

IMPROVED-FUNDING OF UNIVERSITY EDUCATION IN NIGERIA: A PANACEA TO ENDING INDUSTRIAL ACTION BY ACADEMIC STAFF UNION OF UNIVERSITIES (ASUU)

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Abstract

Frequent industrial action by ASUU in Nigeria is becoming a source of worry not only to those in the academic environment but to people in all works of life. It is therefore not the time for shifting blame on either ASUU, which is embarking on strike action, or government which is to meet the demands presented by the striking union, but to critically assess the University system in Nigeria in order to determine its viability in training youths to meet the challenges of global competitiveness. Further, graduates of Nigerian Universities already constituting a challenge to the economy due to skill mismatch are the product of the university. These and many other issues are assessed in this paper to justify the demands of ASUU which hinges on improved funding.

The university system in Nigeria has been passing through crisis which has threatened the ideals of the institution. The crisis is historical and constitutes parts of a wider governance crisis in Nigeria mismanagement of public utilities and funds, poor policy execution, environment, authoritarian rule and the under-funding of social services, especially since the neo-liberal reforms in Nigeria. The wider crisis has affected Nigerian universities in specific ways related to three broad areas namely; inadequate university funding, lack of respect for university autonomy or academic freedom and poor conditions of service. These have tended to jeopardize the basic objectives of excellence in teaching, research and community development associated with the university. The efforts made by Nigerian intellectuals to restore the system often pitched the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) against the government and its agencies, both at the federal and state levels. The conflicts have had a devastating impact on the university system in Nigeria (Frank, 1984).

A combination of decline in funding and facilities largely due to the neo-liberal state policies, authoritarian administration, poor conditions of service, non-rational admission of students and the depletion in academic staff strength through brain drain led to a fundamental decay in the university system at the social, infrastructural, institutional and intellectual levels (Ade-Ajayi, 2001).

The major objective of this paper is to trace the remote and contemporary issues, factors or causes of the incessant industrial conflicts in Nigerian universities as a framework for understanding the prevailing tensions in the university system, implications for the future of Nigerian universities and a way forward to ending industrial action by Academic Staff Union of Universities. The key argument is that the deep-seated problems that underlie the ASUU-Government conflicts have remained fundamentally unresolved, irrespective of about three decades of struggles by ASUU, because the Government has preferred cosmetic solutions and authoritarian approaches in dealing with the problem, with implications for conflicting ideas of a university: that of the Government and that of the Academics.

Remote Causes of the Government – ASUU Conflicts

Society cannot do without history, not to go back to it, but to refer to it to explain the present phenomenon and find pointers for future development. The 1992 Agreement between ASUU and the Federal Government of Nigeria was a landmark document. The signing of the Agreement between the federal government of Nigeria and the Academic Staff of Nigerian Universities (ASNU) took place on Thursday, 3rd September 1992. The agreement was described by the union as a “Jewel of inestimable value” to the university community and to the nation at large. According to the union:

The Agreement halted the brain from the universities, at least temporarily. It raised the quality of teaching and research in the universities, at least for a while, it kept the mobile police and soldiers out of the campus because student demonstrations and protests against poor condition of hostels etc. reduced drastically in number and frequency between 1992 and 1995 (ASUU, 1996).

Given its envisaged significance for the recovery of the university system that was neck deep in crisis by the 1990's, the 1992 agreement was to become a reference point in the ASSU struggles of the 1990's and 2000's.

