

UNIVERSITY AUTONOMY AND MATTERS ARISING BETWEEN ACADEMIC STAFF UNION OF UNIVERSITIES (ASUU) AND FEDERAL GOVERNMENT OF NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study determined the relationship between university autonomy and agitation by Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU). Only one research question was answered - What is the extent of autonomy of Nigeria's public universities as perceived by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU)? The study also tested the null hypothesis - There is no significant relationship between university autonomy and agitation by ASUU in Nigeria's public universities. The ex post facto research design was adopted for this study carried out in Nigeria. The study used a population of 100 professionals purposively used as sample size. The structured questionnaire tagged, "University Autonomy Questionnaire (UAQ)." The research question was answered using item-by-item analysis and the null hypothesis was tested using Simple Regression Analysis (SRA). Based on the finding of this study, it is concluded that as long as government undue interference in the university system is unresolved, the university system in Nigeria will continue to face crisis and slow pace of development as well as efficient delivery of its mandate with more agitation by ASUU resulting to industrial action. Based on the conclusion drawn it is recommended that government of Nigeria should allow public universities to be run under full university autonomy to give room for accelerated development.

Keyword: University; University autonomy; Industrial action; Union

Introduction

Public universities in Nigeria have been in an unending industrial battle with university lecturers under the umbrella of what is unarguably the most powerful labour union in the country, the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU). Amidst emerging demands like Academic Earned Allowance (EEA), Integrated

Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS), university autonomy continues to form significant demand by the union over the years just as governments (Federal and State) continue to play politics with their antics that strip members of the university community of this laudable demand.

Consequently, ASUU has resorted to what it believes the only language that government understand in terms of giving attention to the demands of the union. This however has further consequence as the nation's public universities have embarked on industrial actions almost every academic year if not every semester. This has no doubt adversely affect students, lecturers, and the nation with slow pace of development in the education sub-sector and the nation's economy.

Despite its significance, university autonomy in Nigeria is not well defined and is embraced with mixed feelings. Members of the academic community in one hand see it as the only way to get the university system in Nigeria a lift in terms of development and reposition it for global competitiveness. On the other hand, federal government, the proprietor of public universities is not ready to grant full autonomy to the direct stakeholders (management and staff).

Literature

University autonomy falls in different categories including autonomy in management, staffing, financing and academic activities. Akinnaso (2016) posited that public universities across the globe have been concerned about university autonomy since the state began to seek ways of protecting the huge investment of public funds in university education. Akinnaso highlighted two historical perspectives to university autonomy – the classical and the contemporary perspectives. The classical perspective sees university autonomy as total independence from state control. This implies that the university is independent in decision-making in all matters regarding its existence including financial, organisational, managerial, staffing, and academic control within the institution. The author noted that the other view, the contemporary view, developed with the rise of the nation-state, when the investment of public funds in university education became necessary in order to develop the manpower needed to build and sustain the state and its institutions. Autonomy for universities is viewed in terms of their freedom to govern themselves, appoint their key officers, determine the conditions of service of their staff, control their student admissions and academic curricula, control their finances and generally regulate themselves as independent legal entities without due interference from the government and its agencies (Aguba, 2016). It is freedom granted each university to manage its internal affairs without undue interference from outside bodies, implying that for a university to discharge its statutory functions effectively, it should be free to decide: which students shall be admitted and to what discipline they shall be subjected; who shall teach, how much they shall be promoted or disciplined and whether they shall have tenure; the substance of the course, the nature of the curricula, and the standards for degrees; the relative

emphasis on instruction, research and public service; how the institution's resources shall be prudently allocated among various departments and faculties (Aguba, 2016).

Labour laws bestow certain rights on employees to collectively bargain for better conditions of service. In the case of university teachers (lecturers), the resolve to bargain for their rights is gaining weightier through the quest for autonomy. Aguba cited ASUU (2002), which viewed university autonomy as the right of the members of the academic community to determine the manner in or the ground rules by which they are governed and their capacity as a unity to control their own affairs and shape their own destiny, free of external interference or dictate. It embodies the right of the university to determine by and train whom to appoint or dismiss what kind of research to undertake and what path of researched knowledge to pursue, where the frontiers of knowledge lie, in which direction they may be advanced, and how to perform those self-imposed tasks.

