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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Autonomy and Accountability in the Nigerian University System

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ABSTRACT

The university system is anchored on certain pillars of support. Two of which are academic autonomy and accountability of the university system. The legal instruments that authorized the establishment of the university in Nigeria provide enough frameworks for its development if they are followed as expected. But over the years, there are violations and non-compliance with the requirements for autonomy. Governments or its agencies are involved in the erosion of the university autonomy in many respects such as in appointments and termination of appointments, financial matters, academic affairs and the like. Instances exist where government appoints and removes the Vice Chancellors without recourse to the Governing Council; refused to constitute the Governing Council or even set up a Special Intervention Team to undermine the law requiring her to run the university through the instrument of the Governing Council. In another situation, quality control measures such as setting academic standard which are statutorily the responsibilities of Senate is being done by government agency. Being that as it may, all stake-holders expect accountability in the university system. This paper is organised on the theoritical foundation anchored on accountability theory propounded by Frink and Kilmoski (2004), Violation of university autonomy in Nigeria in recent time, how accountability operates in the Nigerian University system, followed by conclusion and suggestions. It however cautioned that both academic autonomy and accountability in the Nigerian university system should be nurtured, with time it would gain appreciable recognition in the country.

Keywords: Academic autonomy; accountability; government; university; governing council

INTRODUCTION

University autonomy and accountability are two fundamental pillars that shape the governance and functionality of the university system. University education in Nigeria began with the establishment of the University College, Ibadan in 1948. Ever since then, there has been exponential growth and development in the system. Universally, university education has existed for over ten centuries (Boyd, & King, 1981) whereas, Nigerian university system is less than a century old (Fafunwa, 2004). Therefore, autonomy and accountability in the Nigerian university system may still be in its infancy as compared in developed and ancient climes.

The goals of university education is the development and dissemination of information through teaching, research and community service (Paul and Amadi 2017, Oyebamiji et al, 2019). These goals can hardly be fulfilled without the harmonious relationships that should exist between the university stakeholders which include the Visitor, students, parents and other interested persons. The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria placed university institutions on the concurrent list. This means that the Federal and State Governments can legislate on the matter of a university leading to public ownership of the

university. Private individuals and corporate organizations are also empowered legally to establish university in the country. From a university college at the eve of independence in 1960, the quest for university education in the country has led to the establishment in less than a century of over 270 universities made up of 62 federal, 63 states and 149 privately owned universities respectively (NUC, 2024). Therefore, university autonomy and accountability as observed in Nigeria could be influenced by the ownership structure which implies the concepts may not be construed to be the same in public and private educational institutions. In this paper our reference would be public universities. Institutional autonomy and sustained accountability drive corporate organisations. As envisaged by Adeyemi (2011), corporate governance in the university system in Nigeria would address issues of financial efficiency, quality of leadership, quality of performance, appointment and promotion, participation and accessibility, interaction among stakeholders, unionism and industrial harmony, autonomy and academic freedom and bureaucracy and decision speed. In this paper, a theoretical foundation shall be laid; main concepts clarified, and a discussion of university autonomy and accountability in contemporary Nigeria are discussed.

Theoretical Background and Clarification of Concepts

This work is anchored on accountability theory propounded by Frink and Kilmoski (2004). The theory viewed the concept of accountability through the axis of the operations of the social system. To them, the success or failure of any social organization depends on the process of accountability in operation. They postulated that accountability is the adhesive that binds social systems together. That for every task assigned there should be a corresponding answerability on how it was carried out. General agreement about expectations and rules guiding behavior should be strictly followed. Accountability therefor sustains the social organization as administrators are called to answer for their actions or inactions. By so doing, orderliness and responsibilities in the conducts of public affairs in financial, academic and administrative affairs are sustained. The theory is apt for this work because Nigerian universities are products of law of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The laws, rules, regulations and policies should guide the operation of every actor in the university system. It may not be necessary for government or its agency to interfere in the daily operation of the university in as much as there is compliance with the laid down procedures or operational legal instruments. Where there is infraction, disciplinary actions follow. So, if every stake holder in the Nigerian university system follows the rules, there would be accountability and the university autonomy would be guaranteed, functional and productive.