The agreement entitled “agreement between the federal government of Nigeria and the academic staff of Nigerian universities” was negotiated in two phases. The first phase began on 31 March 1992 and terminated in a deadlock in July 1992. The second phase began on August 20, 1992 and ended in an agreement on the 3rd September 1992. The agreement was signed on behalf of the federal government of Nigeria by Owella Gilbert, P. O Chikelu, the Honorable Minister of establishment and management services, and on behalf of the academic staff of Nigerian universities by the president of ASNU, Dr. Attahiru M. Jega. President Ibrahim B. Babangida also endorsed it on behalf of the federal government; while ASNU's National Executive Council {NEC} did the same on behalf of the union. Thus the agreement became valid contract within the meaning of the Trade Dispute Act of 1976 and cap 437 of the laws of the Federation of Nigeria 1990. The signing of the document by the two parties marked the end of the protracted negotiation between the Government and the Academic Staff of Nigeria University (ASNU) which was aimed at revitalizing the university system.

Shortly after the signing of the document, it became evident that the federal government was bent on violating several aspects of the Agreement. According to ASUU (1996):

The first attack was launched on chapter six of the Agreement. The University Academic (staff) Salary Scale (UASS) was first surreptitiously, then openly and more brazenly, merged with the Elongated University Salary Scale (EUSS). Second, the Agreement was declared by the Secretary of Education as a mere “gentleman's agreement” – a contract of imperfect obligations” which would be implemented “only so long as overriding public interest or other compelling circumstances do not make it impracticable or inexpedient to do so”. The third assault on the agreement was 1994. The areas attacked this time were chapters four (dealing with funding of universities) and five (concerning university autonomy and academic freedom).

Implication for the Future of Nigerian Universities Funding

Central to decay and desecration is funding and it does not need a gift of prophetic wisdom to surmise that unless this is addressed positively and aggressively, there can be no turnaround in the status of Nigerian Universities (Akinkugbe, 2001).

The history of university education in Nigeria can be traced back to the establishment of the University College Ibadan in 1948 which marked the beginning of university education in the country. In his historical outline of university funding in Nigeria, Ukeje (2002) noted that Ibadan was funded initially from two main sources. First, the Nigerian government provided 70% of the funds while the United Kingdom provided 30% of the total recurrent cost. In addition to the above named sources, Private Sector Organizations also made financial contributions to the university. The Nigerian Cocoa Marketing Board, for instance, made an endowment to the faculty of Agriculture at Ibadan which was used for faculty building (Omeregbe, 1995), while the United African Company (UAC) Ltd, made donations that were utilized for the building of Trenchard Hall in the University of Ibadan. With the establishment of University of Nigeria, Nsukka in October 1960 as the first regional university, the institution received its funding from the then government of Eastern Nigerian. The Eastern Nigerian Marketing Board also complimented the government's funding. Nsukka was followed by the establishment of three more universities in Lagos, Zaria and Ile-Ife – the first as federal university and the rest regional – following the Ashby commission's report. In 1972, the mid-west Region established the University of Benin and this brought the universities in Nigeria to six- two federal universities and four regional universities. The six were well-funded. In the case of the Ahmadu Bello University Zaria for instance, Ukeje (2002) observed that:

From the beginning in 1962 to 1975, there was no substantive difference each year between the amount requested by the university and the amount received from the Regional Government. In fact, it was reported that there were years in which the amount received was slightly more than the amount requested.

With the adequate funding, the universities were able to maintain internationally reputable standards as graduates from Nigerian Universities were easily admitted into post-graduates studies in reputed universities abroad. Then, in 1975, the Federal Government unwisely established seven more universities at Jos, Sokoto, Kano, Maiduguri, Ilorin, Calabar and Port-Harcourt and went further to take over the four existing regional universities. Hence, while the establishment prior to 1975 was based on rational considerations related to need, as indicated by the various commissions that recommended them, the post 1975 universities were established more or less by military fiat. The year 1975 thus marked the beginning of the problem of university funding in Nigeria. The case of Ahmadu Bello University (ABU), Zaria is a case in point. After the 1975/1976 session, for the first time ABU recorded a shortfall of 20 percent in the amount requested, and since then the funding of the Nigerian universities has been on the decline (Ukeje, 2002). This was followed up in 1978, with the abolition of tuition fees for undergraduate's studies in Nigerian Universities of the federal government. The above situation was made worst by the third phase of university expansion in Nigeria, which resulted in the establishment of seven more federal universities by the second republic politicians between 1979 and 1983. This expansion was guided by political considerations: funding implications were merely given due consideration.

