How to use the Graduate Code

1. Read the tenets of each chapter carefully and try to get a sense of the message of the chapter. Do not worry so much if the message of the tenets is not immediately obvious, as it will be when you read the code narrative. You might need to refer back to the tenets once in a while to understand their connection with the narrative.

2. Read the code narrative of each chapter to appreciate the full message and insights that bring the tenets to life. Note that these narratives have been developed from personal experiences and the experiences of friends, colleagues and acquaintances. The idea is to use the code narrative to build a picture and consider how it relates to your past or present situation.

3. Each chapter's code narrative will prepare you to respond to the practical exercises that follow. Try to respond to these exercises as much as possible – even if the essence might not be clear to you, it will become clearer as you progress. There are two blank lined pages at the end of every chapter, which you can use to respond to the practical exercises. I realise these two pages might not be enough to fully respond to all the practical exercises, so feel free to include extra sheets within the pages and keep them safe. This is important because even though the codes in every chapter are separate, they are all closely interlinked, and you will be asked in some cases to refer back to previous answers when responding to new ones.

4. Finally, keep an open mind, be ready to engage and trust the process, and I wish you a good read as you delve into the Graduate Code!

Excerpts from Chapter 2 – Introducing the Graduate Code

The Tenets

2.1 In the huge elephant tussle of mismanaged educational systems, the students and graduates, like green grasses, are always the losers. Be aware.

2.2 If you dislike your programme, change it; if you can't change it, accommodate it; if you can't accommodate it, align with it, because all in all, there is goodness in every programme.

There is always the availability of multiple career directions, but it is their accessibility that you need to work on.

code (noun): a system used for brevity or secrecy of communication, in which arbitrarily chosen words, letters or symbols are assigned definite meanings.

Dictionary.com

This definition of code implies a complex item or situation which requires ingenuity to decipher. But how is this relevant to you? Let me explain.

Irrelevant as it might initially sound, it is actually a good description of Africa's educational system, which is effectively a huge collection of stakeholders made up of proprietors and beneficiaries, assessors and regulators, all pulled together and apart in seemingly random directions. In this 'elephant tussle', the students and graduates, like the green grass on which the elephants stand, are the ones who lose out.

Frequent academic strike actions, constant disagreements between those in different circles, educational migration on one end and cultism on the other: all make this code more complex. Unfortunately, alas, many foreign educational institutions take advantage of this state of confusion by perpetually advertising 'better' educational (and sometimes 'asylum') opportunities in the national dailies. And who would choose to go overseas if the educational system at home was good (unless, of course, they wanted something extra such as global exposure or a different academic environment)?

There is no simple answer, no all-encompassing formula from worlds unknown, and I will not pretend that I have all the answers. After all, the code we face at the moment is quite complex. However, what I do know is that the current code can be dismantled just enough for a new set of codes to be developed. This time I refer to the governing principles behind the Graduate Code, which aims to guide you through university and to a successful graduate life.

Recently, I was delivering a career talk titled 'The Graduate Code' (surprise, surprise!) to over 200 undergraduate students at the University of Benin, Nigeria, and I felt incredibly jealous. I stood there, jealous at how they didn't even know how blessed they were to be hearing what I was saying. I couldn't help wishing that someone had told me these things when I was in their position – fresh, young and protected from the chaos of professional life in that incredible career-building, life-changing and profession-shaping bubble known as university.

At one point, I started asking questions, and requested a show of hands so I could gauge the dynamics in the room. 'How many of you are currently studying a subject you dislike?' I asked. About half of the room put their hands up. Then I asked the next question: 'How many of you have decided to stick with the programme (course) that you now do, even if you dislike it?' And a third of the room put their hands up. Then I asked the final question: 'Who here knows what they want to do when they graduate?' and only four students put their hands up. I appreciate that these were only around 200 students out of the 40,000 at that particular university, but I have seen the same trend in several African countries when asking the same questions of different groups of people.

Let's put this in perspective.

On the one hand, around half the students I spoke to wished they were studying something else but were compelled by the system to continue with it. On the other hand, around a third of students had decided to focus and complete their studies despite not being satisfied with their course. But what got me the most is that even the majority of those who loved their courses still had no idea what they wanted to do after they graduated.

As I mentioned in Chapter 1, I studied zoology at university, but this was not my intent when I took my entrance examinations. I wanted to study medicine, and my parents were delighted at this idea. Being called 'Dr Akanimo Odon' sounded really cool to me (naively, the idea of saving lives was an afterthought!). I needed to score 250 in the official undergraduate entrance examination to be accepted to study medicine. As you might remember from the first chapter, I only scored 204. My dreams (or rather, what I assumed were my dreams at the time) were crushed. Instead of medicine, I was directed to register for a course I knew nothing about.

