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IMPLEMENTATION OF AUTONOMY IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY SYSTEM: CASE STUDY OF NORTH EAST FEDERAL UNIVERSITIES, NIGERIA

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Annotation: This study assessed the level of autonomy implementation in the universities in Nigeria. Survey design was for the study. The population of the study consisted of 11,344 academic staff in the 17 public universities in the region (NUC, 2019 Digest). The study sample only 240 respondents which were selected through stratified and random sampling. 240 academic were selected from twelve public universities through purposive sampling technique. An instrument titled "Implementation of Universities Autonomy Questionnaire (IUAQ) was developed by the researchers. Modified four point Likert Scale with a range of Strongly Agree (SA) 4 points; Agree (A) 3 points; Disagree (D) 2 points and Strongly Disagree (SD) 1 point were adopted for the study. The instrument was validated by the researchers and two Lecturers in Measurement and Evaluation to ensure face and content validity. Their comments and suggestions were used to prepare the final draft of the instrument (IUAQ)). After the validation, the test of reliability utilizing Pearson Product Movement Correlation result was 0.74. The instrument was justified to be reliable. Data generated for the study was analyzed using mean and standard deviation. The data collected and analyzed showed that the level of autonomy implementation in the federal universities in Nigeria is low to some extent in the areas of funding, recruitment, appointment of principals' officers and curriculum development. The result also showed that Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS), National universities commission (NUC) Act on curriculum development, centralization of university admission and appointment of governing council are the factors that have militated against autonomy in the universities in Nigeria. Based on these findings, the paper hereby suggested that the government should grant full autonomy to the universities in the area of funding, recruitment, appointment of principals' officers and curriculum development. The government should also all remove the universities from the supervision of National universities commission and Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS) platform.

Key words: Autonomy, University System, Nigerian Universities

INTRODUCTION

In the sprawling expanse of Nigeria's North East, a transformative evolution unfolds. Embarking on an audacious quest for educational innovation, the Federal Universities set their sights on autonomy. As their journey commences, the winds of change carry the promise of a brighter future, forever altering the academic landscape of this vibrant region. The Confederation of Indian Universities (2004) defined autonomy as the necessary degree of independence from external control that the university requires in respect of its internal organization and governance; the internal distribution of financial resources; staff recruitment; the setting of the condition of study; the freedom to conduct teaching and research. Also, Ajayi (1989) looked at autonomy as the freedom of the institution to make its own decisions on broad complex issues without interference from external or non-university agencies. Autonomy in higher education especially in the universities according to NOUN (2009) implies that each institution must be governed according to the law that establishes it. Every institution has its law, edict or even decree which spells out the functions of the various organs, such as council, senate, congregation, faculty, department and institute etc. Autonomy in higher education relates to the protection of the institutions from interference by government officials in the day-to-day running of the institutions especially on the issues related to the selection of students; the appointment and removal of the academic staff; including the Vice-Chancellors/Rectors/Provost; the determination of contents of higher education and the control of standards. Aiyedun et al (2021) noted that for the Nigerian universities to meet up with the global best practices and be ranked among the best universities worldwide, there must be financial, academic, human resources and administrative autonomy in all aspects of the university's operations known as total or complete autonomy.

Azenabor (2022) stated that a concept that is a corollary to University autonomy is academic freedom, which constitutes the soul of the university. University autonomy is to guarantee academic freedom, which is vital to the university. Ogunode and Ibrahim (2023) the complete (total) universities' autonomy is the freedom of the universities to determine their financial operations, academic operations, human resources and administrative processes without external influence. Universities' autonomy is the freedom of universities to coordinate their activities of staff employment, programme development, student's admission, faculties and department establishment, awards of degrees and finance administration without any interference or influence from the government.

There are forms of university autonomy or dimension of autonomy. We have individual autonomy and institutional autonomy. Individual autonomy according to Confederation of Indian Universities (2004) is an academic freedom. Individual autonomy has to do with members of the academic community. That is scholars, teachers and students pursuing their scholarly activities concerning ethical rules, and international standards without outside pressure. Furthermore, they maintain, that academic freedom engages the obligation of each member of the academic profession to excellence, innovation and advancing the frontiers of knowledge through research and diffusion of its results through teaching and publication.

Institutional Autonomy is according to Fourie (2004) is the relative freedom of the institution to conduct its own affairs free from outside interference, whether from the state, the market, donors or other stakeholders. Anya (1982) defines institutional autonomy as the ability conferred on institutional arrangements of the state on each university to manage its affairs and consists usually of the corporate freedom of institutions to exercise its prerogatives in the areas of appointment of its staff and of its governing authorities; pursuit of institutional

goals as defined for itself under the rules of the law of the land; insulation of the institution in the management of its routine affairs from political, administrative; religions and other authorities.