This paper dwells on the twin concepts of autonomy and accountability which are discussed in this section. Autonomy is closely related to freedom. Though, the concepts of university autonomy and academic freedom are not exactly the same. Oyebamiji et al (2019) argued that academic freedom has to do with individual lecturers' rights to independent thinking, invention, research, teaching and creation of knowledge and the dissemination of knowledge without fear of intimidation from within and outside the university. In support, (Paul and Amadi, 2017) felt that academic freedom is individual privilege of academic staff, while autonomy is the institution privilege. Thus, university autonomy is institution based while academic freedom is individualized. The main objective is to sustain internal control and ward off external control especially from the government in matters relating to financial resources distribution, staff recruitment; formation of policies on the condition of study; conduct of teaching and research. Autonomy has to do with the institutional exercise of freedom and discretion in the discharge of their responsibilities. Olorunsola (2018) supported the view that university autonomy is necessary for management of university affairs and staff control. Autonomy enhances the management sense of taking initiative to transact the institutional activities within the laid down laws without unnecessary external control. Paul and Amadi (2017) defined university autonomy as the freedom of a university to run its own affairs without direction or influence from any level of government. Thus, university autonomy connotes a high degree of independence in taking or not taking certain actions in the conduct of the management of the university.

According to Sawyerr (1996), university autonomy includes the freedom of the institution to determine who should be employed to teach or admitted to study in it and what is to be taught, by whom, how and under what conditions. Ekundayo and Adedokun (2009) agreed that university autonomy relates to protection of the university from interference by government officials in the day to day running of the institution. Universities are involved in the selection of students, the appointment

and removal of staff (including the Vice-Chancellors); the determination of the content of university education and the control of degree standards. Any of these could be manipulated by vested interest groups in the absence of autonomy.

Accountability in education on the other hand has to do with the preparedness to provide transparency and answers to assigned tasks. Imakpokpomwan (2021) buttressed accountability in education as the process of demanding explanation from education stake-holders on specific aspects actors are functionally authorized to act. As Oyebamiji (et al 2019) put it, accountability in education is designed to be a rational, critical and systematic analysis of activities of the production process. The objective of educational venture is to ensure the attainment of set goals. Accountability is the process of determining if the set goals of education are attained or not or whether goals attainment was effective, efficient or not. Usman (2016) opined that accountability is usually linked to the management of the scarce resources of education to ensure prudent utilization of available resources for the accomplishment of the stated goals. Anderson (2005), felt that accountability should be focused on (a) compliance with regulations, (b) adherence to professional norms and (c) results. Regrettably it has focused less on compliance but instead on result. Universities in Nigeria are products of Acts of Parliaments, rules and regulations that guide virtually all aspects of its conduct, which should make accountability easier.

Imakpokpomwan (2021) however questioned who actually should be responsible for educational accountability; government, management, teachers, learners, communities, or who? For example; the Visitor is expected to cause a visitation panel to the universities at regular interval; study its reports, issue a white paper which guides further action. Supposing the government fails to carry out any of these, the university management may get away with any infraction. In this case, the government should be held accountable for the short-comings in the university. So, at every point, the actor responsible for accountability in the university system should be identified and held responsible. Hence, not only the teachers and school administrators should be held accountable but also other stakeholders including the government and parents (Alabi et al, 2022).

Violation of University Autonomy in Nigeria in Recent Time

National Universities Commission: The public universities are established by Acts of Parliaments which control its affairs. However, in 1962, the Federal Government of Nigeria, established the Nigerian Universities Commission- NUC (Igenegbai, 2021). The Decree No. 1 of 1974 empowered it to maintain standard, ensure general development and funding of university education in Nigeria. Over time it has metamorphosed into huge octopus, setting carrying capacity for the universities as well as setting academic guidelines such as Minimum Academic Standard (MAS), Benchmark Minimum Academic Standards (BMAS) and presently, the Core Curriculum Minimum Academic Standards (CCMAS) for the Nigeria university system. Adetunji (2015) argued that NUC has the mandate to accreditation of courses, and programmes, maintenance of minimum academic standards, monitoring of universities, providing guidelines and processing of applications for the establishment of new private universities. The mandate conflicts with the power given to the university senate to regulate academic standards.