Presently, one of the major ways in which the government exerts its influence on the universities is in the appointment of the Chairman of Council and other strategic members of the body. It also ratified the appointment of the university's vice chancellor. Nigerian universities emerged and grew with this contemporary view of university autonomy until the early 1970s, when successive military governments began to encroach on the powers of the universities. According to Akinnaso, vestiges of this encroachment are evident in four recent developments:

1. the drastic reduction in the current budgetary allocation to education by federal and state governments;
2. the approval of the appointment of new Vice-Chancellors for federal universities, without the required recourse to their Governing Councils—a decision that was reversed, following its public denunciation;
3. the premature dissolution of the Governing Councils universities in some cases; and
4. the appointment of new executives for three governmental institutions, each with a crucial role in university affairs, namely, the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board; the National Universities Commission; and the Tertiary Education Trust Fund.

University autonomy in Nigeria today is curtailed by the activities of these governmental institutions because they interfere with the quartet of freedoms essential to university success, namely:

- a. Who teaches?
- b. What?
- c. How?
- d. To whom?

Meanwhile, Nigerian universities are essentially free to recruit their lecturers but has very limited powers in funding with attendant limitations that further impose serious restrictions on who and how many staff they could recruit.

The above notwithstanding, public universities still have a duty to account for the federal and state funds given them. The culture of secrecy surrounding university funds maintained by much university management should give way for more transparency, leading to some cases, to suspicions of corruption. University autonomy in Nigeria has continued to generate disagreement between Federal Government of Nigeria and Academic Staff Union of Universities. Hence, Lawal (2019) observed that in a shamble, Nigeria's universities groan as they grapple with the federal and state governments' stranglehold on their administration, noting that successive Nigerian governments still find as elusive the glamour on university autonomy, where they have equally ignore the benefits of university autonomy, despite the awareness that the best universities in the world are very autonomous. Lawal further explained that the call for university autonomy though strident has become a long-drawn-out worry for government-owned universities with every effort aimed at securing autonomy, particularly in the area of academic freedom, resulting in an inevitable quagmire. This has been an age-long problem.

Members of the Nigerian universities were delighted after the signing of the 2009 agreement. Thus, Alabi (2016) observed that 2009 when the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) secured a deal with the Federal Government granting autonomy to universities in Nigeria, there were celebrations in the academia and the general public. According to Alabi, prior to this, there had been incessant strikes and shut downs of universities, arising among others, from the dependence of the universities on the Federal Government or its parastatal in taking simplest of decisions. Alabi further argued that it is disheartening to note that since this agreement, the spate of strikes by the unions in the universities has radically subsided.

Despite the controversy and delay in full implementation of the 2009 agreement, Alabi's noted that the 2009 agreement has gone a long way in restoring sanity in university education which most times in the past has been subjected to politics and unnecessary interferences. Of course, Section 5b of the agreement in reference says in part: "The protection and enhancement of the autonomy of universities and academic freedom require a greater assumption of responsibilities and commitment from inside the universities themselves, by the university administration strictly adhering to proper operation of the Committee System which essential for smooth and effective running of the university from the departmental to Council levels."

A study conducted by Oluronsola (2018) examined the concept of autonomy and its effect on the management of universities in Nigeria with four dimensions of university autonomy in focus. An instrument titled, “Erosion of University Autonomy Questionnaire (EUAQ)” was used to collect data. The study employed a descriptive research of the survey type, where data collected were subjected to frequency counts, percentages and correlation matrix for analysis. The instrument used was subjected to thorough screening by experts in educational management and tests, and measurements. Both face and content validity of the instrument was ascertained by its appropriateness in measuring what it was supposed to measure. Results showed that the levels of autonomy in the four dimensions were high and there was significant relationship between the four dimensions of autonomy (organization, financial, staffing and academic autonomy and management of the universities). Recommendations were made that if the university autonomy is preserved, it will instill confidence in the Vice Chancellors, and management to act; moreover, it will promote a high sense of meaning, competence and commitment among the staff and management. This will enhance the ability to be resourceful, innovative, improve productivity and the use of initiative by both the management and workers. In addition, brain drain, turnover and conflict in the universities will be at its low ebb.

