

# **POLITICS: THE BANE OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM IN NIGERIAN TERTIARY EDUCATION**

By

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## **Abstract**

The near absence of academic freedom in tertiary education in Nigeria has made it difficult for tertiary institutions to live up to the expectations of producing quality manpower that would engender national development. This paper examined the impact of politics on the practice of academic freedom in Nigerian tertiary education. The study is qualitative in nature, hence the philosophical research method was adopted and the data was from secondary sources. The paper observed that politics plays huge role in the formulation and implementation of educational policies, allocation of funds to education sector, appointment and recruitment of heads and staff of tertiary institutions, and provision of a conducive learning environment for meaningful learning to take place. In addition, accreditation exercise is another avenue government uses to infringe upon academic freedom of tertiary institutions, while academic corruption and weak leadership were identified as major impediments to academic freedom. It was recommended among others that: academic freedom should be accorded a pride of place in tertiary education, government and heads of tertiary institutions should endeavour to be tolerant and accommodate divergent views; and, students should be encouraged to express themselves freely as this would bring about the strengthening of the democratic system, with attendant improvement in the quality of governance offered the citizens.

**Keywords:** Academic freedom, politics, tertiary education

## **Introduction**

Tertiary education is an integral component of the education system all over the world as it prepares people for the onerous task of nation building by equipping them with necessary skills to cope with the responsibilities of nation building.<sup>1</sup> Hence, it cannot be relegated to the background because it is the bedrock of national development through the provision of the driving force needed for the socio-economic, political and industrial development of the country.<sup>2</sup> This is achieved through the production of a crop of highly skilled and competent individuals that would run the various sectors of the country's economy.

Tertiary education in Nigeria is regulated by government through political decisions, education laws and policies that stipulate the entry requirements, curriculum content, qualification of teachers, conditions of service, among others.<sup>3</sup> Political decisions have far

reaching effects on the education system, especially tertiary education which is the summit of the educational process. This is even more worrisome considering the fact that most tertiary institutions in Nigeria are established and managed by the federal, state governments or private organisations. Government's involvement or interference in the activities of these institutions do, in most cases, affect academic freedom, and by extension the quality of education. Even the privately owned tertiary institutions in the country are not left out, as meddlesomeness by their proprietors who wield much power and influence in their day to day running could stifle academic freedom.

The quest for quality tertiary education in Nigeria has remained a topical national issue. But one wonders if this dream is achievable in the absence of academic freedom. It is on this premise that this paper sought to examine the effects of politics on academic freedom in tertiary education in Nigeria, and its implications for national development.

### **Conceptual Clarification**

The main concepts that form the fulcrum of this study would be analyzed contextually in order to have a clearer understanding of the topic of this discourse. These concepts are politics, academic freedom and tertiary education.

### **Politics**

Politics, to the layman, is a means or tool for achieving power or governance, and a vocation for those who seek political offices. In other words, it is limited to the activities of elected or appointed government officials and the political class. According to Dowse and Hughes in Haralambos and Horlborn, politics is all about power and it can be seen in everyday life of the people.<sup>4</sup> It is usually associated with authority and it can be seen in the family, school or the larger society, as the responsibilities or duties of some persons tend to confer some level of authority on them over others. It is on this premise that Nwogu posited that politics is a social construct described together with power,<sup>5</sup> because it ascribes power and authority to a smaller group of persons over a larger group. Such power whether constitutional or not should be used to achieve certain set objectives, and it could affect the people in certain ways: positively or negatively.

### **Academic Freedom**

The term freedom which is often used interchangeably with the word liberty is a quality that man over time has come to treasure and enjoy, and it has also raised some dust and ignited unending debates. It is the cause of most struggles and agitations in human history. Freedom is the ability of man to choose freely without restraint, and it stands in contrast to the concept of determinism.<sup>6</sup> It enables people to achieve their individual goals and ambitions, while at the same time regulating how they live and interact with others in the society. It is against this backdrop that Enoh asserted that freedom to choose has some inherent responsibilities associated with it.<sup>7</sup> Hence one would be held responsible for the consequences of one's unrestricted choices and actions because of the freedom he enjoys. As a result, decisions, actions and choices should be based on careful considerations of the alternatives at one's disposal and their possible outcomes. There are different types of freedom in the society; e.g.,

individual freedom, political freedom, economic freedom, judicial freedom, academic freedom, among others.

