

ADMINISTRATIVE AUTONOMY IN NIGERIAN TERTIARY EDUCATION

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Abstract

This paper examined administrative autonomy in Nigeria tertiary education. Tertiary education is an autonomous public institution with general function of providing liberal tertiary education, and encouraging the advancement of learning throughout Nigeria. Administrative autonomy is the management of men and women with most highly developed and developing minds and intellects. The ultimate aim of tertiary education activities is application of affairs of men. The active agents are the academic staff and students. Tertiary education in Nigeria is in state of crisis. The survival of our tertiary institutions in Nigeria is dependent largely on the quality of administrative services available. Administrative therefore influence the result to achieved, the direction to be pursued and the priorities to be recognized within the organization. The paper stresses the concept of administrative autonomy, autonomy, types of administrative autonomy. The paper stated the essential ingredient of institutional autonomy, historical overview of autonomy in Nigeria universities, what is tertiary education, goals of tertiary education, autonomy in tertiary education in Nigeria, problems of administrative autonomy and strategies to ensure ideal tertiary education autonomy, conclusion and recommendations.

Keywords: Administrative, autonomy, tertiary, education

Introduction

Autonomy is a principle upon which the tertiary education system normally operates and through which operational stability and actualisation of goals of the tertiary educational institutions are ensured. Tertiary education exists to generate and disseminate knowledge, skills, and information, which are critical to the development of the individual and the society at large. Nigerian tertiary education encompasses universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education. It plays a crucial role in the country's development. When autonomy is enthroned in the right perspective, it facilitates academic freedom and accountability. The survival of the tertiary education system is directly proportional to, or to a large extent dependent on the institutionalisation of autonomy. In order to accomplish these noble goals, autonomy must of necessity be enshrined in the system. This has been the position in place since the inception of

the tertiary education system in the middle ages (Ajayi 2004). Administrative autonomy, when it is fully attained in tertiary education, will give the institutions the freedom to independently determine the number of students to be admitted, the cut off mark for admission, the appointment and termination of university staff and heads, formulation of academic policies and general control of standards and all other activities within the institution. According to Ojedele and Ilusanya (2006) administrative autonomy is intended to protect university education from unnecessary interference from government agents in the day-to-day running of the institutions. The question of autonomy to Nigerian tertiary institution is a matter of necessity if quality output is required or expected, and for guaranteed uninterrupted academic calendar. The incessant face- off between the ASUU and the government should be put to rest through providing enabling teaching- learning environment is to be assured. The struggle for tertiary institution autonomy has been a long- standing matter in the tertiary educational institution system in Nigeria. For a tertiary institution to be truly autonomous, the state control must be minimal.

Concept of Autonomy

According to Akinnaso (2021) autonomy is derived from two Greek words (Auto) means self and (Nomo) meaning 'Law'. When put together, the two words means to give oneself own law or being a ruler of oneself. Autonomy entails the ability of a person, group of person or an organization to make informed decisions without unnecessary interference from external authority. It entails a degree of freedom, self-independence or the capacity of an organization to act independently. Autonomy is opposed to centralisation of the control of universities. It confers on each Universities the right to select or admit its own students decide what to teach and determine areas of research. Indeed, autonomy in tertiary education implies that each institution must be governed according to the law that establishes it. Every institution has its law, edicts or even decree which spells out the functions of the various organs, such as council senate, congregation, faculty, department and institute etc. Autonomy means the ability to take control of one's own learning independently or in collaboration with others.

Concept of Administrative Autonomy

Administrative autonomy refers to public organization ability to determine their own preferences and to translate those preferences into authoritative actions. The concept describes a relationship between an organization and a set of actors outside the organization most importantly elected officials and executive politicians (Maggetti and Verhoest 2014). An institution without administrative autonomy has consequently been regarded as not being an institution in the real sense. An institution that has no administrative autonomy and academic freedom is therefore regarded as a contradiction in term's. Bach (2020) opined that administrative autonomy can be defined as public organization's ability to determine their own preference and to translate those preferences into authoritative activities. Administrative autonomy is a subnational administrative division or internal territory of a sovereign state that has a degree of autonomy-self-governance under the national government. Administrative autonomy will give the institutions the freedom to independently determine the cut off mark for admission, the number of students to be admitted, formulation of academic policies, the appointment and termination of university staff and heads and general control of standards and

all other activities within the institution when it is fully attained in the universities. Ajayi (2006) posited that Administrative autonomy is intended to protect university education from unnecessary interference from government agents in the day-to-day running of the institutions