Fourie (2004) states that institutional autonomy has two dimensions: Substantive autonomy; and Procedural autonomy. **Substantive Autonomy deals** with the power of the institution to determine its own goals and programmes, while **Procedural Autonomy** refers to the power of the institution to determine the means by, which its goals and programmes will be pursued, the how of academy. Justifying this statement, Berdahl (1990) holds that the essential ingredients of institutional autonomy to include: Freedom to select staff and students; determine the conditions under which they remain in the university; freedom to determine curriculum contents and degree standards; freedom to allocate funds across different categories of expenditures.

Reasons for university autonomy in Nigeria according to Azenabor (2022) are: it is a traditional right, which has worked over the years. The responsibilities of creating new knowledge through scholarship and research, transmitting and preserving culture, developing the capacity in students for critical and independent judgment, and cultivating aesthetic sensitivities are best carried out in environments free from direct external control and domination. The complexity of academic work requires a fair measure of independence. Autonomy provides for both staff and students checks and balances and better morale in a democratic society.

The integration of the federal universities into the Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS), centralization of the university system, centralization of admission, governing council dominance, Establishment of National Universities Commission (NUC), poor implementation of the university Autonomy Bill and poor funding model of public universities are the tools used by the Nigerian government to undermine universities autonomy in Nigeria (Azenabor, 2022; Ogunode, Ugochukwu & Iroegbu, 2022; Ogunode, Akinjobi & Musa, 2022; Ogunode & Ibrahim, 2023; NOUN, 2012).

Autonomy is a principle upon which the higher education system normally operates and through which operational stability and actualization of goals of the higher educational institutions are ensured. When autonomy is enthroned in the right perspective, it then facilitates academic freedom and accountability. The survival of the higher education system is directly proportional to, or to a large extent dependent on the institutionalization of autonomy (NOUN, 2012). Due to the fact that autonomy is vital for the sustainability of universities, the academic staff union of Nigerian universities have been insisting the Nigerian government give the universities full autonomy. Due to the pressure, the federal government of Nigeria in 2004 drafted a Bill to universities operation in Nigeria. The Bill of 2004 Act stated that **Powers of the Council** in 2AA. The powers of the Council shall be exercised, as in the Law and Statutes of each University and to that extent establishment circulars that are inconsistent with the Laws and Statutes of the University shall not apply to the Universities. The Act of 2004 ensure partial autonomy for the universities operation. The implementation of this Act have been very poor in the universities management in Nigeria. The Nigerian government keeping intervening in the administration and management of the universities by introducing policies and programme that obviously violated the autonomy of the universities. For instance, in 2019 the Nigerian government asked all federal universities to enroll in integration of the universities into the Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS) which implies a central payment system for all federal government staff. In respect of this Ogunode and Ibrahim (2023) observed that the integration of the universities into the Integrated

Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS) lowered the prestige, and status and violated the autonomy of the federal universities.

Statement of the Problem

Tertiary education which include the university system are structured to operate in full autonomy if they are to achieve their mandate. The mandate of the universities include; teaching, researching and provision of community. To realize these mandate, universities are supposed to operate in full autonomy with any government intervention and influence. It has been observed that most tertiary institutions especially the universities in developing countries including Nigeria are not given full autonomy to operate due to that that the government owns larger percentage of the investment in the universities. It has been established that many government in developing countries are financier of their public universities and because of this, the government interference with the running and management of the universities. In Nigeria, federal and state government in different time in past and in present come up with policies and force the public universities to implement such policies. Recently, the federal government asked all federal tertiary institutions to enroll in Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS). The Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS) is a central system for the payment of all federal government civil servant. It is imperative to assess the perception of academic staff on the level of autonomy implementation in federal universities: Case study of Federal Universities in North-East, Nigeria.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this paper is to assess the level of implementation of autonomy in universities in Nigeria. The specific objectives are;

i. To find out the extent to which financial autonomy of federal universities been achieved;
ii. To establish the extent to which federal universities' autonomy on staff recruit have been achieved;
iii. To assess the extent to which federal universities' autonomy to recruit its principals' officers have been achieved;
iv. To find out the extent to which federal universities autonomy of curriculum development have been achieved; and
v. To identify the factors militating against universities autonomy in Nigeria

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study.

