

UNIVERSITY AUTONOMY AND THE QUEST FOR QUALITY EDUCATION IN NIGERIA: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS.

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Abstract

This paper focuses on university autonomy and the quest for quality education in Nigeria. It seeks to answer the question whether there can be quality assurance in Nigeria's system of education through the implementation of university autonomy policy. The paper defines the concepts of autonomy, university autonomy and quality education. In its review of scholarly works on university autonomy, the paper observes that the philosophy behind the agitations for autonomy of universities strongly aligns with the motif for the attainment of quality education. However, the paper notes that the stranglehold of the Government on almost every sector of Nigerian university education as her principal funder, (which negates institutional autonomy) introduces other subterranean policies like federal character to maintain its inordinate ambition of control of the University system (a major setback to quality educational output). The paper therefore recommends the full implementation of university autonomy as a panacea to the declining quality of Nigerian education at the university level.

University Autonomy And The Quest For Quality Education In Nigeria: A Critical Analysis

Introduction

Education is globally recognized as a portent instrument for individual and national development. For this reason; government of the nations, non-governmental agencies, and communities implement programmes, policies as well as provide financial interventions in education in order to nurture and sustain quality education and to leverage on its limitless potentials to gain competitive advantage in the global market. While many developed and some developing nations are already reaping the fruits of quality education, Nigeria's education, her largest industry is nose-diving. Ironically too, the exponential growth in enrolment and number of schools being recorded at all levels of education in Nigeria have imparted insignificantly and insufficiently on the quality of Nigeria's education. Her current educational standard is a far cry from what quality education should be (Ekpo, 2014; Esene, Ozuomba, & Amaefule

2014). Against this backdrop, it becomes imperative to embark on a quest for solutions to Nigeria's education problems and to bring her educational standard and quality, to the highest degree of repute and respect among the committee of nations.

The quest currently is eliciting positive responses from interest groups who consider the provision and implementation of equal educational opportunities; employment of sufficient and qualified academic staff; adequate funds for educational administration and management; consistency in policy implementation, transparency and accountability, and autonomy of universities as critical to attainment of quality education in Nigeria. It is believed that the implementation of these proposals will lead to urgent reconstruction and repositioning of the Nigerian education system in order to attain the standard and quality worthy of her status at the global level. Among these proposals, autonomy of Nigerian universities seems to be the most topical and one that has engendered wider coverage, debate and sometimes tension between the university academic community and the political class.

Autonomy is principally the capacity for an individual, institution or state to determine its course of action in full consciousness without interference from another party. University autonomy is the independence of the university from external pressures to effectively attend to its administrative, academic and financial program in order to realize its educational objectives. The autonomy of Nigerian universities as a principle or idea is considered by stakeholders in education as indispensable in the restoration of quality to Nigeria's education, and critical to Nigerian universities' quest to achieve their mission and objectives (Babalola, 2014). The further belief in the instrumental essence and efficacy of autonomy of universities in the restoration of quality education principally accounts for the emergence of pressure groups within the education sector such as; the Association of American University Professors (AASUP) in the United States of America (Reichman, 2019) and its counterpart in Nigeria; the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) (Ogbonnaya, 2009). Can there be quality assurance in Nigeria's education through the implementation of the university autonomy policy? The search for an answer to this fundamental question constitutes the motif for this article.

Concept of Autonomy

The concept 'autonomy' seemed to have had a restrictive definition and application from the beginning. It was a dominant political concept which as Campbell (2017) observed, was used in reference to independent city states of ancient times. In modern times, however, as Campbell further noted, the concept has tremendously resonated not only in philosophy and political thoughts, but also almost in every area of life where the human person has had to define and assert some level of uniqueness and difference in choices and responsibilities. Hence the concept is assumed to be multidimensional with multidisciplinary implications (Nwaokugha, 2021). There are suggestions that Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) lifted the concept of autonomy beyond political circumscriptions to refer to the quality of a person as a 'self-governing moral agent' (Kleingeld, 2017). Kant's interpretation of a person as 'a self-governing moral agent' stems from the literal presentation of autonomy. From Greek etymology, 'auto' means 'self' and 'nomos' means 'law.' Literarily therefore, autonomy means to give oneself one's own law