University system is designed to be self-governed by insiders (Ogunode et al, 2024). Instead, the NUC runs Nigerian universities from the outside the campus (Paul and Amadi, 2017). In 2024, the NUC came up with CCMAS which is the latest in determining curriculum content on what to teach in each course in Nigerian universities. What then is now left for the Senate to regulate? According to Sawyerr (1996), university autonomy includes the freedom of the institution to determine what is to be taught, by whom, how and under what conditions. Instead of the university determining its standard, the NUC has assumed the role of academic standard providers in Nigeria. This is a clear violation of the university autonomy. No wonder Paul and Amadi (2017) described NUC as a very formidable agency of government in governing and regulating administrative and academic activities in Nigerian universities. Another exercise embarked on by the NUC is the accreditation of courses in the Nigerian University system. Some have questioned the credibility of the NUC in the conduct of the accreditation exercises. According to Sofoluwe et al, (2015), there were reports of manipulations in programme verification in the NUC exercise of accreditation. Instead of stake-holders to hold NUC accountable for failure to adequately fund the universities, NUC is holding departments and faculties responsible through the accreditation ritual for its failures to provide the needed

facilities in the universities.

Treasury Single Account (TSA): The Buhari regime (2015 to 2023) operated the Treasury Single Account. By this, the internally generated revenue of the university must be paid into the Federal Government operated TSA. Some scholars have investigated the contribution of TSA to revenue generation (Omosidi et al, 2020, Edoh et al 2023). Their findings show that the objective of the government in aggregating all revenue generation into a single account were for easy oversight and cost reduction (Edoh et al, 2023). From their findings, the Federal Government objectives in operating the TSA, were realized. If the FG aggregates to itself all revenues throughout the federation in a single account, were then is the oversight functions of the university councils of its funds since the FG aggregates revenue generation, oversees its operations and disburses handout to universities? The university autonomy is actuality relegated to the background in such a situation. On the other hand, who in this case accounts for what? Where then are the authorities of the Council if the federal Government of Nigeria that appointed Council operate the bank accounts of their universities in the name of Treasury Single Account?

Uzochukwu et al (2017) raised the issue of erosion of the Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2007 which supports the universities to expend whatever they realize as internally generated revenue. In defiance of that Act of Parliament, TSA expects the universities to remit whatever was generated to it. Uzochukwu et al, (2017) found that the operation of the TSA has often thrown university management into disarray whenever the needed funds are not forth coming from the TSA administrators thus leading to forfeitures of grants from the international communities, late payment of salaries and delay generally in making essential payments for implementation of programmes and projects.

Integrated Personnel and payroll Information System (IPPIS)

The Federal Government introduced the IPPIS to the nation in 2006 (Targba and Osuji, 2023). If the main goal of IPPIS was to entrench transparency and accountability in the Federal public service human resources records and payroll administration as opined by Musa et al, (2020), failed to prevent a former Accountant general of the Federation from allegation of siphoning over 80 billion Naira from the scheme in the first instance. IPPIS was operated in phases. In 2019 it lump the Federal Government Ministries, Departments and most agencies including the University staff (Hassan et al 2023). The Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) vehemently opposed the introduction of the platform (IPPIS) because they believed it was established to erode the university autonomy and would be a conduit pipe to siphon the resources of the nation (Edema, 2024). Major failures of the IPPIS as it applies to the university system include none capturing of the peculiarity of the Nigerian university system, non-recognition of sabbatical and visiting lecturers status, non-recognition of payment of promotion arrear, external examiner, external assessors or earned academic allowance (Targba and Osuji, 2023, Hassan et al, 2023). Thus, the operation of the IPPIS positioned the Federal Government of Nigeria to run the universities on purely civil service template. On the contrary, the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) however suggested the replacement of IPPIS with the University Transparency and Accountability System (UTAS). The union believed that UTAS captured the peculiarities of the Nigerian university system. The IPPIS did not provide for the recruitments of lecturers when there were vacancies to fill until approval to that effect was received from the Federal Government through the office of the Account General of the Federation. Such approval hardly came until the IPPIS was abrogated from the university system in October 2024 (Tunji 2024). The university's argument against this policy is based on the fact that the institution is supposed to be guided by Council on matter of financial management. The Office of the Accountant General of the Federation (OAGF) usurped that power, thereby making the Governing Council of the universities sidelined. According to Targba and Osuji (2023), IPPIS specifically violated university autonomy by transferring powers from their various governing councils to the office of the Accountant General of the Federation (OAGF). With the current arrangement under IPPIS, universities cannot recruit and control the budgeting process of the universities they are supposed to govern,

In addition, the IPPIS was designed to phase out staff at age 60 contrary to the university regulation of Professors retiring at age 70 (Hassan 2023, Tagba and Osuji, 2023). Forcing the IPPIS on the university was to operate the university on the civil service template. With the OAGF being submerged in allegation of fraud estimated at over $130 million. It means university unions opposition to IPPIS of eroding their autonomy was not misplaced.