The concept “academic freedom” is often loosely used even though its ideals are often not fully understood and applied. It is a principle of higher education that has gained large acceptance and has become very cardinal to tertiary education all over the world. The debate about it has continued unabated, hence there has not been a universally accepted understanding and definition of the concept. This is obviously as a result of differences in the culture, time and perception of various scholars. The implication of various definitions is that their practical application and interpretation leave much to be desired. To drive home its importance, it is not only spelt out in some national constitutions, but also in some international conventions.<sup>8</sup>

Academic freedom, as espoused by Osieja, is related to freedom of speech, but the two concepts are not one and the same.<sup>9</sup> In an attempt to distinguish between the two concepts, she remarked that freedom of speech is necessary for the teacher to practise academic freedom, while academic freedom is based on curriculum content, time and academic rigor. In effect, freedom of speech is a *sine quo non* for effective application and practice of academic freedom. Therefore, the principles of academic freedom entail applying the principles of freedom of thought and speech in the practical conduct of education, especially at the higher level.

Academic freedom according to Altback in Osieja, is concerned with the freedom of the professor (lecturer) to teach and that of the student to learn, which is encapsulated in the maxim “freedom to teach and to learn”.<sup>10</sup> This includes conducting researches into various aspects of the society and making their findings available to the public. It makes it possible for teachers and students to freely participate in intellectual discourse without fear of censorship or reprimand. Academic freedom could be institutional academic freedom that allows institutions to determine their mission, or individual academic freedom that the teacher enjoys in discharge of his duties and responsibilities. The society benefits from it through the transmission of knowledge, training of skilled professionals, education of future leaders and encouraging critical thinking and cross breeding of ideas.<sup>11</sup> The teacher is held responsible for his actions because of the freedom he enjoys in performing his duties to the institutions and the students.

### **The Concept of Tertiary Education**

Tertiary education which is synonymous with higher education is the component of the education system that is accessed after secondary education.<sup>12</sup> Adeyemi in Ogunode and Abubakar described it as the aspect of the education system that constitutes the greater part of a nation’s research ability and the production of large number of professionals for her labourmarket.<sup>13</sup> It is made up of the traditional universities, colleges of education, polytechnics, monotechnics, among others. The goal of tertiary education in Nigeria include; the production of highly skilled manpower with entrepreneurial abilities needed to fast track technological growth and stimulate national development.<sup>14</sup> One distinguishing feature of

tertiary education is its emphasis on research and development, which seeks to investigate and proffer solutions to societal problems and advance development.

In Nigeria, tertiary education is that level of education that brings people from different walks of life together in an academic environment to foster mutual co-existence, tolerance and broader understanding of the heterogeneity of the country, and the peculiarities of their various ethno-religious and cultural groups. This makes for the unity and continued corporate existence of the country.

### **Politics in a Democratic Setting**

Democracy has been universally accepted to mean government of the people for the people by the people. This means that political actors are chosen by the people for the overall interest of the masses and not that of a few individuals. It is on this ground that Haralambos and Horlborn asserted that those who hold any form of power do so on behalf of others.<sup>15</sup> Hence politics in a democratic setting should be premised on the cardinal principles on which democratic rule is based. These principles include inclusiveness, rule of law, liberty, accountability, checks and balances, among others. They make for a level playing ground that ensures unhindered participation of members of the society in the decision-making process whether directly or indirectly, and that opinions and views of the minority are heard even though the majority would eventually have their way.

In line with democratic tenets, politics should engender governments that are responsive to the priorities and needs of the masses. This could be achieved when broad consultations and consensus become the basis for policy formulation, and that the views of the less privileged members of the society are taken into account in the decision-making process.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, in a democratic environment, politics should bring about good governance which would be seen in the equitable distribution of resources, transparency, and the rule of law.

Since the return to democratic rule in Nigeria, the political class which is made up of the elites have shown to be largely undemocratic in their utterances and actions. They are known for manipulation of the political process in their favour, contrary to the will and wishes of the masses because of their desperation for power and the “win-at-all-cost” mentality. This is contrary to democratic principle which is anchored on numbers i.e., the majority. This ugly situation is largely responsible for the high level of corruption, underdevelopment and poverty that have ravaged Nigerians due to bad governance. The situation is radically different in egalitarian societies such as Finland, Iceland, etc., because of the presence of social equality, inclusiveness, accountability, and the rule of law, which do not give the masses reasons to revolt against the government of the day. This is largely responsible for the sustained growth and development enjoyed in those democratic societies.

