

*Full Length Research Paper*

## Erosion of autonomy: The pitfall of educational management in Nigeria universities

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This study examined the concept of autonomy and its effect on the management of universities in Nigeria. Four major dimensions of university autonomy were investigated. An instrument titled Erosion of University Autonomy Questionnaire (EUAQ) was used to collect data. The instrument was administered for four universities. The study employed a descriptive research of the survey type. The data collected were subjected to frequency counts, percentages and correlation matrix for analysis. The instrument used was subjected to thorough screening by experts in educational management and tests, and measurements. Both face and content validity of the instrument was ascertained by its appropriateness in measuring what it was supposed to measure. Results showed that the levels of autonomy in the four dimensions were high and there was significant relationship between the four dimensions of autonomy (organization, financial, staffing and academic autonomy and management of the universities). Recommendations were made that if the university autonomy is preserved, it will instill confidence in the Vice Chancellors, and management to act; moreover, it will promote a high sense of meaning, competence and commitment among the staff and management. This will enhance the ability to be resourceful, innovative, improve productivity and the use of initiative by both the management and workers. In addition, brain drain, turnover and conflict in the universities will be at its low ebb.

**Key words:** Autonomy, management, organization, financial, staffing.

### INTRODUCTION

Autonomy is a concept that every human being enjoys and aspires for. Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2010) defined autonomy as a right of a group of people to govern itself, or to organize its own activities. Hughes et al. (2009) perceived autonomy as the degree to which a job provides an individual with some control over what he does and how he does it. He further reiterated that someone with considerable autonomy

would have discretion in scheduling work and deciding the procedures used in accomplishing it.

Draft (2008) saw autonomy as the degree to which the worker has freedom, discretion and self-determination in planning and carrying out tasks. He also added that autonomy contributes to experienced responsibility for outcomes of work. Autonomy is the degree to which a job gives employees the freedom, independence and

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discretion to schedule their work and determine the procedures used in completing it (Mc Schane and Von Glinow, 2005). They further opined that work motivation and performance increase when employees feel personally accountable for the outcomes of their effort. Autonomy also contributes to the feeling of experienced responsibility. It is expected then that if the university is given full autonomy, the management and staff would have control of their work environment and feel responsible for their successes and failures.

Luthan (2005) perceived autonomy as job independence. This is how much freedom and control the employees have to keep for scheduling their work, making decisions or determining the means to accomplish objectives. He also shared the view of Mc Schane and Von Glinow (2005) that autonomy leads to the feeling of responsibility as workers are encouraged to develop and use their own unique approach to work, allowed some degree of freedom to do certain things in the work place and even make suggestions for necessary changes in all phases of the policy and operations.

Mullins (2005) introduced another dimension by describing autonomy as a way of building spirit, morale and commitment in any organization. He also reiterated that people should be in control of at least some part of their lives and that they should be given some influence over things that affect them.

Obviously speaking, university autonomy especially academic autonomy has been a matter of discourse worldwide particularly in academic circles and institutions of higher learning. Altbach (2015) described academic autonomy as a core value of higher education everywhere and that without it, quality of teaching and research are constrained. Universities are seen as reservoir of knowledge all over the world, and it will be rendered inactive if the freedom is curtailed or tampered with.

The confederation of Indian Universities (2004) defines the principle of university autonomy as the necessary degree of independence from external interference that the university requires in respect of its internal organization and governance, the internal distribution of financial resources, the recruitment of its staff, the setting of the condition of study and finally the freedom to conduct teaching and research.

The concern for autonomy in Nigeria Universities is most desirable for obvious reasons. University is the highest educational institution, the highest level of human capital development and the nation's hope for national development.

Over the years, management of universities in Nigeria has witnessed myriad of challenges particularly under the military regime of 1973 where the autonomy of the academic staff was seriously infringed on. According to Onyeonuoru (2005) a trade dispute between the governing council of the university teachers in 1973 on

the review of the condition of service led to a strike by the university lecturers. This led to the need for the governing council to review the conditions of service, and every attempt to secure government attention on this was thwarted by top officials of Federal Ministry of Education.

