



Autonomy: The Bane of Public University Education in Nigeria - What Way Out?



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Abstract

The study aimed at proffering suggestions on possible way out of a regularly occurring crises in the tertiary education sub-segment of Nigeria's educational system. The often recurring problem of prolonged strikes have been very detrimental to the students of public universities especially in the last quarter of a century. It therefore became necessary to look into this issue in the light of the adverse effects that these incessant strikes have on the students, their parents, commercial business owners on the campuses, government and the country as a whole. The study was designed as a qualitative study and employed a research instrument that combined both Likert scale items and open-ended questions which enabled respondents to provide additional opinions about their views on the research questions. The research instrument was administered to three groups of high school, university and workplace alumni. The membership of the three groups cut across the major demographic attributes of perceived stakeholders who are concerned about public tertiary education in the country. A total of 60 respondents from a combined membership of 507 participated in the study. The data collected were analysed using simple descriptive statistics. All the three research questions were positively confirmed with the mean of means been 3.6, 3.64 and 3.26 respectively. It was thus established that the current model of the ownership and management of the public universities in the country is no longer supporting the provision of sustainable education. The model therefore needs to be changed to one that will guarantee quality education as well as balance the interests of stakeholders even under a system that assures full autonomy. Rightly there are implications from the findings of this study, the major one been that the children of the less financially endowed in the country will not have equal access to university education. However, it is the suggestion of this study that various stakeholders should devise schemes that will guarantee the inclusions of everyone who aspires to study up to the tertiary level in public institutions. Host communities, parents groups, the institutions themselves and even governments can design scholarships, indigents students support funds and students loans schemes which will be all-inclusive to guarantee equal access to all students. It is the argument of this study that full autonomy with limited government funding is the way forward as far as the provision of tertiary level education by public owned institutions are concerned.

Keywords: ASUU strike; Nigerian universities; Universities autonomy; Tuition fees

Introduction

The state of university education in Nigeria has continually raised concerns among many, including scholars and those outside the academia. Igbuzor [1] captured this problem by stating that the responses of the governments at all levels to the problems which has bedevilled our educational system had always been externally motivated. This claim is premised on the fact that it had often taken the imposition of conditions by international financial institutions for the governments to act responsibly on educational matters. This is suggestive that the three tiers of government in Nigeria only act when pushed, especially by external parties. However, Saint et al. [2] recognized that the Federal Government had at some time initiated reforms on autonomy, differentiation, governance and quality assurance, all of which were aimed at

ensuring better teaching and research capacities of the universities in the country.

Unfortunately, the hopes of Nigerians for the desired improvements in the educational sector, particularly public university education dwindle every year. The problems with education provided by the public tertiary institutions in the country rather than abate get worsened year after year. The crux of the problem is the recurrent and often protracted industrial strikes by the workers unions in these public tertiary institutions. There are at least five different workers unions in the various public universities alone and as many in public polytechnics and colleges of education in the country. For instance, in the public universities, there are the Academic Staff Union of Universities

(ASUU), Non-Academic Staff Union of Educational and Associated Institutions (NASU), National Association of Academic Technicians (NAAT), Senior Staff Association of Nigeria Universities (SSANU), Senior Staff Association of Teaching Hospitals and Research Institutes (SSATHRAI). In fact, the Federal Ministry of Labour and Employment recently issued certificates of registration to two new labour unions of academic workers, the Congress of Nigerian Universities Academics (CONUA) and Nigeria Association of Medical and Dental Lecturers in Academics (NAMDA) [3,4]. All of these workers unions represent the diverse interests of workforce in the government-owned universities. Often time, the resolution of issues or disputes with any one of them led to grounds for disputes with one or more of the other groups [5].

There is no doubt about the right of workers to organise for the purpose of putting up a collective front on issues of bargaining and improvement of their welfare. This much is guaranteed by the Nigerian labor laws and other international labor conventions. However, one would expect that the exercise of such rights would not negatively impact national development. The right to unionize in the workplace stemmed from the principles of freedom of association and collective bargaining which were guarantees provided by the United Nations [6] and the International Labour Organization [7]. The main objectives behind these guarantees are firstly, about the balance of power in the relationship between the employer and the employee. Secondly, they help to protect the individual employee from management action in a conflict situation. However, in the course of exercising this right, the workers unions in the public universities, particularly the academic staff (ASUU), appear to have taken things far, thus causing significant damages to university level education and by extension negatively impact human capital development of the country.

Although the primary interest of this paper is the issue of the autonomy or independence of the public universities, it will examine this in the light of the most recent industrial actions embarked upon by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU). This particular strike went on for more than eight months before it was 'suspended' or 'called-off'. The strike action caused the complete shut-down of academic and research activities in many of the government-owned ivory towers. It also caused irreversible damages to the academic aspirations of many students at all levels [8,9]. The issue of the full autonomy of public universities has been revisited in this study with the objective of suggesting ways out of the problems which recurrently paralyse public tertiary education in Nigeria.