I know this is a situation many are familiar with, and I will cover this topic in a later chapter, but I wish to make the point here that it is not the course you study that is important but the force you bring to it. Going by the minuscule number of students who showed their hands when asked if they knew what they wanted to do after graduation, it re-emphasises my view that the real issue is understanding what you want to study after graduation well enough to prepare for it. And even if you don't know exactly what you want to study, might it not still be a good idea to plan for what might lie ahead?

Excerpts from Chapter 5 – Getting paid for your hobbies

The Tenets

5.1 There is a difference between what you love to do and what you're paid to do. It's probably okay to do what you're paid to do but wouldn't do unless you were paid. However, while you're doing what you're paid to do but wouldn't do unless you were paid, it's crucial to invest time and limited resources developing what you love to do and would do even if you were not paid.

5.2 When you get paid to do what you love and would do even if you were not paid, this is the quintessential representation of doing the 'dream job'.

5.3 Universities provide the perfect environment to start or develop a hobby you enjoy or an interest you love. Run with this, because it's a possible career direction.

hobby (noun): an activity that someone does for pleasure when they are not working.

Cambridge English Dictionary

If I understand the above definition right, your hobby is tied to work inextricably – except that it is the release from work. (In other words, your work is the thing you will be paid to do which stresses you out so much that you need a hobby to relax.) It might be right to assume that the more you hate your job, the more stressed you are likely to get, and the more likely you are to become dependent on your hobby.

This then leads me to the next question: can a hobby stress you out? Think about that for a minute. I hope not, because that would totally defeat the purpose of a hobby, wouldn't it? You might then need another hobby to release you from the stress of your stressful 'hobby'. (Anyway, let's not let me mess with your mind.) My point is that a hobby is something you enjoy. If you don't, it won't serve its purpose. But imagine this scenario: what if you could be paid to do your hobby?

I am sure you will have been asked 'What hobbies do you have?' many times. (It is a particularly important question to ask during a date. I doubt you would go on a date and not want to find out a bit about the other person's hobbies!) But why is the question important in the context of your life and career post-graduation? Let me tell you.

There is often a difference between what you love to do and what you are paid to do. It won't do you any harm to do something you would only do if you were paid – but if this is the case, it is crucial to invest your limited time and resources developing what you love to do (and would happily do even if you were not paid). Trust me, the Graduate Code is all about helping you find your 'dream job', in other words the career where you are paid to do what you love.

It is important to note that I use the term 'hobby' loosely in this chapter to mean anything you enjoy doing that is not what you are studying – or studied in the last few years – but which has the potential to be a career direction. Can all hobbies be developed into a career direction, though? Perhaps, given the right support, focus and resources. (This question is particularly personal to me. I used to love long-distance running when I was in high school. I wasn't particularly great at it, but it was something different. Unfortunately, I had given it up by the time I went to university. However, even if I had continued with athletics in university, I am not sure I would ever have considered long-distance running as a career. Maybe if I had I would have run in the Olympics. Yeah, right!)

The point is that I spent Part I of this book writing about how you could progress your career on the back of your school and university studies but didn't consider outside interests. How about we spend some time analysing your other interests and how they could possibly lead you to your future career?

Excerpts from Chapter 6 – Investing your time

The Tenets
6.1 The university is a great banking institution, and if you invest your time under the right

terms and conditions, you'll get value for money upon graduation.

6.2 Your time is the most important currency. Spend it wisely.

6.3 Spend time doing old but relevant things differently, new career-enhancing things efficiently, and stop doing career-defecting things totally.

6.4 There is always time, and even when there is none, you can create it if it's important enough – for time management is the control of self in order to control time.

This might sound a bit of a cliché, but investing your time (in the sense of the Graduate Code) is like investing your money. You place some funds in a fixed deposit in a bank account and agree the terms of the investment at an agreed percentage over a period of time. At the end of that time, you get your funds back, with value added. The university is a great bank, and if you invest your time well, under the right terms and conditions, you will get value after you graduate. It may be a cliché, but like most clichés, it is also true.

The other saying I love is 'time is money'. Well, this one is definitely true – if you are anything like me as a student, being broke will be the norm. I can't remember ever having had cash that was not already accounted for. I never had spare cash and never used a bank. I'll tell you what I had in abundance, though: time. It was my currency, and if only I had known that back then, I would have acquired a lot more value for my career. Since I can't turn back the clock, I had better let you in on the 'time trick'.

The Graduate Code is all about encouraging people to take three principal steps: to develop skills differently if they are old but still relevant; to do new things efficiently if they are to enhance your career; and to stop doing things totally if they are irrelevant to your career. The most reliable resource you have, one which is much more precious than gold, is your time.

