

A Historical Appraisal of the Aftermath of Politics on Autonomy and Control in Nigerian University Education: The Case of National Universities Commission

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Abstract

The origins of university education in Nigeria were not associated with the dialectics and problems of autonomy and control but by the 70s the calls for autonomy in many spheres of the nation's university system was on the crescendo. Indeed, the search for autonomy in Nigerian university system has been a protracted concern for the university community but every effort aimed at securing autonomy, particularly in the area of academic freedom, has not achieved any absolute result. Thus, the need for autonomy has remained an unending quest in Nigerian university education. This paper is directed at establishing the political circumstances that remotely contributed in the circumvention of the autonomy of the universities in Nigeria via the National Universities Commission (NUC). The paper notes that the extant regulatory functions of the NUC covertly or overtly stifles the autonomy of university education. Therefore, it advocates for a return to the initial mandates of the NUC if universities are to gain back the internal control and autonomy they once enjoyed.

Keywords: politics, control, interference, autonomy,

Introduction

In spite of the remarkable growth of the university system in Nigeria, the system still lacks autonomy. The lack of autonomy in the nation's universities no doubt contributes to the inability of the university system in realizing the principle business of the university education, which are the development academic contents, teaching and research. The world over, university autonomy is highly a significant substructure that is integral to the idea of a university. Universities have always regarded the idea as indispensable for effective university system. However, university autonomy in this discourse is limited to the concept that implies freedom of universities from external control in matters relating to academic policies and programmes. This is because the best universities according to recent rankings are very autonomous (Weber, 2006). The universal idea of the university is that it is a community of scholars, free to pursue knowledge without undue interference. So for the university system to succeed in the accomplishment of its cardinal goals of curriculum development, teaching, learning and research the system requires to be autonomous because autonomy creates a more flexible and responsive system of university in the areas of teaching and research. No doubt, many universities in Nigeria today are controlled by government but in spite of some statues of autonomy entrenched in the laws setting up these universities, government and its agencies continuously assume the powers of the universities and according to Ekundayo and Adedokun (2009), this usurpation of the power of universities in Nigeria came to play with the introduction of the National Universities Commission (NUC). Thus, this study investigates the role of politics in all of this development.

An overview of the influence of politics in NUC

The Ashby Commission strongly recommended the establishment, by the Federal Government, of a National Universities Commission, similar to the UK University Grant Commission. To this end, the Federal Government in October 1962 established the National Universities Commission (NUC). Initially then, the NUC was created by administrative order as a unit of the cabinet office advisory body directly responsible to the Prime Minister, to advice government and develop guidelines for the most efficient system of university development (Idachaba, 1995; Babarinde, 1994). However, in 1967, owing to the immediate secession of the eastern region, the federal government created States and increased the central control of the nation's resources and policy formulation. Consequently, the organs of the federal government got more powers than they ever had. The NUC was one of such organs of government so affected. Again, as the increased federal powers weakened the resources of the States, the federal government was forced to increase its role in the sustenance of the regional/state universities. This development thus brought all the universities in the country under the direct influence of the NUC. This means that from 1967, the NUC acquired more powers and prominence in the affairs of the universities. But these powers were acquired administratively by the force of existing political circumstances and not by law. Therefore, the establishment of a statutory NUC increasingly became apparent

(Kosemani and Okorosaye-Orubite, 1995). Consequently, in 1968, the NUC was reconstituted in an interim basis. But much more significant was that in 1974, the NUC acquired a regulatory status with the promulgation of NUC Decree No. 1 of 1974 which became effective in 1975. Hence, the mandate of the Commission became extremely modified by the aforesaid Decree.

The reorganizations of the NUC beginning with the Decree No 1 of 1974, did not only alter the original intentions for establishing the NUC as advisory body on matters that could prompt the development of the university system, the changes in the status of the NUC to that of a regulatory body had some consequential implications for the NUC itself. First, for the NUC, the membership of the Commission which initially comprised a chairman, a fulltime secretary, an honorary adviser and ten other members gradually became expanded (Ike, 1976). Section 2 (C) of Decree No 1 of 1974 provided for the appointment of six members on individual merit on a national basis to represent commercial, industrial, professional interest and such other national interests. This means that other diverse interest groups that had nothing to do with the process of university education and its products became represented in the Commission (Kosemani and Okorosaye-Orubite 1995). In fact, when the NUC decree No 1 of 1974 was further amended as decree No 49 of 1988 it was still aimed at the expansion of the membership of the NUC board (Okojie et al 2011). A major consequent effect of this development was that it gave rise to the occasional political appointees cum interests in the Commission (Fafunwa 1971).