Statement of the problem

The staff unions in public tertiary institutions particularly ASUU often resort to the use of strike actions to press their demands whenever there is a dispute with their employer. Agitations for improvements in the conditions of their employment and funding of tertiary education in the country are usually among the reasons

for embarking on strikes. The recorded cases of ASUU strikes have been so many that Olakunle [10] and Adavbiele [11] both agreed that tertiary education has been most badly affected by it. In fact, between 1999 and 2022, the recorded strike actions of ASUU alone were sixteen [12,13]. If the last total strike by ASUU which lasted for eight and half months is added, the cumulative loss of public tertiary education in the country would be in excess of sixty three months. This implied that in just about a quarter century, public tertiary education in Nigeria has lost more than six academic sessions due to ASUU strikes. Jolayemi and Fatomilola [14] said that the issue of ASUU is a yearly one, with demands made on successive governments since 2013.

These strikes as legitimately as they may have been in terms of the reasons adduced for embarking on them are now perceived to be disruptive, detrimental and harmful to the aspirations of the students, their parents, the society and human capital development of the country. Several reasons had been adduced by ASUU for calling members to go on industrial strikes. Adeyanju et al. [15] identified a couple of reasons for recurrent ASUU strikes as the need for the restoration of integrity; and the improvement in the standard of tertiary education in the country. In the case of the most recent and last strike called by ASUU in February 2022, the Nigerian Labour Congress (2022) highlighted the following as the key issues:

- i. Re-negotiation of the 2009 Agreement which was required to be reviewed triennially (Bello & Isah, 2016);
- ii. Opposition of ASUU on the adoption of the Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPPIS);
- iii. Improved funding for tertiary education in particular public universities in Nigeria;
- iv. Non-payment of outstanding minimum wage for university staff; and
- v. Non-payment of earned allowances of both academic and non-academic staff in public tertiary institutions.

Njoku [16] also affirmed the above stated reasons for the last ASUU strike. Chukwudi and Idowu [17] had earlier identified a couple of reasons which were adduced for previous strikes, these were the licensing and establishments of new public and private universities; and complaint on the issue of the constitution of the Visitation Teams for public universities.

While there might be no gainsaying that public tertiary education has reached its lowest ebb in the history of the country, the habitual and ritualistic yearly strikes called by ASUU appear to have done more damage than the improvements it had always claimed to seek. The frequencies and lengths of national total strikes called by ASUU and the seeming poor attitudes of the governments towards prompt resolution of the issues that constituted the grievances are clear pointers to this assertion. It is, however, often said that doing things in the same manner time and

time again tended not to bring about any changes or improvements of the situation. Thus, this is the reason a different perspective has been brought into the problems of the 'weaponization' of strikes by ASUU. The intention here is to find and suggest a model that could help to deal with the problems of tertiary education in Nigeria. It is the hope that if adopted and implemented, cases of total national and paralyzing strikes will be reduced to the barest minimum if not completely eradicated from our public ivory towers.

Objectives of the study

The key objectives of this study are listed below:

- i. Evaluate the operating model of the public universities in Nigeria, with specific focus on the Federal Universities;
- ii. Identify the problems arising out of the current operating structure of these public universities; and
- iii. Propose ideas on measures to adopt for the effective operations of public universities that will be devoid of incessant strikes by the university workers.

Research questions

The study aimed at proffering suggestions to the specific under-listed research questions:

- i. How reliable is the current model of public universities ownership and management in providing sustainable tertiary level education in Nigeria?
- ii. In what ways have the current ownership and management structures of public universities caused problems for tertiary education in the country?
- iii. What measures or changes should be made to the ownership and management structures to guarantee access to qualitative education in the Federal public universities?

Literature Review

Industrial disputes and universities autonomy

Grievance in any employment relationship is quite a common and well anticipated phenomenon. The industrial relations policies in both public and private organizations had thus established clear guidelines on how grievances and disputes should be managed in employee-employer relationships. Chidi [18] noted that the grievance procedure deals with the approaches to grievance or conflict management, the stages or phases to be followed in declaring and settling of disputes in any formal organization with a view to promptly resolving those issues of contention. The objective of the grievance procedure is the prompt resolution of grievances or nipping them in the bud before becoming full scale conflicts. This is because industrial disputes which are often expressed in the form of general strikes in most cases in Nigeria are more costly, that is, have more negative consequences than benefits resulting from them [5,18,19].

The lecturers in the public universities in Nigeria embarked on the last general strike in February 2022, just about the time students were to commence their first semester examinations. This strike action paralysed activities in all the universities owned by the Federal and State governments, excluding a few that did not join at the start or those that pulled out as the strike progressed [20-22]. The strikes caused significant damages not only to the students, they adversely affected the businesses and livelihood of several who own or operate commercial services on the campuses [23-25], just as parents and guardians were impacted. The consequences of prolonged strikes by the unions, particularly the lecturers in federal and state-owned universities have similarly affected other stakeholders and even several other national economic indices.