The Punch Tuesday April 14 (2015) Punch, page 14 gave a report titled "Experts Canvass New Chapter in Appointment of Vice-Chancellors". Prof. Oloyede at a public lecture at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, spoke on the theme "The Journey to Excellence: Making Nigeria a Tertiary Education Hub For Africa". He frowned at the localization of students' admission, staff recruitment and above all, the politicization of the headship of the universities in Nigeria. He further added that the appointment of Vice Chancellor has become controversial, resulting in ethnic groups coming together to "fight" one another once there is need for a new VC. Besides, Oloyede noted that the issue had put Vice Chancellor under pressure, especially during recruitment of members of staff and admission of students to schools. Also, a retired Professor of Political Science, Kayode Soremekun in an interview with Punch correspondent, said the development was promoting mediocrity in the system and he described it as "ghettorisation" of the office of the Vice chancellor

These academic dons, Professors Olukoju, Okebukola, Oloyede and Soremekun in the same Punch, discussed how the post of Vice chancellors are now zoned to indigenes of the locality where the Universities are situated, thereby sidetracking competence, merit and intellectual savvy. He said it reduces the quality of governance and academic delivery in the universities. Another major area discussed by these dons is the involvement of the natural rulers and the local communities in the administrations of many of the universities by pressurizing university councils to appoint indigenes or face their wrath. "Council buckles under the pressure and appoint the indigene. The indigene VC in turn shares academic and other appointments among members of staff from local governments in the state and the university is turned into a shameful satire of an institution with merit compromised in governance.

He further added that patronage of the community leaders who pressed for the appointment, is a necessary payback through dubious contracts and admission of less qualified candidates from the community. He said all these negatively affect good governance in Nigerian University system and depressing quality of the delivery system while Ibukun (1997) observed that university governance in Nigeria today is nothing but crisis management.

University autonomy is the basic principle that anchors the whole system, ensures the stability and actualization of all the goals and aspirations of the university. In order for the universities to be run smoothly and successfully, a level of autonomy must be accorded than viewing the

importance of his level of education in the changing globalization and disseminating of knowledge, training manpower for social economic development for the nation and also rendering consultancy services to the community. Organizational autonomy in the university is all embracing, it includes financial autonomy, staffing and academic autonomy. If the government of the day would allow the Vice Chancellors and the university management to handle all these without interference, the universities would be better than what they are now. If universities are given the power to freely decide on its internal organization, such as the choice of who rules or becomes their Vice chancellor, decision making bodies will have legal entities and internal academic structures. With the ability to select and decide on the length of years of these executive leadership, universities governing bodies and take decisions on long term strategic issues, such as curricular and staff promotions, universities should have a say in these matters as they affect them directly.

Financial autonomy refers to a university's ability to manage its funds and allocate its budget independently. This is the crux of stability of any institution. The universities in Nigeria are financed by the federal and state governments depending on the type of the university, and subventions are given to these universities to maintain them.

Many of the universities derived their subventions from the state government particularly the state owned universities, making it difficult for the Vice Chancellors and university management to pay workers and these universities well. Workers' salaries are not paid as at when due, talkless of all the allowances of lectures. All these are causing demotivation and brain drain for the lecturers.

Government interference on how to charge tuition fees is dominant in the universities, as these open up new private funding streams, which make up a significant percentage of university budget. The freedom to charge and set the level of tuition fees is a crucial factor in deciding institutional strategies.

Staffing autonomy refers to a university's ability to decide freely on issues related to human resource management, including recruitments, salaries, dismissals and promotions. In order to compete in global higher education environment, universities must be able to employ the most suitable and qualified academic staff without external prescriptions or interference. Nigeria universities nowadays side track merit and merit is outlawed to "who you know syndrome". University affairs have been politicized, and if university autonomy is void of interference, academic excellence will prevail, total man will be produced and total quality will be enhanced.

Academic autonomy refers to a university's ability to decide on various academic issues, such as student admissions, academic content, quality assurance, the

introduction of degree programmes and languages of instruction.