### **Roles of Politics in Tertiary Education**

Politics according to Ikegbusi *et al.*, cannot be separated from education.<sup>17</sup> This is because of the mutual relationships that exist between them, where they benefit or suffer from each other at the same time. A major effect of politics on education is its use by politicians and government officials to achieve the goals and interests of their political parties.<sup>18</sup> This has

been the reason for the use of education for political propaganda, to increase the popularity and acceptability of the government of the day, e.g., the free education of the defunct western region.

The effects of politics on tertiary education can be felt through external and internal sources, which can also be referred to as “politics of education” and “politics in education”. The external sources include the actions and policies of government and her agencies, while the internal sources are the politics that play out in tertiary institutions that directly or indirectly infringe on academic freedom of the academic community. The following are some examples of the roles of politics in tertiary education in Nigeria:

1. **Formulation and implementation of educational policies:** Educational policies are government pronouncements and initiatives that determine the course of the education system.<sup>19</sup> These policies which are statements of intent that guide and direct the education sector, are formulated by government and implemented through her agencies and administrations of tertiary institutions. The problem in Nigeria is not the absence of good policies, but the inability of those saddled with the responsibility of implementing the policies to translate the beautiful policy statements into action. The failure or success of educational policies, to a greater extent, is dependent on their implementation.<sup>20</sup> The way policies are implemented would make or mar the education process as effective implementation of sound policies would have positive impact on education, while negative impact would be the outcome of ineffective implementation of policies. One of such policies is the introduction of the Core Curriculum Minimum Academic Standards (CCMAS), which has been hugely criticized by academics.
2. **Funding:** The actualization of the goals and objectives of tertiary education is largely dependent on the availability of funds. This would ensure that equipment and facilities needed for a conducive academic environment are provided, and salaries and allowances of staff are paid promptly. Unfortunately, funding has remained a major challenge militating against the sustainable development of education, as the cost of running higher education in Nigeria is very high. This is a serious cause for concern considering the limited resources available and the various sectors of the economy that require urgent attention like security, health, transport, among others. In such situations, politics plays a crucial role in the negotiation and allocation of funds or resources that are already in short supply. As Nwemgwu and Elechi observed, government places premium on the social and political needs of the nation, but fails to realize that tertiary education is non-negotiable for the socio-economic and political development of the nation.<sup>21</sup> Undoubtedly, this is responsible for the low budgetary provision for education over the years that has turned Nigerian tertiary institutions to glorified secondary schools, due to the absence of state-of-the-art facilities that would make for meaningful learning.
3. **Appointment and Recruitment:** The appointment of heads of public tertiary institutions in Nigeria has remained the exclusive preserve of government. On this basis, the composition of the governing councils of government owned tertiary institutions is usually based on political affiliation and patronage. This ensures that members of the opposition parties are not appointed into governing councils so as not to give room to views and opinions that may be at variance with those of the party in power. The appointment of Vice Chancellors and other

heads of public tertiary institutions is also the responsibility of governments. In recent times, some tertiary institutions have experienced the imposition of unpopular Vice Chancellors and Rectors, contrary to the wishes and aspirations of the academic community. In other instances, some tertiary institutions have not had substantive heads for a long period of time, and this may have affected the smooth running of those institutions adversely.

The recruitment of academic staff has become highly politicized such that only those sponsored by political heavy weights are employed, thereby denying the institutions the services of those that are eminently qualified for those positions. This would amount to putting a square peg in a round hole, and as such would create room for inefficiency and unproductivity. Promotion exercises in most cases are conducted in similar manner, leading to the delay or outright denial of the promotion of those considered not to be of the same political leaning. This does not encourage academic freedom as it demoralizes the morale of teachers and reduces productivity of affected staff. It therefore lowers both the standard of education in the country, and the quality of the products of tertiary institutions.

