



University Autonomy and Academic Freedom: Implication for Nigerian Universities

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Abstract

The study investigated university autonomy and academic freedom and their implications for Nigerian university. Two research questions were posed and two hypotheses were postulated for the study. The population of the study comprised academic staff of the three universities in Rivers State. A sample size of 160 lecturers was drawn from the institutions investigated. A self designed instrument titled university autonomy and academic freedom questionnaire (UAAFQ) was used for the data gathering, while the hypothesis of no significant difference was statistically tested at 0.05 level of significance. From the data analysis, recommendations were proffered. This academic work is addressed to the Nigerian government, National University Commission, Ministry of Education, and the national assembly for the need to speedily pass the bills on university autonomy and academic freedom into law.

Keywords: University, Autonomy, Academic freedom, Lecturers, Nigeria.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows:

Okai, N. O., & Worlu, P. (2014). University Autonomy and Academic Freedom: Implication for Nigerian Universities. *International Journal of Scientific Research in Education*, 7(2), 191-201. Retrieved [DATE] from <http://www.ij sre.com>

INTRODUCTION

The concern for university autonomy has become part of Nigeria's national agenda aimed towards reforms in university systems (Ololube, Amaele, Kpolovie, Onyekwere, & Elechi, 2012), and the making of successful universities requires a supportive governance structure in which universities have autonomy to achieve objectives, whether in research or teaching (Raza, 2009). There is no country of the world that can move significantly forward without guaranteeing autonomy and academic freedom to its tertiary institution (Owhondah, 2008). The overriding challenge of the university, particularly Nigeria universities is how to have full autonomy and academic freedom. It is difficult to harness and consolidate Nigerian universities capacity to employ their own staff, admit their students, determine the balance between teaching and research, establish and maintain its own standards without the fear of unjustifiable external influence (Goma, 1989, Anyamele, 2004). University autonomy in this context refers to the condition, which permits an institution of higher learning to govern itself without any external interference. In this regard, universities are permitted or allowed freedom from government regulation, terms of internal management of the university, its governance, and the internal management of financial resources. Furthermore, it means the ability of universities to generate income from non public sources, the recruitment of staff, determine condition of study and services of its staff, freedom to teach and carry out research to proffer solutions to the problems that plague the education industry and the society particularly in the area of agriculture and governance, and operate as an independent legal entity without undue influence and interference from government and its agencies. Basically, one of the fundamental issues of university autonomy is in the area of appointment and removal of its vice chancellor and the composition of the governing council (Chapman & Austin, 2002).

According to Kerr in Jegede (2010), autonomy allows the university to stand as an independent legal entity on the basis of the status conferred to it by law, it is the prescribed criteria towards the establishment of a formal university and it enables such universities to stand as administrative service of the state.

William (1995) pointed that historically, university autonomy and academic freedom originated from ancient Greek, and it means freedom from external control. According to Sidney (1969), the philosophy of intellectual freedom was granted to scholars in the sense that knowledge grew when individuals are allowed to engage in research. This implies that researchers are prone to contribute knowledge. Therefore, a free interplay of idea must be granted to such dedicated scholars. To achieve this, universities are expected to be adequately funded. As a corollary, Okai and Elekwa (2012) states that fund allocation to the federal and state university in Nigeria is grossly inadequate, therefore, the university system should seek alternative means of funding the university in order to meet the relevant needs of universities.

University education in Nigeria has been a neglected venture. Commissioned reports, research publications and academic debates on the need for higher education reform, autonomy and freedom beginning in the early 1990s and extending into late 2014, have not yielded any significant results because of the disjointed and a little at a time action by the government (Ololube et al., 2012). According to ASUU (2002), university autonomy and academic freedom should be more than a statement of policy. It must be the very essence and legalizes spirit of the academic institution itself. To this end, no nation can unmindfully move forward without university autonomy and academic freedom. As a corollary, Owhonda (2008) states that university existence is hope to fasten the economy of the nation, political awareness and prepare the ground for technological advancement. In fact it is seen as the pivot of social development.