Types of Administrative Autonomy

Nigerian tertiary education autonomy can be viewed from two dimensions, namely (institutional and individual autonomy):

Institutional Autonomy: Institutional autonomy has been regarded as the corner stone of the tertiary education system. Anya (2002) defined institutional autonomy as the ability conferred on institutional arrangements of the state on each university to manage its affairs and consists usually of the corporate freedom of institutions to exercise its prerogatives in the areas of appointment of its staff and of its governing authorities pursuit of institutional goals as defined for itself under the rules of the law of the land; insulation of the institution in the management of its routine affairs from political, administrative, religious and other authorities. An institution without autonomy has consequently been regarded as not being an institution in the real sense. An institution that has no autonomy and academic freedom is therefore, regarded as a contradiction in terms. Fourie (2004) stated that institutional autonomy as referring to the relative freedom of the institution to conduct its affairs free from outside interference, whether from the state, donors, market or other stakeholders. She further stated that institutional autonomy has two dimensions:

Substantive Autonomy: This has to do with the power of the institution to determine its own goals and programmes.

Procedural Autonomy: It refers to the power of the tertiary institution to determine the means by which its goals and programmes will be pursued.

Essential ingredients of institutional autonomy

According to Berdahl (2000) the essential ingredients of institutional autonomy to include:

Freedom to select staff and students, determine the conditions under which they remain in the university, freedom to determine curriculum contents and degree standards and freedom to allocate funds across different categories of expenditures

Individual Autonomy: The confederation of Indian universities (2004) referred to individual autonomy as academic freedom has to do with members of the academic community. That is, scholars, teachers and students pursuing their scholarly activities in respects of ethical rules, international standards and without external pressure. Furthermore, they maintain that academic freedom engages the obligation of each individual member of the academic profession to excellence, innovation and advancing the frontiers of knowledge through research and diffusion of its results through teaching and publication. According to Fourie (2004), individual autonomy pertains to the who, the how and the whom of teaching and research by the individual academic. Berdahl (2000) opined that individual autonomy is the freedom of the individual scholar in his/her teaching and research to pursue truth whenever it seems to lead without fear of punishment or termination of employment or having offended some political, religious or social orthodoxy.

Historical overview of administrative autonomy in Nigerian tertiary education

Contention and related disputes on administrative university autonomy in Nigeria can be traced back to the 1970s when the sanctuary model of universities in Nigeria, which began with the establishment of the university college (later University of Ibadan), came under pressure by military dictatorship. A trade dispute between the Governing Council of Nigerian universities and the local branches of the National Association of University Teachers in 1973, on the review of conditions of service led to a strike by the university teachers. The demand for the review was necessitated by the high inflationary trend aftermath of the deplorable conditions left behind by the Nigerian civil war (1967-1970). The Federal Ministry of Education, however, stood against the efforts of the university Councils to secure improved pay and conditions, even after the Councils and the local teacher's associations had agreed on specific increase. This marked the beginning of the violation of the power of the council to negotiate and determine the condition of employment at the local level. It also became the point of contention in the university teacher's strike of April 1973, especially as it became obvious that the reluctance of the Ministry was as a result of contention over the status of the top ministry officials vis-à-vis university professors. The government's handling of the 1973 conflict was coercive. The then military ruler (Yakubu Gowon) in a national broadcast simply ordered the university teachers back to work or face dismissal and ejection from their official residence. The ministry officials were to have an upper hand when the erosion of university autonomy became formalised in 1974 when the university teacher's 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, 2019). The event signalled the beginning of the bid by the ruling class to capture the university terrain. The university teachers' union in Nigeria now named the academic staff union of Nigerian universities (ASUNU) has always insisted on the sanctity of university autonomy and academic freedom.

