

The Unresolved Issue of University Autonomy and Academic Freedom in Nigerian Universities

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Abstract: The paper examined the contentious issue of university autonomy and academic freedom in Nigerian Universities. The paper made case for University autonomy and academic freedom. The major areas of erosion of university autonomy include: appointment of Vice-Chancellor; erosion of the powers of the Senate as the supreme organ in academic matters; the issue of quota system that makes it mandatory for universities to take candidates from certain areas whether or not they qualify for admission. The paper found out that there is no way total autonomy could be in the nation's universities because the proprietors of the universities would still want to monitor that the system complies with societal standard. Again, the National Universities Commission may not want to jeopardize quality assurance in the nation's universities for autonomy. It was therefore recommended that autonomy should be granted in certain areas. Besides the National Universities Commission should be repositioned to ensure better quality of products from the universities despite autonomy and academic freedom. The appointment of vice-chancellors should be allowed to follow due process so as to reduce the wrangling between government and the universities.

Key words: University autonomy % Academic freedom % Quota system

INTRODUCTION

The role of universities in human capital development, research and technological innovation cannot be underestimated. All over the world investment in University education is a critical component of national development effort. Nations today depend increasingly on knowledge, ideas and skills which are produced in the universities[1].

Nations invest in university education because society expects it to contribute to national development in three principal ways. First, society expects its university to produce the highly skilled personnel in technology, engineering, management and other professions, secondly, universities have the responsibility of producing their own corps of academic personnel that is, the intellectual resource pool that will, through scientific research generate new knowledge and innovation to solve developmental problems. Thirdly, universities produce teachers, administrators and managers for other levels of human resources development institutions.

The history of university education in Nigeria started with the Elliot commission of 1943 which moved the establishment of University College Ibadan (UCI) in 1948. UCI was an affiliate of the University of London [2]. When Nigeria attained independence in 1960, the need to train skilled manpower to take over from colonial expatriates heightened. Universities were later established based on felt needs as advised by the Ashby Commission of 1959[3]. At the moment, Nigeria has a total number of ninety-one universities made up of 27 federal universities, 30 state universities and 34 private universities [4].

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In spite of the tremendous expansionary growth of the university system in Nigeria, the system lacks autonomy, academic freedom, facilities and infrastructure to absorb the teeming number of applicants each year[3]. The lack of autonomy and academic freedom in the nation's ivory tower seems to be an impediment to the full realization of the goals of the university.

It appears not much serious academic work goes on in the Nigerian Universities these days. Most lecturers, Heads of departments and Deans of faculties appears not to be committed to serious academic work. Academics appears to be committed much to business nowadays rather than research which they are hitherto known for.

It also appears that the whole University system has been politicized because of the erosion of the autonomy and academic freedom in the nation's universities. This has a negative effect on the quality of graduates being produced from the ivory tower. The purpose of this study therefore is to examine how realistic the attainment of full autonomy and academic freedom in Nigerian universities as well as the implication of the university autonomy and academic freedom on the nation's university.

Concept of University Autonomy and Academic Freedom: University autonomy and academic freedom are highly significant substructures that are integral to the idea of a university. Universities have always regarded the two ideas as indispensable values and have defended them as such due to their inestimable value[5]. According to Babalola, *et al.* [6] university autonomy is a limited concept implying freedom of universities from external control in matters relating to academic and effective participation of the academic community in the formulation and implementation of university policies and programmes. The author posited that for autonomy to be fully practiced, there should be no dictation from outside the university as to what its standard should be, except from funding authorities. University of Ibadan in its Press Release (of 15th May 1981 No. 46) defined university autonomy as a system of internal regulation to ensure survival rather than wait for an external body to do so[6].

University autonomy and academic freedom are essential to the advancement, transmission and application of knowledge. They relate to the protection of the university from interference by government officials in the day to day running of the institution, especially on issues related to: the selection of students; the appointment and removal of academic staff (Vice-Chancellors); the determination of the content of university education and the control of degree standards; the determination of size and the rate of growth; the establishment of the balance between teaching, research and advanced study, the selection of research projects and freedom of publication; and the allocation of recurrent income among the various categories of expenditure[5]. Academic freedom in another dimension guarantees freedom of expression and of action, freedom to disseminate information and freedom to conduct research and distribute knowledge and truth without restriction.

A Case for University Autonomy and Academic Freedom: University autonomy is defined as giving universities the freedom to govern themselves, appoint key officers, determine the conditions of service of their staff, control their students' admissions and academic curricula, control their finances and generally regulate themselves as independent legal entities without undue interference from the government and its agencies[7].