Academic freedom guarantees the right of lecturers to teach without fear of reprisals to advance the frontiers of knowledge as widely as possible. The result of non-academic freedom negates the existence of true academic culture in the tertiary institutions (Fashina, 2001). For example, to protect and sustain university autonomy and academic freedom, appointments and promotion of lecturers has to be regularized such that it gives recognition to lecturers on the basis of their intellectual contributions, expertise and professionalism. This can be achieved when the university is free from political insulation and is given the mandate to choose their own vice chancellor and other principal officers (Jegede, 2010).

The above mentioned background highlights the importance of this present study whose major focus is to examine the implication of university autonomy and academic freedom and effective administration of tertiary institutions in Nigeria. According to Owmondah (2008), the question of university autonomy and academic freedom in Nigeria has become a perennial and contentious issue amid the state and federal owned universities and the academic staff union of universities (ASUU). The issue has led to industrial disputes between the parties especially since the 1990s. The question of university autonomy and academic freedom in Nigeria has, thus, become an issue of concern; these issues tend to generate conflicts, which led to industrial action in 2012 and 2013 academic session. The universities lost several semesters and indeed years to such industrial actions because of government failure to fund the universities, pay earned allowances to lecturers and improve infrastructure. Okai (2013) states that the objectives of highest education can hardly be achieved when resources are in short supply. For teaching and learning process to effectively take place resources must be provided adequately. The conflict generated by such absence of industrial peace in the higher education results in some lecturers leaving the country for greener pastures abroad (brain drain).

In addition, the tempo in the recruitment of lecturers has drastically reduced so much that the few ones remaining in the system are struggling with excess workload, for instance it takes more than three years to round off a masters degree program which is meant for a maximum of two years. Again, because of the present situation it is difficult to determine the beginning of a new academic session.

The purpose of this study is to examine university autonomy and academic freedom with a view to determine its implications for Nigeria universities. In this regard, the study focused on the perceptions of lecturers in both federal and state universities with regard to their views on university autonomy and academic freedom, which is aimed to examine how the concept was practiced in Nigerian universities. It is expected that this study will highlight the actual situation of autonomy and academic freedom in Nigerian universities. Equally, we hope that this study will provide important information for the Nigerian government to be acquainted with their responsibilities in the matter of university autonomy and academic freedom, and be well-informed in dissemination of information to address the problems that plague higher educational system in the country. To this end, the following research questions and hypotheses were formulated to direct the study:

Research Questions

- What is the awareness of university lecturers in autonomy and academic freedom in tertiary institution in Rivers State?
- What is the extent of the practice of university autonomy and academic freedom in tertiary institution in Rivers State?

Hypotheses

- H_{01} : There is no significant difference between male and female lecturers' perception of federal and state universities of the practice of university autonomy and academic freedom in tertiary institutions
- H_{02} : There is no significant difference between federal and state university lecturers' awareness of the principle of university autonomy and academic freedom in tertiary institutions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The idea of university autonomy was developed from the theory of institutional autonomy by Feinberg (1989), which states that if institutions are allowed to carry out the purpose for which they are established without external forces, manipulation, direct control, or imposition of controlling measures, they would be capable of unleashing their potentials, and work towards optimal achievement of set goals.

The concept autonomy may be applied both to the individual person and to a group or an institution. An autonomous person is, essentially, a person who is able to act according to his or her own direction, which is the prerequisite for rational human action. An autonomous institution is one able to regulate its own affairs. The relation between the self-government of a group and individual autonomy is complicated by the need to distinguish between the collective self-government of a group and the self-direction of an individual member of that group. Guttmann in Onwugbuna (2003) supports this theory when he opined that autonomy should be given a central place in the articulation of educational policies, since it is a necessary condition to the realization of core goals of liberal education. From the point of view of Feinberg (1989) and Guttmann in Onwugbuna (2003), it could be seen that the theory of institutional autonomy is in line with the concept of independence. This concept suggests that in every endeavour of men, they require some form of independence. When people work on the strength of a well-directed goal without undue pressures from the external too they would be able to work towards achievement of set goals. This explains why independent states (countries free from colonial and neocolonial powers) are in a better position to articulate their goals and objectives, and device the most appropriate means of achieving them (Onwugbuna 2003).