Elsewhere in the world, university autonomy is taken seriously. For instance, in UK, Hilman (2017) posited, “Autonomy has been the essential prerequisite for all UK universities to thrive and the level of autonomy enjoyed by our universities is broadly accepted or even celebrated on both the left and the right of the political spectrum. It is no coincidence that we have both the best universities in Europe according to every global league table and, according to the European Universities Association, the most autonomous. Academic excellence flows from academic freedom.” In Canada also, university autonomy is reported to have been enhanced until recently where study revealed a decline in some universities. Thus, Shen (2019) averred, “Canadian universities have historically enjoyed high levels of institutional autonomy compared to their counterparts in other countries, but recent study of six research-intensive universities in five provinces finds that autonomy appears to be declining in the face of increasing government regulation and accountability measures.

The rate at which ASUU embarks on strike is observed by Albar and Onye, (2013) as having damning consequence on university education. In addressing the the decay that has already been noticed in the university system, both parties have signed many agreements which ASUU’s unending agitation portrays lack of implementation. Thus, Emmanuel and Muhamed (2013) reported, that recent re-negotiation is to enforce implementation amidst emerging demands to reverse the decay in the university system and reposition it for greater responsibilities in national development, among others. One of the cardinal issues in ASUU’s struggle has been on meagre salary and sometimes delays in payment of the meagre salary (Enaohwo,

2005). Issue of meagre salary is not a surprise considering the fact that university education is poorly funded in Nigeria. For instance, Bassey, Akuegwu & Udida (2007) observed that funding remains a major issue between the academic staff union of universities (ASUU) and the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN). On its part, government sometimes resist the decision of striking lecturers by issuing the “No Work, No Pay” clause (Akinbode, 2019).

The Problem

Public universities are frequently being closed due to incessant industrial actions thereby forcing students out of classroom for several months. Consequently, teaching and learning in the university have been interrupted. Most times, academic activities are rushed. Besides, frequent industrial actions have brought untold hardship on employees of the university system. In a bid to addressing the situation also, members of the university community, especially union members have hard to be in battle of words with relevant governments and university management.

Research question

This study sought answer to one research question. What is the extent of autonomy of Nigeria’s public universities as perceived by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU)?

Statement of Hypothesis

There is no significant relationship between university autonomy and agitation by ASUU in Nigeria’s public universities.

Method

The ex post facto research design was adopted for this study carried out in Nigeria. An accessible population of 100 professionals in university education system was used. The population consisted of 50 branch chairmen of ASUU who were accessible in public universities in Nigeria and 50 non-ASUU members including government functionaries in the education sector. The accessible population was purposively used as sample size. The structured questionnaire tagged, “University Autonomy Questionnaire (UAQ).” The questionnaire has two sections and responded to by same respondents. The rating of the questionnaire indicates the extent of autonomy of Nigeria’s public universities as perceived by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU). Hence: Very Great Extent (VGE), Great Extent (GE), Low Extent (LE) and Very Low Extent (VLE) with 4, 3, 2 and a point respectively. However, these values fall into range as described in the footnote in Table 1. The research question was answered using item-by-item analysis and the null hypothesis was tested using Simple Regression Analysis (SRA).

Results

What is the extent of autonomy of Nigeria's public universities as perceived by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU)? The research question was answered using item-by-item analysis based on data generated from UAQ. Summary result is presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Item-by-item analysis of the extent of autonomy of Nigeria's public universities as perceived by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU)

S/N	Item	
Mean	Remark	
1.	Extent of non-implementation of Academic Earned Allowance (EEA)	
2.86	GE	
2.	Extent of resistance to Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS)	3.26
	GE	
3.	University autonomy continues to form significant demand by the union over the years	3.14
	GE	
4.	Governments (Federal and State) continue to play politics in university autonomy	2.88
	GE	
5.	Nigeria's public universities have embarked on industrial actions almost every academic year	2.42
	LE	
6.	Frequent industrial action has adversely affected students	2.28
	LE	
7.	Frequent industrial action has adversely affected lecturers	2.44
	LE	
8.	Frequent industrial action has adversely affected the nation with slow pace of development in the education sub-sector	2.88
	GE	
9.	My university enjoys financial autonomy	2.36
	LE	
10.	My university enjoys organisational autonomy	2.56
	GE	
11.	My university enjoys managerial autonomy	2.52
	GE	