It has often been said that for universities in Nigeria to play a meaningful role and discharge its responsibilities effectively, the system must enjoy high degree of autonomy in addition to the academic freedom of its academic staff. While citing examples of France, Japan, the Netherlands, Chile, Thailand and Viet Nam, the World Bank demonstrated how financial and spending autonomy served as incentives for quality improvement and efficiency in various higher education systems[6]. The best universities according to recent rankings are very autonomous[8].

The universal idea of the university is that it is a community of scholars, free to pursue knowledge without undue interference from any quarters[9]. Every university has its own laws or edicts which spells out the functions of the various organs in the institution such as the Governing Council, Senate, Congregation, Committee of Deans, Faculty, Department, Institute and so on.

So for all these organs to succeed in the accomplishment of the organizational goals the system needs to be autonomous. The system must have the freedom to run its own affairs without external interference; it must have the right to organize its internal affairs, to make decisions and to establish its own academic programmes. University autonomous and academic freedom will create a more flexible and responsive system of university in the areas of teaching and research[3].

Historical Overview of Erosion of University Autonomy and Academic Freedom: Disputes over university autonomy and academic freedom can be traced back to the 1970s where the University College Ibadan came under military dictatorship. A trade dispute between the Governing councils of Nigerian universities and the local branches of the National Association of University Teachers in 1973 on the review of conditions of service [5]. History recorded that the Federal Ministry of Education opposed vehemently the improved pay and improved condition of services approved to the aggrieved teachers' association by their local councils.

The senate of the University of Ibadan also experienced an erosion of its statutory powers in 1978 when a query was issued on it by the Federal Ministry of Education to explain why so many students failed in the 1977/78 academic session. Adesina in Oyeonoru [5].

The Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) that has been at the fore-front of the reforms in the Nigeria Universities has also been met with stiff oppositions from the federal government. Many times the ASUU have been banned and unbanned, unions, must especially, National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS) have been banned and unbanned. Many academics have been dismissed, retired and unjustly jailed for teaching what they were not employed to teach[10].

Forty-nine academic staff of the University of Ilorin (comprising of 9 professors, 21 Ph.D holders and 18 non-Ph.D holders) were dismissed in 2001 for participating in the nation-wide strike called by the Academic Staff of Nigerian Universities (ASUU)[11].

Major Areas of Erosion of University Autonomy in Nigeria: There are many universities in Nigeria today some controlled by the federal government, some by the state government and some by private individuals and corporate organizations. However, in spite of the autonomy entrenched in the laws setting up these universities, government and its agencies and proprietors have continuously imposed conditions of service and bureaucratic rules on how the universities should be managed. The following are the areas by which the university autonomy has been eroded.

Appointment of Vice-Chancellors: The appointment of the Vice-chancellors had hitherto been the sole responsibility of the Governing Councils of Universities[5]. However, with the Decree No. 23, of 1975 when the Federal Government took over the regional universities, the power to appoint and remove Vice-chancellors was vested in the Head of State or the Federal Military Government. Since this time the appointment of the vice-chancellor has become a political affair and the visitor has the final say. The President has the final say in case of Federal Universities, the State Governor has the final say in case of state universities and the proprietor in case of private universities[12]. As a result of this change vice-chancellor over time became increasingly accountable to the visitor.

Senate and Academic Matters: Another area where the autonomy of the universities has been eroded has to do with the usurping, the power of the Senate to assess the academic merit of the university teachers and the content of the programmes. The usurpation of this power comes to play with the introduction of the National Universities Commission (NUC). The senate which consists of the Registrars, all professors, all heads of departments and faculty representatives deals with all academic decisions and their execution [12,13]. However, with the establishment of NUC in 1962 and its reconstitution in 1974 through Decree No. 1 of 1974, the role of NUC shifted from mere ensuring orderly development of university education, maintaining standards and ensuring adequate funding to an agency with the power to dictate what do teach and the number of students to be admitted into the universities.

The Decree 16 of 1985 and its amendment in 1988 dismantled what was left of university autonomy by expanding the functions of NUC. Section 10 of the Decree vested in the commission the “power to lay minimum standards for all universities and other institutions of higher learning in the federation and the accreditation of their degrees and academic awards[5].

Quota System Syndrome: The quota system otherwise known as “federal character” is another way by which the autonomy of the university is eroded. The quota system was entrenched in the 1979 constitution with the aim of rectifying the recruitment imbalances which in the past, made one ethnic group / state to supply the entire personnel into federal parastatals (universities inclusive). It was also to ensure equity and fairness in the admission process[6]. With quota system, the University is under obligation to admit students not entirely on merit but on the quota on the states as stipulated by the government.

Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB) and the Admission Processes: JAMB as an examination body was put in place in Nigeria by the Military government in 1978 with the responsibility of conducting entry examinations into the Nigerian universities[3]. This action of the government had been described as though desirables but an erosion on the university autonomy of the universities.