- i. Education has to do with the unfettered acquisition of knowledge and its use for the benefit of the society
- ii. Universities as schools of education should be committed to this twin freedom in relation to the search for and use of knowledge
- iii. To be faithful to this commitment, a university worth its duty, is bound to recognise the connections between knowledge and the numerable dimensions of the concrete realities of our time, by allowing a free interplay of different opinions in the pursuit of learning (ASUNU, 1979). Three aspects of the violation of university autonomy are particularly noteworthy of the:
- iv. Violation of procedures for the appointment of university vice-chancellors
- v. Erosion of the powers of Council as statutory employers and
- vi. 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 appointing Vice-Chancellors, has implication for other aspects of university autonomy, began in the Yakubu Gowon era. In 1975 when the Federal government began to take over regional universities, it promulgated Decree No. 23, which among others vested the power to appoint and remove vice-chancellors or the head of the Federal Military Government, in contrast with

the joint committee of council and senate that was exercising the responsibility on behalf of the council in the universities. Thus far, the appointment of the vice-chancellor had remained the primary responsibility of the university community as provided for in the enabling laws. With the above, however, Governing Councils of the universities lost their power to appoint and remove vice-chancellors. Over time the position of the visitor became substantially altered from a largely ceremonial one to that in which empowered the visitor to intervene in the routine administration of the universities. As a result of this change vice-chancellors overtime 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. That was the situation in Nigerian universities until 1992 when the question of university autonomy became one of the major issues in the industrial action embarked upon by the Academic staff union of Nigerian University, (ASUNU), which culminated in the promulgation of the university (miscellaneous) Act of 1993- that is now in dispute. Tertiary education is the education given after secondary education, it include universities, colleges of education, polytechnics, monotechnics including those institutions offering correspondence courses. The Nigerian tertiary education encompasses universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education. It plays a crucial role in the country's development by providing advanced knowledge and skills necessary for economic growth. The structure of tertiary education in Nigeria are:

- i. Universities: Nigeria has federal, state and private universities. Federal universities receive funding from the central government, while state universities are funded by state governments. Private universities are funded by private organizations and individuals.
- ii. Polytechnics: Polytechnics offer technical and vocational education, they provide National Diploma (ND) and Higher National Diploma (HND).
- iii. Colleges of Education: These institutions primarily focus on training teachers. They award the Nigerian Certificate of Education (NCE).

The Goals of Tertiary Education are to:

- i. Contribute to national development through high level relevant manpower training;
- ii. Develop and calculate proper values for the survival of the individual and society;
- iii. Develop the intellectual capability of individuals to understand and appreciate their local and external environments;
- iv. Acquire both physical and intellectual skills which will enable individual to be self-reliant and useful members of the society;
- v. Promote and encourage scholarship and community service
- vi. Forge and cement national unity understanding and integration (FRN,2004, section 45)

Okebukola (2015) Stated that tertiary education in Nigeria has been facing with the following challenges namely:

- i. Funding: Insufficient funding is a persistent issue, leading to inadequate infrastructure, limited research opportunities, and poor staff remuneration.
- ii. Infrastructure: Many institutions face infrastructural deficits, including dilapidated buildings, outdated laboratories, and insufficient learning materials.

- iii. **Quality of Education:** The quality of education is often compromised by large class sizes, inadequate teaching staff, and a focus on theoretical rather than practical learning.
- iv. **Research and Development:** Limited funding and support for research activities hinder the advancement of knowledge and innovation.
- v. **Strikes and Unrest:** Frequent strikes by academic and non-academic staff disrupt the academic calendar, affecting the quality of education.
- vi. **Access and Equity:** There are significant disparities in access to tertiary education, with rural and low-income students facing greater barriers.

Autonomy in Tertiary Education in Nigeria

Autonomy in tertiary education is essential to the advancement transmission and application of knowledge. Autonomy in tertiary education in Nigeria became almost an impossible request because of government ownership of the institutions in Nigeria. It has been incomprehensible for the government to handover the control of its investment. A major chunk of recurrent and capital fund for public institutions (Federal and state) is obtained from government. This has made government to be more inclined to the adage that says ‘who pays the piper dictates the tune’. The fact that bulks of the funds for institution operations comes from the government and the duty to be accountable for the public funds have made successive government to be reluctant and thus institute mechanisms to undermine the autonomy in tertiary education. Arikewuyo (2004) recounted how past and present governments have encroached on university autonomy as follows:

