



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### PERSPECTIVES OF UNIVERSITY AUTONOMY IN NIGERIA.

**Chinedu R. Aguba, Ph.D.**

Department of Educational Management, Enugu State University of Science and Technology, Enugu-Nigeria.

#### Manuscript Info

#### Abstract

#### Manuscript History

Received: 30 September 2016

Final Accepted: 30 October 2016

Published: November 2016

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#### Introduction:-

Universities are established for the common good of the people. William (1992) opined that strong universities are necessary for promoting African capacities to plan and manage national affairs in the spheres of culture, education, and science and technology. He reasoned that autonomy is central to the growth and development of universities. In the words of Adeniran (2000:1)

*autonomy for universities is defined in terms of their freedom to govern themselves, appoint their key officers, determine the conditions of service of their staff, control their student admissions and academic curricula, control their finances and generally regulate themselves as independent legal entities without undue interference from the government and its agencies.*

This view is supported by Ojo (2010) who perceived university autonomy as “that freedom granted each university to manage its internal affairs without undue interference from outside bodies.

Davis (1966) and Corson (1975) warned that for the university to discharge its statutory functions effectively, it should be free to decide: which students shall be admitted and to what discipline they shall be subjected; who shall teach, how much they shall be paid, when they shall be promoted or disciplined, and whether they shall have tenure; the substance of the course, the nature of the curricula, and the standards for degrees; the relative emphasis on instruction, research and public service; how the institution's resources shall be prudently allocated among various departments and faculties. In its own reaction, ASUU (2002:2) referred to university autonomy as,

*the right of the members of the academic community to determine the manner in, or the ground rules by, which they are governed and their capacity; as a unity, to control their own affairs and shape their own destiny, free of external interference or diktat. it embodied the right of the university to determine by, and train, whom to appoint or dismiss, what kind of research to undertake and what path of researched knowledge to pursue, where the frontiers of knowledge lie, in which direction they may be advanced, and how to perform those self-imposed tasks.*

These submissions of Davis, Corson and ASUU are very apt in the description of university autonomy because they touch virtually every facet of university administration. University autonomy in its strictest sense includes the

**Corresponding Author:- Chinedu R. Aguba.**

Address:- Department of Educational Management, Enugu State University of Science and Technology,

2317

authority and power of respective universities to appoint, dismiss and discipline staff, financial independence and other things necessary for a self governing academic community.

Academic freedom lies at the heart of university autonomy. Hinchliffe (1987) noted that academic freedom is the liberty of the university to determine curricula and how to teach. He opined that it entails the “liberty to do research, publish and disseminate knowledge freely, without let or hindrance”. Precisely, academic freedom is all about intellectual freedom. It guarantees excellence in all aspects of the university teaching and research. It is only through the open competition of ideas that innovation and development can be advanced. The right to hold any opinion, no matter how unpopular, to express it freely and the tradition of not only tolerating but also encouraging the holding of diverse and differing views on any issue is the hallmark of academic freedom. Truth emerges in the course of clash of opposing ideas and development takes place through dialectical interaction of antithetical social forces. Ocho (1988:37) proclaimed that “progress is not possible where people are not free to be different.” The pride of academics lies with the free search and free dissemination of knowledge for knowledge is light and ignorance can never govern knowledge.

The Federal Government of Nigeria (2013) enunciated the traditional areas of academic freedom and autonomy for institutions as follows: selection of students, “excepts where the law prescribes otherwise”, appointment of staff; teaching, selecting of areas of research and determining the content of courses. the University of Sokoto Senate as reflected in Ojo (1990:67) specified that institutional autonomy implied

- *The freedom of universities to select their student and staff by criteria chosen by the universities themselves;*
- *Autonomy to shape their curriculum and syllabus;*
- *the freedom to decide how to allocate among their various activities, such funds as are made available to them.*

However, Nicol in Ojo (1995: 65) remarked that “academic freedom cannot be regarded as implying exemption from the laws of the land as far as libel, slander, keeping of the peace and sedition are concerned”. Supporting this view, Adamolekun (1989) stressed that staff and students of the university are not above the law of the land. So, where clear cases of breaches of penal and criminal laws have taken place, the university authority is not empowered to treat the matter as an internal affair. the Ashby Commission Report (1960) maintained that while each federal or regional university should be autonomous, the overall national interest should be safeguarded. The report showed that the interest of the nation should always be held more sacrosanct than issues bordering on university autonomy.

