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PERSPECTIVE ON TERTIARY EDUCATION IN NIGERIA



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CHAPTER TEN

**AUTONOMY IN TERTIARY EDUCATION IN
NIGERIA: MEANING, TYPES, PROBLEMS
AND SOLUTIONS**

By

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Abstract

Institutional autonomy is a cornerstone of modern higher education because it underpins academic freedom, institutional responsiveness and quality assurance. This chapter clarifies the concept of autonomy in tertiary education, distinguishes its main dimensions (academic, administrative, financial and organizational), identifies major barriers to effective autonomy in Nigeria, and proposes pragmatic solutions. Drawing on international policy instruments and Nigerian evidence, the chapter shows that legal ambiguity, chronic under-funding, political interference (including the appointment powers of “Visitors”), centralized payroll/control systems, weak internal governance, and corruption together limit universities’ ability to innovate, manage resources, and guarantee academic standards. Recommended remedies include a clear legal framework that balances autonomy with accountability; strengthened internal governance (independent counsels, regular audits, transparent procurement and performance evaluation); diversified and sustainable funding (endowments, industry partnerships, grants, alumni giving); capacity building for university managers; re-design of centralized controls that impede operational flexibility; and robust external quality assurance and anti-corruption measures. With sensible reforms, Nigerian tertiary institutions can better harness autonomy to improve teaching, research and societal service while safeguarding affordability and equity.

Keywords: University autonomy; academic freedom; financial autonomy; governance; higher education policy; Nigeria; IPPIS; quality assurance

Introduction

Autonomy is a concept that has gained significant attention in the academic world in recent years. It refers to an individual's ability to make independent decisions and have control over their own actions. The importance of autonomy lies in its role in promoting self-determination and empowerment. Autonomy is a key aspect in various fields such as education, healthcare, and law. In education, it allows students to have a sense of ownership over their learning, leading to increased motivation and better academic outcomes. In healthcare, promoting patient autonomy means giving them the right to make decisions about their own treatment, which can greatly impact their overall well-being. In the legal system, autonomy plays a crucial role in protecting individuals' rights and freedoms. In the context of tertiary education, autonomy denotes the degree of institutional independence from external control in matters of internal organization and governance, resource allocation, staff recruitment and the freedom to determine curricula, teaching and research priorities (IAU, 1998; UNESCO, 1997). (IAU, 1998).

Autonomy is also closely linked to individual happiness and satisfaction. When individuals have control over their own lives and can make decisions that align with their values and beliefs, they are more likely to experience a sense of fulfillment and contentment. The importance of autonomy is further emphasized in current societal trends that prioritize diversity and inclusivity. Autonomy allows individuals from diverse backgrounds to have a voice and be heard, promoting a more equitable and just society. Autonomy is a vital concept that holds great importance in various fields and has a significant impact on individuals' lives. It promotes self-determination, empowerment, happiness, and diversity, making it a crucial aspect to consider in academic research and discussions. Autonomy matters because it underpins academic freedom, supports institutional innovation and strengthens the capacity of universities to respond to changing social and labour-market needs (Altbach, 2001; UNESCO, 1997). At the same time, autonomy requires corresponding accountability mechanisms to protect the public interest and ensure equitable access. (Altbach, 2001; UNESCO, 1997).

Thus, this chapter is discussed under the following subheadings:

- Clarification of concepts
- Autonomy
- Types of Autonomy
- Importance of Autonomy in Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria
- Barriers to effective Autonomy in the Tertiary Education
- Solution to Autonomy's Problems in Tertiary Education in Nigeria

Clarification of concepts

Autonomy

Autonomy as the necessary degree of independence from external control that the university requires in respect of its internal organization and governance; the internal distribution of financial resources; staff recruitment; the setting of the condition of study; the freedom to conduct teaching and research (Confederation of Indian Universities 2004). Also, Ajayi in Musa (2020) looked at autonomy as the freedom of the institution to make its own decisions on broad complex issues without interference from external or non-university agencies. Ogunode and Ibrahim (2023) the complete (total) universities' autonomy is the freedom of the universities to determine their financial operations, academic operations, human resources and administrative processes without external influence. Universities' autonomy is the freedom of universities to coordinate their activities of staff employment, programme development, student's admission, faculties and department establishment, awards of degrees and finance administration without any interference or influence from the government. Autonomy refers to the degree of independence that higher education institutions have in managing their internal affairs without external interference, especially from the government or political bodies. It is considered a cornerstone of academic freedom, institutional development, and innovation.

Autonomy in higher education especially in the universities according to NOUN in Musa (2020) implies that each institution must be governed according to the law that establishes it. Every institution has its law, edict or even decree which spells out the functions of the various organs, such as council, senate, congregation, faculty, department and institute etc. Autonomy in higher education relates to the protection of the institutions from interference by government officials in the day-to-day running of the institutions especially on the issues related to the selection of students; the appointment and removal of the academic staff; including the Vice-Chancellors/Rectors/Provost; the determination of contents of higher education and the control of standards.

