

University management and staff unions in Nigeria: issues and challenges

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Abstract:

This article examines the relationship between staff unions and the management of Nigerian universities at both government and institutional levels. It observes that unions within the system have often based their demands on adequate funding of the system, university autonomy and academic freedom, as well as salary and conditions of service. It also notes that high handedness, arbitrariness and corruption, on the part of university administration, are some of the causes of agitation in the system. It is therefore recommended that Nigerian universities need to be re-orientated in consonance with acceptable democratic and international standards. Appointment of people into Governing Councils must be based on merit and not on political or ethnic affiliation. There is also the need to fund the system effectively, so that the goals of university education can be realized. Staff unions must also show restraint in their demands and agitation.

Introduction

All over the world, universities are recognized as centres of excellence, where knowledge is not only acquired, but also disseminated to those who require it. They are formal institutions set up by the society to be centers of learning, rich ideas and ideals. In its strict sense, Benjamin (2001) is of the opinion that universities are ivory towers, where instruction is given and received without harassment and undue influence from the outside world. Thus, the universal idea of the university is a community of scholars, free to pursue knowledge without undue interference from any quarters (Banjo, 2001). In the same vein, Hannah (1998) postulates that universities are enterprises that produce and distribute a public good, which is knowledge. Salter (1983) agreed that knowledge production is the focus of universities and that the production of knowledge has always focused on teaching and research. Also Clarke and Edwards (1980) recognized the high level of respect and trust bestowed on the university system in this way:

Universities have since their medieval beginnings, been founded to preserve the positive heritage of society. They are committed to promote society's corporate well being and advancement by refining the ability of its members to select reasons and understand by enquiring into and seeking to explain the development and function of man as part of the natural world and by acting as guide and critic in those areas which can be informed by a university's resources of knowledge and specialized skills.

Therefore, the important role, which universities play in the society cannot be ignored. To this effect, Rotem and Glasman (1977), maintained that "the university is an institution which advances and diffuses consciousness for the entire society. Its output are critical factors for the maintenance and adaptive structures of the society".

Citing the incident of violent ethnic conflict between the Ife and Modakeke communities in Osun State of Nigeria, when one of the country's biggest universities (Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife) had to harbour and protect thousands of people displaced by the fierce communal fighting, Ujomu (2001) asserted that universities, especially in Nigeria, have

undergone further evolution and have gained significance not only as a centre of freedom and truth, but also as a place of refuge and protection.

Specifically, the goals of tertiary education (including university education) in Nigeria are:

1. Contribute to national development through high level relevant manpower training;
2. Develop and culcate proper values for the survival of the individual and society;
3. Develop the intellectual capability of individuals to understand and appreciate their local and external environments;
4. Acquire both physical and intellectual skills which will enable individual to be self-reliant and useful members of the society;
5. Promote and encourage scholarship and community service;
6. Forge and cement national unity; and
7. Promote national and international understanding and interaction. (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004, Section 45).

Section 46 of the same document further asserts that universities (and other tertiary institutions) shall pursue these goals through among others, teaching; research and development; virile staff development programmes; generation and dissemination of knowledge, to mention a few.

However, in spite of the laudable goals and objectives, which universities are expected to perform as enunciated above, the various problems and constraints, which confront them, have practically made it impossible for these objectives to be realized. The university system in Nigeria has witnessed a lot of turbulent experiences. The crisis has been characterized by a combination of chronic under-funding, rapidly increasing student enrolment, inadequacy of facilities, deterioration of physical infrastructure, a growing culture of arbitrariness and suppression in managing the institutions, demoralization of staff and students, incessant student riots and periodic staff strikes.

Efforts at solving and ameliorating these problems have often led to collision between the government and staff unions one one hand and between university administration and staff unions on the other. This paper therefore focuses attention on the management of universities at governmental and institutional levels, with a view to addressing the roles of staff unions.

Objectives of the article

The article aims to discuss the management of Nigerian universities at both governmental and institutional levels, with a view to addressing the roles which the various staff unions have been playing in managing these institutions. It also addresses the issues involved in the relationship between the unions, governments as proprietors of public universities, the Council, as well as the administration of the universities. The various challenges which the Unions face in the overall management of the universities are also discussed.