‘Staff and students’ unions were banned and un-banned at various times. The ASUNU and NANS were the most affected. Many vice-chancellors have been removed for not complying with directives from the government. A major General was even appointed as the sole Administrator in a first generation university. Many academics have been dismissed, retired and unjustly jailed for teaching what they were not employed to teach. Forty-nine academic staff of the university of Ilorin were dismissed for taking part in a nation-wide strike called by ASUU in 2001’. In the same vein, professor Jubril Aminu, the then minister of education, observed in his address to the Governing councils of Federal universities in 1986 that:

‘While we are absolutely committed to allowing the governing councils to carry on with their lawful business, we need to agree that university autonomy, such as we understand it, is no charter for privilege, and does not detract from government the responsibility of protecting public interest and in ensuring proper accountability’. Aminu contended that academic freedom and university autonomy should not be the excuse for ‘maladministration’ and ‘outright lawlessness’.

Problems of Autonomy

According to Sanda (2002) the problems confronting university in Nigeria, particularly from the external perspective are as follows:

Centralisation of the University system: The thought of a centralised system was not paramount at the inception of the university system in Nigeria. The universities then existed as entities conducting their affairs independently. The growth of the university system over time necessitated the establishment of National Universities Commission (NUC) in 1962 to play an

advisory role and act as a buffer between Federal Government and the Universities and not to control the later. The commission was saddle with the responsibility of receiving and disbursing subventions to universities. NUC has constituted itself into an external agency infringing on the individual university's autonomy to chart its courses in such areas as:

- Training of academic personnel
- Curriculum determination
- Creation of academic programme
- Programme standardization

Centralisation of Admission: The idea of a centralised board engaging in the conduct of matriculation examination and placement of qualified candidates into Nigerian established institution was never thought of when the early institutions were established. At that time each institution conducted its entrance examinations and selected qualified candidates. This situation prevailed until when the Joint and Matriculation Board was established to conduct matriculation examinations. JAMB has trespassed into the individual autonomy of tertiary institution to select their students. The common malaise associated with this body in relation to tertiary education is the growing trend in examination malpractices, and creating serious selection credibility problem. It is a common sight in our tertiary institutions to see students with high JAMB score, but performing poorly academically. This situation has compelled several universities into setting aptitude tests to confirm the credibility of the students.

Council Dominance: The domination of university council by government-appointed officials to the detriment of minority representation of university community members serve as another avenue of autonomy breach in Nigerian universities. Government's own position regarding its dominance of the Councils is that, since the government is the primary source of fund for the system, it must also be in control through government's agents to ensure accountability in such areas as financial and physical resources, staff recruitment, student admission and programme quality.

Strategies to Ensure Ideal Tertiary Education Autonomy

Sanda (2002) stated that there should be an increase in the number of university community members in the Council as a sustainable way of protecting the institutional autonomy. It must be free from the shackles of external interference which is currently impeding growth.

The interfering role of the NUC should be reviewed, while allowing the Commission to function in its original advisory capacity. The current reform in the tertiary education sector should address the problem of centralised admissions through JAMB, where candidates now write JAMB examination and later subjected candidates to another examination by the various universities. The right to admit should rest with the institutions.

Conclusion

Autonomy in tertiary education relates to the protection of the institutions from interference by government officials in day-to-day running of the institutions especially on the issues related to the selection of students, the appointment and removal of the academic staff, including the vice-chancellors etc. the determination of contents of tertiary education and the control of

standards. Autonomy also gives learners the confidence to take control of their own learning and contribute positively towards organizational development.

Suggestions

As the study found out that administrative autonomy is highly imperative to the quality and administration of higher education. Government at all levels should allow heads of tertiary institutions to manage and run their schools without interfering in the affairs of the school in terms of employment of staff, admission of students and financial expenditure of the school. Adequate capital should be provided, equipment's and building should also be enough, education should be given the highest budgetary vote especially where it incorporates research and development and education should also get a bigger share of government expenditure. When administrative autonomy is fully attained in universities, it will give the institutions the freedom to independently determine the number of students to be admitted, the cut off mark for admission, the appointment and termination of University staff and heads, formulation of academic policies and general.

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