

University autonomy and academic freedom in Nigeria: A theoretical over view

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Abstract

The need to build strong, vibrant and formidable universities in Nigeria is crucial, and this cannot be over emphasized. Most transformations experienced in all spheres of life today across the globe came through teaching and research activities of Universities. University Education has thus become an important tool for development of the nations, and therefore must be organized in such a proactive way that would guaranty efficiency and high productivity. This paper makes a review of the usefulness of the principle of institutional autonomy and academic freedom in Nigerian Universities. This lingering issue has caused colossal disaffection in the running of universities across the nation. Over interference of government and other external forces has left a poor relationship between the major internal stakeholders of universities like the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASSU) and other unions in the institutions. The study was anchored on self-determination theory, this calls for an attitudinal change of government and agents in the universities towards embracing the principle of institutional autonomy because of the enormous benefits in it. The work highlighted some of such benefits like, the encouragement of academic excellence, contribution to the high-income economy, and building a focused education that would secure a better future for the younger generations.

Keywords: university autonomy, academic freedom

Introduction

The world today is best described as a knowledge based entity, driven by a knowledge based economy where the survival of mankind majorly depends on information and ideas. The ideas are generated from teaching and research mainly conducted in higher institutions of learning with particular reference to universities. Universities have thus continued to occupy a pivotal position in the socio-economic, political, technological life of every nation including Nigeria (Ekunda & Adedokun 2009) ^[9]. Universities have long been conceived as institutions poised to search out the truth and knowledge that the society needs for survival. In the Universities, academics and students engage in scholarly interactions to generate and transmit ideas, skills and views for the good of the land. A university is an assemblage of scholars from diverse fields of study who teach and research on ideas and transmit same to younger generations who seek knowledge for personal and societal development. These conceptions of the university have made it an indispensable component of nations across the globe.

Universities across the globe are currently undergoing a serious transformation, trying to do things better and to catch up with the fast moving world. These transformations are in areas of the mode of teaching/learning, patterns of decision making, administrative tactics, vision and mission. In the light of these, it has become essentially necessary for the administrative patterns and the entire governance of universities to be restructured to be able to garner solutions to the societal needs and challenges. According to Jegede (2010) ^[10] autonomy allows the university to stand as an independent legal entity on the basis of the

status of law. Modern day universities require a greater management flexibility to be able to face the competition in the global market. To achieve this objective is to come out of the old system of university administration characterized by much influence of government and other external forces on the running of the universities. The system significantly influenced the appointment of university vice-chancellors and a significant number of members of the governing councils, which take major decisions for the university. The entire mechanism simply reduced the universities to the extension of government departments which serve the myopic purpose of the state and industries. The new trend is intended to turn universities from being an agency that satisfies immediate needs of government, industries and market, but to an agent of innovation and change in all aspects of the society's life. It is very difficult for government controlled and regulating universities to fit or adjust to the competition among universities (Dill, 2001) ^[7]. University education in Nigeria has been a desolated enterprise due to the fact that education reform, autonomy and freedom has not yielded a significant result between 1990 to 2014 (Ololube 2015) ^[13]

Literature Review

This study was anchored on the on Self-Determination Theory (SDT) by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan (2000) ^[6]. The theory focuses on how social and cultural factors facilitates an individual and organisational sense of volition and initiative and their well-being regarding the quality of their performance. The train supporting individual / organisational experiences of autonomy, competence, and relativeness is argued to facilitate the

volitional and high-quality type of motivation and engagement for their activities. Therefore the extent to which any of these three psychological needs are thwarted within a social context will have a sound determination of impact on the wellness of that particular individual or organisation. Self-determination theory depicts a framework for the study of human motivation and organizational personality which has to do with intrinsic and extrinsic sources of motivation for the social development of the individual/organization. Relating self-determination theory to this study implies that when individuals/organisations are granted self-autonomy it triggers the social development of the organisation thereby motivating the sub-system of the organization to structure its activities in a way that will derive a better outcome for the organisation.

The Concept of University Organization

The organization of universities remains a key factor on the realization of the objectives of the university system. There are fundamental principles underlying the corporate existence of universities. It is widely believed by old and modern scholars that for universities to remain what it should be, those fundamental principles must be upheld and not politicised. One of the principles is that as institutions poised with the responsibility of generating, transmitting, appraising knowledge and transmitting culture and ethics through teaching and research, they should not operate under the influence of political authorities and economic powers so that objectivity can be guaranteed (Magna Charta Universitatum 2001)^[2]. It is also maintained that freedom in research and training is a core principle that can allow for the achievement of the objectives of university education. It is also believed that non-interfered process of teaching and research is what can allow for smooth knowledge generation and transfer to the younger generation. It is believed that the university institution is a central and objective custodian of knowledge and tradition of the diverse culture of societies, in which case, it should not be subjugated by the business and parochial ideologies of successive governments.