It is instructive to note that the foundation for the current state of tertiary education in the country has been long laid. Odetunde [26] described the state of higher education in Nigeria as a sad one and charged stakeholders to take actions towards its revival from the deplorable state it had fallen. Commentators on the state of tertiary education including many who have written or commented on the ASUU strikes ended up laying the blames on successive governments (Egwu, 2018; Olatide, et al, 2020). Some of the identified failures of governments included the inadequate or lack of prioritization of funding for university education, non-implementation of agreements and the proliferation of public and private universities [26]. Aidelunuoghene [27] similarly put the blame of the regular ASUU strikes on the Federal Government, due to its indecision to resolve the important issues at stake. Some of the issues enumerated to justify this position were pay and employment conditions, poor funding as well as the inadequacies of infrastructural facilities in the universities. Ajayi (2014) equally agreed with this view while challenging the national government to always grant the requests of the universities unions through prompt engagements and dialogue, thereby saving the educational sector from total collapse.

As a result, the solutions to the problem of incessant strikes had always been viewed from the perspective that placed sole responsibility on the government. That is, governments alone should provide the finance necessary for revamping the public university (Bello & Isah, 2016). The stance canvassed and vehemently maintained by ASUU is that government has the responsibility of funding the universities without having to unduly interfere in their affairs [28]. Unfortunately, successive governments at the federal level have not done much to rid itself of the foundation of the problems in the Nigerian tertiary institutions. Even the Universities Autonomy Act No. 1 (2007) did not fully liberate the system as the 'ultimate power of control' remained vested in the government (Oshio, n.d).

The Universities Autonomy Act No. 1 (2007) in addition to retaining the effective power for the control of the federal universities, also had a number of other shortcomings. It provided

for what can be described as semi or guided autonomy rather than making the federal public universities fully autonomous. The identified shortcomings of this Act are enumerated hereunder:

i. Retention of the powers for the appointment and dissolution of the Governing Councils with the Federal Government;

ii. Contradictions between sub-clauses 2AAA(1) and 2AAA(2) on the independence of the Governing Councils to carry out their functions while at the same time stipulated that funds disbursements must follow specified approved budgetary guidelines;

iii. Failure to address the critical issue of funding and welfare of workers in the public universities which has always been major recurrent issues in the agitation of the universities workers; and

iv. Ambiguous description of the subject matter of the Act which did little to specify its applicability only to the Federal Government owned universities. The ambiguous title of the Act may perhaps be reason workers in States owned universities participate in general strikes called by the workers in Federal Government owned universities.

The issue of autonomy of the public universities have seen diverse opinions from as many as those who have contributed on it. According to Okoroma [29], the recommendation by the Ashby Commission in its report was for universities to be insulated from political interferences and managed by autonomous councils. West [30] defined university autonomy as freedom in terms of internal government and governance. Taiwo [31], described autonomy of the universities as involving selection and setting the conditions and standards for the employment of staff and students, curriculum development, award of degrees and the allocation of resources to meet own expenditures regardless of the source of income been public or private. Ojo [32] also agreed that autonomy implied the ability of the public universities to be free from government interferences in its internal matters even though the government is responsible for their funding. These various definitions of autonomy of the universities even by scholars have inherent contradictions in them.

The original design concept of public universities in Nigeria did not plan or foresee them to generate revenues even from their own activities [29]. They were and are still largely or fully funded through national or state budgetary provisions and allocations. These government funding are now inadequate due to increasing students' population, dwindling revenues to the governments and the expanding needs for investment in other social infrastructure. The funding of public universities by government is the main cause of their sustained interferences in the administration of these institutions. This brings to the fore, the saying that he who pays the piper dictates the tune. Thus, the various explanations given

for the autonomy of public universities when still substantially funded by either the States or Federal Governments are not tenable. In fact, government functionaries also appeared to be unable to extricate themselves from contradictory positions on the issue of the autonomy of public universities.

A glaring example of the miscarriage about university autonomy in Nigeria was expressed by a former Minister of Education in the presentation made on the then proposed policy document on the subject matter of autonomy of public universities. The document on the issue stated thus:

'University autonomy means more and better funding for universities so as to strengthen them to be globally competitive. University autonomy does not mean abdication of government responsibility to fund the universities. One of the dividends of autonomy is that the hands of the universities will be united to seek alternative sources of augmenting their revenue base as government funding regardless of how substantial, is still inadequate. Student fees and charges remain a legitimate source of revenue in an atmosphere of university autonomy after adequate empowerment of students and their sponsors. The programme of empowerment include improvement of the take-home pay of workers and adequate scholarship and loan schemes for students to enable them meet their financial obligations' (Adeniran, 2000).

The above policy statement was in itself inconsistent. It sought for the continuation of government funding of public universities and at the same time held the expectation that there would be no interferences in their administration. Another misunderstanding of universities autonomy can be seen in Okoroma (2001), who lampooned the proposed government policy as retrogressive, unacceptable and advocated for full funding by the Government since according to him, the government has control of all resources. These are inconsistent with the demands for the autonomy of federal public universities. It does not fit to ask for public universities to be independent, seek continued funding from government in full or part and not expect the same government to interfere in their administration. In fact, Abugu [33] said it is incongruent that ASUU or indeed anyone would seek government funding for public universities and expect it to be less interfering in their management and control. He further suggested a holistic review of the law or policy on universities autonomy. Ike (1976), had similarly reasoned along this line, that it is only in an utopian world that the government will establish and finance universities, hand them over to the governing councils and lecturers who would only make requests for funding and spend as they like without being accountable to it. Other areas of conflict on the issue of universities autonomy can be identified from the functions of the National Universities Commission (NUC) as stated in the legal instrument for its establishment. Among the numerous functions of the NUC, it is empowered to prepare the master plans and coordinate the development of the programmes

to be taught, approval and the disapproval of the establishment of faculties or postgraduate schools. This is a function which appears to be unaligned with the legal provision of the Universities (Miscellaneous Provisions) Amendment Act [34].