1) To what extent have the financial autonomy of federal universities been achieved?
2) To what extent do federal universities have autonomy to recruit staff?
3) To what extent do federal universities have autonomy to recruit its principals' officers?
4) To what extent do federal universities have autonomy to develop its curriculum in Nigeria?
5) What is the factors militating against universities autonomy in Nigeria?

Methodology

The design of this research was a survey. The population of the study consisted of 11,344 academic staff in the 17 public universities in the region (NUC, 2019 Digest). The study sample only 240 respondents which were selected through stratified and random sampling. 240 academic were selected from twelve public universities through purposive sampling technique. An instrument titled "Implementation of Universities

Autonomy Questionnaire (IUAQ) was developed by the researchers. The instrument has 20 items. The (IUAQ) has two parts, part 1 and 2. Part one elicited demographic information on sex, age, academic status, experience, type and location. The 20 item on were structured on four point Likert Scale with a range of Strongly Agree (SA) 4 points; Agree (A) 3 points; Disagree (D) 2 points and Strongly Disagree (SD) 1 point respectively. The instrument was validated by the researchers and two Lecturers in Measurement and Evaluation to ensure face and content validity. Their comments and suggestions were used to prepare the final draft of the instrument (PLNRQ). After the validation, the test of reliability utilizing Pearson Product Movement Correlation result was 0.74. The instrument was justified to be reliable. Data generated for the study was analyzed using mean and standard deviation. The procedures employed in the analysis of the data collection were the frequency count and the mean statistic for the six research questions. The cut-off point for the rating scale was 2.50, obtained by dividing the sum of the numerical value by the number of scaling items. Scale rating on No Extent (NE) = 1, Low Extent (LE) = 2, moderate Extent (ME) = 3 and Great Extent (GE) = 4.

Data Analysis

Table 1: **Financial Autonomy of Public Universities Been Achieved**

S/N		MEAN	S.D	DECISION
1	Universities have right to increase tuition fees	2.4	2.37	Disagreed
2	Universities have generated a lot of funds to be self-independent	2.2	2.21	Disagreed
3	Universities have power to spend money without permission	2.3	2.31	Disagreed
4	Universities are free from government financial influence	2.1	2.28	Disagreed
	Total Mean	2.3		

The result collected revealed that item 1, 2, 3, and 4 had a mean scale of 2.4, 2.2, 2.3 and 2.4 and with a total cumulative mean of 2.33 implying that respondents disagreed that Universities have right to increase tuition fees, Universities have generated a lot of funds to be self-independent, Universities have power to spend money without permission and Universities are free from government financial influence. The result indicated that the total cumulative mean of 2.33 is below the cut-off point of 2.5 meaning that Universities do not have right to increase tuition fees, have not generated a lot of funds to be self-independent, has no power to spend money without permission and are not free from government financial influence.

Table 2: Public Universities Autonomy on Recruitment of Staff

S/N	MEAN	S.D	DECISION

1	Universities have right to hire staff without permission	2.4	2.37	Disagreed
2	Universities have right to decide salaries of staff	2.0	2.12	Disagreed
3	Universities have power to hire contract staff	2.2	2.21	Disagreed
4	Recruitment in Universities are free from government influence	2.3	2.32	Disagreed
	Total Means	2.3		

Result from table two disclosed that item 1, 2, 3 and 4 had scores of 2.4, 2.0, 2.2 and 2.3 with a total cumulative score of 2.3 which is below the cut-off point of 2.5. The result showed that respondents disagreed to all the items meaning that Universities do not have right to hire staff without permission, Universities do not have right to decide salaries of staff, Universities do not have power to hire contract staff and recruitment in Universities are not free from government influence.

Table 3: Public Universities Autonomy on Appointment on Principals' Officers

S/N		MEAN	S.D	DECISION
1	Universities have right to appoint principals officers without approval from the presidency	2.3	2,35	Disagreed
2	Universities have right to decide salaries of principals officers	2.2	2.27	Disagreed
3	Universities have power to remove principals' officer from office	2.0	2.12	Disagreed
	Total means	2.1		

Table three result revealed that item 1, 2 and 3 got the following means scores of 2.3, 2.2 and 2.1 with a cumulative scores of 2.1 which is below cut-off point of 2.5. This implies that all respondents disagreed on the item question raised. The result obtained showed that Universities do not have right to appoint principals officers without approval from the presidency, Universities do not have right to decide salaries of principals officers and Universities do not have power to remove principals' officer from office.