The Concepts of Academic Freedom and University Autonomy

The above assertions point to the issues of university autonomy and academic freedom. These concepts, however, need to be properly clarified for general knowledge. Erguder (2010) in an explicit manner has defined these related concepts. According to him, academic freedom is the personal privilege of an academic staff of a university, while university autonomy is an institutional privilege. Implicitly, while lecturers enjoy academic freedom, universities leverage on institutional autonomy.

Academic freedom implies that teachers are empowered to become independent thinkers, inventors, researchers, teachers and knowledge creators within the confines of academic practice in the institutions, void of fear of intimidation by the administration or government forces. It is only by this principle that novel ideas and unpopular views can be expressed and opinionated for possible

advancement of the society. University as an independent and autonomous centre for teaching, learning and research, poised with the herculean task of ensuring a high standard of the educational process and institutional sustainability of the society, can only achieve its statutory role of teaching and research if it operates independently. It, therefore, means that they will not be subjugated by political and economic hegemonies (Berdah, 2006)^[5].

Literarily, university autonomy means a state of independence in the operations of the institution. A more comprehensive view of university autonomy defines it as the freedom of a university to run its own affairs without direction or influence from any level of government. He further described areas of government influence such as legislative power and executive decisions on funding, appointment, discipline and condition of service. Institutional autonomy fosters academic freedom, which allows individual academic to decide on course content, carry out research, interpret research findings, initiate ideas, freely express ideological stance and think freely. Utile (2008)^[16] pointed out that the philosophy of intellectual freedom was granted to scholars based on the fact that knowledge improves when humans are allowed to engage in research activities which in turn add to the body of knowledge, which in turn guarantees a free interplay within the system.

Ajayi and Awe (2010)^[1] opined that in the history of higher education system no higher institution is faced with external free factor influence as such university autonomy may not be constant over time. There must be a relationship between the university, government and the society at large. Every university has its own laws, rules and regulations that govern the system which is made by the governing council, university senate, and committee of deans, faculties, departments, and institutions. The system must be granted the autonomy to operate on its own without the interference of the external factors. International Association of Universities (IAU) in Sirat (2009)^[14] described university autonomy as the necessary degree of independence from external interference that the university needs in respect of its internal organization and control, the internal allocation of financial resources and generation of income from non-public sources, the recruitment of its staff, the setting of the conditions of study and finally the freedom to conduct teaching and research activities. By implication, when universities enjoy institutional autonomy, its members will, in turn, gain academic freedom. Academicians will thus conduct research, interpret their findings and freely make recommendations. They will also express their line of thought over all manner of societal issues, irrespective of who may be affected. The university will in any of the above situations defend and protect an individual member of staff as well as tolerate and respect their personal opinions on academic issues.

However, members of staff can then exercise their academic freedom with caution. For instance, they will be expected to demonstrate a high degree of commitment to their university's code of conduct and ethics. They will also be expected to fulfil their moral and intellectual obligations to their university as well as strongly uphold

the main aim of the university as earlier stated. More so, while trying to be self-regulated, academic staff by the tenet of freedom will not do anything that will tarnish the image of their university. Kirk (2005) ^[11] opined that the role of National University Commission (NUC) is to encroach in the functions and responsibilities of the universities which do not permit the university autonomy and academic freedom. Anyamele (2004) ^[3] noted that the main aim of university existence is to boost the academic pursuit of individuals learners, therefore such aim cannot be achieved without university autonomy. However, there are various levels of autonomy within the university system in designing academic programs, promotion of staff, appointment into administrative positions etc. it was on this note that the former vice-chancellor of the federal University of Calabar professor Ekpo noted that university autonomy should be properly implemented since the university has not been properly funded because of its dependence on federal government. (Guardian newspaper June 29, 2000) ^[6].

Ekhaton (2009) in a study sought to find out the perception of academic staff regarding university autonomy and how it affects their job satisfaction, attitude to work and the staff general welfare. The findings reveal that staff attitude and job satisfaction is directly related to the university autonomy and academic freedom. The review of the above literature reveals that university autonomy and academic freedom guarantees a high level of academic success, effective work satisfaction, good attitude towards work among staff and effective facilitation of the University's' functions among Nigerian universities.

Basic Indices of University Autonomy

The clamour for university autonomy across the globe is a clear indication that there exists the significant level of interference in the university administration and operation by the government and other external forces. The interference is also perceived to be antithetic to the traditional principle of the university system. The lingering question is: "who owns the university and who funds it? Believing that the owner and sponsor of an institution are supposed to be in charge of the operation of the institution, it has thus, remained a mirage, especially in public universities in Nigeria to achieve ideal institutional autonomy. From the available literature on the subject matter, the following constitute essential prerequisites of university autonomy.