Government, staff unions and management of universities

Three prominent unions are recognized within the universities in Nigeria. They are the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities (SSANU) and Non-Academic Staff Union (NASU). The major objective of these unions is to protect the welfare of their members. On ASUU, for instance, Iyayi (2002) says the union is a trade union, which like other trade unions is a "combination of workers or employers, whether temporary or permanent, the purpose of which is to regulate the terms and conditions of the employment of workers". In specific terms, Iyayi outlined the principles that guide ASUU as a union as follows:

- Integrity, transparency and accountability;
- Professionalism, objectivity and hardwork,
- Courage, sacrifice and total commitment,
- Internal democracy, teamwork and group solidarity, as well as
- Patriotism, anti-imperialism and working class solidarity.

In carrying out these principles, ASUU has been at loggerheads with both the government and university authorities. At the level of government, the union has always based its agitation on three major issues. These are:

1. Funding of the system
2. University autonomy; and
3. Conditions of service

The issue of funding has been a source of crisis in the Nigeria educational system. Various organizations, parents, labour unions, etc, have at various fora pointed the attention of government to the poor funding of the system. For instance, Ibukun (2004) reported that between 1987 and 1997, average expenditure on education by the federal government, as a percentage of the annual budget was 5.1%. When related to the GDP, Federal government expenditure on education averages 1.1%. In addition, Arikewuyo (2004) reported that since the advent of democracy in 1999, funding of education dropped from 11.12% to 1.81% in 2003. UNESCO (2000) reported that unlike Nigeria which spends an average of 1.1% of its GDP/GNP on education, other countries like Ghana spend 3.6%, Kenya 6.2%, and Zimbabwe 9.5%.

The effect of poor funding is evidenced in the brain drain, a phenomenon which has depleted universities in Nigeria seriously. The country has lost most of its experienced academics to even smaller African countries, such as Ghana, Rwanda, Kenya, South-Africa, to mention a few. Even when enrolment continues to increase from 325, 299 in 1999/2000 session (Okogie, 2004) to 433,821 in 2000/2001 session (FME, 2003), the level of funding has been going down. ASUU, for instance, has gone on strike for several times, namely, in 1992, 1993, 1994, 1996, 1999, 2001, and 2003 to press home its demand for increased funding for the system. Perhaps the government fails to understand the fact that:

the success of any school depends upon the resources available to it. Money is very important in this respect because by it, all other vital elements in the school can be obtained such as school buildings, purchase of equipment, payment of teachers salaries and allowances and running expenses (Aghenta, 1984).

The issue of university autonomy and academic freedom has also been a vexed matter between governments and ASUU especially. The Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004) had recognized that:

- The internal organisation and administration of each institution (of higher learning) shall be its own responsibility;
- The traditional areas of academic freedom for the institutions are to:
 - select their students, except where the law prescribes otherwise;
 - appoint their staff;
 - teach, select areas of research; and
 - determine the content of courses.

However, government has always hidden under the following clause, which says: "Government shall continue to respect this freedom as long as these areas are in consonance with national goals". The question is: What constitutes "consonance with national goals"?

But what is institutional autonomy? Anya (1982) defined it 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 institution to exercise its prerogatives in the areas of appoint-

ment of its staff and of its governing authorities; pursuit of institutional goals as defined for itself under the rules of the laws of the land; insulation of the institution in the management of its routine affairs from political, administrative, religious and other authorities. Indeed, university autonomy implies that each university must be governed according to the law, that establishes it. Every university has its law, edict or even decree which spells out the functions of the various organs, such as Council, Senate, Congregation, Faculty, Department, Institute, etc. But successive governments have often impinged on this autonomy, usually hiding under the cover of national interest. Ajayi (1989) quoted Professor Oluwasanmi, a former Vice Chancellor of a Nigerian university, as asserting that "actual interference in university affairs started in 1975. There was no question at all of any, up to 1975, usurping the powers of council to dismiss staff... This problem which universities find themselves with started in 1975".

One of Nigeria's reliable Scholars, also captured the picture of Nigerian universities in this way:

...universities suffered from arbitrary governance ... rather than being a place where justice and truth are to be nurtured, the universities triumphed on mediocrity and untruths. Promotion was earned through sychophancy and the admission procedure became systematically bastardized as wives, children, and cronies of Vice Chancellors had their own admission quota without reference to the established procedure. University governance became unpredictable and university finances in shambles (Olorode, 2001).