Can Universities Be Totally Autonomous?: The idea of introducing ‘limited’ or ‘total’ autonomy in public schools and universities has been for several years. Although the idea of autonomy in universities has not been shelved, it appears to have been fizzed-out and being overshadowed by more pressing contemporary issues. Issues like fighting corruption in all forms, constitutional reforms and amendments, improvement of the economy and advancement of democracy [14].

Autonomy Issue Had Been Subjected to Various Interpretations: To the students, autonomy means government handing off the funding of higher institutions and increase their school fees [15]. Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) perceived granting autonomy to universities as idea being tailored towards the monetization of education, thereby making it an elitist venture. From the federal government perspective, university autonomy does not mean the same thing as government handing off the funding of universities. Rather, it is meant to enable the universities to have freehand to choose their vice chancellors as well as make some money by the side to argument the government funds [16]. With this the university will be free from government control and the governing council of the universities will not only appoint or remove the vice-chancellors, but also determine the pay package and other conditions of service of all categories of staff.

The intense disagreement over what autonomy should entail, particularly between the Government and the ASUU necessitated the autonomy Bill presented to the National Assembly [17]. The Bill stipulated Government’s position as:

- C The government should provide funds as a block vote, which universities will spend as they choose; universities to raise additional funds independently.
- C The government should retain the control of governing council through majority membership of government nominees.
- C Governing councils should appoint vice-chancellors.
- C Each governing council should determine the conditions of service of its staff.
- C Staff (and students) unions should relate only to individual governing councils.
- C Tuition fees should not be charged at the undergraduate level, but universities may charge for other services e.g. accommodation.
- C The functions of the NUC should be curtailed; a major function will be to monitor standards.

The Academic Staff Union of Universities, on the other hand, propose as follows:

- C The government should fully fund the university education; it has the resources to do so.
- C The number of internal members of Governing Councils should exceed the number of external members.
- C Governing Councils should appoint Vice-chancellors, following extensive consultation with academic staff.
- C There should be uniform conditions of service in all universities.
- C Staff Unions should continue to be organized and recognized as National bodies.
- C University education should be free.
- C The functions of NUC should be curtailed; universities should be responsible for setting and monitoring their own standards [18].

Considering the unsettled imbroglio between the stakeholders of the university education as regards the autonomy of the system, one continues to wonder if the universities can be totally autonomous. See reasons below:

Issue of Appointments: The relationship between universities and governments, or, between politicians and universities, has always been fraught with difficulties, arising out of differences in expectation, in particular, over funding and autonomy [17]. This is more so if universities continue to be financially dependent upon government. Public funded universities should see government as their proprietors the same way private institutions see their proprietors. It would be absurd to expect the proprietor of a private university to stand clear in matters relating to the appointments of members of Board of Governance in his or her institution [6]. This is an area where politics cannot be divorced from education as he who pays the piper dictates the tune.

Issue of quality assurance: The National Universities Commission has over the years been responsible for quality assurance in the nation's universities. One of the ways by which the commission has been doing this is through programme regulation which entailed the enforcement of government regulation stipulating that for any Nigerian university to commence an academic programme or establish an academic unit, it must obtain the written approval of the NUC [9]. The problem of irrelevant curriculum may be pronounced if there is no such national norm to specify minimum standard expected from each university by the society [6].

Protection of Students from Exploitation: One function of the government is to protect the citizens against any form of exploitation. While full autonomy is granted to universities, if care is not taken, some universities may go out of their way to engage in unethical money making activities at the expense of their primary responsibilities which is to teach, research and to carryout community services.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The states of things in Nigerian universities seem unsatisfactory. This could be attributed to the wrangling between the government and the other stakeholders in the university education sector over whether or not full autonomy or partial autonomy be granted to the nation's universities. To this end, the following recommendations were made:

- C Autonomy should be granted to the universities in certain areas such as recruitment, training, admission among others. Autonomy cannot connote total independence from the government/state.
- C There is the need to reposition the powers of some regulatory agencies of the university system such as the NUC, JAMB as well as government ministries to conform to the autonomy of universities as contained in the laws establishing universities in the country.

- C There is also the need for the NUC to strengthen its quality assurance mechanism to ensure that autonomy to universities is not achieved at the expense of the quality of university education in Nigeria.
- C There is the need for the government to expand and improve the existing university facilities so as to be able to address effectively the admission problem. Improvement on the level of infrastructure will enhance the carrying capacities of the system and thereby reduce the problem of quota system.
- C Nigerian universities must be re-oriented towards performing their statutory functions of teaching research and community service. This will enable them to focus on the production of quality manpower needed for the nation's economy.
- C Appointment of Vice-chancellors must follow the laid-down procedures. Visitors who sit in their offices and appoint vice-chancellor based on sentiment are making mockery of the training of future leaders as such Vice-Chancellors would only owe allegiance to the visitor and not to the system.

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