Types of Autonomy

Tertiary education autonomy can be broadly categorized into four types:

1. **Academic autonomy** — freedom to design curricula, introduce new programmes, select teaching and assessment methods, and set admission and progression criteria. Academic autonomy enables curricular innovation and responsiveness to new knowledge and labour-market needs. (IAU, 1998).
2. **Administrative autonomy** — authority over internal operations, staff hiring and management, and organizational structures. Administrative autonomy supports timely decision-making and operational effectiveness. (Okoroma, 2007).

3. **Financial autonomy** — control over revenue generation, budgeting, fee setting (where permitted), procurement and investments. Financial autonomy is essential for sustainability, the pursuit of institutional priorities and the attraction of external funds. (Fabayo et al., 2022).
4. **Organizational (or corporate) autonomy** — authority to define mission, governance models (e.g., council composition) and senior leadership appointments. Organizational autonomy affects institutional strategy and long-term stability. (IAU, 1998).

Importance of Autonomy in Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria

- The importance of autonomy in tertiary institutions in Nigeria cannot be overstated. It plays a crucial role in shaping the overall academic environment and the quality of education provided to students. Autonomy allows for institutions to make independent decisions and have control over various aspects such as curriculum, faculty, and budget. This level of independence enables them to tailor their approach to suit the needs of their students and ensure the highest quality of education.
- Furthermore, autonomy also allows for institutions to foster innovation and creativity in their teaching methods and research. With the freedom to explore new ideas and approaches, tertiary institutions in Nigeria can stay at the forefront of academic advancements and provide students with a well-rounded education.
- In addition to this, autonomy also promotes accountability and responsibility within institutions. With the ability to make independent decisions, institutions are held solely responsible for the outcomes of these decisions. This not only ensures transparency but also motivates institutions to strive for excellence in all aspects of their operations.
- Moreover, autonomy also plays a crucial role in promoting diversity and inclusivity in tertiary institutions. With the freedom to make decisions, institutions can prioritize the needs of underrepresented groups and provide them with equal opportunities for education. This creates a more inclusive and diverse academic environment, fostering a sense of belonging for all students.

Barriers to effective Autonomy in the Tertiary Education

The autonomy of tertiary institutions in Nigeria has been facing several challenges in recent years. Some of these challenges include lack of funding, political interference, and weak governance structures, corruption and mismanagement

Role of the Visitor to the Federal Tertiary institutions

The role of the Visitor to the Federal Universities, the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, and State Governors as the Visitors to the State Universities with both political and government powers to appoint the principal officers of the Universities and interfere in the determination of tuition fees and accommodation fees that the students will pay hamper the financial autonomy of

the public universities. The Visitors see the school fees and other fees chargeable by the Universities as political tools to influence the electorates to support the government (Fabayo, Ololade, & Ogbeide, 2023).

Complacency of the Managers of the Nigerian public Tertiary Institutions

Complacency of the Managers of the Nigerian public universities to depend on the statutory allocations has scuttled innovative and creative ideas from these managers on how to generate funds for academic and research programmes and create wealth for the University through grants, donor agencies or private industries. Endowment, alumni, private donors, and internal businesses set up through various entrepreneurial programmes of the universities are some of the ways that the managers of the universities can through the strategic thinking generate funding for their universities (Fabayo, et al 2023).

Lack of funding

The lack of funding greatly affects the autonomy of universities in Nigeria. Without adequate funding, universities are unable to invest in research, infrastructure, or hiring qualified faculty. This leads to a decline in the quality of education and research, which ultimately affects the autonomy of these institutions. Without sufficient financial resources, universities are often forced to depend on external sources such as government grants or private donations, which come with their own set of expectations and conditions (Ogunode et al 2023).

Political interference

Political interference also plays a major role in limiting the autonomy of universities in Nigeria. In many cases, government officials and politicians use their influence to dictate the curriculum, policies, and decisions of universities. This can lead to a lack of diversity in ideas and academic freedom, as universities are unable to freely explore and debate different perspectives and viewpoints. Appointment of Vice-Chancellors and other principal officers should not only be considered on the merit of the academic qualifications alone but also on their capacities and experiences to generate funding and wealth for their universities (Fabayo, et al 2023).

Centralised payroll/control systems (IPPIS) and operational restrictions

Implementation of centralised payroll and personnel control systems (e.g., IPPIS) has been contested because such systems can restrict universities' ability to recruit and pay staff independently, thereby limiting financial and administrative autonomy. The federal government has intermittently taken steps to exempt tertiary institutions from IPPIS to restore operational

flexibility, but implementation has been slow and incomplete. (ThisDay, 2024; Punch, 2024). (ThisDay, 2024; Punch, 2024).