#### **NUC Perception of University Autonomy and its Administrative Implications:-**

The National Universities Commission (NUC) was set up in 1962 following the recommendation of the Ashby Commission on Higher Education. It emerged as an administrative department in the then cabinet office. By Decree No. 1 of 1974, the NUC was reconstituted as a statutory body in order to give it the proper legal instrument to perform its functions (FGN 2000:1-3). The Executive Secretary is the chief executive officer of the Commission whose principal duty is the responsibility for the execution of the policy of the Commission on routine basis. The National Universities Commission (NUC) is made up of the following departments; Personnel Management, Finance and Supplies, Academic Planning, Physical Planning, Research and Post graduate development, Data Management and Executive Secretary’s office. Each of these departments is headed by a Director.

The functions of the National Universities Commission as spelt out in the Federal Government of Nigeria (2000:1-3) include:

- *To advise the Head of the Federal Government, through the minister, on the creation of new universities and other degree granting institutions in Nigeria;*
- *To prepare after consultations with all the state governments, the National Manpower Board and such other bodies as it considers appropriate, periodic master plans for the balanced and coordinated development of universities in Nigeria and such plans include:*
- *The general programmes to be pursued by the universities in order to ensure that they are fully adequate to national needs and objectives;*
- *Recommendations for the establishment and location of new universities as and when considered necessary; and*
- *Recommendations for the establishment of new faculties or postgraduate institutions in existing universities or the approval or disapproval to establish such faculties or institutions.*

- To make such other investigations relating to higher education that the Commission may consider necessary in the national interest;
- To make such recommendations to the federal government and state governments or to the universities relating to higher education as the Commission may consider necessary to be in the national interest.
- To make such recommendations to the federal government and state governments or to the universities relating to higher education in Nigeria; and study the financial needs of university research and to ensure that adequate provision is made for this in the universities.
- To receive block grants from the federal government and to allocate them to universities in accordance with such formula as may be laid down by the federal executive Council.
- To take into account, in advising the federal government on university finances such grants as may be made to the universities by state governments and by persons and institutions in and outside Nigeria.
- To collate, analyze and publish information relating to university education in Nigeria and from other sources where such information is relevant to the discharge of its functions under this Act;
- To undertake periodic reviews of the term and conditions of service of personnel engaged in the universities and to make recommendations thereon to the federal government where appropriate;
- To recommend to the Visitor of a university that a visitation be made to such university as and when it considers it necessary;
- To act as the agency for channeling all external aid to the universities in Nigeria; and lastly.
- To carry out such other activities that are conducive to the discharge of its functions.

The FGN (2000) further states that a major integral function of the NUC is accreditation of degree and other academic programmes. Accreditation simply means a system for recognizing educational institutions for a level of performance, integrity and quality which attracted them to the confidence of the educational community, the public they serve and employers of labour. The essence of accreditation as stated in the FGN, NUC (2000) are to ensure that a minimum level of academic standards and competence are attained, maintained and enhanced; to assure employers and other members of the community that Nigerian graduates of all academic programmes have attained an acceptable level of competence in their areas of specialization, and, to certify to the international community that the programmes offered in Nigerian universities are of high standards and the graduates are adequate and have attained comparable standards for employment, and for further studies.

From the above stated functions of the National Universities Commission (NUC), it seems that complete university autonomy in Nigeria is illusory. For example, the NUC is charged with the; approval and disapproval of new academic programmes and establishment of new faculties, relating to the government the financial needs of universities, receipt of funds from the government and its disbursement to the universities, recommendation to the visitor of a university that a visitation be made, and above all, review of conditions of services of university staff. Another clause in the functions of the NUC which could have many interpretations is "to carry out such other activities that are conducive to the discharge of its functions." Some of these functions assigned to the NUC could lead to administrative clashes between the NUC and the university authorities. These functions of the NUC are in sharp contrast with the provision of various university Acts, Edicts or Decrees which empower the Governing Councils to establish, after considering the recommendation of the Senate in that behalf, faculties, institutes, schools, boards departments and other unit of learning and research, to prescribe their organization, constitution and functions and to modify or revise same (FGN 1981). Also, it is the responsibility of various Governing Councils to review the conditions of services of their staff and not NUC (Adeniran 2000).