The ability to decide on overall student number and set admission criteria are fundamental aspects of institutional autonomy. The number of study places has great implication on universities that are always under pressure of the politicians in the selection of students for admission while National Universities Commission (NUC) always checkmate the universities in the area of introduction of degree programmes and academic content which they say is for quality control. All these interference are hindrances to proper functioning of these universities.

Ojedele and Ilusanya (2006) described university autonomy as protection of the universities from interference by government officials in the day to day running of the institution especially on the issues related to the admission of students, the appointment and dismissal of academic staff including the Vice Chancellors, the determination of content of university education and the control of the degree standard, and the determination of size and the rate of growth. Government involvement in university governance has been a point of strife between the government and Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) over some time (Ajayi and Ayodele, 2002). Autonomy is the hallmark for excellence in our universities. Babalola et al. (2007) supported that university autonomy and academic freedom has over the years been a recurring issue in Academic Staff Union of Universities' demand from the federal government.

The purpose of the study therefore is to examine the level of autonomy accorded the universities in south west Nigeria in the four dimension mentioned and to know if there is any significant relationship between erosion of autonomy and management of the universities in south west Nigeria.

### **Research question**

This research question was raised to guide the study: What is the level of autonomy in south west universities in Nigeria?

### **Research hypothesis**

This hypothesis was formulated in the study: Is there any significant relationship between erosion of autonomy and management of the universities?

### **METHODOLOGY**

The survey type is a descriptive research. The population consisted of all the lecturers in south west universities in Nigeria. The sample consisted of 120 lecturers selected from four universities, two federal and two state universities with 30 respondents from each.

**Table 1.** Level of autonomy in south west universities in Nigeria.

Dimensions of university autonomy	Level	Frequency	%
Organizational Autonomy	Low (0.00-28.31)	6	0.4
	Moderate (28.32-56.60)	668	41.8
	High (56.61-85.00)	926	57.9
Financial Autonomy	Low (0.00-16.65)	10	0.6
	Moderate (16.66-33.20)	696	43.5
	High (33.3-50.0)	894	55.9
Staffing Autonomy	Low (0.00-13.32)	17	1.1
	Moderate (13.33-26.63)	634	39.6
	High (26.64-40.00)	949	59.3
Academic Autonomy	Low (0.00-19.98)	16	1.0
	Moderate (19.99-39.95)	325	20.3
	High (39.96-60.00)	1259	78.7

Stratified sampling technique was used to select the sample.

The instrument used for data collection was a questionnaire titled 'Erosion of University Autonomy (EUAQ)'. Face and content validity procedures were ascertained by experts and the reliability of the instrument was estimated using Cronbach alpha. A reliability coefficient of 0.92 was obtained. Hence, the instrument was considered reliable enough for the study.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Research question

#### *What is the level of autonomy in South West Universities in Nigeria?*

In answering the question, scores on the dimensions of university autonomy (organizational, financial, staffing and academic autonomy) were computed. These scores were distributed into "low", "moderate" and "high" levels of autonomy using percentile distribution formula. Table 1 and Figure 1 show that the level of autonomy on each of the dimensions of university autonomy was high: Organizational autonomy (57.9%), financial autonomy (55.9%), staffing autonomy (59.3%) and academic autonomy (78.7%). This shows that the level of autonomy in South west universities in Nigeria is high.

### Research hypothesis

#### *There is no significant relationship between the erosion of autonomy and management of the universities*

The correlation matrix in Table 2 reveals that there was significant relationship between erosion of organizational

autonomy ( $r = 0.83$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ), financial autonomy ( $r = 0.834$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ), staffing autonomy ( $r = 0.834$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ), academic autonomy ( $r = 0.836$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ) and management of universities at 0.05 level of significance. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected.

## DISCUSSION

This result is in accord with Ojedele and Ilusanya (2006) that perceived autonomy as protection of the universities from interference by government officials in the day to day running of the institutions. This result portrays the university as not having interference from any quarter. It also shows that they have organizational, financial, staffing and academic independence, while it negates the assertion of Ibukun (1991) that university governance in Nigeria today is nothing but crisis management.