Academic Scholarship

12. My university enjoys autonomy in staffing LE	2.24
13. My university enjoys academic freedom LE	2.36
Grand 2.63	Mean

VGE (≥ 3.5); GE (≥ 2.5 to 3.4); LE (≥ 1.5 to 2.4); VLE (1.4 and below)

The result presented in Table 1 indicates the extent of autonomy of Nigeria's public universities as perceived by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU). The grand mean of 2.63 indicates that members of ASUU enjoy university autonomy. In the first item that sought to measure the extent of non-implementation of Academic Earned Allowance (EEA), the mean ratings shows that earned allowance has not been implemented is to a great extent; ASUU's resistance to the Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS) is to a great extent. Also, responses on the fact that university autonomy continues to form significant demand by the union over the years is to a great extent. Response to the statement that governments (Federal and State) continue to play politics in university autonomy was equally to a great extent. The response on the effect of strike on the education sub-sector and the nation indicated a great extent. Again, responses on the extent at which universities enjoy organisational and managerial autonomy were to a great extent, financial and staffing were to a low extent. Effect of strike on students and lecturers, according to the responses were to a low extent. The responses on the statement that public universities embarked on industrial action every academic year was to a low extent.

Test of Null Hypothesis

There is no significant relationship between university autonomy and agitation by ASUU in Nigeria's public universities.

Table 2

Result of Linear regression analysis of no significant relationship between university autonomy and industrial actions by ASUU in Nigeria's public universities

Variable	SE	R	R ²		
University Autonomy	3.31453	.812	.659		
Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Significant Level
Regression (X)	2079.360	1	2079.360	189.272	.05
Residual (Y)	1076.640	98	10.986		
Total	3156	99			

N = 100; Critical F = 3.94

Result presented in Table 2 indicates that the calculated F-value of 189.272 is by far greater than the critical F-value of 3.94. Based on this revelation, the null hypothesis, “There is no significant relationship between university autonomy and agitation by ASUU in Nigeria’s public universities” is rejected and the alternate hypothesis stated. This implies that there is significant relationship between university autonomy and agitation by ASUU in Nigeria’s public universities.

Discussion

The continued interference in the affairs of universities in Nigeria is an indication that public universities are yet to enjoy autonomy in decision-making, staffing, finance, management, and academic freedom among others. This has not gone well with university lecturers, who have been driving home their demands under their vocal union – ASUU. The finding of this study reveals a strong relationship between university autonomy and industrial actions embarked by ASUU. The finding has further strengthens earlier findings and assertion of previous researchers. For instance, a study conducted by Oluronsola (2018) which examined the concept of autonomy and its effect on the management of universities in Nigeria with four dimensions of university autonomy revealed that the levels of autonomy in the four dimensions were high and there was significant relationship between the four dimensions of autonomy (organization, financial, staffing and academic autonomy and management of the universities). Recommendations were made that if the university autonomy is preserved, it will instill confidence in the Vice Chancellors, and management to act; moreover, it will promote a high sense of meaning, competence and commitment among the staff and management. This will enhance the ability to be resourceful, innovative, improve productivity and the use of initiative by both the management and workers. In addition, brain drain, turnover and conflict in the universities will be at its low ebb. Despite findings by researchers on the existence of relationship between university autonomy and management of universities, Nigerian government, it is established is playing politics with it. Unfortunately, the flow of activities in the Nigerian ivory tower and citadel of learning has been in constant interruption due to industrial action. This is not a healthy developing for a country that has grappled with development for many decades without attaining the desired development.

Conclusion

Based on the finding of this study, it is concluded that as long as government undue interference in the university system is unresolved, the university system in Nigeria will continue to face crisis and slow pace of development as well as

efficient delivery of its mandate with more agitation by ASUU resulting to industrial action.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusion drawn it is recommended that government of Nigeria should allow public universities to be run under full university autonomy to give room for accelerated development.

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