There is no time! There is no time! That is one of the biggest and most frequent lies I hear from the lips of students and professionals all over the world. I watch people express absolute wonder when I tell them what I do, and their first question is 'How do you find the time to do all these things?' Let's do a short time-mapping analysis to illustrate this.

The average first degree course in an African university lasts four years (or a minimum of five years for engineering and health-related programmes such as medicine, pharmacy, dentistry and optometry). There are generally two semesters per year, lasting three or four months each, including examination periods. The average person therefore spends about eight months studying – so every year there are four months unaccounted for. That's around 16–20 months of your undergraduate life.

Now, whether you are an average student or a super-serious book-grabbing and library-sleeping nerd, you would probably agree that even those four months are filled with a barrage of other course and non-course activities. The time you spend in clubs, society activities, student politics and mischievous rendezvous makes up a significant component of your graduate experiences, exposures and experimentations.
In my opinion (dare I say it?), the most time-consuming activity of all is social media.

Excerpts from Chapter 9 – Learning with no box

The Tenets

9.1 Thinking outside the box is good, but thinking with no box is better, because for creativity to thrive, captivity must die.

9.2 Learning for examinations and reports is good, but learning for graduation and profession is even better, so don't conform when you should reform, or you'll become a graduate with no form.

9.3 Learn your a course content isolation to become a graduate, but learn within and relation to a career context to become a true professional.

9.4 Spending time getting better at something you do like while studying a course you don't like could make the difference between a painfully confusing graduate career and a happy eventful one.

I'm sure you know the expression 'think outside the box', which I like to see as alluding to the fact that for creativity to thrive, captivity must die. The 'box' in this case is society's hold on you to conform when you need to reform, which results in graduates with no form. (Okay, I digress; I am getting carried away with rhymes here.) Some people take the expression a step further and advise you to 'think with no box'. I would advise you to take this to heart, and to 'learn with no box'.

The way universities are set up automatically restricts you in some sense, and this affects the courses you choose and, by implication, your career direction. When you have studied a course for four or five years, you are expected to know everything about your subject. (This isn't necessarily the case, though; many African universities encourage students to learn to pass examinations and not to prepare them for graduation and professional life.)

If you only learn information to pass examinations, after you graduate that knowledge tends to become irrelevant 'luggage' in your brain that you can't wait to offload. Semester after semester, you cram in information and parrot it back as you progress to the following year. I remember in the first few months of my master's degree in the UK, I felt incompetent and a fraud even though I had graduated with a first-class honours degree. I realised then that the examination-only format of learning in Nigeria had stopped me retaining knowledge. My chronic dependence on the lecturers and administrators of that knowledge had made my supposedly curious mind lazy and unproductive. From a conversation I had with a few professors recently, it seems that fifteen years down the line, things have not changed. Against this background, you have a huge opportunity to differentiate yourself.

Generally, I would say the majority of a student's learning is the course content rather than putting that learning into a career context. When I studied zoology, I learnt a lot about parasitology, entomology, hydrobiology, histology and several other 'ologies'. The trouble

was that I learnt all this information in isolation, whereas learning needs to be in relation to life after graduation if it is to enhance your career. So my first lesson, as I alluded to in Chapter 8, is to understand your course in relation to your future career.

To differentiate yourself from other graduates seeking work, it is fundamental to learn outside the boundaries of your actual course of study. I remember saying this at a forum and the students acted like I had said something sacrilegious, but let me use three real-life cases to show you why this is so important. Firstly, if you are training to be a lawyer, learn about something different, for example sustainable agriculture. Secondly, if you are training to be a business management graduate, try learning something highly scientific, such as energy efficiency in sustainable housing. And thirdly, if you are a chemistry student, learn something about business development. Teaching at universities tends to be compartmentalised, so you need to make the effort to 'learn outside the box'.

Excerpts from Chapter 19 – Aligning skills for the new era

The Tenets

19.1 It's 'town and gown', not 'gown and town', so always consider the town (society) first

and then fashion the gown (academia) to respond to the town's needs and challenges .

19.2 Different skills were relevant during the four industrial revolutions; acquire skills

relevant to the current era.

19.3 Irrespective of your field of study or professional space, you should integrate

sustainability into that space.

I had never used a PowerPoint application before my master's degree studies in the UK. I had to do a main seminar presentation during my first degree in Nigeria, but like most other students I used cardboard posters as that was all I knew. As my master's course had a few presentations embedded in it, I had to develop that skill rather quickly. Likewise, I had never used state-of-the-art data analysis software before I started my PhD, and for a course that had a lot of data to analyse, I had no choice but to learn how to use that kind of software. I was learning skills to stay relevant, and when that relevance was crucial to my success, it gave me an extra push to enhance those skills.

