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UNIVERSITY AUTONOMY AND ADMINISTRATION OF PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES IN NORTH CENTRAL, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study examined university autonomy and the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria. The objectives of this study were to determine the influence of staffing and academic autonomy on the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria. Formulating two research questions aligned with the study's specific objectives. At the 0.05 level of significance, we formulated and tested two hypotheses. The study adopted a survey research design. The population of the study was 25,353, which comprised of academic and non-academic staff from public universities in North-Central Nigeria. The study had a sample size of 394, which was determined by applying Taro Yamane's formula. The study utilized proportionate sampling as the sampling technique. A self-structured questionnaire titled 'Influence of University Autonomy on the Administration of Public Universities Questionnaire' (IUAAPUQ) was used as an instrument for data collection. Using the Cronbach Alpha coefficient, we established the reliability of the instrument and obtained a reliability coefficient of 0.79. To answer the research questions, the data collected were analysed using descriptive statistics of mean and standard deviation, while chi-square of goodness of fit was used to test the null hypotheses at the 0.05 level of significance. The findings of the study revealed that staffing and academic autonomy have a significant influence on the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria. Based on the findings, it was recommended, among others, that; efforts be made to reduce unnecessary government interference in the internal affairs of universities. This includes allowing universities more autonomy in decision-making processes related to academic, and staffing matters.

Keywords: *University Autonomy Staffing Academic Administration*

INTRODUCTION

Education is a valuable tool for nation-building. Education is the process of developing individuals' abilities and capabilities to

realise human potential and transform individuals and nations in a broader sense. Nigeria's formal education system is divided into

three levels: primary, secondary, and postsecondary education. Postsecondary education, which includes university education, is the most important for manpower development. This is because at this level of education, the human resources needed to perform in various sectors of the economy are trained. University education is the branch of postsecondary education tasked with generating intellectuals, researchers, and the general workforce required for society's growth (Paul & Amadi, 2017). As a result, the quality of university education offered to the nation's population has a significant impact on the country's degree of development. Governments across the world emphasise the importance of university education for a country's economic success. In Nigeria, the Federal Republic of Nigeria's National Policy on Education (2014) outlined the goals of tertiary education, which include university education, to: contribute to national development through high-level relevant manpower training; develop and inculcate proper values for the survival of the individual and society; develop the intellectual capability of individuals to understand and appreciate their local and external environments; acquire both physical and intellectual skills which will enable individuals to be self-reliant and useful members of the society; promote and encourage scholarship and community service; forge and cement national unity; and promote national and international understanding and interaction.

Nigerian universities encounter numerous challenges as they strive to achieve these aims. One of the most pressing of these issues is university autonomy. To effectively carry out its statutory tasks, a university's administration must be free and independent of government and other forces. This viewpoint was supported by Mukoro (2017), who asserted that the International Conference convened by the United Nations Educational Statistics and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) in 1950 in Nice stipulated that universities worldwide should stand on three major principles: the right to pursue knowledge for its own sake and to follow wherever the search for truth may lead; the tolerance of divergent options and freedom from political interference; and the obligation. It was also stated that one method to achieve these goals is to resist any propensity to weaken university autonomy, which supports effective university administration and a nation's educational quality standard.

University administration is the mobilisation and allocation of university resources to meet the university's objectives. Effective university administration refers to the university management's capacity to meet the university's aims and objectives. John (2016) defines effective university administration as a condition in which successful and appropriate teaching and learning for all students occurs in the school, thereby increasing the morale of students, teachers, and management staff, as well as coordinating both human and material resources available in the school. A school cannot function properly unless it meets its aims. The more objectives the school achieves, the more productive it is perceived to be. According to Usman (2015), university administration includes staff employment, student admissions, the appointment and termination of university personnel and heads, the creation of academic policies, financial management, the general control of standards, and all other operations inside the institution.

According to Arikewuyo and Ilusanya (2019), a university's values are based on its autonomy in carrying out its ultimate administrative functions. The Federal Republic of Nigeria

reinforced this position in its National Policy on Education (2014), which emphasised that each institution of higher learning is responsible for its own internal organisation and administration. Kerr, on the other hand, argued in Okwor (2016) that, notwithstanding the legislation establishing universities, the government and external factors wield increasing power over university administrations. The encroachment of government powers on universities can be seen in four areas: a drastic reduction in budgetary allocation of funds to education, lecturer selection, approval of principal officer appointments without regard for their governing councils, and the establishment of supervisory agencies or bodies to erode university autonomy in the name of accountability and supervision. These organisations include the National University Commission (NUC), the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB), the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFUND), the Federal and State Ministries of Education, and the National Assembly Committees on Education. There are also certain undesirable policies, such as the quota system, which undermines the university system's functioning (Micah, 2020). The foregoing rhetoric appears to be impeding the university's effective administration.