By 1986, the funding of Nigerian universities had declined between 400-500 percent. Universities funding dropped from 416 million in 1985/1986 session to 316 million in the 1986/1987

session, leading to the payment of salaries in arrears (ASUU, 1987). The effects were stifling for university administrators. At the University of Ibadan, for instance the administration invited the staff unions on December 10, 1987 to inform them of an impending retrenchment of staff due purely to lack of funds to appropriately run the university.

The government grants for the current academics were put at about 31 million and internally generated revenue of 4 million. The 35 million revenue was estimated to be 11 million short of what the university required to maintain a reasonable standard of operation (ASUU, 1987).

The above experience was not limited to Ibadan, but was universal to the Nigerian universities. Hence, by 1991, the gap between the request of the National University Commission (NUC) that dispenses funds to federal universities and the federal government budgetary allocation to the universities was as high as 87.2 percent (FOS, 1995). This was associated with collapse in teaching and research facilities and activities and led to frustration of teachers and students. The high increases in student intake, which rose by almost 100 percent between 1987 and 1991 without commensurate expansion in facility also exacerbated the problem (Onyeonoru, 2000).

University funding was also adversely affected by lack of accountability, misappropriation of public funds, wasteful spending, corruption and the misplacement of priorities by the ruling (military) classes and university administrators in Nigeria (Gboyega, 1996 and Onyeonoru, 2001, 2002). The funding aspect of the agreement covered the recurrent, capital, stabilization and education tax funds. Considering the recurrent vote, for instance, while the calculation of required monies for recurrent fund was made in 1992 on the basis of a 60 percent rise in basic salary for academic staff, the government went ahead to extend the 60 percent pay rise to other categories of staff in the university without providing additional funds to back the pay rise. An additional 15 percent pay rise was granted academics in line with the Longe report and the white paper on it, again without the provisional of additional funds to back this increase. This led to a severe shortfall of funds meant for recurrent spending. In the case of the Education Tax Fund, ASUU alleged that Government's was not sincere in the management of the funds; ASUU discovered that several companies had been paying the tax as far back as 1992. This included the Nigerian Breweries Plc that paid 18.357 million in 1992, and 35.46 million in 1993. The implication of poor funding exacerbated by the above scenario for the occupational health of staff and students is noteworthy:

Many of the laboratories are health hazards to students. Fume chambers are non-functional, exposing the students to toxic fumes. Students and staff are exposed to ultra violet rays when working with inoculation chambers, for example. Lecturers and students are exposed to agents that cause cancer and trigger mutation in genes. Students come to study and earn degrees but leave permanently damaged (ASUU, 1994.)

Conditions of Service

The problem of conditions of service in the Nigerian university system can be traced back to the immediate post-independence era. With regard to basic salaries in the Nigerian public service and the university system, Adekanye (1993) observed that:

At independence in October 1960, the salary of the Prime Minister of the Federation of Nigeria was only eight hundred pounds (£800) more than that of the Principal (that is the future vice chancellor) of the university college, Ibadan, while the latter certainly earned more than the Nigerian

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Army Commander and General. The Prime Minister's personnel emolument was put at £4,500, while the principal of the university college Ibadan was paid £3,750, and the Army major General and Commissioner £3,580.

From the above it is easy to deduce that employees in the university system occupied a high status in the hierarchy relative to their counterparts elsewhere in state bureaucracy. A combination of the 15 January 1996 coup that marked military occupation of Nigerian polity and the bubble of new oil wealth started "distorting both the old parties and relative ties in the system of rewards as between the various occupational groups" producing status incongruence. By 1966, irrespective of salary reviews that tended to favour the military, the university professor was paid £3000. This was higher than the £2, 700 paid a federal prime minister or a federal permanent secretary (group 4). A federal cabinet minister took between £2,700 and £3000. A federal top civil servant of the rank of permanent secretary, group 4, received between £2, 500 and £2, 940. An assistant lecturer (often first class or second class upper division) was offered £950, while his counterparts who went into the federal civil service received £720 (Adekanye, 1993).