Intrusion of Government into University Autonomy in Nigeria

It is pertinent at this point to dive into the issue of the incursions of the Nigerian government into the autonomy of the universities. Firstly, autonomy connotes freedom or independence from the interference and or influence of another be it individual or organization. Dambazau (2014) said the autonomy of the university system includes the freedom of expression of ideas by both lecturers and students, freedom of research and teaching interests as well as that of the institutions to determine professional standards. According to the account of Isa (2014), the genesis of incursions by the Federal Government of Nigeria into the autonomy of universities in the country can be traced back to 1973. The first blow on the autonomy of the universities followed the trade dispute declared by the then National Association of Universities Teachers (NAUT), predecessor of today's ASUU, in 1973. The government of the day refused to accept the outcome of the negotiations between the local branches of the lecturers union and their institutions councils. In order to break the strike which followed the rejection of the collective bargaining outcomes, the Federal Government through the Federal Ministry of Education resorted to harsh actions to quash the strike. In fact, Ade-Ajayi (2001), described the outcome of the government's tough actions as a 'rout' with the consequent inability of the universities teacher to sustain the strike.

The success of quelling the perceived 'rebellion' (Ade-Ajayi, 2001), by the universities lecturers laid the foundation for the unending interferences by successive Governments in the affairs of the universities. Thus in 1974, following the recommendations of the Udoji Commission, the conditions of service of university lecturers was subsumed into the civil service structure (Adesina, 1998). By the extension of the public sector pensions system to the universities workers, the autonomous university superannuation scheme became effectively replaced (Isa, 2014). As stated by Ade-Ajayi (2001), the implementation of the Udoji Commission Report implied the following:

- i. The effective cessation of the employment of universities workers as employees of autonomous and self-regulating corporations;
- ii. The universities became appendages of government ministries; and
- iii. The genesis for the negotiations of the conditions of service with the Government.

Adekanye (1993) had previously identified the impact which the Udoji Commission brought on the remuneration of universities

lecturers, in the comparison of the pre- and post-Udoji periods. He demonstrated this by juxtaposing the pictures of pre-Udoji Commission salaries of lecturers' vis-à-vis those of military officers on commensurate levels and ranks and their respective salaries after the implementation of the Commission's report. Of course, after the implementation of the Commission's report, the salaries of military officers exceeded those of universities lecturers who had hitherto earned more for comparable levels and ranks.

Several other instances of the incursion of the Federal Government which undermined the autonomy of the university system included, the take-over in 1975 of the universities established by the regional governments and empowerment of the National Universities Commission (NUC) to receive and disburse grants to the Universities (Isa, 2014). Osoba (1996) also commented about the government's undue interferences in the affairs of the universities, citing how a former Executive Secretary of the NUC maltreated Vice-Chancellors of the universities and used the position he occupied to deal severe blows on the 'principle of University autonomy'. Osoba (1996) also stated that the establishment of the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) in 1978, was a breach of the universities autonomy over the admission of students into their programmes. This view was also corroborated by Onyeonoru [28] with an assertion that JAMB's determination and setting of criteria for the admission of students clearly eroded the powers of the universities. JAMB as a body since 1978 has exercised the power to singularly organise and conduct examinations for the admission of candidates into universities in the country. However, with the introduction of the post-UTME examination in 2005 (Ikoghode, 2005), the universities now have a say in the admission of candidates into their institutions.

The government has also showed itself to be quite inconsistent in its actions towards the university system. An example cited by Onyeonoru [28] was the unilateral abortion of an ongoing negotiations between the national leadership of ASUU and the Ministry of Education in 1996. The government had attempted to introduce a form of deregulated collective bargaining structure, with the proscription of ASUU at the national level. The government directed ASUU at the institutions levels to negotiate with their respective governing councils, but this directive was opposed by ASUU.

Current model of ownership and management Federal universities in Nigeria (Figure 1)

Establishment and ownership: the journey of the Federal Government into the establishment and ownership of universities in Nigeria can be traced to the report of the Ashby Commission of 1959. The report of this Commission, according to Adeyemo [35] laid the foundation on which the country's higher education system developed. It was the Commission that recommended the need for new universities in addition to then University College Ibadan, due to increased demand for university education. Consequently,

three universities were established by the regional governments: the University of Nigeria Nsukka in 1960, the University of Ife now Obafemi Awolowo University in 1961 and Ahmadu Bello University in 1962 [36]. The Federal Government in responding

to the recommendations of the Commission, established the University of Lagos in 1962 [36,37] and upgraded the status of University College Ibadan to a standard university [38].