The worry for university autonomy and academic freedom is at the level of interference from government in the internal governance of the university in the performance of its traditional functions. In order to effectively generate and disseminate knowledge and information, universities must enjoy a great measure of autonomy to run their internal affairs and decide on what research to do, faculties (lecturers) should be able to decide not only what research to undertake, but also what ideas to disseminate (Ajayi & Awe, 2010).

Narkhede (2001) subscribes to the theory of university autonomy when he opined that to be autonomous, universities must assist to create the zeal of students to be hard working, and thus strive to improve the universities standards. Universities should be able to train skillful personnel to boost the level of development of the particular country rapidly. The inculcation of academic enthusiasm and hard work are very salient points identified by Mehta (2004) to be benefits of institutional autonomy. These as well as the general improvement in the institutions standard are the hallmarks of reputable world class universities. It is no wonder therefore, that human resources development is rapid in most European and American universities because of their subscription to the theory of university autonomy.

CONCEPT OF UNIVERSITY AUTONOMY AND ACADEMIC FREEDOM

The term university autonomy refers to the condition, which permits an institution of higher learning/education to govern itself without external interference. In the present situation, university understanding of institutional autonomy means that the university enjoys freedom from government regulations especially in terms of the internal organization of the university, its governance, the funding arrangement to generate of income for its sustainability the recruitment of its staff, conditions of study and finally, the freedom to conduct teaching, research and publications. The relationship between academic freedom and autonomy is that they are complimentary as there can be no academic freedom without institutional autonomy. Institutional autonomy has been regarded essentially as academic freedom. Academic freedom is concerned with the individual freedom of academic staff to impart knowledge unhindered and the freedom for students to choose what they wish to study (Ajayi & Awe, 2010).

In practice, no higher education system is totally free from external influence. Therefore institutional autonomy may not be constant over time. It is a boundary condition that defines the relations between

university government and society, which enable further modified, redefined and in indeed new conditions that will guide such relationship to enhance its continuance (Paterson, 2005).

On a final note, academic staff must be free to express their views on any current issue in the society. They must ensure that their teachings are in conformity with the professional ethics or requirements and must desist from using their classrooms for propaganda. Academic staff must be given the freedom to think, to investigate and publish their result of their finding in place of their choice. From the foregoing views of autonomy and academic freedom we looked at autonomy from three dimensions: procedural autonomy, organic autonomy and substantive autonomy.

Substantive Autonomy

This is the right of the university to determine its own program of study, and indeed set their goals.

Procedural Autonomy

This is the right of a university to determine the means in which it devotes itself to fulfill the areas of priorities which was agreed upon and consequently assigned to it as part of national policy.

Organic Autonomy

In this type of autonomy, the school is given the mandate to determine its academic organization. It could be based on facilities, departments and other area of specialization. In other words, the university is given the power to determine its constitutional form of academic arrangement.

UNIVERSITY AUTONOMY AND ACADEMIC FREEDOM: THE WAY FORWARD.

The legal perspective of autonomy as opposed to either the sociological or the historical subscribers of university autonomy is in terms of “independence from the state” and the principles of “self administration”. At the presentation of year 2000 budget the former president of Federal Republic of Nigeria Chief Olusegun Obasanjo announced that universities have been granted autonomy. Prior to the announcement by the former Nigerian president, the former executive secretary of national universities commission (NUC) Professor Jibril Aminu in June 1999 had earlier called for the deregulation of the universities funding. Based on this call, the former president announced in the budget of 2000 that he has granted autonomy to Nigerian tertiary institutions. The autonomy meant by the federal government included tertiary institutions funding for themselves. In other words the federal universities and other tertiary institutions are to look out for alternative source of funding in order to sustain their programmes. However, this is not what Prof. Aminu stood for. Aminu (1999) opined that the government alone cannot provide all the money required by the Nigerian universities to meet the minimum standard set by the United Nations, thus, advocated for deregulation of university funding to allow them charge their tuition fees.

Enaowho (1999) sees the role of NUC as a total encroachment in the functions of the council of senate which may not permit university autonomy and academic freedom. Autonomy in the university is the crux of the matter because of the fact that the federal government support for universities has made the universities to compromise their autonomy to satisfy the government. This is in line with the saying that “he who blows the piper dictates the tune”. The lack of autonomy in Nigerian universities has led to incessant crisis in the universities.