NUC and its implications for university autonomy and control

The political circumstance that informed the revised status of the National Universities Commission (NUC) vis-a-vis the regulatory powers that government arrogated to the Commission also had far-reaching effects on the autonomy of the universities. First, the general contents of Decree, NO 1, 1974, which forms the basis for the contemporary functions of the NUC, meant that there was a complete centralization of university co-ordination, funding and control. The implication of this was that the sanctity of the autonomy of the universities was compromised because, beginning with the aforesaid Decree universities have to work under the strict supervision of the NUC. By this development also, government implicitly moved power away from the universities towards itself.

In the functions of the NUC, it is observed that universities lost their financial autonomy to the Commission as it has the powers to receive block grant from the Federal government and allocate the fund to universities in accordance with formula spelt out by the federal government. Suffice it to that the designing or spelling out of such formula is, as Akinsolu (1990) notes, usually subjected to elements of politics that have no direct benefit to the actual financial needs of the universities. The characteristics of such politics could therefore explain why “the federal government also made direct release to some universities from approved budget/allocation in some years without reference to the NUC.” (NUC, 2012). Thus, the formula for financial allocation and grants accruable to each university is largely beyond the control of the universities. The obvious implication of this is that since universities don’t determine the funds to be available for them meaningful academic planning becomes difficult.

Furthermore, the Decree 16 of 1985 and Decree 49 of 1988, which initiated the powers for NUC to close down academic programmes and to establish minimum academic standards for all universities as well as to carry out accreditation of their degrees and academic awards, had sweeping effects on the universities. By implication, these laws did not only subtly empower the NUC to usurp the functions of Senate, Council, Faculty Boards of universities and professional accreditation bodies they implicitly also ensured a covert control of the universities by the Nigerian state. An appraisal of the effects of this pattern of control system is so critical to warrant quoting Enaohwo (2001:77-78) extensively: He wrote:

In the first place, the issue of accreditation is not the business of the NUC in an actual atmosphere of academic freedom and autonomy. This responsibility rests squarely on professional bodies, such as the Nigerian Medical Council (for medical education), Council for the Regulation of Engineering in Nigeria (COREN), for engineering education, and other registration councils set up by government for this purpose. Also included in this task are professional associations, such as NMA (Nigerian Medical Association), Nigerian Society of Engineers, Nigerian Union of Teachers, to mention a few. It is these or similar bodies that are equipped to maintain standards in various disciplines/courses offered by universities, and not the NUC, which tends to tag on to accreditation as the only function to justify her existence. If one may ask, in those countries such as the United States where a body like the NUC does not exist, who ensures accreditation of programmes? Or do we say that because of the existence of NUC, with her characteristic over-bearance, standards in tertiary education in Nigeria are higher than the United States, where accreditation is the job of professional councils and associations? We doubt much.

The foregoing is therefore a pointer that the role of the NUC in the formulation, guidance or co-ordination of academic policy for academic minimum standards in the universities meant that universities could not really have the independence of organizing their curricula, except with the approval of the NUC. This fundamentally negates part of the provisions of Section 8 (63) of the National Policy on Education which states that “tertiary institutions are to determine the content of courses” (FRN, 2004:37). In view of this, academic development has therefore been tied to the apron strings of the NUC, leaving the universities as rubber stamps in their primary assignment. This obvious castration of the powers of universities to absolutely determine their academic contents compromises the worth of the universities on one hand and the contents of university education on the other hand. This is in concurrence with the affirmation of Okoli (2003:59) that “an institution that is incapable of designing its own curricula ... does not deserve the title of a university”.

Likewise, it was only expected that the statutory powers of the NUC were such that it could hardly avoid a disharmonious interface and conflict with other governing and administrative bodies (within the university system) that are in one way or the other saddled with the duties of the planning and co-ordination of university development such as the Councils and Senates of individual universities, the Committee of Vice-Chancellors, etc. Surely, the time and energy dispensed in such conflicts do not inject efficiency in the university system. But more bothersome is that the internal administrative mechanisms of the university system remain subservient to the NUC in the face of such conflicts. This is attested to by Ifeonu (2006) who notes that, whenever the NUC’s position conflicts with that of the senate and experts within the university system, the opinion and powers of the NUC usually prevailed. This is further substantiated by the recent threats and filibuster from the incumbent NUC Executive Secretary Prof Julius Okojie, to close down universities in respect of accreditation of academic programmes when he declared:

This time, the President has given us a marching order that any Vice-chancellor who runs any programme that is not accredited will go. If the Governing Council makes it difficult for us to fire such a VC, we will dismiss the Council and fire the VC.(The Guardian,2013)

This is a statement not only devoid of the cultivated intonation for which the academia as an enclave of civility is noted for but a demonstration of the overlord powers NUC wields over and above university functionaries.