Appointment of the Vice Chancellors: Decree 23 of 1975 eroded the powers of council to appoint the Vice Chancellor as its statutory responsibility to appoint the Vice-Chancellors instead of the Visitor who is the President of Nigeria in case of Federal Universities and the Governors in case of state owned Universities. In each case, the accountability of the university then reverts to the Visitor instead of the university council. The appointment of the Vice-Chancellors has become a political chess game. All sorts of group leaders, traditional leaders, market group leaders, heavy weight politicians are recruited to “fight” for the installation of a Vice-Chancellor. Olorunsola (2018) alluded to the situation where demand for indigenous Vice Chancellor has become the norm rather than the exception. In that wise, the aspirant to the office of the VC would have to patronize the community leaders who would fight for his emergence and in due time demand for their own share in area of admission, appointments and the award of contracts.

The over bearing political interference in university administration could create instability in the ‘system. The Ambrose Alli University (AAU), Ekpoma,Edo State,Nigeria is an instance. The Governing Council of the AAU was dissolved in 2021. Prof B.O. Osadolor was installed as Acting Vice Chancellor in the interim on May 10, 2021 under the Special Intervention law promulgated in 2021. On February 8, 2022, he was removed and replaced with Prof Sonnie Adagboyin who was also appointed in an Acting capacity (Adewale, 2022). Prof Sonnie Adagboyin was also replaced by Prof Samuel Olowo who took over as another Acting Vice Chancellor in September 2024. Meanwhile a ten man Special Intervention Team (SIT) was installed in 2021 to exercise the powers of Governing Council of the University for six months (Edo State Government, 2022). The SIT effectively occupied and carried out the functions of running the Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma from 2021 to 2024 (Edo State Government, 2022). The SIT was accused by the Academic Staff Union of Universities, of select salary payment, stagnation of promotion of staff, termination of staff appointment and the like (Adedipe, 2023). These were clear erosion of university autonomy. Where the visitor is in doubt of the Governing Council, a Visitation Panel ought to have been set up to investigate and report its findings which normally would result in issuing a white paper for implementation of the Visitation Panel report. This was not done. Instead, the functions of the Governing Council was usurped by Special Intervention Team whose report never received an issuance of a white paper until the end of that tenure.

Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB)

It was empowered by Decree No2 of 1978 and subsequently amended by Decree 33 of 1989 and Decree 4 of 1993 (Igenegbai, 2021). Among other functions, it was made to conduct the Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examinations and also to place suitable qualified candidates into the universities. Overtime, the examination body eroded the autonomy of the universities in determining the quality of its entrants. JAMB activities became dissatisfactory hence the universities took it upon themselves to conduct another screening test called the Post-University Matriculation Examinations. Up till now, JAMB authorizes the universities admission procedures including the determination of the carrying capacity of the university programmes which is an erosion of the university autonomy.

Accountability in the Nigerian University System

Scholars like (Sofoluwe et al 2015, Imakpokpomwan, 2021, Ogunode et al 2024) have argued about who should actually be responsible for accountability in the education system in Nigeria Accountability implies openness, responsibilities to answer questions over the actions and inactions of the universities. There are many facets of accountability in education. It could be for financial and material resources invested in the system, or for the academic goal of the institution. Nevertheless, governments, institutions and individuals have invested enormous resources into the university system. Managers should be able to understand that the public wants to know how the universities handle the resources entrusted into them. Universities should shift attention to the society in terms of impact making and showing accountability. Universities should develop a knowledge based society and take responsibilities for the socio cultural and overall well-being of the society (Paul and Amadi, 2017). There is every reason why the university must be held accountable. The university system is a creation of the society and public universities are being funded by the tax payers (Ogunode et al 2024, Sofoluwe et al, 2015). Elements of accountability in the university include the laws and policies established for the orderly development of the universities that must be complied with. For example, the Governing Council of the university is established by government and should account to the government for their activities. Another element is the visitation panel that visits the university on the behest of the

government. Their reports are supposed to be submitted to government and white paper produced by the government which would be actionable to streamline the workings of the university system.