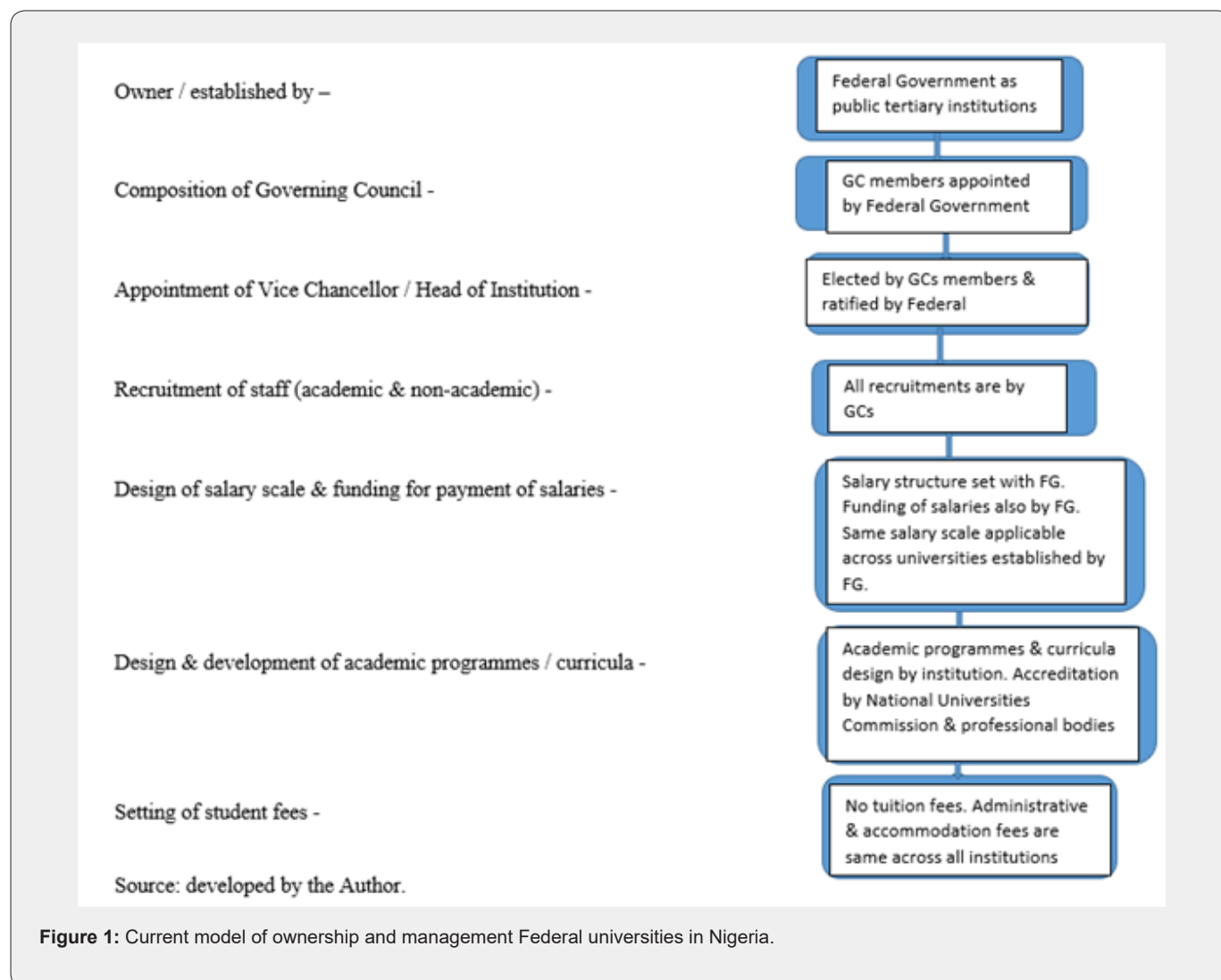


Figure 1: Current model of ownership and management Federal universities in Nigeria.

As at the end of 1962, all the five universities in the country were owned or established by either the Federal or Regional Governments. However, by 1975 the Federal Military Government through Decree No. 25 of 1975 effected the take-over of all the three universities established by the regional governments and the University of Benin which was just established by the Government of the Mid-Western State in 1971 [39]. Since then, the Federal Government has established several universities, with the current number owned by it been 49 (National Universities Commission, 2022).

Governing Council: the governing councils are the highest policy making organs in all Federal Universities in Nigeria. The membership composition of the governing councils is stated in the

Universities (Miscellaneous Provisions) Amendment Act (2003). This Act provided for at least 17 persons on the Governing Council of each Federal University. Six of these council members including the Chairman are external of the university system.

The governing councils in public universities in Nigeria are similar to same bodies in foreign universities. These highest policy making organs in foreign universities are called by various names such as university council, board of governors or other terminologies. These are bodies charged with the responsibility of managing the affairs of the universities and their future development [40]. The Universities (Miscellaneous Provisions) Amendment Act [34] reserves the power for the dissolution of the governing councils of federal public universities in the Visitor,

that is the President of the country (Olayinka et al., 2017). This by extension applies to the State Governors who have the right to exercise similar powers over State-owned tertiary institutions.

