

INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY OF NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY EDUCATION – UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS

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Abstract

This paper titled “**Institutional Autonomy of Nigerian University Education**”: ‘Underlying Assumptions’, is concerned with the vex issue of institutional autonomy in Nigerian Universities. It looked at how the Concept autonomy is being given different interpretations, which has made it not to be actually practicable. Rather, Lips-Service is paid to the issue of University Autonomy in Nigeria probably because the institutions are owned by the Government of Nigeria. Just like the saying goes that, He who plays the piper dictates the tune”. The Paper made some findings among which is that institutional Autonomy in Nigeria has been greatly eroded and finally some suggestions were made.

Antonomy of Nigerian University Education: *Underlying Assumption*

Introduction

The agitation for institutional autonomy of Nigerian Universities still bristles with thorny issues which has continuously provoked an industrial unrest by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU). This vex issue of institutional autonomy had greatly dealt a devastating blow on the quality of education in Nigeria. Interestingly, the essence of the agitation for institutional autonomy in the country by the Academic Staff Union of Nigeria (ASUU) is enable it put the university education at par with the global trend as it is obtained in developed countries. Institutional autonomy is very essential for the advancement, transmission and application of knowledge. Regrettably the agitation for institutional autonomy in Nigeria universities education has become almost impossible request due to government ownership of these institutions. Inspite of that, institutional autonomy appears to be indispensable for universities to play their role effectively within the societal context, which certain realities exert considerable erosive influences on it.

The notion of institutional autonomy as being revisited in this year Annual Conference of Philosophers of Education Association of Nigeria with a renew hope and aspiration that the present democratic dispensation, will examined what hopes it holds for the realization of these principles and what ways will the government of Nigeria demonstrate the political will for the realization of the principle of autonomy. Also it is hope that the contending issues of granting institutional autonomy to universities in Nigeria will be backed by administration of a political will. This paper therefore attempts to explicate the concept of autonomy, government and

institutional autonomy, constraints to autonomy in Nigerian universities and the way forward in the quest for university autonomy in Nigeria.

Meaning of Autonomy

The concept of institutional autonomy has been given many interpretations which are suitable for particular situations. In this paper/study, some array of definitions will be presented to offer an in-depth of what institutional autonomy implies. Institutional autonomy is generally perceived as non-interference and independence of an academic institution¹ Institutional autonomy in the words of Abubakar and Abadulahi² implies “the freedom of institutions to function without undue control or influence by external forces or agencies“. Arguably here is that, what is common to the concept of institutional autonomy is that it relates to institutional governance which entails such institutions carry out its functions of advancement, transmission and application of knowledge. In another sense of it, the Kampala Declaration explained the concept of institutional autonomy as follows:

“Institutions of higher education shall be autonomous of the state or any other public authority in conducting their affairs including administration and setting up of their academic, teaching, research and other related programmes. Autonomy shall be exercised by democratic means of self-government, involving active participation of all members of the respective academic community.”³

It can be deduced that institutional autonomy is a universal concept although its interpretation and application may vary from one country to another. It is an essential element of a true academic community. Similarly, Jega⁴ opined that, “autonomy is in many respect of life line for institutional growth and development for universities. Indeed, ASUU, the vanguard for the struggle of university autonomy explained institutional autonomy as:

“Self-determination and self-governance or self-rule. The right of members of the academic community to determine the manner in or the general rules by which they are governed and their capacity, as a unit to control their own affairs and shape their own destiny, free of external interference or dictate, are what is meant by university autonomy.”⁵

In consonance with ASUU Concept of institutional autonomy, the Federal Government of Nigeria conceptualized Autonomy as thus: Autonomy for universities is defined in terms of their freedom to govern themselves, appoint their key officers, their staff, control their student’s admissions and academic curricular, control their finances and generally regulate themselves as independent legal entities without undue influence from the Federal Government and its agencies.⁶

It is apparent according to Ruwa⁷, that the conceptualization of institutional autonomy by both ASUU and the Federal Government composed of the same elements. One then is forced to ask why then has the problem of autonomy remained a bone of contention between the two. It appears from the perception of the author of this paper that institutional autonomy is a mere paper tiger work.

Institutional Autonomy in Nigeria Universities

This section of the paper is concerned with the issue of practical or feasible institutional autonomy in Nigeria institutional autonomy is situated at the very core of the mission of the universities and it is essential to teaching, learning, and research. Many have argued that a fully developed higher education system cannot exist without institutional autonomy. It is for this reason that ASUU continue to struggle for the realization of institutional autonomy in Nigeria.