The former Vice-chancellor of the University of Calabar (Prof. Ekpo) in an interview with a Guardian reporter on Thursday June, 29, 2000, describes university autonomy as a welcome development, however, called for a careful implementation. He noted that the funding arrangement in the universities has not been good because the system depends largely on government for its financing. He specifically stated

that government cannot afford to stop giving grants to the universities just because it is giving them autonomy. He however noted that some level of autonomy existed in the university system in designing academic programmes, appointment, and promotion. In other words the activities of the universities as a whole are influenced by government. Prof Ayo Banjo, the former pro-Chancellor of the University of Port Harcourt, during his series of meetings with some principal officers on his maiden visit to the university, noted that sourcing other complimentary areas of funding for the university is critical. That fund would be a major challenge for the new governing councils of Nigerian universities. Furthermore, he declared that the universities will not have NUC or Ministry of Education run their money for them. He encouraged the university administrators to whole heartedly accept the challenges associated with running their own affairs. He however noted that government cannot completely deviate from funding universities due to autonomy and academic freedom given to universities. In addition, he further encouraged the need to source for funds and determine “areas of academic excellence” for both staff and students including how to spend government grants (Owhondah, 2008).

Anyamele (2004) noted that universities exist essentially for academic pursuits. However such pursuit may not be realized in a depressed and unfavourable environment. What is required is an environment that will broaden the financial base of the university. To this end, university management has a duty to create avenues to internally generate revenue, and also to ensure that there is effective management of the resources that are available in the university.

In an interview with a Guardian Reporter on Thursday June 20, 2014 on several issues including funding of university and university autonomy, Dr. Fagi Mohammed, the Nigerian national president of Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) was of the view that the main functions of the universities are that of teaching and research and this can only be achieved if the Nigeria university system is adequately funded. Universities are centres for producing ideas. To him, autonomy means deciding on the curriculum content, what to teach and the areas of research. He sees the senate as the final authority in academic affairs not government. Senate has such power in proper autonomy. In addition, he stated that autonomy does not mean that the university will not be funded by the government.

The review of literature has revealed that university autonomy guarantees the broadest possible academic, administrative and financial freedom as a means of facilitating the functions of universities, such as teaching, researching and the dissemination of information without any fear or political insulation. Autonomy also implies the obligation to permanently seek academic quality and excellence in all their activities (Owhondah 2008). One of the challenges autonomous universities face is reconciling the social function and academic excellence. Academic freedom is a necessary condition for freedom to teach, carry out research and publish the findings of the study without fear and molestation. Transmission of knowledge has to be controlled for the benefit of the society. Nigerian universities have been constrained by factors similar to lack of autonomy and academic freedom, the role of government, the military and political leaders and stakeholders maybe attributed to the diversified nature of Nigerian educational system.

It is imperative to advocate for full university autonomy because such autonomy is hope to create an enabling environment for the realization of the university set goals.

METHODOLOGY

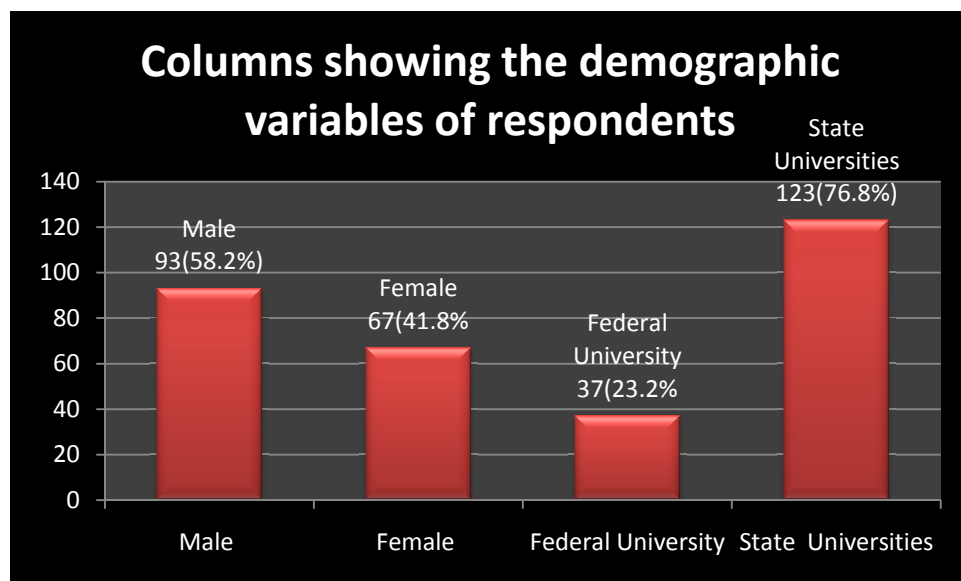
The study adopted a descriptive design method. A descriptive design seeks to collect information from the members of the study population based on the variable under investigation. Descriptive design would enable us to examine what the perception of respondents in respect to the study. The design tells us, in a sense, what and how to analyze the quantitative representations of the data. The design further tells us what type of statistical analysis to use (Ololube, 2009, Ololube et al., 2012).