This result shows that erosion of university autonomy significantly influences the management of the university and if the autonomy is eroded, it would have great impact on the management of the universities. This is in disharmony with Draft (2008) who saw autonomy as the degree to which the managers/workers have freedom, discretion and self-determination in planning and carrying out tasks. If the autonomy of the universities is eroded, there is no way it will not hinder the management of the universities.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is concluded from the findings of this study that the levels of autonomy in the universities in the four areas examined are high. It is also shown that erosion of

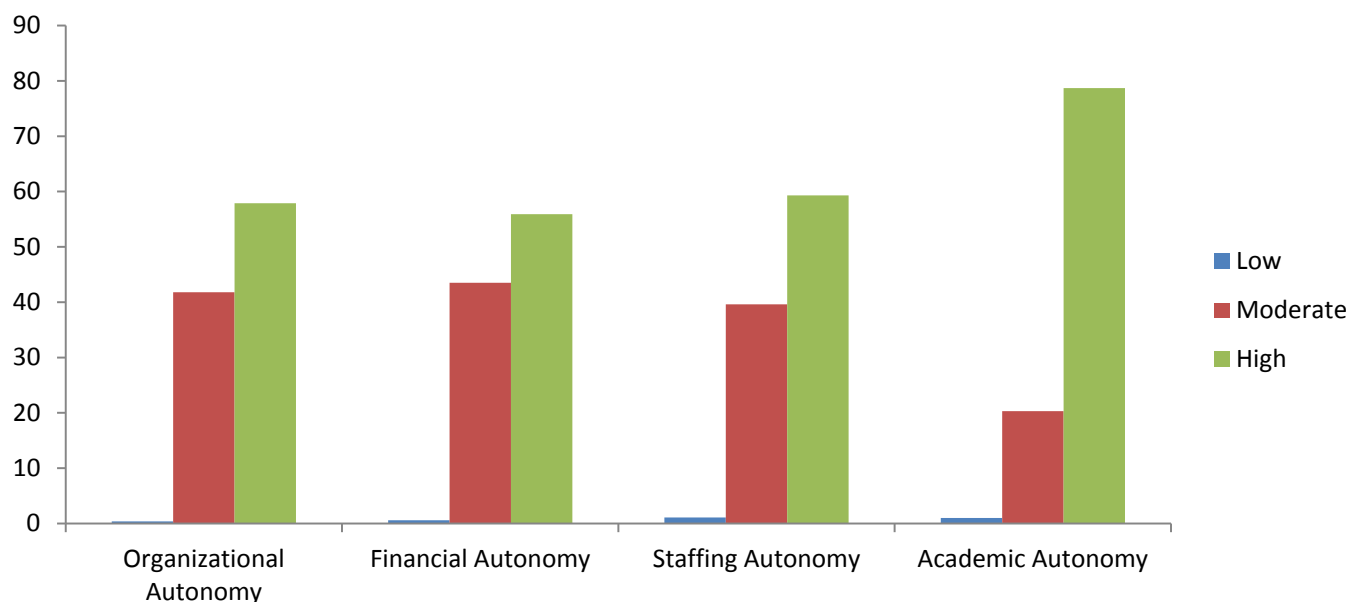


Figure 1. Level of autonomy in south west universities in Nigeria.

Table 2. Correlation matrix showing erosion of university autonomy and management of the universities in South West Nigeria.

Variables	Organizational autonomy	Financial autonomy	Staffing autonomy	Academic autonomy	Management autonomy
Organizational autonomy	1.000	0.607	0.599**	0.511**	0.8318**
Organizational autonomy		1.000	0.619	0.599**	0.834
Organizational autonomy			1.000	0.660**	0.843**
Organizational autonomy				1.000	0.836**
Organizational autonomy					1.000

\*\*P<0.05, N = 1600.

university autonomy significantly influences the management of the universities. Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Every effort to maintain and sustain the high level of autonomy in the universities must be maintained for academic excellence in the universities and for better management.
2. Every effort should be made not to erode the autonomy of the universities so that management of the universities may not be hampered. Once the organizational, financial, staffing and academic autonomy are eroded in the universities, the management of this great institution will be jeopardized.

3. Every effort should be made by the university management to make the lecturers comfortable so that academic work will not be hindered.

**CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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