- Respective universities must exercise legal right of ownership of University assets including land, buildings and plants.
- Freedom to set strategic plans and pursue them independently.
- The right to budget for the running of the university.
- Freedom to design academic programmes that are considered suitable to the University
- The right to recruit and sack university academic and non-academic staff
- The freedom to determine the fees and charges students should pay
- The freedom to develop and run salary structure that is suitable to the University

- The right to determine students' enrolment.
- The right to independently determine and run suitable academic calendar.
- The right to select administrative heads of the institution.
- The right to decide admission policy
- The right to determine the intake capacity in various courses and faculties
- The right to determine teachers' work load.
- The right to conduct admission and degree awarding examinations.
- The right to enjoy full financial autonomy, including the right to run institutions bank account, operating internal auditing, right to generate income.
- Enjoying administrative autonomy void of government political and bureaucratic interference.

Controversy Over University Autonomy

Literature reveals that the issue of institutional autonomy across nations remains a great controversy. Much agitation had been on going without significant result. One of the big hindrances has been that a university established by government or state will definitely serve the purpose of the state. Even though there may seem to be autonomy and academic freedom, there will be limits and boundaries set by the government. One of the reasons why the government may want to exercise maximum control may be due to its plan to use the university as machinery for the advancement of the state. Since the state needs a human resource, technological inventions and expertise skill to achieve its goals, the best way to regulate the entire process is to have the institutions under its whims and caprices. Based on the truism that 'who pays the piper dictates the tone', subsequent government keep insisting on influencing the appointment of Vice Chancellors, making regulations on students' enrolment mindless of what the university may consider appropriate or otherwise. In Nigeria, the National University Commission (NUC) has remained a very formidable agency of government that governs and regulates administrative and academic affairs of universities.

The NUC retains the power to approve or disapprove academic programmes of universities. It, in fact, runs the universities from outside the campus. It is believed that NUC plays politics with the universities by luring the university management to its side and making them perceive the staff unions of the university such as the Academic Staff Union of the University (ASSU) as opposed to the management and government. This situation of disunity in universities has remained the major cause of incessant strike actions experienced in the country. Usman (2005) ^[15] in a study on the consequences of lack of university autonomy among Nigerian universities and the result reveals that high level of academic staff unrest, inadequate funding of internal university projects, insufficient human and material resources etc are all part of the consequences of lack of university autonomy among Nigerian universities. Contrary to the claims of the government that universities can become better if it exercises maximum control over them, experts in higher education practice hold the view

that universities will be better positioned to achieve their objectives more adequately when they are granted full autonomy. It is argued that with honest autonomy, universities will thrive in their academic, administration and development.

Management and Implications of Academic Freedom and University Autonomy

It is very imperative to note that the authorization of universities is implicated on the internal running of the system. It does not only end at the withdrawal of external hegemony of the state, it extends to further devolution and delegation of powers to the different strata within the institution. When the principle of academic freedom is evoked in the operations of universities, it will behave the management of the institutions to observe and ensure the rudimentary rules of the principles. For instance, universities as espoused by Sirat (2009) ^[14], will have to:

- Ensure that the academic members of staff will exercise the freedom to conduct research, have freedom of expression, freedom to disseminate truth and facts arising from their studies fearlessly.
- Focus on the traditional cultural and social responsibilities towards ensuring the distribution of intellectual property generated through research and skill development.
- Ensure that while it is freed from the influence of forces outside the university, there will, in turn, be free delegated and devolution of authorities among internal structures of the institution. In fact, it will guarantee efficient governance and management internally.
- Arouse high capacity of creativity and innovativeness among academics so as to avert intellectual stagnation, which remained a consequence of the absence of institutional autonomy and academic freedom.
- Ensure that it becomes proactive and respond to immediate needs of society, which is the actual constituency of the university. Universities will be optimally sensitive to rising challenges in societies and strive assiduously to resolve them using generated knowledge and ideas born out of intensive research and teaching. It is only when this has been done that the original role of the university as an institution for the pursuit of universal knowledge would have been achieved.
- Shift attention to the society in terms of impact making and showing accountability. Universities thus should develop a knowledge based society and take responsibility for the sociocultural and overall well-being of members of the society.
- Be in a very close touch with the society in order to understand her needs. This close contact will also enable universities to not only attend to the needs but also to make projections into the future for sustainable development.
- Take up the full responsibility of training the human elements by making them attain a high level of civilization. The universities will ensure that the right values, culture and ethics that will promote harmony and coexistence are inculcated in the

citizenry. They will also ensure that citizens become highly productive and global. These will be achieved by allowing members of staff the freedom of thought and expression.