For many years, trade unions in the country's universities have been fighting for autonomy, which would give university management complete control over their schools' activities. For example, the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) recently embarked on an eight-month strike action from February 14th to October 14th, 2022, because of the Federal Government's insistence on paying striking lecturers using an Integrated Payroll and Personnel System (IPPS) rather than the platform developed by the union known as Universities Transparency and Accountability Solution. Despite these protests, colleges are still not allowed to conduct their operations in accordance with the laws that established them. As a result, university autonomy issues have been a recurring problem in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

In 2004, Nigeria's National Assembly enacted a University Autonomy Bill, which attempted to make new and better conditions for university autonomy in Nigeria. The government and other agencies in Nigeria have corroded the bill's goals. Oloyede (2015) delivered a public lecture on the theme "The Journey to Excellence: Making Nigeria a Tertiary Education Hub for Africa" at Obafemi Awolowo University in Ile-Ife, expressing his displeasure with the erosion of autonomy in Nigerian universities, ranging from localization of student admission, staff recruitment, control of university finance, and curriculum content to the politicisation of university leadership in Nigeria. Furthermore, Olukoju (2021) emphasised how the nomination of vice chancellors has become contentious, with the job now being restricted to indigenes of the locality where the governor is from, thus sidestepping competence, talent, and intellectual savvy. In their contribution, Ogunode and Abubakar (2020) observed that these activities are affecting the effective administration of public universities in Nigeria, and they opined that university administration would be better than it is now if universities were allowed to exercise autonomy in managing their affairs without interference from the government of the day. In a similar vein, Ekpoafia and Amadi (2018) believe that universities require autonomy in areas such as staff employment, student admission, funding, vice chancellor appointments, institutional academic programmes, decision-making, and instructional delivery.

In line with the foregoing, since university education must be performed within the framework of the National Policy on Education, the government and its agencies must be sensitive to the issues and concerns surrounding university autonomy. This is basically vital because university autonomy is required for effective university administration.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Universities are institutions of higher learning saddled with the responsibility of producing intellectuals, researchers and required general workforce needed for societal and national development. Public universities though owned by the government are expected to be autonomous in their operations, especially in the areas of organisation, finance, staff employment, institutional academic programmes, admission of students and condition of service, if they must be viable, democratic, and functional to earn progressive results in attaining university goals. Unfortunately, it is perceived that the public universities have experienced continuous and undue interference from political stakeholders in its administration who have brought in an avalanche of setbacks to the smooth running of the university system. Altbach (2020) noted that till date Nigerian universities find it challenging to effectively discharge its statutory functions due to undue interference by government of the day. Currently the interference of government and external bodies is seen in staff employment, finance, appointment of principal officers, institutional academic programmes, and admission of students. This situation, no doubt is perceived to have grossly affected effective administration of universities and quality of university education provided as it is occasioned by continuous interference of government and political stakeholders in the mentioned areas of university administration which has been observed to affect the quality of staff employed, difficulty in accessing funds which has led to a decay in infrastructure and quality of teaching and learning and difficulty in curriculum design and implementation. The question now is: will university autonomy influence the administration of public universities? This is the crux of the problem of this study. Hence, the study investigated the influence of university autonomy on the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The objective of this study is to investigate influence of university autonomy on the administration of public universities in North Central Nigeria. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. ascertain influence of staffing autonomy on the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria.
2. establish influence of academic autonomy on the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions are raised to guide the study.

1. What is the influence of staffing autonomy on the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria?
2. What is the influence of academic autonomy on the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria?

STATEMENT OF HYPOTHESES

The following null hypotheses will be formulated and will be tested at the 0.05 level of significance.

1. Staffing autonomy does not significantly influence the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria.
2. Academic autonomy does not significantly influence the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Confederation of Indian Universities (2008) defines university autonomy as a university's degree of independence from external interference in terms of internal organisation and governance, internal financial resource distribution, staff recruitment, study conditions, and, finally, the freedom to teach and research. Concern for autonomy in Nigerian universities is obviously desirable. The institution reflects the apex of human capital development and the country's desire for success (Olorunsola, 2018). To be more specific, university autonomy is a university's level of self-regulation and administrative independence in terms of legal status, strategic decision-making, funding, employment, asset ownership, academic work and standards, and related activities (Assefa, 2008; Schmidt & Langberg, 2008). According to Olorunsola (2018), university autonomy (organisational, financial, personnel, and academic) has a considerable influence on university management, and decreasing university autonomy will have a big negative impact on university management. Reducing autonomy in universities will undoubtedly affect their management.