In addition, Arikewuyo (2004:128) recounted how past and present governments have encroached on university autonomy as follows:

...Staff and student unions were banned and unbanned at various times. The ASUU and NANS were the worst affected. Many Vice Chancellors have been removed for not complying with directives from the government. A major General was even appointed as the sole administrator in a first generation university. Many academics have been dismissed, retired and unjustly jailed for teaching what they were not employed to teach.

Forty-nine academic staff of the University of Ilorin were dismissed for taking part in a nation-wide strike called by ASUU 2001. The President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria has affirmed at various convocation fora that there would be no reprieve for those lecturers. If academics could be dismissed unjustly in a democratic government, one could imagine what would happen under a military regime.

The third contentious issue between the government and ASUU is that of conditions of service of academics. This area covers such areas as salary and allowances, retirement and pension, appointment, discipline and promotion of staff, etc. Poor conditions of service of staff are often reflected in such ASUU slogans such as "My boss is a comedian, the wages he pays are a joke; "My take-home pay cannot take me home". It has been asserted that what academics are paid in Nigeria represent 0.0005 of the pay of their colleagues in Botswana (Onyeonoru, 1996) and even in Ghana (Asobie, 1996). As a matter of fact the Federal Ministry of Education (2003) reported that public universities in Nigeria remained closed for an accumulated period of about 33 months due to progressive reformulation of collective bargaining issues by university staff unions. Of course, poor pay has led to the brain drain syndrome in the university system. Indeed according to the Federal Ministry of Education (2003) there was a total of 18,328 academic staff to look after 433,871 students and by NUC staffing norms, a total of 33,951 should be in the system. Therefore, the academic staff shortfall was 15,718 (46%) in the Nigerian Universities in 2000.

Often, governments in Nigeria retorted to certain hardline postures in order to counter ASUU's strike actions. These include banning and unbanning of the union, seizure of salaries

under the guise of no work no pay; ejection from government quarters, detention, etc.

Other staff unions within the university system have often focused more on welfare and salary of members, rather than on the issues of funding and autonomy. Till date, only ASUU is perhaps the only union that has signed comprehensive agreements with governments on the vexed issues of funding, autonomy and conditions of services. Onyeonoru and Bankole (2001) observed that much of the conflicts involving the government and non-academic staff unions emanate from the collective agreements reached between the government and ASUU, which the unions often regard as exclusionary. These have led to the popular parity conflicts in the universities that sometimes involve physical assaults.

Staff unions and university administration

At the institutional level, the relationship between university authorities and staff unions, especially the academic body, has also not been all that rosy. Vice Chancellors in most Nigerian universities have often been in collision with unions on many issues, which range from allocation of funds to high handedness on the part of the administration. Funding of various university projects, award of contract, payment of outstanding allowances and salaries, purchase of facilities, library and laboratory materials, etc. have sometimes caused some disharmony. Even when government allocates fund to the universities, cases have arisen when university authorities allocate money to things that have no bearing on teaching and learning. Olorode (2001) insists that the inability of most Vice Chancellors to effectively manage the resources available to their universities is due to the fact these people have acquired almost unlimited power to manipulate university resources according to their whims and caprices. This high rate of corruption in the university system, in his opinion, arises from the absence of democratic control of university administration.

Also, arbitrariness and high handedness on the part of university authorities and Vice Chancellors have often caused a lot of conflicts. For instance, at the University of Abuja, the Vice Chancellor, Professor Isa Muhammed unilaterally sacked thirty-five teachers, dissolved senate, created programmes and altered the academic structure of the university. He ran the university like a chiefdom and with unbelievable brutality (Egbokhare, 2000). In addition, Isa Mohammed was intolerant to the existence of alternative views and trade unions. The man would ultimately declare that he was the "Law" (Mustapha, 1995). He was said to have displayed extreme autocratic tendencies contrary to the expectations of a man of his social and academic status. In 1999, crisis erupted at the university of Ibadan following the action of the administration geared at increasing the fees to be paid by students. The ensuing crisis led in almost a year long conflict leading to the loss of an academic session, the suspension of some students from the university and the assassination of the university's acting Chief Security Officer who was shot and killed by assailants (CDHR, 2000).