Furthermore, the erosion of the autonomy of the universities could also be identified and demonstrated in the reversal of the pattern communication between the universities and government. Benjamin (2011) thus argues that with the change from of the status of the NUC from being an advisory body to government to a regulatory agency for universities made the direct communication between the universities and the government ineffective. Before 1974, the Vice Chancellors had unlimited access to the government but dating from the promulgation of Decree N01, 1974, NUC has been acting as buffer between the government and the universities. The implication as Ade-Ajayi (2002) accentuates was that the universities were cut off from direct communication from the government. With the gap in communication, universities were no longer duly consulted by government in policy-formulations that affected the universities. Such gap in communication on the other hand also blurred the understanding which government used to have for the academic needs of the universities just as such rift in communication would not allow universities come to terms with clear intents of the government for the universities.

It is also known that the laws establishing the NUC made its regulatory powers ubiquitous on all universities in Nigeria. Again, this left some logical implications for the independence and autonomy of state universities when the state governments started to establish their own universities beginning from 1979. With the powers vested on the NUC to lay down minimum standards and accreditation of degree courses and other academic awards for all universities in the federation, it becomes obvious that such were not only infractions to the 1979 Constitution that ceded autonomous powers to the states to establish and run their own universities, they invariably robbed the state universities of their separate powers to independently plan and co-ordinate the affairs of their universities without recourse to the NUC. This anomaly is no doubt rooted in the logjam of the pseudo structure of Nigerian federalism. Ade-Ajayi (1983:13) agrees with this, noting that:

Many of the problems of university co-ordination in Nigeria have arisen from the transposition of a system of co-ordination designed to operate within a unitary system of government to the federal system of government in Nigeria, where university education was a concurrent responsibility of the both Federal and the State Governments.

The aftermath of this is that state universities could be surreptitiously run by the federal government via its agency, the NUC. This allusion is supported by Nwachuku (1977) who infers that “The state governments hate to think that their universities are being run from Lagos”- Lagos referring to the former capital of the federal government and the former headquarters of the NUC. The effects of NUC’s infraction of the constitutional

powers conferred on states to own and run their universities becomes very consequential bearing in mind that neither the states nor their state universities are strongly represented in the NUC. It is obviously in the light of this that Ukwu (2002) observes that the National Association of Pro-Chancellors of Nigerian Universities (NAPCNU), under the chairmanship Prof Ayo Banjo, called for the review of the composition and functions of the NUC to accommodate the interests of the state universities which are not adequately protected in the structure of the Commission.

The preceding here affirms that the establishment of the NUC was initially well intentioned but the review of the status of the Commission had some grave effects on the control and autonomy of the university system. The periodic amendments of the laws establishing the Commission were although all in attempt to define its roles nevertheless every successive statutory mandate increasingly made the Commission more powerful to the universities. The amendments to the original decree were thus to suit the political wimps and caprices of the government. Ade-Ajayi (2003) lends an analysis to the effects of these on university education by noting that through the NUC, the government was more inclined to assert its powers than to consult and establish broad basis for evolving base policies on university education. This eventually dragged the university system to into the dictates of the Commission and by extension the government. Instead of helping in the development of the university system, the Commission became an already made tool through which the government imposes its policies on the institutions. The ever imposing activities of the Commission only stifled the autonomy of the university system, much as it left a gulf in the flow of communication between the government and the universities.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The politics of centralization of the university system as it affected the activities of the NUC has not augured well for the development of university education because the external influence exerted on the system by this development definitely affects the performance of the system in academics and internal management of the system. It is not enough to announce by the words of mouth or even by the passing of law, through the Universities (Miscellaneous Provisions) (Amendment) Act, 2003, that government has granted autonomy to the universities. Government must find the unfettered political will to respect the letter and the spirit of the law on university autonomy. Government policies and reforms towards effective autonomy for the universities should start by the reversal of the functions of the NUC to the original advisory and facilitating role for university development rather than maintaining the contemporary superimposing regulatory functions of the Commission. For autonomy to be fully practiced there should be no dictation from outside the universities as to what their standards should be. The system must have the freedom to run its own affairs without external interference; it must have the right to organize its internal affairs, to make decisions and to establish its own academic programmes. Autonomy must imply the protection of the Nigerian university system from any form or shape of control from the government and its agencies.

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