast planning, therefore, must be cornerstone and focus for all leaders. The idea is to not just predict, but also fully understand the complexities of the potential realities that lie ahead and develop a university-wide strategic initiative and response that will be instrumental in successfully mitigating the potential effects.

In the case of UPSA, our state of readiness means change will not influence what we will do, because we have engaged in careful planning infused with the flexibility, innovation and agility for which we have now become known. These will allow us to continue to stay ahead of the game and deliver service excellence that will enhance the experiences of all our stakeholders — from our students to our visitors to our faculty, staff and alumni.

**AJBER: I can see that you have taken the bull by the horns by engaging with an educational outreach programme/ project in the midst of the lockdown. What prompted this and what measures**

## **have you put in place to ensure effective educational experiences for students and teaching staff?**

Yes, with the sudden change in the mode of delivery of courses, it was important for us to institute outreach programmes to provide our students with the certainty of knowing that we were available to provide human assistance to them as needed to help with the transition. Our key question throughout this process was how could we use additional tools to optimise comprehension of the courses we are delivering? This allowed faculty to introduce several tools and options that complemented and deepened the learning process, ensuring that our students received an effective and robust learning experience. We also had a team ready to assist the students and provide guidance and counseling as needed. Our goal was to remain responsive to our students and their needs by addressing their issues promptly and offering solutions. This means

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although we instituted IT systems and protocols for learning, we ensured that our students could reach our faculty through WhatsApp, phone, email, and/or other options consistent with the preferred mode of communication of the student. As we move further along, we are introducing new outreach programmes, such as holding Open Day interactive sessions, to enable interested students engage with faculty on questions they may have about studying at UPSA.

In terms of providing effective educational experiences for our students, preparation was key. We understand that the purpose of technology is to enrich the learning experience — therefore we view technology as the conduit through which we deliver our programmes to students. In past years, we have spent a considerable amount of time and resources working on key considerations and recommended guidelines to allow us create a quality educational experience for our students who opt for online learning. We have invested heavily in technology, upgrading our systems, purchasing hardware and software, and establishing a Distance Learning School to support our faculty for online teaching. We had also recently ramped up our training faculty on the different strategies and teaching needed for an online learning experience, developed performance and behavior expectations within the online environment, and trained relevant staff on digital communication and

transmission of materials and assessments. All these proved useful during the lockdown.

We had already planned to offer about five graduate programmes fully online next semester and this number might now increase due to a new, developing vision for course delivery.

It is also important to add here that as early as 2018, UPSA began a process to deliver our accredited programmes through distance learning delivery methods. This was part of the University's vision intended to widen access to higher professional education and training to qualified persons constrained with time, space, distance and adequate material resources to access the conventional face-to-face method of teaching and learning. We went through a rigorous distance school and distance programme accreditation process by Ghana's National Accreditation Board (NAB) that emphasised the utilisation of instructional design principles, educational technologies and online teaching and learning to deliver distance programmes. In the process, UPSA successfully became the first university to meet the new criteria for accrediting distance

schools and distance programmes and received a letter of commendation from the NAB.

We also have an excellent homegrown learning management system that has been tweaked over the years in response to user-issues, so it was an excellent portal for the delivery of our online learning during the mandatory closing of all universities in Ghana.

**AJBER: Finally, what are your thoughts on how University Education would look like in a post-crisis situation?**

Well, while some universities have already made sweeping changes such as voluntarily choosing to keep their campuses closed for another year, experts are rife with predications about the potential changing landscape of university education, especially with a prediction of a decline in enrolment anywhere from 15% to 25% depending on your location. The following are some changes in university education being predicted by experts: many universities will change how they deliver their programmes; potential closure of universities, while others will choose to

merge to ensure their viability; changes in student recruitment strategies; and an increase in inter-university collaborations in an effort to strengthen the academic enterprise.

At UPSA, we are committed to working with our faculty and the rest of the university community on reimagining our future to include a possible permanent transition to quasi-online system, with hybrid, blended learning. As part of our planning efforts, we need to ensure that technology does not amplify existing inequalities in access and quality of learning. We are currently in the throes of analysing data from our students that will inform these decisions going forward. The students are key in this equation and it is important that we make sure that their voices are not only heard, but that we incorporate their recommendations in the formulation of our long-term visioning and planning efforts.

The Fourth Industrial Revolution is here – digital teaching and learning, digital working, digital social relationships, digital networking. It is up to each institution to embrace the opportunities it presents and use that as a springboard to reinvigorating our institutions.

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