In 1996, at the Ogun State University (now Olabisi Onabanjo University), Ago-Iwoye, over one hundred academic staff were unilaterally sacked by the Vice Chancellor for their refusal to "sign back" during a nationwide strike called by the national body of ASUU. Thus, due to the fact that some Vice Chancellors became much too sensitive to criticism, (Belo 1998), and did not necessarily see themselves as accountable to any one in the university, they effectively transformed into feudal lords within an environment designed to promote tolerance and freedom. This is a graphic description of what someone has called the winner-takes-all syndrome. All these acts of arbitrariness dictatorship have put ASUU on collision with the administration of many universities.

The blatant refusal of university administration to allow for participatory decision-making

has also caused some problems. The contention has always been that all segments of the university, namely academic and non-academic staff; students and public at large must be involved in the administration of the system. It is in this regard that Ejiogu (1987) argued that such involvement transcends the hand, but more importantly, it involves the mind, the heart and head.

Conclusion

The role of labour unions in many organization cannot be ignored. They are important stakeholders in the system. Unionism within the Nigerian university system is no longer new. Indeed, the system has witnessed a lot of conflicts, partly because of the divergent role perceptions of government and the unions. According to Egbokhare (2001), one of the primary causes of conflict between the ASUU and government is the conflict of perception of the mission of the universities. ASUU sees its role as that of defending and protecting the interest of the country as a whole. It sees in the universities the role of a people's tribune, a critical watchdog for the society striving to contain the excesses of the ruling class and the state ... government sees the universities as organs of the state's bureaucracy, parastatals of a King which should be loyal to the national interest as defined and interpreted by the state.

However, it can be deduced that both the government and unions obviously have good intentions for the university system. Their conflicting views could therefore be harmonized for effectiveness and efficiency in the overall management of universities in Nigeria.

Recommendations

There is no doubt about the fact that the long years of military rule in Nigeria have adversely affected the psyche of all facets of life in the country, including the management of universities at both governmental and institutional level. Unfortunately six years after the restoration of democratic rule in the country, leaders and government functionaries are still behaving like military dictators.

It is therefore imperative for the university system to be re-oriented in consonance with acceptable democratic and international standards. In this regard, there must be a total overhauling of the system, such that universities in Nigeria would be run properly. To that extent, government must ensure that only credible people are appointed into University Governing Councils. A situation whereby a visitor appoints politicians, who themselves have not even understood the norms of the university system should be discarded. Councils of universities should not be seen as avenues of compensating politicians, who supported the visitor during an electioneering campaign.

The appointment of Vice Chancellors must also follow laid-down procedures. Visitors who sit in their offices and appoint Vice Chancellors based on friendship or political affiliation are making a mockery of the training of future leaders, as such Vice Chancellors would only owe allegiance to the visitor and not to the system.

Indeed, Nigerian universities must be seriously re-oriented towards performing their statutory functions of teaching, research and service. For now, it appears not much of serious academic work goes on in the universities. Most Vice Chancellors, Deans and heads of departments are not committed to serious academic work. This has therefore affected the academic staff, some of whom have turned themselves into business tycoons, rather than researchers.

Government at all levels must now show serious attention to the institutions. Funding is very germane in this regard. Federal and State governments must re-order their priorities, such that the educational sector would occupy the highest priority in the budget.

The staff unions must also show restraint in their agitation. It is understandable that

issues of funding, academic freedom and autonomy, as well as conditions of services are quite germane to the survival of the system. Indeed, money is needed to do virtually everything in the system — providing infrastructure, building lecture rooms, laboratories, library, even employment and retention of qualified academic staff.

Staff unions must begin to take more interest in the discipline of their members. Some lecturers are noted for illegal sale of handouts and sub-standard textbooks, absence from lecture rooms, and other acts of indiscipline. Such academics should have no hiding place in the system. The unions should also assist the university administration in sourcing competent staff. After all, as far back as 1973, Harbison noted that "human resources — not capital, nor income, nor material resources — constitute the ultimate basis of the wealth of nations ... human beings are the active who accumulate capital, exploit natural resources, build social, economic and political organizations and carry forward national development".

Finally, government must show understanding in dealing with staff unions whenever they make their demands. As trade unions, they cannot be passive to the welfare of their members. The idea of unjust sacking and dismissal of people, seizure of salary in the guise of no-work-no-pay-rule, ejection from official quarters and proscription of unions should be discarded for meaningful collective bargaining.

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