However, the National Universities Commission feel that the university is the bedrock upon which all economic and social development in Nigeria must vest. FGN (1963:28) asserted that "the strength of any nation is its professional and scientific manpower." As a result, the NUC feels that it is duty bound to supervise the activities of all the universities in Nigeria. The National Universities Commission (NUC) is not alone in the opinion that universities should not be completely free to manage their human and material resources without the encroachment of outside bodies such as NUC. Ike (1976:168) described those who preach the doctrine of complete university autonomy as utopian. He reasoned that,

*Universities have been established and are being financed by government for a purpose, and it sounds utopian to expect the government to turn each of these universities loose to university Councils and*

*Professors who would be free to request as much money as they consider appropriate and to spend what they receive as they deem proper, without being answerable to anybody outside the university circle.*

This opinion suggests nothing short of absolute lack of confidence in the use of Governing Council and Senate in the administration each university in Nigeria.

Supporting Ike (1976), Aminu (1988) observed that university autonomy is not a Charter of privilege and cannot obviate accountability or the rule of law. In a Swift reaction, he reiterated that the NUC is charged with the duty to review the collective conditions of service of all university staff. Unfortunately, this is contrary to the provision of the university laws which mandate the Governing Council of each university to review and determine the conditions of service of its staff. Still, Abubakar (2000) opined that university autonomy is not a legal concept but a mere ethical or academic concept believed to be a prerequisite if the universities are to discharge their functions effectively. In other words, he maintained that autonomy is not a right but privilege to the universities. He subscribed to the view of Ojo (1990) that no university can be fully autonomous in the face of the present day reality of interdependence of mankind. Ukpabi (1992) lamented that many staff carry academic freedom and autonomy too far. He posited that many people tend to forget many limitations imposed on autonomy by government regulations. Ayu (1994) ruled out absolute autonomy for universities in Nigeria as it had not been achieved by any nation.

An essential area in the conception of university autonomy is in the design of curricular and teaching. Ayu (1994) maintained that, the freedom to decide what to teach must be exercised within the frame work of an ever changing national objective and aspiration. Okafor (1971: 194) stressed that no university in Nigeria has developed undergraduate curricular specifically tailored for the Nigerian Society. He reasoned that the undergraduate programmes in Nigeria resemble the humorous attempt to produce “an ideal bride for the prince of Wales by assembling a pretty nose from here, a good figure from there and a lovely pair of eyes from yet another source”.

It is the view of Okafor that all the academic programmes that are run in the universities should be regulated by the government and its agencies. This is to guard against a situation where the nation’s university graduates would in the word of Ocho (1988:73) want to “speak like the American, dress like the English, eat like the French and think like a slave“ Education should be rooted in one’s culture. The guiding spirit for African education should be centred on civilization without westernization.

The National Universities Commission (NUC) has always maintained that the courses taught in the university should be related to the needs of the country as far as possible and should follow the guidelines laid down by the NUC. Plato in Hans (1967) advocated that the child should be educated by the state, for the state and in state institutions. This is to achieve proper citizenship education. The NUC is therefore, obliged to look into the academic agenda of all the universities in Nigeria with a view to meeting the national needs and aspirations. In his own reaction, Adetoro (1969:6) cautioned that academic freedom does not include the right to use a classroom as a platform for political and ideological indoctrination or for preaching subversion of constituted authority. He revealed that “the prophet does not belong to the classroom.” Musa (1982) contented that classrooms should not serve as arenas for political rallies. All these views boil down to the fact that what to teach must be relevant to the national objectives of Nigeria. It is to achieve this feat that Borishade (2001:1) declared that it was high time Nigerian universities overhauled their curricula in order to make them more relevant and to ensure quality control in order to make them more relevant and to ensure quality control in university education in the country. He pointed out that the NUC would map out “benchmark-style minimum academic standards for all the programmes in all the universities.” The benchmark, according to Borishade would indicate the minimum expectations of knowledge and skills to be acquired in the course of studies to qualify the candidate for the award of the degree.

On the relationship between the universities and their visitors, NUC remarked that since the visitors represent the federal and state governments which fund all the universities, the visitors should be consulted when it comes to the appointment of the Vice-Chancellors who should supervise the disbursement of the funds provided. This view is shared with Abdulkadir (1988) who noted that universities must be accountable to the government. He warned that autonomy in the real sense of it will further aggravate and totally destroy the university system. Yesufu (2013) observed that “the African university should accept the hegemony of government.” He contented that the university is generally set up on the initiative, and at the expenses of the government to meet certain objectives.