4. **Conducive academic environment:** The inability of government to meet and attend to the welfare of its citizens has given room to unstable, volatile or harsh political atmosphere.<sup>22</sup> This has given rise to civil unrest, riots, protests, clashes and counter clashes that do not encourage developmental and socio-economic activities like education. Unstable political climate could result in unstable academic calendar, which according to Ogunode and Abubakar could bring about the extension of the duration of an academic programme, and an increase in the cost of education.<sup>23</sup> It could also create a situation where some lecturers would seek greener pasture outside the shores of the country, thereby robbing the institutions and the nation at large of their invaluable services and wealth of experience.

### **Politics and Academic Freedom in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions**

There is no gainsaying the fact that politics cannot be divorced from education, because it has impacted academic freedom in tertiary institutions in different ways. Its effects could originate from external sources or from within the academic community of the institutions.<sup>24</sup> The external impact occurs when government or its agencies and parastatals formulate and implement policies that pose threats to academic activities, while the actions and, leadership styles of the management of tertiary institutions and their sub units which could prevent lecturers and students from enjoying academic freedom, make up the internal sources of threats to academic freedom. The following instances would help buttress this assertion:

1. **Funding:** Finance according to Holt has great a consequence on academic freedom in tertiary institutions.<sup>25</sup> No tertiary institution can fulfill its mandate of teaching and research if funds are inadequate or grossly insufficient. The total reliance on government for funds has tied all public tertiary institutions in Nigeria to the apron string of government. The absence of infrastructural facilities needed for effective teaching and learning is a direct attack on the academic freedom of lecturers and students. It could be in the form of unjust removal of heads of tertiary institutions and dismissal of lecturers for sticking to standards and global best practices, or for calling into question some programmes and policies of government. Nonpayment of salaries and denial of

promotions could also be used by government to gag the academic community. Therefore, for tertiary institutions to proffer solutions to societal problems through community service, teaching and research, academic freedom should be, if possible, completely separated from politics.<sup>26</sup> This is obviously very difficult because he who pays the piper calls the tune.

2. **Accreditation:** Accreditation exercises are conducted by the regulating bodies set up by government to determine whether tertiary institutions are meeting set standards, and by extension, achieving their mission or purpose.<sup>27</sup> As novel as its objectives are, accreditation ensures that tertiary institutions do not enjoy absolute academic freedom, rather it subjects lecturers to scrutiny by their colleagues.<sup>28</sup> Government as noted by Holt, directly or indirectly uses accreditation bodies to dictate learning objectives, methodology and assessment system.<sup>29</sup> Such external imposition do not make for the principle of institutional autonomy on which the operation of tertiary institutions is anchored.
3. **Religion:** Pluralization of religion in Nigeria has made religious opinions and practices subjective. The presence of faith-based tertiary institutions in Nigeria has accorded religious organizations influence and control over what happens in these institutions unlike their secular counterparts. The principle and practice of academic freedom may not be feasible in tertiary institutions owned and managed by faith-based organizations, especially in the department of religion or theology. This is because the principle of academic freedom is not in tandem with the religious conception of absolute truth.<sup>30</sup> Academic freedom encourages secularity rather than strict adherence to the dogmatic teachings of religion, because tertiary institutions will become vibrant and relevant if it encourages cross fertilization of ideas and beliefs. The imposition of sanctions and punishments on religious grounds, would lead to the infringement of the academic freedom of a lecturer or student of a different faith.
4. **Academic corruption and weak leadership:** Academic corruption which is a form of corruption that occurs within the academic community is commonplace and widespread in tertiary institutions. It involves the teachers, learners and even their parents, and could occur in different forms such as diversion of funds for infrastructural development and research, fiscal extortion, sex for grades, examination malpractice, among others. These vices limit the ability of the lecturer to teach conscientiously in line with the principle and spirit of academic freedom because he would have been compromised in one way or the other. In this regard, it would affect the quality of human capital development needed to drive the different sectors of Nigeria's economy.  
Also, if the leadership of tertiary institutions is weak, poor and ineffective, it will not pay attention to some key policies and programmes of the institution.<sup>31</sup> Policies like academic freedom that is pivotal in teaching and learning may not be strictly implemented and this would affect the transmission of knowledge.