So here is my question: if you knew which skills and knowledge were (or would be) relevant to your current or future national, regional and even global career space, would you try and develop these? (If your answer is no, you might as well stop reading the book at this point and hand it over to someone who would find it more useful.)
You have probably heard the term 'town and gown' used to refer to industry and academia (in another sense, the non-academic population could be seen as the 'town' and the academic community as the 'gown').

For some reason people never really say 'gown and town', and I have always wondered why that is the case. After all, it rhymes whichever way you say it. By implication, though, putting

'town' first is logical. It would make sense for the authorities, government and university management to always consider the town first and then fashion the gown to respond to the needs and challenges of that town. Then we would have functioning and effective institutions that produce graduates whose skills fit with the society or community they are released into. Now wouldn't that be interesting? If we think about it this way, it makes sense to focus on what industries need and use this as a basis for universities to develop and incubate graduates who meet these needs. And if universities are not doing that, then students and graduates must strive to make themselves and their gowns relevant to the town. Here I thought it might be useful to paint you a picture of different industrial revolutions throughout history and show you where we are now, so you can see if you have the skills and knowledge to survive in a new industrial era.

Excerpts from Chapter 20 – Optimising opportunities for internationals

The Tenets

20.1 If the change is in your hands, you mustn't struggle through your studies or work in an environment with minimal career support and still face the same struggle in one with enough support.

20.2 In a globally connected world in which connectivity is the most valued currency, you need to always think local and act global.

At the early stages of conceptualising the writing of this book, I always knew that the positioning of my piece was unique. The book's primary aim was to bring important information to the African career space using lessons learnt from my experiences in the United Kingdom. It was almost as if I had stood up and could see clearly why some things worked and why others didn't unless they were adapted, or adopted differently. That unique position of being caught in the middle between a developing and somewhat underdeveloped economy and a developed one comes with some interesting perspectives.

In this chapter, I am taking a step back to focus a little more on those who are studying, living and working overseas. In other words, an international is a person who has left their country to study and work and who probably now lives overseas. I will use the United Kingdom as a sample overseas destination here, but am sure you can draw appropriate parallels with any other overseas study and working destinations. Regardless of where you study and work, the proposed premise remains valid, I believe, and I intend to explore this shortly. (You could perhaps use the word 'foreigner' in place of 'international', but I use that term advisedly and with respect for political correctness.)

First let me paint you a picture of the big challenges I faced as a student when I first came to the UK to study, and hopefully this will set the scene to explore the opportunities for students, young graduates and professionals considering studying overseas.

Firstly, as mentioned in previous chapters, I had to learn to cope with the disparity between dependence on and independence from tutors. In Nigeria, as in most African countries, a student has an almost total dependence on their lecturers and tutors. As I discussed earlier in this book, lecturers load you with lecture notes and mostly leave little breathing space for independent thinking or creative reasoning.

There is a colloquial term in many African countries, 'garbage in, garbage out', which, though a computing analogy, is used to describe when in examinations a student gives back to the lecturer exactly what they were fed in class. In fact, in some cases, the apparent demonstration of intellect and the sign of a great student is how consistently he or she is able to garbage out the garbage that has gone in. That is the African study environment which I grew up in, where the lecturer was lord and master and ruled the intellectual empire with a rod of creativity-starving iron.

So imagine my despair when a lecturer walks into class during my postgraduate programme in the UK and, part-way through the lecture, stops and asks us, 'So what do *you* think about this scenario?' Alarm bells went off in my head. I thought to myself, 'This is abominable – lecturers aren't allowed to ask me my opinions.' As far as I was concerned, all I was used to was lecturers telling me what to think. After all, that had been good enough for me, because each time I had parroted back to them what they had taught me in the first place, I did amazingly in my examinations. (And yes, that reminds me, I grew up in an examinations-only-driven environment where writing reports, essays and case study analyses were almost alien concepts. Imagine my struggle when I now had to write essay upon essay with word limits, cross references, plagiarism screenings and independent recommendations. Oh, how much I struggled. But soon I found that when I was given a chance to explore my creativity, I flew, and flew fast.

I had grown up in a culture where I wasn't allowed to call a professor by name unless I used the title 'Professor' before it, or else the academic gods would rain down fire and brimstone on me (figuratively speaking, of course!). However, back in the UK it was the opposite, and indeed sometimes caused mild offence if I used the title. I had to address all my professors by their first names. I remember having to remind myself each time I did so that this was okay. Who wouldn't, especially when your previous experiences were of fire and brimstone? A better way to paint this picture, I think, is to show you a typical UK examination marking scheme. (I have decided to focus on grading from 50% scoring and above for illustration, as anything below this is considered a fail.)