The wave of government intrusion into university management is not restricted to Nigeria. It is not even restricted to Africa. Carr-Saunders (1961) revealed that University of Paris, France is controlled by the government. Also, he reported that universities in Sweden are controlled by the government to the extent that the appointment of Professors and lecturers is the prerogative of the Crown. Similarly, Mountford (2006) stressed that; in the Federal German Republic, the universities are publicly controlled, Professors, while enjoying freedom in their choice of curriculum are civil servants and are 'called' to their posts by the minister of Education.

In the United States of America (USA), both the private and public universities are under severe state attack. Their hitherto autonomous status is rapidly vanishing into thin air (Mountford 2006). He reasoned that private universities in the USA which receive grants are under constant pressure from the sources of their income. Mountford equally concluded that owing to the fact that education in the United States is a state rather than a federal responsibility, the pattern of governmental control of the public universities is not uniform. It is on this basis that Ojo (1990) doubted the feasibility of granting autonomy to Nigerian universities whereas more advanced countries have found it difficult to give autonomy to their universities.

Liverpool (2001:8) stressed that Sweden has completed far-reaching reforms designed to devolve authority from government to institutions. According to him, the Danish Government intervened with the aim of reducing the length of courses and time taken to graduate. He emphasized that Italy recently granted budget autonomy to her institutions and that the government in New Zealand deals with the funding of tuition costs, the funding of research as well as governance and accountability of tertiary institutions. Liverpool further maintained that,

*Australia academics have come to believe that there is undue government intervention in their affairs. Government has decreed which institutions can be universities, has forced amalgamations between formerly autonomous institutions, has denied salary increases to academic staff, has required students to pay one quarter or more of the cost of tuition, has attempted to change the size and composition of university councils, and has pressured university management to reduce entitlements of academic staff to tenure.*

He concluded with the view that in Africa generally and Nigeria in particular, government has the authority to intervene in the domestic operations of universities. This view was supported by Ajayi, Gma and Johnson (1996) who indicated that no country in the world has a government which does not retain some control over its institutions of higher education, which are considered as public services. The results of a study on university autonomy in the Commonwealth (Richardson and Fielden 1997) were reported region by region along a continuum. The Caribbean countries came out as least intrusive, Canada next, then Britain and Australia; New Zealand was slightly more intrusive, then the African countries by a significant margin; then the Asian Commonwealth countries by an equal margin.

It seems that complete university autonomy may not be tenable anywhere in the world. Autonomy like any freedom or right has its limitations. It is, therefore, not out of place to posit that one's right ends where another one's right begins. Self-governance of universities may not be complete if they do not enjoy financial autonomy. But absolute financial autonomy may be unrealizable as long as the universities rely on government funding and donors who may stipulate the specific purposes or projects tied to their funding. The greater emphasis lies on the degree and extent at which universities lose their autonomy to external bodies such as the government and NUC. For example, Mounford (2006) revealed that the position in the United Kingdom is different. He noted that British universities have not come under the same degree of government control as universities in France, Sweden, Germany and the USA. Reston (1970:5) observed that all the debate about whether a university should be "involved" in the affairs of the world or "detached" seems to have "settled down to the common sense conclusion that it must be both".

Autonomy, good as it may be, will only be achievable by universities if the Governing Councils live up to their responsibilities. The greatest surprise is that some Council members have aided and abetted, sometimes even led the attack on the university autonomy. MacIver (1955) emphasized that the failure of the Governing Council to serve as the guardian of the university has exposed the university system to ridicule, odium and invasion of privacy.

### **Limitations/Conclusion:-**

Adamolekun (1989:5-6) identified the following as some of the limitations of autonomy.

- *Government funding: the much cherished liberty to decide what disciplines to pursue and what courses to teach must be taken within the constraints of available of available government grants;*
- *Research and teaching in universities have significant implications for a nation's economic and social development and this makes the university highly susceptible to governmental influence; and*
- *Accountability: This is the liability of one body to be called upon to explain, account for or be answerable for what it does.*

Still on the limitations of autonomy, Adeniran (2000:5) as Minister of Education directed that the criteria for fund allocation will be approved by government on the advice of the NUC. He declared that "the NUC will monitor fund utilization, accountability and quality of output in the universities twice a year."

It may not be possible for the university to refuse to direct its research potential towards goals desired by its chief financier, the government or its agencies such as the NUC. The university may equally find it difficult to refuse government request for an admission policy which for example, favours a higher ratio for science students than the Arts on the basis of 60:40. The university has a duty to ensure that all the resources made available are devoted purposefully and the government, acting on behalf of the tax-payers, has a duty to ensure that this is so.

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