Table 4: Public Universities Autonomy and Curriculum Development

S/N		MEAN	S.D	DECISION
1	Universities have right to develop its curriculum	2.3	2.33	Disagreed

2	Universities have start a programme without permission	2.1	2.21	Disagreed
3	Universities have right to suspend programme in their universities without taking permission	2.0	2.12	Disagreed
	Total mean	2.2		

Result collected from table four showed that item 1, 2 and 3 with the following mean scores 2.3, 2.1, and 2.0 and a cumulative score of 2.2 which is lower than the cut-off point of 2.5. This result showed that respondents disagreed on all the item questions meaning that Universities do not have right to develop its curriculum, Universities do not have start a programme without permission and Universities do not have right to suspend programme in their universities without taking permission.

Table 5: Factors Militating Against Universities Autonomy in Nigeria

S/N		MEAN	S.D	DECISION
1	IPPIS	2.2	2.30	Disagreed
2	NUC Act on curriculum development	2.1	2.25	Disagreed
3	Centralization of university admission	2.3	2.39	Disagreed
4	Appointment of governing Board Council	2.0	2.21	Disagreed
	Total Mean	2.2		

Result on table five disclosed that item 1, 2, 3 and 4 with the following mean scores 2.2, 2.1, 2.3 and 2.3 and a cumulative score of 2.2 which is below the cut-off point of 2.5. The result collected revealed that respondents have a contrary view and accepted that Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS), NUC Act on curriculum development, Centralization of university admission and Appointment of governing Board Council are the factors that have militated against autonomy in the Nigerian universities.

Discussion of Findings

The result collected revealed that universities do not have right to increase tuition fees, have not generated a lot of funds to be self-independent, has no power to spend money without permission and are not free from government financial influence. This result is in line with the submission of Bello and Mela (2022); NOUN (2009); and Ogunode and Emmanuel (2023) that concluded that Nigerian universities lack financial autonomy.

The result also indicated that universities do not have right to hire staff without permission, do not have right to decide salaries of staff, do not have power to hire contract staff and recruitment in universities are not

free from government influence. This result supported the finding of Ogunode, Haliru, Shehu and Peter (2023) who stated that Nigerian universities cannot employed staff without permission. However, Olatunde-Aiyedun and Ogunode (2021) argues that as the nation grappled with a dire shortage of professional lecturers and teachers, the weight of external influence hindered the universities' ability to address this critical issue effectively. The call for autonomy echoed louder than ever, as the imperative for self-governance resounded throughout the academic corridors of Nigeria.

The result disclosed that universities do not have right to appoint principals officers without approval from the presidency, do not have right to decide salaries of principals officers and do not have power to remove principals' officer from office. Ogunode, Atobauka and Ayoko (2023) agreed with this discovered when they noted that political influence is the major determinant of appointment of principals' officers of higher institutions in Nigeria.

The result also disclosed that universities do not have right to develop its curriculum, do not have power to start a programme without permission and do not have right to suspend programme in the universities without taking permission. This result is in agreement with the finding of NOUN (2009) that noted universities in Nigeria lacks the power to develop curriculum except the National universities commission.

The result showed that Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS), NUC Act on curriculum development, Centralization of university admission and Appointment of governing Board Council are the factors that have militated against autonomy in the Nigerian universities. This result collaborated with the discovered of Aluko (2020); Ogunode and Garba (2023); Omeje, Ogbu, Nkwede and Njoku (2021); Ogunode and Ibrahim (2023) who concluded that Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS), NUC Act on curriculum development, Centralization of university admission and Appointment of governing Board Council are policies designed to militate against autonomy in the Nigerian universities.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The purpose of this paper is to assess the level of implementation of autonomy in universities in Nigeria. The specific objectives are; to find out the extent to which financial autonomy of public universities been achieved; to find out the extent to which public universities' autonomy on staff recruit have been achieved; to find out the extent to which public universities' autonomy to appointment of principals' officers have been achieved; to find out the extent to which public universities autonomy of curriculum development have been achieved and to find out the factors militating against universities autonomy in Nigeria.

The data collected and analyzed showed that the level of autonomy implementation in the universities in Nigeria is low to some extent in the area of financial, recruitment, appointment of principal officers and curriculum development. This result also showed that Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS), NUC Act on curriculum development, Centralization of university admission and Appointment of governing Board Council are the factors that have militated against autonomy in the Nigerian universities. Based on these discovery, the paper hereby suggested the following:

i. The government should grant full autonomy to the universities in the area of finance, recruitment, appointment of principals' officers and development of curriculum.

ii. The government should also all remove the universities from the supervision of National universities commission and Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS).

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