Staffing autonomy refers to a college's authority to recruit and set its own employment terms (Gulieva 2013). The ability of schools to attract their own professors is significant for both academic and financial challenges (Obia & Bassey, 2020). Staffing autonomy requires controlling total wage expenditures, setting individual salary levels, and being responsive when recruiting staff (Bach, 2016). According to the author, a wholly autonomous institution employs and compensates its employees directly, rather than through the government. Universities partially create their academic profiles during the recruitment process. As a result, this type of autonomy is intermediate between financial and academic autonomy and should be evaluated alongside the latter (Estermann & Nokkala, 2009). According to Nguyen et al. (2022), staffing has a positive impact on academic staff development, allowing for the development of plans and strategies to improve university efficiency. Staffing has a significant impact on the quality of teaching in Uganda's public institutions, according to Luija et al. (2017), and effective staffing would increase university teaching quality even if other factors remained constant. There is growing concern regarding personnel autonomy as well as the multiple rules governing the university's various employee classifications. There are separate legal regulations for public and private labour law, both within a country and across borders. As a result, developing this dimension of university autonomy is difficult; however, three dimensions can be used to estimate the state of staffing autonomy around the world: appointment recruitment procedures, university employee status, and staff salary levels (Akinwumi & Olaniyan, 2022). These three components outline the autonomy-based staffing dimension and explain the areas of concentration that develop when working within it.

Academic autonomy refers to universities' ability to design their own curriculum, syllabus, what to teach, how to educate, what to research, and how to evaluate students (Akinwumi & Olaniyan, 2020). Douglas (2021) defines academic autonomy as the ability to choose and design one's own curriculum, syllabus, what to teach, how to teach, what to research, and how to evaluate students. A critical examination of this reveals that academic autonomy allows individual institutions and lecturers to identify what they want to do in terms of teaching, learning, research, community service, and other activities that will help them achieve their specific mission and vision. This means that universities and their professors have the entire freedom to construct their academic policies, programmes, and profiles without intervention or disruption from the government or any of its authorities (Grey, 2017). Rónay and Niemczyk (2022) argue that academic autonomy should be included in the university charter to protect academic freedom. Academic autonomy must be encouraged by regulatory organisations to guarantee that academicians have sufficient space to pursue knowledge through research and academic engagement. Roberts et al. (2023) define academic freedom as the right to study and gain knowledge as desired and required by the researcher. Individuals thrive in an academically free environment where they can pursue knowledge without limits until they have truly fulfilled their pursuit. According to Belgaroui and Hamad (2021), academic autonomy enhances teaching quality, whereas admission policies promote educational performance; hence, institutions require actual autonomy to improve their performance. Okai and Worlu (2014) claimed that academic workers were competent and knowledgeable about issues such as university autonomy and academic freedom. They displayed a high level of freedom in their numerous jobs. Thus, academic workers are free to teach, pass or fail students, and do research in their field of interest without external interference. University administration is the use of university resources to carry out university courses with the goal of achieving university objectives (Ogunade, 2020). According to the author, university administration is the mobilisation and allocation of both human and material resources to achieve the institution's objectives. The objectives of university administration include: to implement the university's programme as defined; to allocate resources for the implementation of the university's programme; to ensure the implementation of the teaching programme; to ensure the implementation of the research programme; to ensure the delivery of quality community service programmes; to ensure effective staff development; to ensure effective student administration; and to ensure smooth implementation.

Similarly, university administration is the process of controlling, directing, planning, and organising all of an institution's resources in order to fulfil its stated goals and objectives (Obia & Bassey, 2020). According to the authors, the university system, like any other institution, exists to achieve certain goals that are relevant to overall societal development. Effective university management is crucial to the sector's growth and long-term viability. Higher education in Nigeria has encountered various challenges in recent years due to persistent government interference in institutional operations. For years, various trade unions at the country's universities have fought for autonomy, which would grant university administration unlimited control over their schools' activities. The current practice of the government selecting who heads institutions, the composition of the governing council, and other institutional officers is harmful to the sector's development

(Babalola, 2014). It has been observed that universities are no longer fully immune to political influence outside of the university system. The present government, notably in state-owned universities, has an active role in the selection and appointment of chief executives, deans, departmental heads, programme directors, and, most crucially, vice-chancellors.