The population of this study was drawn from three universities: one federal university and two state universities. The population of the study comprised academic staff of the universities under investigation, which consist of senior lecturers, lecturer I and II.

The study sample size was made up of 160 lecturers. To this end, 93(58.2%) were male and 67(41.8%) were female. 37(23.2%) respondents were from the federal university, while 123(76.8%) were from the state universities. A simple random sampling technique was adopted. The aim is to ensure that every member of the sampled population has the opportunity of being sampled.

Table 1: Demographic variables of the respondents

Variables		N	%
Gender	Male	93	58.2
	Female	67	41.8
Universities	Federal University	37	23.2
	State Universities	123	76.8



Instrumentation

The instrument for data collection for this study was questionnaire designed by the researchers titled university autonomy and academic freedom questionnaire (UNAFQ) was used for data gathering. The questionnaire was scaled on four point Likert pattern. The questionnaire was design to elicit information based on the variables under investigation.

The questionnaire was weighted thus:

Strongly agree	(SA)	4 points
Agree	(A)	3 points
Disagree	(D)	2 points
Strongly Disagree	(SD)	1 point

The instrument used in this research was valid because the researchers took time to comply with the formalities and procedures adopted in framing a research questionnaire (Ololube, 2006 p. 112; Nworgu, 1991, pp. 93-94). A reliability test was conducted using Pearson Product moment statistical tool and a cumulative reliability of .802 shows a strong reliability of the research instrument.

Data Analysis

The data collected was converted to means and rank order. The Z-test and T-test was used for testing the null hypothesis of the study at 0.05 level of significance. The mean scores determine the acceptance or rejection of the rating items. In order to make decisions from results obtained, the mean responses were computed thus: $4+3+2+1= 10/4 = 2.5$. In the light of the above computation, any mean score more than 2.5 was accepted, while the mean score of 2.5 and below was taken as rejected.

RESULTS

Research Question I

What is the awareness of the university lecturers in autonomy and academic freedom in tertiary institution in Rivers State?

Table 2: Mean (X) and rank order statics score on lecturer awareness of university autonomy and academic freedom

S/NO	Items	X1	X2	Arrangement	Rank Order
1	Relationship between University autonomy & academic freedom	2.67	2.53	2.60	5 th
2	Enabling environment for academic work	2.71	2.61	2.66	3 rd
3	Autonomy and academic freedom as democratic in nature	2.52	2.57	2.55	7 th
4	Freedom of speech and self administration	3.02	2.72	2.87	2 nd
5	Lecturers' freedom of formulating hypothesis and definition.	2.57	2.53	2.55	7 th
6	Lectures freedom of expression	3.01	3.11	3.06	1 st
7	Control and management of resources	2.53	2.62	2.58	6 th
8	Payment of staff entitlement	2.71	2.51	2.61	4 th
Mean set 2.50					

Results from table 2 revealed that universities lecturers are highly knowledgeable about university autonomy and academic freedom.

Research Question 2

What is the extent of the practice of university autonomy and academic freedom in tertiary institution in Rivers State?

Table 3 revealed that the practice of university autonomy and academic freedom in tertiary institution in Rivers State is not properly practiced *vis-à-vis* in the areas of payment of staff entitlement, victimization of lecturers and conducive environment, which ranked 7th and 9th positions respectively.