For it is a protective corner which universities staff always seek to cherish, but which society greatly envies. Permit one to say that, if there is no institutional autonomy in Nigerian Universities there can be no academic freedom. Autonomy therefore, is the right to control one's affairs in order to enhance the profession of truth and the search for knowledge. These activities demand adequate independence of thought and action, with minimal or no supervision from outside agencies⁸.

Nigeria universities are weighed down by the bureaucratic demands of political interference. From a far, one may tend to think that, the institutional autonomy of universities in Nigeria is well deserved from a meaningful academic research to solving problems which puzzle mankind, but at a closer look, Undie⁹ opined that, it may be obvious that the restriction of institutional autonomy, is the by-product of some *de-homo-sepiens* colleagues who found themselves at the helm of managing the affairs of tertiary education.

In the fourth Republic of Nigeria, the federal government of Nigeria initiated University Autonomy Bill for the consideration of the National Assembly which was passed into Law. According to a media report, as opined by Bagudo¹⁰ that, government decided to restore autonomy to federal universities. To explicate this point further, President Obasanjo opined that “the belief that all aspect of our policy which were militarized in the last three decades ought to be demilitarised as a dividend of democracy, even as he debunked allegations that the move would see the introduction of tuition fees for undergraduate students.”¹¹

The President condemned the militarization of all facets of the nation's life which in his words, degenerated into a situation in which universities, which were autonomous and self-governing institutions lost so much of their autonomy that every major decision affecting them is taken by authorities other than themselves.¹²

To conclude this section of discourse, it is pertinent to acknowledge the erosion of the university autonomy over the years by the Federal Government of Nigeria. The official pronouncement of President Obasanjo in 1992, was an acknowledgement of the erosion of the university autonomy. Thus in cognizant of the role of autonomy in academic pursuit, the Academic Staff Union of University (ASUU), and the Federal Government of Nigeria signed an agreement on the 3rd of September, 1992 with a view to revamping the entire university system with respect to autonomy, academic freedom and funding. Specifically chapters of the agreement discusses University autonomy and academic freedom.

Threats to Institutional Autonomy in Nigeria

In Nigeria, there are too many threats to institutional autonomy which have over the years eroded the independence of its autonomy. They are itemised thus:

- a. Do the universities and other institutions deserve the autonomy in view of the character of University Leadership which represented itself in antecedent cases?
- b. University Employment
- c. Admission in Universities
- d. Awards of Contracts in Universities
- e. Accreditation/Resource Verification.
- f. Payment of Academic staff and Honoraria.

A detailed discussion of each is undertaken as follows:

University Employment

There is abuse of employment in most universities, without recourse to the extant Law. A situation in which the principles of Federal character has been misapplied, due to the fostering of ethnic hegemony. However, each University through a governing council has the power to appoint, promote and discipline staff, but in several cases especially during the military era, some lecturers were dismissed without following due process. Universities in Nigeria have suffered from arbitrary governance.

In addition, some governments in Nigeria have remove Vice-Chancellors for not complying with their directives. In the last civilian administration of Buhari, University of Lagos, Vice-Chancellor was removed, but not for the intervention from some quarters, which caused him to be reinstated. The expectation of academics that civil rule would be respected, rather academic freedom was shattered with the case of 53 academic staff who were unilaterally dismissed at the University of Ilorin in 1999. Similarly, five professors at Lagos State University who were appointed by the Vice Chancellor, contrary to that provided by the Law were dismissed on the orders of the then State Governor. The Academic Staff Union of the Universities (ASUU) has been banned and unbanned severally by successive governments in Nigeria.

Admissions

The Autonomy of the universities is inferred with in the area of Admissions to Nigerian Universities – Nigerian universities are under attack as the very idea of the central Admission Programmes by Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB) was intended to solve the problem of abuse of admissions. This is another way in which the autonomy of universities in Nigerian has been eroded or whittle down.

Awards of Contracts

Contracts are awarded in universities without recourse to the authorities the university management rather universities management have been reduced to supervisory role of contracts. This external interference speaks volumes of the erosion in the area of autonomy.

Accreditation/Resource Verification

- Academic Programmes taught in Nigeria Universities must seek approval from the National Universities Commission. Failure on the part of any Nigerian University which fail to seek accreditation for any course of study or discipline, such certificates will not be honoured. In this direction, one can say that University autonomy is affected.