Furthermore, it has been often stated that for Nigerian universities to play an important role and efficiently carry out their functions, the system must have a high degree of autonomy in addition to academic freedom for its academic staff (Haastrup et al., 2009). Scholars in the university community have the freedom to pursue knowledge without hindrance from outside sources (Obia and Bassey, 2020). Every university has its own set of rules or edicts outlining the tasks and responsibilities of the institution's many organs, such as the governing council, Senate, congregation, dean's committee, professors, and departments. To compete in the global economy, modern universities must improve their managerial flexibility (Akpan & Amadi, 2017). To accomplish this goal, it is necessary to abandon the former system of university administration, which was marked by a strong influence of the government and other external forces on university management. The method significantly influenced the appointment of university vice chancellors and governing board members, who make crucial decisions.

The government oversees higher education academic programmes through organisations such as the National University Commission, the National Board for Technical Education, and the Joint Admission Matriculation Board, among others (Wilkins, 2017). To attain full academic autonomy, these agencies' capacities to run academic programmes and maintain academic standards must be floated and folded; each institution should be given the authority to determine student enrollment, criteria, and procedures. According to Osarenren-Osaghae et al. (2014), a university's administrative autonomy can be influenced by both the government and the institution itself.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a survey research design. The study's population was 25353, with a sample size of 394 (155 academic and 239 non-academic) staff. This study collected data via a self-structured questionnaire. The researcher designed and used the "University Autonomy and Administration and Public Universities Questionnaire (UAAPUQ)" instrument to collect data from respondents, particularly focusing on staffing autonomy and academic autonomy. Five professionals verified the instrument. Two validators were from Measurement and Evaluation, and two from Educational Administration and Planning, all from Joseph Sarwuan Tarka University's Department of Educational Foundation and General Studies in Makurdi. The validated questionnaire was trial tested to ensure its dependability. The Cronbach Alpha coefficient was used to assess the internal consistency of the instrument's items. The overall dependability coefficient was 0.89. As a result, the instrument is suitable for the investigation. Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) will answer the research questions, while the null hypotheses will be tested using the Chi-square (χ^2) goodness of fit test at a significance level of 0.05. Items with a mean rating of 2.5 or higher were considered to have a considerable influence, while those with a mean rating of 2.49 or lower were deemed to have no significant influence. The null hypothesis choice criterion was a p-value less than or equal to

the alpha value of (0.05), which indicated a substantial influence. A p-value larger than or equal to the alpha value (0.05) was regarded as statistically insignificant, implying no meaningful

influence. This study used the Chi-square (χ^2) goodness-of-fit test to analyse categorical data and determine if observed frequency distributions differed significantly from expected distributions.

RESULTS

Research question one: What is the influence of staffing autonomy on the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria?

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation of the respondents on the influence of staffing autonomy on the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria

S/No	Item	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	SD	Decision
1	The university's ability to recruit its staff enhances manpower planning.	254	125	11	4	3.60	0.59	Agree
2	The university's freedom to determine the status (rank) of its employees improves cooperation among staff.	152	223	19	0	3.34	0.56	Agree
3	The university's capacity to provide staff training enhances professional development.	184	201	8	1	3.44	0.55	Agree
4	The freedom of the university to facilitate staff promotion enhances motivation.	160	220	13	1	3.37	0.56	Agree
5	University's freedom to determine its recruitment procedures improves staffing.	163	203	26	2	3.34	0.62	Agree
	Cluster Mean					3.41	0.57	Agree

The data presented on table 3 shows that all the 5 items on influence of staffing autonomy on the administration of public universities in North - Central Nigeria had their mean values ranged from 3.34 to 3.60, indicating that their mean values were above the cut-off point of 2.50. The grand mean of 3.41 indicates that the respondents agreed that financial autonomy has positive influence on the administration of public universities in North -Central Nigeria. The table shows that the standard deviation of the items ranged from 0.55 to 0.62 indicating that the respondents were not too far from the mean and the opinion of one another in their response on influence of staffing autonomy on the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria.

Research question two: What is the influence of academic autonomy on the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria?

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation of the influence of academic autonomy on the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria?