(Babalola, 2014). This Greek interpretation further provides for Ogbonnaya (2009), the impetus to define autonomy as the quality of being independent, free and self-directing. Kant again defines autonomy as that property of the Will by which it [the Will] is a law to itself (Campbell, 2017). In the health care sector, autonomy stands out as a key ethical principle. Within this spectrum, Engelbrecht (2014) defines autonomy as the manifestation of one's legal and mental capacity to understand and make an informed decision. Engelbrecht's view of autonomy is also in line with Babalola (2014) who conceives and defines autonomy as the capacity of an individual or institution to make an informed, un-coerced decision by its own self; it is the state or condition of having independence or freedom to decide a course of action. Contextually, autonomy is the capacity for an individual, institution or state to determine its course of action in full consciousness without interference from another party. It is the condition in which one is able to do things freely without coercion.

The philosophical debates around autonomy and what constitutes it reveal that it is a complex concept, existing in varying degrees in different fields. This complex nature of autonomy is largely driven by paradigms or exemplars about it that are recognizable (Double, 1992). Accenting to the claim that autonomy exists in varying degrees, Snyder in Ogbonnaya (2009) pencils down two types of autonomy: absolute or formal autonomy and existential or reasonable autonomy. About absolute autonomy, Snyder thinks that it is more theoretical. This means that there are no chances that absolute autonomy can be practicable. Engelbrecht (2014) could not agree any less with Snyder when he claims that autonomy cannot be absolute. For him autonomy is greatly mitigated by one's cultural, traditional and legal systems. Rommel and Verhoest (2013) as well share the opinion that autonomy is not absolute. For them, autonomy is a relational concept; that is, autonomy is increased or reduced through the relations that agencies have with their principals or parent ministers. Furthermore, Ritzen (2016) suggests that political factors influence the amount of autonomy allotted to public universities in specific countries. This is the reality in Nigeria's university education system where autonomy is to a large extent moderated by certain extraneous variables such as; proprietors, funding agents and policy makers. Reasonable autonomy exists (Ogbonnaya, 2009). It comes into play when the concerned autonomous individual, institution, or state adjusts the ideal perception of autonomy to suit its circumstances, interests and those of their principals. This distinction is necessary because it spells out and will later clearly give the leeway in the struggle for autonomy for Nigerian Universities.

Concept of University Autonomy

The search for the right definition of university autonomy has constituted as well as dominated academic discussions in several fora. Critical questions are constantly being raised concerning university autonomy and the extent to which Governments, religious bodies and private individuals as owners and principal funding agents in education can concede independence of decision and action to universities. For instance Afe Babalola in a keynote address to committee of Pro-Chancellors of Nigerian Universities held at the Shehu Musa Yar'adua Center, Abuja on 'University Autonomy and Good Governance asked what university autonomy means? Does it mean that government stands aloof and shows no interest of any kind in university governance at the same time this same government is expected to fund university education?

Does it also mean that the government exercise a limited level of involvement in university administration like imposing strategic directions and policies in university educational management, while allowing universities to choose methods of implementation? (Babalola, 2014). These are critical issues that cannot be easily swept under the carpet. Answers to these fundamental questions are contributing immensely in the understanding of the distinction between absolute and reasonable autonomy, university autonomy and the agitations within the university community that implementation of university autonomy will improve quality education.

By posing the critical question, what is university autonomy, volumes of articles and white papers are produced on daily basis on what could constitute university autonomy, thereby leading to a catalogue of definitions. For instance, the Lima Declaration on university autonomy in Okeke (2007) projects universities autonomy as relating to the independence of institutions of higher education from state and all other forces of society, to make decisions regarding its internal government, finance, administration and establish its policies of education, research, extension work and other related activities. Leveraging on this declaration, Okeke also in the same work, defines university autonomy as the right of the higher educational institutions to govern themselves without outside control. For him, an autonomous university is an integrated organization with a flexible management structure, integrated finance, personnel and services and incentives to generate external income. The implication of the above positions is that with reference to university autonomy there ought to be a shift in the focus of certain aspects of control and decision making be it from the government and its agencies, or any other external compelling structure, to the university administrative setting, notably the council, senate and university management.