Table 3: Mean (x) and rank order statistics scores on lecturers assessment of the practice of university autonomy and academic freedom.

S/NO	Items	X1	X2	Arrangement	Rank Order
1	Lecturers protection	2.53	2.61	2.57	3 rd
2	Conducive environment	2.37	2.41	2.39	9 th
3	Availability of fund	2.51	2.56	2.54	4 th
4	Victimization of lecturers	2.42	2.39	2.41	7 th
5	Lecturers immune to consecutive criticism	2.61	2.52	2.57	3 rd
6	Professional ethic	2.61	2.71	2.66	1 st
7	Effect of Research findings	2.63	2.57	2.60	2 nd
8	Government assistance on Research work	2.41	2.39	2.50	6 th
9	Payment of staff entitlement	2.28	2.33	2.41	7 th
Mean set = 2.50					

Hypothesis 1

There is no significant difference between male and female lecturers' perception of federal and state universities of the practice of university autonomy and academic freedom in tertiary institutions

Table 4 shows that the calculated Z-value of 0.75 at 158 degree of freedom is less than the critical value of 1.96. Therefore, the null hypothesis is accepted. The implication is that there is no significant difference between the male and female lecturers' perceptions of the practice of the university autonomy and academic freedom in tertiary institution.

Table 4: Z-test analysis of the practice of university autonomy and academic freedom.

Category of lecturer	N	Mean	SD	Df	z-crit. value	Value Critical	Remarks
Male	93	2.41	191	158	0.75	1.96	Accepted
Female	67	2.18	1.86				

Hypothesis 2

There is no significant difference between federal and state university lecturers' awareness of the principle of university autonomy and academic freedom in tertiary institutions.

Table 5 shows the mean rating of the federal university lecturers is 3.16 and 3.10 for state universities lecturers. The *t*-value of .061 revealed that no significant differences existed. The implication is that there is no significant difference between the categories of lecturers view on their awareness of the principles of university autonomy and academic freedom in tertiary institution.

Table 5: T-test analysis of lecturer awareness of the principles of university autonomy and academic freedom in tertiary institutions.

Categories	N	Mean	SD	T. Value	Remarks
Federal University	37	3.16	.22	.061	Accepted
State Universities	123	3.10	.25		

CONCLUSION

This study has relatively shown the implication of university autonomy and academic freedom on tertiary institution development. The study showed that male and female universities lecturers' were highly knowledgeable and aware in the issues of university autonomy and academic freedom. The male and female lecturers showed a high level of freedom in their different profession. Thus, lecturers are free to teach, pass or fail a student, carry out research in their areas of interest without external molestation. Male and female lecturers are aware of university autonomy and academic freedom. The administrative procedures in the state universities are the same with federal universities. The duties of the Governing Council, Senate, Deans, and the Heads of Departments are the same in both the federal and state universities. The freedom of all management staff is guaranteed in that they are free to carry out their assignments. However, the practice of university autonomy and academic freedom tend to be minimally practiced.

University autonomy is expected to provide a better framework through a decentralized management culture within the university system. The designation of authority with accountability for the academics as well as the associate management function is therefore, essential for the success of university autonomy.

The findings of this study is relevant in the management for educational of educational organization this could be seen in terms of the, practice of autonomy and academic freedom in tertiary institutions. In this regard, university autonomy and academic freedom can be linked with the idea of democracy as a form of government, thus, the concept of university autonomy is similar to freedom of speech and self expression. Lecturers are free to teach, investigate and impart same to their students without any form of external influence that may disturb such expression.

Finally, a good university leader must practice democratic leadership principles for effective followership, which in turn will lead to effective autonomy and academic freedom. In fact there must be cordial relationship between the university management and academic staff, to guarantee the full practice of university autonomy and academic freedom.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. The passage of bill on university autonomy and academic freedom should be done quickly by the Nigerian national assembly.
2. An enabling environment for the implementation for practice of university autonomy should be provided.
3. Seminars and workshop should be organized to further educate lecturers on university autonomy and academic freedom.
4. Lecturers should not be victimized in course of publication, and expression.
5. Payment of staff salaries and entitlements should be done as at when due.

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