S/No	Item	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	SD	Decision
1	University's freedom to introduce new academic programmes maintains standard of education.	244	137	11	5	3.58	0.57	Agree
2	University's freedom to terminate programmes maintains standard of education.	156	205	29	4	3.30	0.64	Agree
3	The university's ability to encourage award-winning research in chosen directions motivates its staff.	165	213	15	1	3.38	0.57	Agree
4	The university's freedom to design the content of its degree programmes enhances quality assurance.	162	221	9	2	3.38	0.55	Agree
5	The university's discretion over its admission procedures ensures that only qualified candidates are admitted into its programmes.	165	208	17	4	3.36	0.61	Agree
	Cluster Mean					3.40	0.58	Agree

The data presented on table 4 shows that all the 5 items on influence of academic autonomy on the administration of public universities in North -Central Nigeria had their mean values ranging from 3.30 to 3.58, indicating that their mean values were above the cut-off point of 2.50. The grand mean of 3.40 indicates that the respondents agreed that academic autonomy has positive influence on the administration of public universities in North -Central Nigeria. The table shows that the standard deviation of the items ranged from 0.55 to 0.64 indicating that the respondents were not too far from the mean and the opinion of one another in their response on influence of academic autonomy on the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria.

Hypothesis 1: Staffing autonomy does not significantly influence the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria.

Table 3: Chi-square test goodness of fit of Staffing autonomy influence on the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria.

Responses option	Observed N	Expected N	Df	χ^2	P	Sig level	Remarks
SA	182	98.5	3	327.01	0.00	0.05	Significant
A	194	98.5					
D	16	98.5					

SD	2	98.5					
Total	394						

P<0.05

Table 9 shows that the chi-squared calculated value of 327.01, $df = 3$ and a P-value of 0.00 which is less than alpha-value (α) of 0.05 ($P < 0.05$). Therefore, the null hypothesis which states that Staffing autonomy does not significantly influence the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria is rejected. This implies that Staffing autonomy has significant influence on the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria.

Hypothesis 2: Academic autonomy does not significantly influence the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria.

Table 4: Chi-square test goodness of fit of Academic autonomy influence on the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria.

Responses option	Observed N	Expected N	Df	χ^2	P	Sig level	Remarks
SA	178	98.5	3	324.35	0.00	0.05	Significant
A	197	98.5					
D	16	98.5					
SD	3	98.5					
Total	394						

P<0.05

Table 10 shows that the chi-squared calculated value of 324.35, $df = 3$ and a P-value of 0.00 which is less than alpha-value (α) of 0.05 ($P < 0.05$). Therefore, the null hypothesis which states that Academic autonomy does not significantly influence the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria is rejected. This implies that Academic autonomy has significant influence on administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria.

DISCUSSION OF FINDING

The study found that staffing autonomy has a major impact on the management of public universities in North-Central Nigeria. The study's findings are consistent with those of Luija et al. (2017), who concluded that staffing has a considerable influence on the quality of teaching at public universities and that good staffing would enhance the quality of teaching in universities if other factors stayed constant. The study's findings support those of Olorunsola (2018), who discovered that university staffing autonomy has a considerable impact on public university administration. The study's findings are consistent with those of Nguyen et al. (2022), who researched factors influencing staff autonomy and discovered that autonomy had a favourable impact on staffing and academic staff development. The study shed light on the relationship between staffing autonomy and academic advancement, which helps establish plans and strategies for improving the university's efficiency.

Furthermore, the study found that academic autonomy has a major impact on the management of public institutions in North-Central Nigeria. The findings are consistent with those of Belgaroui and Hamad (2021), who discovered that academic autonomy improves the quality of instruction, admission policies, and academic achievement. Universities require true autonomy to improve their effectiveness. The survey also supports Okai and Worlu's (2014) findings that academic staff at Nigerian institutions were knowledgeable and aware of concerns concerning university autonomy and academic freedom. Thus, academic personnel are free to teach, pass or fail students, and do research in their field of interest without external influence.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, these findings provide valuable insights for policymakers, university administrators, and other stakeholders in the education sector. It was concluded that autonomy dimensions, including staffing, academic, autonomy, are crucial for promoting a conducive and thriving environment within public universities in North-Central Nigeria. As the landscape of higher education continues to evolve, these results contribute to the ongoing discourse on governance and autonomy in the academic sector.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on these findings, several recommendations were proposed.

1. The government should grant staffing autonomy to public universities to enable administrators to address issues of inadequate staffing and prioritise effective staffing practices, including hiring qualified personnel and providing ongoing professional development opportunities for faculty.
2. Protecting and promoting academic freedom is essential for the advancement of knowledge. Universities should uphold the principles of academic autonomy, allowing faculty the freedom to pursue research, teach, and contribute to academic discourse without undue external influence.

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