In line with the foregoing, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in its recommendation concerning the status of higher education teaching personnel in Ojedeke and Fadokun (2009), defines university autonomy as the degree of self-government necessary for effective decision-making by institutions of higher education regarding their academic work, standards, management and related activities consistent with systems of public accountability, especially in respect of funding provided by the - state and respect for academic freedom and human right. The nuances involved in university autonomy as reflected in UNESCO's definition are very intriguing. It literally stresses that there are three essential components of university autonomy. These are: Self-governance, collegiality and appropriate academic leadership. These components were carefully dissected by Babalola (2014). He notes that Self governance refers to the ability of a university to exercise internal control or rule over itself. This implies the internal integrity and the ability of an institution to derive authority for its key decisions from within. On Collegiality, Babalola opines that it refers to shared power and authority vested among colleagues. This means therefore that in an autonomous university, decision making powers are exercised amongst scholars, students, staffs, and stakeholders in the academic environment in a fair and democratic way. The last essential element of university autonomy is academic leadership. Academic leadership in the opinion of Babalola, refers to a situation where leadership in the university are exercised by

the most qualified members of that University community. The emphasis basically is meritocratic system; the belief that power should be vested in individuals according to merit.

University autonomy is further delineated in Onyemuche & Ekpoafia (2018). Here, university autonomy is defined as the situation where higher educational institutions can do without government interference and intervention in areas like finance, employments, appointments, administration, management, and the establishment of rules, regulations, policies, programmes, research, extension work and other related activities. In the view of Akinwale (2023), autonomy in Nigerian Universities in simple terms connotes a situation where each university exercises its right to select or admit its own students, decide what to teach and determine its areas of research. From these plethora of definitions, University Autonomy can be articulated and defined as the independence of the university from external manipulations and pressures to effectively attend to its administrative, academic and financial program in order to realise its educational objectives.

Concept of Quality Education

Quality education appears very simple on the face value but it is quite a complex concept to define. This is because ‘quality’ as a modifier to education according to Harvey & Green (1993), is controversial. The controversy is informed by the attempt to understand the parameters for the description of a thing, a concept or an idea as possessing some degree of excellence. For example, people go into the market with the intention of buying ‘quality’ products. Others spend time on the net in search of quality items. Parents and students search for ‘quality’ schools for their wards or for themselves. Employers and manufacturers in industries are on the lookout for and hire the best brains who translate ideas or intellectual capital into ‘quality’ products in a competitive market. Owners of entertainment industries are also involved in the search for ‘quality’ actors and actresses. In these activities, the searchers are on the lookout for certain indicators of ‘quality’ of which their availability or non-availability will make certain options preferable. In the ensuing frenzy for quality appreciation, the concept of quality and by extension quality education becomes subject to parochial interpretation.

To the question therefore, what is quality education, there is a scarcity of answer from the point of view of definition. Nonetheless some scholars and organizations, approaching the concept descriptively have put forward some ideas that could lead to a better appreciation of the concept of quality education. For Sulyman (2022), quality education can be described as the processes that lead to acquisition of knowledge skills and character development that facilitate the realization of individual and societal development in line with the values, needs and aspirations of the individual and the society. He further maintains that quality education is the ideal focus of all educational systems and it is education in its true sense. Sulyman’s position is related to the understanding that there is an ideal in education just like every other aspect of human institution have their targets. The summation of the processes and the critical ingredients that lead to the realization of this ideal in education constitute quality education. so then, when quality education discourse is on the table, one is expected to be on the look out for certain

conditions precedent. These conditions precedent are well captured in Education International, a Belgium-based global union federation of teachers' trade unions and the UNESCO.