The 1970s were marked with events that have bearings with the 1996 ASUU strike in the area of condition of service. These include the trade union dispute between the Governing Councils of Nigerian Universities and the local branches of the National Association of University Teachers in 1973 which led to a strike by the university teachers. The dispute was about the review of conditions of service. In spite of the efforts of the university councils to secure improved pay and condition centrally, the Federal Ministry of Education prevaricated. Even after the councils and individual local teachers' associations had agreed on specific increases in 1973, the ministry refused to accept the outcome of this collective bargaining. The violation of the power of the council to negotiate and determine the conditions of employment at the local level became the point of contention in the strike of April 1973.

The government's handling of the 1973 conflict was coercive. The then Head of State did not differentiate between the functions of the visitor and those of the Head of Government and council. The university teachers were ordered back to work during the conflict and the widely reported humiliation engendered by this had a profound effect on the morale of the university teachers. University professors had to queue up to sign registers, and write their VCs, promising to be of good behaviour at the pain of being sacked or rejected. The sense of security and of total commitment to academic pursuit was irretrievably shattered. That was the beginning of the loss experienced by the university teachers in their relative position in the pay structure of Nigeria: That loss was to be formalized in 1974 when the university teachers conditions of service was brought under the civil service structure following the recommendations of the 1974 Udoji commission Report on the Review of the Public Service (Adesina, 1988).

As part of the review, the government offered public sector pensions to the university employees in place of the Autonomous University Superannuation Scheme responsible to the university staff themselves. Such a major steering away of the autonomy of universities was not even debated in the universities, much less being resisted. Ade-Ajayi (2001) pointed out the implications thus:

In accepting government pension without so much as even a debate, university staff ceased to be employees of different autonomous university councils, and became in effect, second-class civil

servants. The universities ceased to be autonomous self-regulating corporations and became government parastatals monitored by government ministries, with conditions of service that henceforth, had to be negotiated with the government.

The conditions of service were to improve first under the Abubakar regime and then with the Obasanjo administration following the new national minimum wage of 6,500,000m, such that a Nigerian University Professor now earns a minimum of ₦100,000. Part of the reason why ASUU insists on a separate salary scale is the historical experience with falling public sector wages that engender corruption in Nigerian institutions (Onyeonoru, 2002).

University Autonomy and Academic Freedom

University autonomy and academic freedom are highly significant substructures that are integral to the idea of a university. Professor Ayo Banjo, formerly a vice chancellor of a first generation university in Nigeria noted this significance as follows:

If we accept that one of the most important functions of any university is to seek the truth, any constraint on that search reduces the value of the university. If also we agree that a university has a duty constantly to reduce the area of the unknown socially and physically, a university is excellent to the degree that it is not only free but also empowered to do so (Akimkugbe, 2001).

The Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) has always insisted on the sanctity of university autonomy and academic freedom and that state responsibility in the area of university funding must not translate into undue government interference and meddling in the university affairs: Education has to do with the unfettered acquisition of knowledge and its use for the benefits of society. Universities as schools of education should be committed to this twin freedom in relation to the search for and use of knowledge. To be faithful to this commitment, a university worth its salt is duty-bound to recognize the connections between knowledge and the innumerable dimensions of the concrete realities of our time, by allowing a free interplay of different opinions in the pursuit of learning (ASUU, 1979).

The forgoing views are widely held. According to the Dearing Report which reviewed Higher Education in Britain:

Institutional autonomy should be respected. While we take it as axiomatic that government will set the policy framework for higher education nationally, we equally take it as axiomatic that the strategic direction and management of individual institutions should be vested wholly in the governance and management of autonomous universities (Akinkugbe, 2001).