- Payment of Academic Staff and Honoraria: Today, Nigeria University Academic and non-academic staff are not being paid by their individual universities. What is obtainable today is the Integrated Payroll System which has grossly failed to take care of staff promotion and Honoraria. This has affected professional rights of lecturers on sabbatical

Constraints of Autonomy

All universities in the world as a matter of utmost importance strived to dedicate themselves to the cause of truth, that they observed strict adherence to the path of truth and uphold the principle of academic excellence in whatever discipline they identify themselves. Arguably, therefore institutional autonomy in Nigeria is being influenced by some societal realities. These societal realities which tend to erode or limit institutional autonomy are identified by Colier and Bagudo¹³ as thus; academic, economic, egalitarian and consensus imperatives.

One of the reason for the founding of universities in Nigeria was the need to produce or raise intellectuals, researchers, teachers and various categories of manpower desired for the economy, which is the academic imperative. The economic imperative is the second, as an economically developing nation, Nigeria with a low productivity in both per man and per area due to obsolete methods, tools and societal organisation, poor rate of energy production, poor rate of manufacturing output, great needs in education characterized by few schools, small proportion of graduates in relation to the population and professionals and chronic wages, mass poverty.

Universities therefore are being looked upon in order to develop economically as producers of the required and needed manpower to bring about the developmental changes. The tenancy to specifically address the issue of economic development problems of Nigeria, is responsible for the establishment of more universities in the country.

The autonomy of universities founded in egalitarian principle is strongly guarded so as to avoid any deviation from the motivating objectives. Although their traditional autonomy founded on pure academic imperatives is considerably modified or limited. In Nigeria, such limitations tend to ignite complaints of access, parochialism and manipulation by the favoured group.

The consensus imperative perceives a society as one in which conflicts are inherent among its various segments. Such conflicts arise from groups struggling for power, wealth, amenities and other social privileges. They struggle either for the improvement of their own position or the maintenance of the status quo. The Consensus identify therefore advocates conflict resolution through accommodation, restraints, negotiation and consultation. The effect of this ideology on universities is seen in the established structures, through which conflicts and conflicts resolution are affected. The structures are of two dimension as identified by Bagudo¹⁴, those emanating externally from the government through the Ministry of Education and National Universities Commission (NUC) and those that operate internally comprising the Vice-Chancellor, the Governing Council, the Senate, the Deans, the Heads of Departments and other units. The prime motivation for the existence of these structures in Nigerian Universities is to facilitate control, communication, consultation, negotiation, and also achieve consensus so that academic programmes could operate in an environment of order and tranquillity.

Finally, other factors associated with the withering away of university autonomy as observed by Benjamin include, the involvement of states in the establishment and running of universities, ill-equipped in all respects. The erosion of institutional autonomy in Nigeria can be understood within the context of increasing attempt by the states and private individuals to reappraise and redefine the role of higher education in response to shifts in the accumulation process.

Conclusion

University will only be able to claim total autonomy from government when it neither looks up to government for funding nor for employment of its graduates. This situation therefore, is easier imagined than realised, University autonomy from government and government autonomy from university can only be mutually negotiated.¹⁵

There is a common misconception of the government as “the one that pays the piper also dictates the tune”. If Universities deserve or desire autonomy, they must then be self-funding. The matter of autonomy has also been used as a strategy for demobilising and disintegrating the staff unions in the university system. Thus sometime in 2003, Obasanjo’s government attempted to force what it styled “Autonomy Bill” on the Federal University System, the effect of which was to decentralised negotiation between unions and the government(s).

Conclusively, Institutional Autonomy is nothing but all academic, research, administration and related programmes should be run according to individual university laws, statutes, rules and regulations in the governance of the universities. No interference from Government or its agencies such as NUC, ASUU, for a genuine autonomy to be realised there should be adequate funding of Universities.

Suggestions

Having been able to point out some underlying assumptions of Institutional autonomy of Nigerian waivers educate autonomy in Nigeria University, the following suggestions are made thus:

- g. Universities should strive to play by the rules governing their operations in terms of admissions, employment, contract, appointment of Vice-chancellors and indeed the enterprise for which the universities stand for.
- h. Universities being citadels for learning should endeavour to operate as centres, rather than being in the periphery and it is the peripherality of this very existence and by extension their autonomy that makes the public tend to lose confidence in their dealings.
- i. Autonomy should be at the top of the agenda for everyone concerned with higher education. Although, the issue of autonomy is hardly discussed in conferences, rather the major actors in the academic enterprise seem to be concentrating on financial issues, accountability and Institutional Survival.
- j. Institutional autonomy needs a universal definition and interpretation. It should not limit its scope to the ideal of teaching and research within the confines of the university and in the area of expertise of the scholar.

Endnotes

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