Appointment of Vice Chancellors: the vice-chancellors occupy the most senior administrative seats in Nigerian universities. By virtue of the position being the chief executive officer of the ivory tower, there are often many diverse interests and factors in who occupies it, some of which threaten the university system [41,42]. In an interview, Olukoju [43] identified a couple of factors which influence the choices of vice chancellors of Nigerian universities as the types of ownership and nature of appointment, that is, pioneer or successor appointments.

The issue of appointments of vice chancellors are always contentious with many interests, factors, considerations and influences involved. The University (Miscellaneous Provisions) Amendment Act [34] has tried to make the process of appointment one with less interferences. Specifically, Section 3 of the Act sets the guidelines on actions to be taken towards the selection and or appointment of vice chancellors in universities owned or established by the Federal Government by vesting the powers in the Governing Council. Unfortunately, the Governing Councils still do not have the final decisions on the appointments of Vice Chancellors for their institutions. Their choices or recommendations are forwarded to the Visitor, who is either the President or the State Governor to ratify and confirm [44,45].

Recruitment of staff: in the current structure of management of federal universities in Nigeria, the recruitment of both academic and non-academic employees is vested in the governing councils. Shu'ara [46] stated that the governing councils in federal owned universities exercise control over establishment matters concerning the staff below the vice chancellors. The establishment matters include recruitment, staffing, appointments, promotion and disciplinary issues [47] of workers in the university or tertiary institutions. Briggs [48] affirmed this function of the governing councils by stating that the Appointments and Promotion Committees are important standing committees of the governing councils both for teaching and non-teaching staff. This function of the governing councils of federal universities in Nigeria is akin to that of similar bodies in universities in the United Kingdom [40].

Design of remuneration scale and funding of the payment of salaries: this has been a major area of contention. Issues around remuneration and payment of salaries have often featured among the reasons public universities workers unions embarked on strike actions. For instance, some of the reasons ASUU adduced for going on the last strike which lasted more than eight months according to Nigeria Labour Congress (2022) and Njoku [16] were:

- i. non-payment of minimum wage and earned allowances;
- ii. renegotiation of salaries; and

iii. issue of the payroll system, that is the enrolment and payment of universities

iv. workers' salaries through the IPPIS

These are clearly incongruent with the supposed functions of the tertiary institutions Governing Councils as provided for in the University (Miscellaneous Provisions) Amendment Act [34] and highlighted by Shu'ara [46], Briggs [48] and Kazaure [47] in their various presentations. The governing councils are supposed to be responsible in addition to the employment, appointment and promotion, for the negotiation and agreement of the terms and conditions of employment of all the universities workers. Sourcing for the funds to pay workers' salaries is also a function of the Governing Councils. However, the prevailing model in the Nigerian tertiary institutions are different. On one hand, workers are recruited by the Governing Councils who also determine the positions, salary grades of staff and other applicable conditions of such employments. On the other hand, funding for the payment of salaries are seen as the responsibility of the Federal Government who the various workers unions also see as their 'real' employer and go into collective bargaining on the terms and conditions of their employments with. The Federal Government also perceived that universities workers are its direct employees just like others employed in the civil service, thus their compulsory enrolment into IPPIS.

Design & development of academic programmes and curricula: to a large extent, the universities are independent in developing their academic programmes and curricula. Although, the National Universities Commission (NUC Act, 1974) is empowered with oversight function to supervise and regulate the universities on their programmes. The functions of the NUC included ensuring the adequacy and quality control of academic programmes offered by the universities. It also has the responsibility of ensuring that higher education provided by the universities align with national interests. Thus, to a large extent specifically on these functions, the NUC as a superintending body over universities in the country appear to be in order.

Setting of fees: fees charged by federal government owned universities in Nigeria appear to be guided or regulated as observed from the range of fees paid by students in these institutions. These Federal public universities do not charge any fee for tuition. Students generally pay fees for admission or acceptance of admission in their first year, administrative charges for services such as examinations, issuance of students' identity cards, students' health insurance and so on. In addition, where a student is allocated an accommodation space in any of the university's halls of residence, a fee is charged for such on-campus hostel accommodation. The hostel accommodation fee covers both for residency and utilities that is, electricity and water usage.

The administrative and accommodation fees charged by the federal government owned universities are comparably low to those of state government owned. The fees charged by the federal public universities can be regarded as paltry in comparison to those charged by the licensed private universities in the country. For instance, returning full-time undergraduate students in Federal Government owned universities pay less than \$300 per full academic session. This amount is irrespective of the course of study and including accommodation fees. However, returning students in private universities pay fees ranging between \$1,000 to \$6,000 per full academic session for tuition, administrative and accommodation.

Funding as the biggest problem of public universities in Nigeria

A major issue that has continued to plague public universities in the country is funding. This funding problem, whether in terms of providing sustainable conditions of service for university workers or provision of teaching and learning infrastructure remains a recurrent issue. Akinkugbe (2001) described the issue of funding as a central one that has ultimately caused decays and complete desecration of public universities in the country. It is an issue considered to be very central to turning around the Nigerian public universities. The funding of public tertiary institutions in Nigeria had always been by the tier of government that owns or established the institution and can be traced back to 1948 with the establishment of University College Ibadan now University of Ibadan [28]. Ukeje (2002) pointed to the governments of Nigeria and United Kingdom as two government sources for the funding of the University College Ibadan. Each respectively provided 70% and 30% of the funds required to meet the institution's recurrent expenditure. Other sources such as endowments and donations by business organisations were equally identified by Omeregic (1995) and Onyeonoru [28] for the development of infrastructural facilities in the then University College Ibadan.