Weak governance

Weak governance structures within universities in Nigeria also contribute to the limited autonomy of these institutions. Without proper leadership and management, universities may struggle to effectively address issues and make decisions that are in the best interest of the institution. This can lead to a lack of accountability and transparency, further weakening the autonomy of the university (Fabayo, et al 2023). (Fabayo et al., 2022; Ogunode & Ibrahim, 2023)

Corruption and mismanagement

Corruption and mismanagement have been found to have a detrimental effect on the autonomy of universities in Nigeria. This issue has been highlighted in various studies and has caused significant concern among academic institutions. Corruption and mismanagement can lead to a lack of transparency and accountability, hindering the independence of universities to make their own decisions and manage their own affairs. This can ultimately result in a decrease in the overall quality of education and research being conducted at these universities, as well as eroding public trust in their integrity. Furthermore, corruption and mismanagement can also lead to financial instability and misallocation of resources, further undermining the autonomy of universities in Nigeria. These issues must be addressed in order to safeguard the autonomy of universities and ensure the continued growth and development of higher education in the country. Empirical studies identify misappropriation and poor financial management as persistent problems that erode public trust and limit autonomy in practice because governments and donors resist delegating authority where fiduciary risk is high (Ololube, 2016). (Ololube, 2016).

Solutions — practical and evidence-based recommendations

To maximize the benefits and minimize the risks of university autonomy, several solutions can be adopted:

1. **Clear legal and regulatory framework** — revise and harmonize statutes to define the scope of autonomy, the limits of ministerial/visitor powers, and accountability obligations. The regulatory framework should enshrine academic freedom and institutional self-governance while ensuring public accountability (UNESCO, 1997; IAU, 1998). (UNESCO, 1997; IAU, 1998).
2. **Strengthen internal governance** — reconstitute governing councils to include independent experts, enforce transparent appointment processes, require regular external audits, and publish performance reports. Evidence shows that stronger internal governance

supports effective autonomy. (Fabayo et al., 2022; Ogunode & Ibrahim, 2023). (Fabayo et al., 2022; Ogunode & Ibrahim, 2023).

3. **Diversify and sustain funding** — encourage endowments, alumni giving, industry partnerships, consultancies and competitive grants. Universities should establish dedicated offices for research commercialization and fundraising. (Fabayo et al., 2022). (Fabayo et al., 2022).
4. **Capacity building for managers and councils** — offer training on financial management, strategic planning, fundraising and procurement to reduce mismanagement and increase confidence in delegated autonomy. (Ogunode & Ibrahim, 2023). (Ogunode & Ibrahim, 2023).
5. **Balance autonomy with equity safeguards** — maintain tuition-support programmes, scholarships and targeted subsidies so that financial autonomy does not undermine access for disadvantaged students. (UNESCO, 1997). (UNESCO, 1997).
6. **Robust external quality assurance and transparency measures** — the National Universities Commission (NUC) and similarly mandated bodies should focus on standards and outcomes rather than micro-management; regular accreditation, public reporting and independent external audits will protect quality while respecting autonomy (NUC guidelines). (NUC, 2024).
7. **Anti-corruption and fiduciary controls** — implement transparent procurement, routine publication of budgets and expenditures, digital payment trails and sanctions for malfeasance to reduce the fiduciary risks that drive central control. (Ololube, 2016). (Ololube, 2016).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the importance of autonomy in tertiary institutions in Nigeria cannot be emphasized enough. It not only allows for institutions to provide high-quality education but also promotes innovation, accountability, and diversity. As such, it is essential for the continued growth and development of the Nigerian education system. Tertiary institutions' autonomy is essential for fostering innovation, excellence, and responsiveness in higher education. However, it must be accompanied by responsible governance, transparency, and inclusive practices. With the right balance of freedom and accountability, autonomous universities can become powerful engines of societal progress and global competitiveness. The lack of funding, political interference, and weak governance structures have a detrimental effect on the autonomy of universities in Nigeria. These factors not only hinder the academic freedom of these institutions but also impact the overall

quality of education and research. It is crucial for these issues to be addressed and for universities to have the resources and independence to make decisions and carry out their academic activities

Revised review questions (for teaching or assessment)

1. What is institutional autonomy in higher education? (briefly define and cite the IAU definition).
2. List and briefly explain four types of tertiary-education autonomy.
3. Identify four reasons why autonomy is important for Nigerian tertiary institutions.
4. List four barriers that limit effective autonomy in Nigerian tertiary education and give a short example for each.
5. Discuss four practical solutions to the problems limiting autonomy in Nigerian tertiary education, citing policy and empirical sources.

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