Education International (1993) defines quality education as one that focuses on the social, emotional, mental, physical, and cognitive development of each student regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status or geographical location. For this organization, education is qualitative if it is geared towards integral human development. The organization's understanding of quality education is similar to and accords well with the earlier position of Sulyman and would gain further elaborations by UNESCO, a major arm of the United Nations. UNESCO offers a broader horizon for conceiving and applying the concept of quality education. It holds that quality education entails issues such as appropriate skills development, gender parity, provision of relevant school infrastructure, equipment, educational materials and resources, scholarships or teaching force (UNESCO, 2021). Arguably, the presentations of these international bodies on quality education provide the springboard from which other extrapolations on quality education are made. For example, the agencies' white paper on quality education provides the leeway into the investigation on the core elements of quality education as yardsticks for measuring quality education in a given country. These core elements are as follows: effective school management, funding, quality teaching aids and materials, quality learning content, quality learning environment and quality teaching. In the provision or non-provision of these core elements lies the interface between the Government and the University community that often results in and vivifies the struggle for university autonomy. Operationally, quality education is defined as the educational processes and actions whose outcome satisfies individual and national educational goals and objectives.

University Autonomy and Quality Education in Nigeria

The provision and the attainment of quality education are at the heart of all educational enterprises anywhere both in the public and private sectors. This is for the reason that the prosperity or impoverishment of any nation is largely dependent on the quality of her education. Though quality education as a concept may seem to have subjective and contextual variations; the indices for quality education remain constant across various cultures and societies and they include: effective school management, funding, quality teaching aids and materials, quality learning content, quality learning environment and quality teaching (Thinley, 2021). Once these elements are taken into consideration and adequately provided for all levels of formal education; the primary, the secondary and the tertiary levels, no one is left in doubt of their positive effects on individual and national levels of development. Recently too, critical stakeholders and pundits in education are assigning a lot of relevance to university autonomy in the promotion of quality education especially in Nigeria. The supposition and claim that university autonomy enhances quality education is premised on the findings of some scholars who have conducted extensive research on the relationship between university autonomy and quality education.

For example in Germany, Ritzen (2016), conducted a study on university autonomy and improving educational output. The study presented sufficient evidence suggesting that an increase in autonomy for universities provides better educational outcomes and have a direct impact on labor market productivity. It also showed that university autonomy, specifically in

reference to academic approach, staffing, internal decision-making, and financial practices, combined with proper funding, is likely to enable universities to produce graduates with better competencies and to enhance both the quality and quantity of research output. It therefore recommended increased autonomy for universities. Also the findings of Ofoyuru, Lukwago & Kimoga (2016) in a study on the extent Institutional Autonomy affect content and quality of University Education in Uganda lent credence to the conclusions of Ritzen. In their study, they found out that partial institutional autonomy is inherent in the determination of content and quality of university education in Uganda. Hence they recommend that universities should be accorded more institutional autonomy in order to achieve better content and quality of education suitable for national development.

In Cambodia, Visalsok, Ngoy and Virak (2014) carried out a study on Governance reforms in higher education: A study of institutional autonomy. The findings too are similar to those reported by Ritzen and Ofoyuru et al. They revealed that institutional autonomy is highly practiced in Cambodia in respect to determination of quality of university education. They suggested that government should put in place regulatory measures to ensure quality in higher education. In the same vein in Nigeria, Utile (2021) found out that the one strategy to encourage university-level education is to implement a deliberate policy that promotes autonomy. Such autonomous reforms should aim to restore sanity, raise academic standards, and put the entire university system into right perspective, allowing it to compete favourably with international university norms. The findings of his study revealed that there is a statistical significant relationship between autonomy and the benefits it can have on the entire university system in Nigeria. These benefits are evidenced in the promotion of academic excellence, enhancement of quality and competition in universities, make universities self-sustaining, improves funding and management, and encourages participation through the Committee system.