In the immediate post-independence period up to 1972 when the total number of universities established and owned by the Federal and the four Regional Governments had risen to six, the major source of funding was still by the respective governments. This period can be said to be the glorious past of public universities in Nigeria as their funding was deemed sufficient. For instance, Ukeje (2002) said in the case of the Ahmadu Bello University, established by the Regional Government of then Northern Nigeria in 1962, the University had sufficient funding to the extent that it even received more than it requested in some years. Scholars have ascribed the genesis of the funding problems of public universities in the country to the era between 1975 and the mid-1980s. Onyeonoru [28], Isa (2014) and Nyewusira and Jamabo (2015) all connected the recurrent problem with the funding of public universities to the proliferation of public universities from five in 1962 to about twenty-two by the mid-1980s, especially

as the country began to witness economic meltdown in the 1980s. Credence is given to this view as during this same period the various Federal and State Governments established other categories of tertiary institutions such as Colleges of Education, Mono and Polytechnics, thereby compounding the problem of funding of tertiary education. This sudden increase consequently implied that resources which were hitherto used for funding six universities at federal and regional government levels now had to be applied to more than three times that initial number.

As of now, there are one hundred and thirteen public universities with fifty-one and sixty-two belonging to the Federal and States Governments respectively (NUC, 2023) [49]. According to Nyewusira and Jamabo (2015) the establishments of these new universities were based more on political correctness without consideration for their funding. The spate of establishment of more public universities appears to still be the trend going by reports in the media Tolu-Kolawole [50], Ojo [51], and Abati [52]. Okorosanye-Orubite (2003) identified factors which exacerbated the funding problems of public universities in Nigeria following the second and third phases of establishment of new universities up till the mid-1980s. The factors identified included:

- i. increased number of universities;
- ii. economic recession consequent to the glut in the crude oil market;
- iii. abolition of tuition fees;
- iv. economic policies such as the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP)

Besides the above factors, Jega (2000) attributed the under-funding of the universities to successive military government's nonchalance towards the prioritisation of tertiary education. The de-prioritisation of the funding of education in the national budget in deference to budgets for defence was considered by Nyewusira and Jamabo (2015) as a clear demonstration of this nonchalance. Adekanye (2003) supported this view citing the high disparity between the remuneration of military personnel and lecturers in the universities. It must be stated as a matter of fact, that just like it was under the successive military governments, the funding of education in general under their civilian successors since 1999 steadily declined. The civilian governments have struggled to provide the funds which the existing universities require to function well, but each bequeathed the nation with new universities established by both the States and Federal Governments. For instance, Nyewusira and Jamabo (2015) reported that while the civilian government of Obasanjo had in 2001 agreed on gradual increase of budgetary allocation to the education sector to 26% by 2026, the administration under him did not exceed 12%. The Obasanjo administration established two universities at the Federal level between 1999 and 2007 (NUC, 2023).

The initial improvement in the budgetary allocation to the education sector in the first national budget of the Yar'Adua government in 2008 took the allocation to 13% but this dropped to 5.3% in 2010. Unlike the previous government, the Yar'adua government did not establish any new university at the Federal level during its short three year tenure. The highest budgetary allocation to education during the President Jonathan's regime from 2010 to 2015 was 9% [53]. By the end of the government's tenure in May 2015, the Jonathan government had added thirteen new Federal universities to the number. Budget data during the eight years rule of the Buhari administration showed that the highest allocation received by the education sector was 8% in 2016. It further showed that the 2023 allocation of 5% [54] was the lowest even lower than the allocation to the sector in 2010 under the Jonathan regime. There is no gainsaying that the records of budgetary allocations to the education sector since 2010 and even in prior years, has been nowhere near the UNESCO's recommendation of 26% to the sector. This therefore suggests that there is an urgent need for a total revamping of not only the public universities but the entire education sector of the country.

Methodology

There have been several studies carried out on different aspects of this subject matter, and of course, taking different approaches. Some of the related studies were purely quantitative, employing means, standard deviation and Z-test for data analysis [55]. Similarly, some others took the qualitative approach such as historical research methodology and review of historical antecedents [56] or content analysis of secondary sourced materials [57]. Yet, some others adopted both quantitative and qualitative (mixed) methods [58].

This particular study can be largely regarded as a quantitative one. It adopted survey design and collected data with the aid of self-developed research instrument. The responses obtained with the aid of this instrument were subjected to both statistical and content analyses which enabled appropriate inferences and deductions to be made in order to suggest answers to the research questions.

Research Instrument

The research instrument was a self-developed questionnaire. This instrument was made into four parts. The first part basically obtained demographic data of the study participants while the remaining three parts were designed to elicit responses to address each of the three research questions. The questionnaire included thirty six Likert scale items and eight open-end items. The open-end questions were included to enable study participants provide their independent views on some of the issues investigated.