### **Implications of Academic Freedom for National Development**

The implementation of the principles of academic freedom in tertiary institutions in Nigeria have some implications for national development. This could be achieved through the following:

1. **Strengthening Democracy:** Academic freedom which is a form of freedom of expression is one of the known criteria used in ranking democracies.<sup>32</sup> The participation of scholars in political discussions and activities makes for strong democratic institutions by instilling the spirit of tolerance and national unity in the citizens. This promotes egalitarianism, high level of tolerance, and respect for the rights and views of others even when they are at variance with one's views and opinions. In essence, education uses academic freedom among others, to consolidate democracy and encourage and inclusiveness in the polity. A strong democracy therefore would engender good governance in Nigeria, which would in turn precipitate sustained national development.
2. **Critical thinking:** Academic freedom is of immense benefit to the educational institutions by enhancing the pursuit of truth and protecting them from despotic government tyranny, thereby ensuring that tertiary institutions are treated as "institutional sanctuaries" of free thinking.<sup>33</sup> This provides a healthy academic climate that encourages students to reject certain notions and think for themselves, rather than become passive recipients of knowledge.<sup>34</sup> It would make the students to articulate their views on subject matters reflectively, and respectfully defend their position on those issues. It would go a long way in curbing the menace of indoctrination and gullibility, while at the same time encouraging objectivity and independent mindedness in the students. This would drastically reduce some of the social vices that have bedeviled Nigeria and left it grossly underdeveloped.
3. **Improved standard of education:** Academic freedom would improve the standard of education in Nigeria by encouraging effective teaching, and research and, which would lead to an improvement in human capital development. The growth and development of industrialized nations can be partly attributed to their belief in the principle and practice of academic freedom. This is evident in the quality of their citizens. Conversely, the implementation of intellectual discipline in tertiary institutions would result in low research productivity, which ultimately does not contribute to human capital and national development. Therefore, national development which is anchored on human capital development is achievable if academic freedom is practised in tertiary institutions, as it will bring about an improvement in the standard of education.

## Conclusion

Academic freedom as a universal concept provides healthy academic environment that guarantees the freedom of the lecturers and students to make their positions on subjects known without fear of reprimand and punishment from within and without. It also ensures that tertiary institutions are at liberty to plan and implement their academic programmes devoid of external interference. Achieving the goals of tertiary education in Nigeria as enshrined in the National Policy on Education has remained a mirage partly because tertiary institutions and lecturers do not enjoy academic freedom. The reason for this anomaly is largely connected to politics which plays a great role in the distribution of human and material resources to the citadels of learning, thereby affecting their ability to teach effectively and carry out research. This ugly scenario does not encourage the development of critical thinking ability in the students; it lowers the standard of education, and contributes to the weakening of



democratic tenets. The overall effects of this is that human capital development would be almost non-existent thereby negatively affecting sustainable national development.

## Recommendations

As a result of the indispensability of academic freedom to tertiary education in Nigeria, and the obvious need to encourage the practice of academic freedom in Nigeria, the following recommendations are proffered:

1. Government and heads of tertiary institutions should accord academic freedom a pride of place in the education system in order to create a healthy learning environment that encourages intellectualism, rather than imposing sanctions and measures that impede academic discourse between lecturers and students, thereby reducing their research interests and capability. Policies that restrain the lecturers and stifle academic freedom, make it difficult for academics to robustly engage in serious research and teaching.
2. Government and administrators of tertiary education should learn to tolerate and accommodate divergent views and opinions. This would go a long way in strengthening the fledging democracy in Nigeria.
3. The criteria for accreditation of academic programmes of tertiary institutions should not be unilaterally imposed by government through the parastatals and agencies supervising tertiary institutions. Rather, tertiary institutions should contribute towards the formulation of the policies that regulate their academic programmes. If this is done, implementation of academic programmes would become much easier.
4. Academics should defend and advocate the principle of academic freedom in their various institutions of learning, instead of conforming to the policies of government and management of tertiary institutions that are obnoxious to the spirit and principle of academic freedom in order to produce creative and critical minded individuals.
5. Students should be encouraged to freely express themselves and contribute to the teaching and learning process. Threatening and intimidating students for making their views on a subject matter known, would amount to a violation of their freedom of expression on which the principle of academic freedom is anchored. The creation of egalitarian society where people's rights and views are respected, would only be possible if the principle of inclusiveness is respected practised in tertiary institutions.

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