Discussions

As already noted in the preceding sections, university autonomy in Nigeria is the independence of Nigerian universities from external pressures to effectively attend to their administrative, academic and financial programs in order to realise their educational objectives as specified in the National Policy on Education. By this is meant that these universities are to be unhindered and unfettered in the appointment of academic staff and constitution of university administrative heads. Without coercion, they formulate and implement the criteria for admission of students into their institutions; they determine the course contents of their universities and select areas of research. The legal foundations of these principles that summarize university autonomy in Nigeria are derived from: the 1948 United Nation's charter on Human Rights, the Right to Freedom of Expression and the Press as contained in the 1999 Constitutions of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and the provisions of the National Policy on Education (Utile, 2021; Onyemuche, A., E. & Ekpoafia, C., A., 2018). This is even as the Nigeria's National Policy on Education, sections 8 (63) on tertiary education clearly concedes to tertiary institutions unfettered powers to internal organization and administration as well as their academic freedom covering; selection of students for admission, except where the law prescribes otherwise, appointment of their staff, selection of area of research and determination of course content (F.R.N., 2004).

How then can the delineated specific elements of university autonomy; administrative autonomy and academic freedom, promote quality education in Nigeria? To begin with, Nigerian universities are caught in the trappings of 'he who plays the piper dictates the tune' (Ojedele & Fadokun, 2009). Universities in Nigeria, most especially public universities are heavily dependent on the government for funds. Government influence is noticed in almost every sector of university education. Government appoint vice chancellors of public universities and some senior members of the administrative unit. Government also through its parastatals like the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board establish and control admission requirements of the various universities in order to maintain the Federal Character principle. These approaches water down quality output from the universities. This is for the reason that unqualified staff and students easily find their way into the university via quota system instead of merit (Enemuo 2004). Sometimes too, when universities may have the need to employ more staff, they are fettered by government policies; leaving the remaining academic staff overstretched and disproportionate by the number of students they handle. The persistent erosion on university autonomy and the infraction of laws governing the operation of government-owned universities by its stakeholders clearly compromise the ideals of individual universities which are geared towards advancement of knowledge through quality education.

However if the universities are allowed to operate within the legal and policy prescriptions that grant them autonomy of administration, employment and admissions, each university will adhere strictly to its philosophy and goals which are ingredients for quality driven education. They will determine sources of funds for their institution including tuition rates for students. They can employ sufficient and qualified staff and manage them effectively without godfatherism at play. They will set their standards for admission of students; determine their course content and areas of research. They will be able to drive knowledge beyond its frontiers. The outcome will be victory and progress for all; the Government, the education sector and the society. The government will have an educated community from whose wealth of human capital a vibrant and progressive knowledge based economy could be created. The universities will remain focused to the pursuit of their educational ideals and promote the development of knowledge. The society at large benefits from an academic community that is devoted towards the advancement of its socio-economic and democratic principles. These suppositions accord well with Nwaokugha (2021) who believes that autonomy transforms the university system so much that individual universities can re-strategize so as to address local, regional and national needs of the people and this re-strategizing comes with enhanced improvement in research, management of resources, improved teaching and learning that can result in improved production of human capital.

Conclusion and recommendations

The paper has demonstrated that quality education is the dream and aspiration of any nation that hopes to remain relevant in a highly competitive and globalized economy. To attain quality education, there are certain indispensable measures or steps all stakeholders in education but especially the government must take. One of these measures is the full implementation of university autonomy. Nigeria's education system which currently is performing abysmally low in terms of quality now has a leeway through the full implementation of university autonomy

for the restoration of confidence in her educational output both locally and internationally. For beyond the provision of basic infrastructures and funds for administrative purposes, a government encumbered and inflected university education system is basically lame in pursuance of quality education except it breathes the air of autonomy and academic freedom. The work therefore makes the following recommendation: First, that Government at the Federal and State levels should see the provision and attainment of quality education a task of urgent attention. Second, Government need to understand that university autonomy has positive relations to quality education and therefore should grant more autonomy to universities to enable them manage their educational affairs in line with the vision and mission of the institutions. Third, the Federal Ministry of Education and all regulatory agencies of the federal government linked with admissions, supervision and control of university education such as Nigeria Universities' Commission (NUC) and Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB), should conform and comply with the statutory provisions of university autonomy as contained in the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and the National Policy on Education.

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