Governments therefore demand accountability on the part of Nigerian universities through the NUC (Adetunji, 2015). Still, it appears that accountability in the system is weak. Ogunode et al (2024), however believed that lack of political will by the government weakens accountability in the university system in Nigeria. As required by law, government is expected to set up visitation panel whose task it is to do an audit of the system. In some cases, government do not set up the visitation panel as regularly required, or when visitation panel reports are submitted, no white papers are released. Where white papers are released, implementation of recommendation may not be forthcoming. These are short comings in the system. Government, in such instances should be held accountable for such lapses. As seen in the case of Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma, instead of the Visitor to set up a Visitation panel, he introduced the Special Intervention Team (SIT) which is like running the university through the backdoor. University autonomy has been eroded and accountability has been forsaken, consideration for the taxpayer may have been taken for granted. According to Ogunade et al, (2024) if government plays its part as it should be, the Nigerian universities would be better than what they are now.

It is also argued that lack of autonomy weakens the accountability process of the universities. When government and its agencies implements government policies contrary to the rules, it is difficult for such institution to hold the universities accountable. For example, the Tertiary Education Trust Fund which is expected to hold the university accountable for project done is the same recommending contractors from God-knows-where to execute university project. Poorly implemented projects in TETFUND sponsored infrastructural projects in the universities abound with allegation of shady dealings (Okoronkwo (2024).

Accountability also covers the curriculum content which the universities teach its students. How relevant are the curriculum to the daily living in the community? We teach agricultural science but import rice from far away Asia. In the Faculty of Education, would-be teachers are trained. Do the Nigerian universities reflect changes made in the secondary school curriculum by the Nigerian Educational Research Development Council? For example, internet is gradually becoming a medium through which instructions are delivered. Are Nigerian universities reflecting the needs to produce teachers for the online classes? For now, it appears there is so much work to do to actualize that.

Paul and Amadi (2017) argued that accountability demands that management involves students in assessing the lecturers' performance and promotion. But students in Nigeria have metamorphosed from Student Union (SU) to Student Union Government (SUG). This is an indication that its activities are highly subjective to political tone of the day. Recently, in 2024, an incident involving the Student Union Government occurred in the University of Benin which reveals SUG biases toward the main stream political party. The three major political parties in Edo State campaigning for gubernatorial election were invited by the Staff Association to defend their manifesto. One of the political parties in the good books of the Student Union Government was unhindered by the SUG. The second Political Party was not so allowed and their activities were disrupted by the student body leading to gunshot injuries and the suspension of the SUG (Ero, 2024). Such partisanship would lead the universities into trouble waters if university management is not proactive in handling student union activities.

For accountability, the Vice-Chancellors should make periodic report of their stewardship to Senate and Council. Their assessment procedure should include the strategic plan of the administration. Orolunsola (2018) found a significant relationship between university autonomy and management advocating that if university autonomy is eroded, the management of the university would be hindered. University autonomy therefore, encourages judicious management of budgetary allocation to universities through strong independent internal audit system that would entrust probity and accountability in the university system.

CONCLUSIONS

University autonomy and accountability in the Nigerian university system are essential in fostering academic freedom, innovation and effective governance. However, this autonomy should be balanced with strict accountability mechanisms to ensure that the university institutions fulfill their public responsibilities to the varied stake-holders. The universities cannot attain its goals if they do not enjoy academic autonomy and where autonomy is granted without accountability, management of the institution may lose its focus. A well-

defined framework that encourages transparency, oversight, and performance evaluation can help strengthen the relationship between university autonomy and national development. Certainly, accountability is not restricted to any particular person or group but for all stake-holders functionally authorized to perform certain duties in the administration of the Nigerian university system.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following suggestions are made to improve on the existing situation.

1. The government and the university management should continue to open up the option for dialogue which encourages democratic disposition that sustains academic autonomy.
2. University stake-holders should strive for global best practices in the administration of the universities. Academic autonomy should not be taken for granted but with mutual reciprocity, it could be nurtured and sustained.
3. The universities are products of law. The laws should be allowed to guide the operations of the university. Where there is infraction, the rule of law should be upheld in awarding punishment irrespective of those involved.
4. Government agencies such as National University Commission, should be held accountable for failures in providing facilities in the universities.
5. The management of each university should be held accountable for the execution of the approved project and programmes, they approve for their universities.

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