

TIME TO REFORM AND DECENTRALIZE THE OPERATIONS OF THE SCHOLARSHIP SECRETARIAT IN GHANA.

Right Honorable Speaker,

Preliminary checks and investigations conducted into the operations of the scholarship secretariat revealed that apart from bursaries that are given to Senior High Schools, all other applications and operations are centralized at the National Capital. Besides, there does not appear to be any clearly laid down laws governing the operations of such an important agency of the state. This does not engender transparency and accountability and as such the situation must be reviewed.

Mr. Speaker,

The scholarship secretariat was established in January 1960 as an extra ministerial body under the office of the President. Its main object was to administer and exercise central control over the scholarship awards for manpower development so as to ensure effective manpower support for the various national development programs. The secretariat now has a mission to utilize Government funds, GETFund and Donor support for the provision of scholarship to brilliant but needy students and qualified workers at a minimum assess cost for human resource development for the purpose of National growth and development.

Mr. Speaker, just to remind ourselves, the Secretariat issues five types of awards:

- Thesis grant for postgraduate students
- Bursary grant for postgraduate students
- Long course allowance for medical students
- Disability allowance for physically challenged
- Hardship allowance for needy students

Mr. Speaker,

In all the cases of awarding the scholarship, centralization seems to be restricting access to the facility. For instance, the scholarship award is intended to provide financial support to brilliant but needy students whose parents/guardians are financially handicapped. Manifestly, many financially handicapped parents reside in remote areas of our country with their brilliant but needy kids. Many of such people have never been to the Nation's capital and as such do not know of the existence of the scholarship facility or even if they do, they are unfamiliar with the process of procuring the application forms. Some simply do not have the money to travel to Accra for the forms. That means that by its location alone, we have failed to make the agency accessible to the very people who are supposed to benefit from it. Additionally, they are put at

a disadvantage of competing with other needy students who are closer to Accra or know some influential people who can follow up on the application forms for them.

To buttress my point Mr. Speaker, according to the official website of the agency, in accessing the scholarship award, Parents/ Guardians collect forms from the scholarships secretariat for completion and endorsement by school heads and DCE's and returned. Many of our village folks have no relations resident in Accra who can readily accommodate them when they come to pick up scholarship forms. Again very few can afford to lodge in any hotel in Accra. In the event, a huge proportion of those who qualify and require the assistance are cut off.

Mr. Speaker,

Better services could be rendered to our people by making the secretariat available in all regions and possibly, districts, first to increase accessibility and second to broaden the scope of the award to the door-steps of the very people the award is instituted for.

Government should take bold steps to open regional secretariats in all the ten regions of the country in a bid to bring the scholarship secretariat to the doorstep of the ordinary Ghanaian. Subsequently, we can extend the service to the districts. A decentralized system will also allow for speedy processing of the forms not forgetting that closeness to real needy students will establish more fairness in the disbursement of awards because there will be people on the ground to verify those who really qualify for the award.

Mr. Speaker,

The operations of the secretariat do not appear to be regulated by any statute. Everything appears to be at the discretion of the National coordinator. It is imperative that the presidency weans itself off the secretariat and allows an independently constituted body to run the agency. This will ensure that expected political influences are reduced to the barest minimum. This point is critical as we seek to consolidate our democratic credentials as a country by ensuring neutrality of such an important agency. Secondly, Mr. Speaker it will enable professionals with expert knowledge in scholarship administration to be brought to bear on the secretariat to strengthen the institution to deliver on its mission.

Mr. Speaker,

I also wish to submit that one of the surest ways of making our institutions stronger as a country is by making sure all manner of patronage is done away with.

Decentralized scholarship secretariat and non-partisan experts running the agency is a sure way of reducing any possible cronyism and favoritism.

Mr. Speaker, we should have a situation where beneficiaries of Government Scholarship are published by the secretariat in the National Dailies so that all of us may monitor affairs of the agency. In other words, there should be a proper means and avenue through which the secretariat gives an account of its stewardship to the people of this country by being more open and collaborative. It should not be difficult for us to publish who received the award, where the person comes from, why he/she received the award and the award amount the individual received.

Further, Mr. Speaker, we need to know the quantum of foreign donations and scholarships that come into the country and most importantly their place of origin and the expected qualifications, made known to the Ghanaian public. This approach in my view would help to ensure the independence of the agency as well as build on donor confidence in the affairs of the secretariat.

Mr. Speaker,

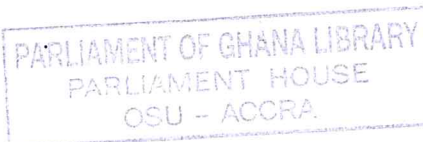
In summary, I wish, following from the above, to submit that:

1. A bill be introduced immediately to govern the operations and activities of the scholarship secretariat.
2. As part of plans to amend the current Local Government Act, plans be put in place to include clauses that will ensure the introduction of a decentralized system in the administration of scholarships in order to enhance easy access by citizens in all other regions, municipalities and districts across the country.

Mr. Speaker, it is my fervent hope that this matter would elicit positive contributions which would lead to the restructuring of the scholarship secretariat to the benefit of all deserving Ghanaians irrespective of their ethnic or regional background or religious, political creed or other beliefs.

Mr. Speaker,

Respectfully, I submit.



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