The essence of insisting on university autonomy is that in certain circumstances, governments tend to place unnecessary limits on the scope and / or the nature of knowledge acquisition in the universities to the detriment of scholarship – as the case of Canada historically shows (Abboth, 1984, 1986, 1991 and Kuhlberg 2002). This tendency is higher under military regimes, as the Nigerian case discussed below indicates.

The nature of events that created the university crisis in Nigeria was initiated in the 1960s with the unsuccessful attempt of the first republic politicians to change the pre-independence sanctuary image of the university system by bringing universities under undue government control.

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This bid was, however, successfully carried out by the military regimes in Nigeria. Three aspects of the violation of university autonomy are particularly noteworthy: the violation of procedures for the appointment of university vice chancellors; the erosion of the powers of the university councils as statutory employers, and the erosion of the powers of the senate as the supreme organ in academic matters.

The altering of the enabling laws of the universities in Nigeria, especially in the area of appointment of vice chancellors which has implication for other aspects of university autonomy began in the Yakubu Gowon era. In 1975 when federal government took over the regional universities, it promulgated Decree No. 23, which vested the power to appoint vice chancellors on the Head of the federal military government, as against the joint committee of council and senate which was exercising the responsibility on behalf of the council in the universities.

In the case the then University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University), for instance, the law providing for the establishment of the provisional council of the university was passed by the legislature of the Western Region on June 8, 1961, and June 26, 1961, the provisional council of the university was formally inaugurated. On June 11, 1970, the University of Ife Edict, 1970 was promulgated by the government of the western state to replace the provisional council law of June 8, 1961. Thus far, the appointment of the vice chancellor remained the primary responsibility of the university community, as provided for in the enabling laws.

The scenario, however, began to change in the post – 1970 era. The federal government amended the 1970 University of Ife Edict by the University of Ife (Amendment) Edict No. 11 of 1975 and the University of Ife (Translational Provisions) Decree No. 23 of 1975. The New Decree, which effected a takeover of the University of Ife by the Federal Government, also vested in the Head of the Federal Military Government the power to appoint the vice chancellor. In the same vein, schedule 1 section 2 (2) of the University of Port Harcourt Decree of 1979 provided among others that “the vice chancellor shall be appointed or removed from his office by the supreme military council after”.... Similar provisions existed in other Nigerian Universities until the 1992 ASUU strike when the question of University autonomy became one of the major issues of contestation.

After the Governing councils of universities lost their power to appoint and remove Vice Chancellors, the role of the visitor became substantially altered from a largely ceremonial one to one of intervening in the day to day running of the universities. As a result of this change, vice chancellors over-time, became increasingly accountable to the Head of Government (Federal or State) instead of the university community as expressed in such institutions as the congregation, senate and council. The arbitrary conduct of the FMG with regard to staff matters was replicated in several Nigerian Universities as Vice Chancellors increasingly took laws into their hands, provided they had the support of the Federal Military Government. At the University of Abuja, the vice chancellor, Professor Isa Baba Mohammed turned himself into a demi-god (ASUU, 1995), with his arbitrary employment, suspension and dismissal of staff (and students), disobedience of court orders, vandalization of houses and property of staff adjudged disloyal to the vice chancellor, and a forced oath of staff allegiance. Similar events were recorded at the Ogun State University (now Olabisi Onabanjo University), where ASUU complained of the dismissal of 200 academic staff without due process mainly those perceived to be critics of the Vice Chancellor, Professor O. Y. Oyeneye (ASUU Ibadan Zone).