- Uphold the ethic of quality assurance in order to justify its efforts and commitment to societal development. They will ensure that problems are not only solved but that they are well solved for the benefit of the society.
- Through the Council, establish administrative and academic structures that will operate the system. It will also determine the mode of selection of the various administrative positions, from the vice-chancellor to the deans and heads of departments. It will also ensure that all the personnel including members of the council abide by the established code of conduct. All these will ensure greater efficiency and quality assurance and accountability.
- Through the Council ensure that personnel are highly motivated while performing their duties. Through this, the best brains who may have drifted to more attractive universities abroad will be encouraged to return. These scholars will only accept to return if the high handedness of government on the public universities is completely abolished.
- Involve students in the monitoring the system. This can be achieved by setting up a mechanism that will allow students to report on teachers' performance and effectiveness. Such reports could serve as input criteria for staff promotion.
- As a way of ensuring accountability, Vice-Chancellors should be making a periodic report of their stewardship to senate and council. The template for assessment will be his or her earlier outlined strategic plan and agenda. If he is found worthy and proficient, he or she may be encouraged to continue to head the institution.

Benefits of University Autonomy

The unbending clamour for university autonomy across the globe is due to the enormous benefits inherent in the policy and practice.

- It encourages well-focused education and assures all interests involved that learners who are the future leaders of the society adequately prepare for responsibilities ahead.
- It encourages collaborative effort among academic staff, school management, parents and significant others who are poised to usher in total transformation through the learning institutions.
- It avails different universities the right to explore peculiar opportunities and to adopt special strategies, methodologies and styles in solving their peculiar challenges. In other words, stereotyping is done without. Hence problems are rapidly tackled with workable and innovative strategies.
- It provides the parent with a wide range of opportunity to choose universities that best sooth their ideologies, expectations and religious inclinations. This freedom of choice fulfils the philosophy of a democratic and globalized society. It also guarantees happiness and opportunity for

maximization of the potential of individual learners and specific ideological groups.

- It also arouses the spirit of entrepreneurialism and excellence in teaching and research. The entrepreneurial university will not only make ground breaking and land mark achievements in knowledge generation, they will also become highly productive and capital generating entity.
- University autonomy will also encourage judicious management of budgetary allocation to universities. The autonomous management system marked by strong, objective and independent internal audit system, maintains a high level of probity and accountability to the entire society. They also ensure the safety of physical assets of the university.
- Institutional autonomy of universities will contribute immensely to the high-income economy as it will train the high manpower capacity needed in the society to run the various sectors of the economy. Their research output also will serve as a source of income to the society due to their impact on economic growth.
- More so, it will cause dramatic boost in academic excellence and innovation among students and there will be a reflection of that in the wider society through the graduates who will serve in various capacities in their immediate society and at the global level

Challenges facing the actualization of University Autonomy in Nigeria

In Nigeria, public universities are fully funded by the government. While a few of them have made efforts to raise internally generated revenue (IGR), others depend almost entirely on government sponsorship. If the government pays staff salaries, build structures and finance researchers, it becomes most likely that it will dictate the tone. In highly placed countries like the United State of America, Japan and the United Kingdom, universities have attained high entrepreneurial status and have gained self-sustainability and efficiency. More so, much more funds are received from high business moguls (Arikewuyo, 2004) ^[4]. Contrary to the vision of training students in character and in learning, and to prepare them for future leadership, the government, which most times award scholarship, offer financial incentives to students tactfully negatively influencing the attitude of students to issues of life, such as hard work, creativity, innovation and management. Having been fed and catered for many of them will develop over dependence and indulgence. Clamour for university autonomy is seriously criticised for its potential to cause increased and exorbitant tuition, which children of the low-income earners may not be able to afford. In that case, the university education will become inaccessible to many citizens of the country.

Conclusion

This paper reviewed university autonomy and academic freedom among Nigerian universities and its implications for university development. University autonomy has the potentials of providing a better framework through the decentralization of management culture with the

operations of the university system.

Recommendations

The following recommendations have been proffered to the government who wish Nigerian universities to provide quality instruction with our future leaders and also contribute to our nation building.

- University autonomy should be granted to all Nigerian universities and to monitor that it is practice to its fullest.
- Academic freedom should be encouraged among the university staff which in turn will improve the educational standard within the country.
- An enabling learning environment should be provided for the proper implementation of university autonomy in Nigeria.
- Prompt payment of staff entitlement and should be given proper attention as at when due so as to motivate them to invest their human and material resources for the development of the university.

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