In the specific area of academic freedom, the Mohammed Commission vaguely acknowledged the existence of differing philosophies and views within University set-up, but went ahead to imply that such view has to be supportive of the social order- in effect limiting the search for knowledge and its expression to aspects that are in coherent with the frontiers of government in power at a given time irrespective of public interest. This informed the recommendation of the commission for a redefining and delimitation of the frontiers of academic freedom, in a bid to check the activities of “extremist organizations of students and staff” on university campuses, as well as the working out of a code of conduct for approval by Federal Military Government. By accepting the recommendation, Federal Military Government displayed culpable over-zealousness in its attempt to stifle the universities initiative in determining their own procedures of self-management and self-monitoring:

It is clearly improper for government to appoint vice chancellors and impose them on the academic communities in clear violation of one of the most cherished principles of university administration and its code of conduct. It is equally improper for government to appoint its own nominees to councils of the universities established under laws, whether decrees or edicts, enacted by it, and then proceed to usurp the powers of these councils arrogating to itself the right to discharge the legal responsibilities of the university councils in relation to the appointment, disciplining and removal of their staff. With this kind of bare-faced sabotage of its own laws, government has maneuvered the university communities into a paralytic state of insecurity and powerless in which any code of conduct, however high-handed is bound to become meaningless in execution (ASUU, 1979). The Joint Admission Matriculation Board (JAMB) also eroded the power of the universities to determine the level of student intake and the criteria for admission. The use of population size rather than need to determine the funding of universities induced the institutions to increase student intake beyond the capacity of available infrastructure that could support quality teaching and learning (Ade – Ajayi, 2001).

With the incremental expansion of the scope of operation of the NUC, the powers of the university senate to regulate the content and structure of curricula in the universities have been usurped by the commission. In several areas, universities have lost their power to develop new programs, realign their courses and the content of their curricula to match labor market requirements. Changes in undergraduate programs, introduction of new degree programs and even changes in the names of university departments must attract the approval of the NUC. Where the NUC’s position conflicts with that of the senate and experts in the field within the universities, the opinion of the NUC will prevail – no matter how wrong or unappreciative of rapid development in the field (Adesina, 2000).

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is clear that Education in Nigeria is in a state of crisis and all the stakeholders are aware of this. Various reasons such as poor conditions of service, heavy workloads and inadequate facilities and working environment all led to a state of frustration for university staff. Therefore, it is of paramount importance that government puts into cognizance and act on problems or factors militating against quality education in the Nigerian Universities as this would go a long way to ending the industrial action in the universities.

Recommendations for Ending Industrial Action by Academic Staff Union of Universities

1. **Funding:** The government should review its funding of the universities as it was in 1962 – 1975 The Nigerian government provided 70 percent of the funds while the United Kingdom provided 30 percents of total recurrent cost. In addition to it, private sector organizations also made financial contributions to the university and so they should be encouraged to do more. With adequate funding, the universities were able to maintain internationally reputable standards as graduates from Nigerian Universities were easily admitted into post-graduate studies in reputed universities abroad.
2. **Conditions of Service:** The university teachers should be granted well-meaningful conditions of service in terms of functions with allowances and also housing accommodation with reasonable years of service at 75 years for professors and 68 for non-professors as retiring age.
3. **University Autonomy and Freedom:** Institutional autonomy should be respected. While take it as axiomatic that government will set the policy framework for higher education nationally, equally take it as axiomatic that the strategic direction and management of individual institutions should be vested wholly in the governance and management of autonomous universities. This will help to curb the problem of government placing unnecessary limits on the scope and nature of knowledge acquisition in the universities as well as imposing vice – chancellors on the university communities.
4. **National Universities Commission (NUC)** should be granted their full responsibilities which they were originally meant to undertake such as advisory committee and consultancy to the Government on university policies and should not be placed under any ministry.
5. **Finance Monitory Committee:** This committee should be set, inaugurated and charged with the responsibility of checking the mismanagement of funds in the university as well as misappropriation of funds.
6. **Increase In Allowances:** In line with the varying functions or activities lecturers operate such as supervision of projects for undergraduates and thesis for postgraduates, seminar and research allowances should be reviewed to lucrative standard to motivate

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