Cronbach's reliability test was used to check the internal consistency of the instrument [59,60]. The initial reliability statistics are summarised in the table below (Table 1):

Table 1: Reliability statistics of research questions measures.

Reliability statistics of research questions measures		
Measures	No of items	Cronbach's alpha
Research question 1	15	0.609
Research question 2	12	0.923
Research question 3	9	0.891
Aggregated research questions	36	0.926

The above showed that the cronbach's alpha 0.609 for the measurement items of research question 1, falls below the suggested limit of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2013). In order to improve the reliability score of the measures of research question 1, four of the instrument items were deleted. Below table shows the improved reliability statistics after deletion of the four items (Table 2).

Table 2: Reliability statistics of research questions measures.

Reliability statistics of research questions measures		
Measures	No of items	Cronbach's alpha
Research question 1	11	0.813
Research question 2	12	0.923
Research question 3	9	0.891
Aggregated research questions	32	0.952

The above result showed better internal consistency of the research instrument with all Cronbach's alpha exceeding the lower limit of 0.70.

Samples and sampling

The possible population of the study could easily mean all those who have keen interest in the subject matter of the autonomy of public universities and the impacts which ASUU strikes have had on tertiary education in Nigeria. This is such a large population that the study can only attempt to have represent through a purposive sampling procedure. Furthermore, considering that the study instrument also had some open-ended questions which will require to be analyzed using a different method from the Likert scale items, it was imperative that the sample size be a manageable number.

Thus, the participants for the study comprised of members of a high school, tertiary institution, and workplace alumni groups. These alumni groups have membership that cut across the major demographic attributes of perceived stakeholders who are concerned about public tertiary education in the country. The following is the breakdown of the membership of the alumni groups: (Table 3)

Table 3: The following is the breakdown of the membership of the alumni groups.

Alumni group	No. of members
High school	227
University	34
Workplace	246
Total	507

The questionnaire was distributed electronically to all the three alumni platforms, and no member of the alumni group was excluded from participation. These alumni groups consisted of parents or guardians who have children about to begin studies, studying or that have completed tertiary level education. A total of sixty (60) members from the aggregated five hundred and seven members of the alumni groups completed and submitted their responses electronically. This represents approximately 12% of the members of the alumni groups.

Data analysis

The study adopted the combination of descriptive statistics and content analysis. Descriptive statistics such as frequency distribution, percentages and means were applied to those instrument items that were measured with Likert scale. On the other hand, content analysis was applied to the open-ended questions to establish patterns of frequencies of the responses. The measurement items which were deleted to improve the internal consistency of the research instrument were not taken into further consideration in the data analysis.

Respondents attributes

The demographic attributes of the respondents showed that forty-four (73%) of them were male and sixteen (27%) were female. The marital distribution reflected 93% were married and the remaining 7% fell in different categories of single individuals. Respondents educational qualifications showed that 23.3% possessed only first degrees or equivalent, 63.3% possessed a second degree or post-graduate diplomas and the remaining were holders of higher Mphil or PhD degrees. Among the respondents, 43% were business owners, employees in the private and public sectors were approximately 22% and 2% respectively and 33% already retired from active service. Finally, 35% of the respondents have children who studied or are currently studying at a Federal Government-owned institution, 15% in State Government-owned, 30% in Private institutions and 20% in Foreign tertiary institutions.

Analysis of research questions

Research question 1: How reliable is the current model of public universities ownership and management in providing sustainable tertiary level education in Nigeria?

The interest of this research question was to ascertain whether or not the current ownership and management model

of public universities, particularly those established and owned by the Federal Government enables them to provide sustainable education at the tertiary level. A combination of eleven Likert scale items and four open-ended questions were analyzed in addressing this research question.

Using descriptive statistics method of analysis, the means of the eleven Likert scale items ranged between 2.68 and 4.64. The mean of means for this category of questions was 3.6. This suggests that respondents tended to agree that the current model of the ownership and management of the public particular those owned by the Federal Government is not reliable in providing sustainable education. This position was further buttressed by the participants through their responses to the open-ended questions which elicited additional perspectives in respect of this research question.

The analyzed contents of responses to the open-ended questions revealed that respondents deem the current model not to be realistic. The factors identified to support the views of respondents are:

- i. Over dependence of the Universities on funding from the government;
- ii. The tendency for Universities administrators to be corrupt or mismanage resources;
- iii. High rate of external interferences and control of the affairs of the institutions;
- iv. Poor remuneration of Universities workers;
- v. Inadequate and substandard infrastructure to support teaching and research; and
- vi. Inability of the Universities to compete with other global institutions

In addition, respondents expressed the opinion that public institutions in the country should be modelled similar to institutions in countries like United Kingdom, United States, and Canada. The models that operate in these countries were considered to largely guarantee their independence in virtually all areas while the governments ensure the quality of their curricula. Majority of the respondents opined that education in general is a serious business and one which governments should steer clear off. However, the few who dissented expressed that it is the responsibility of government to provide equal opportunities for every citizen to fulfil their aspirations. Furthermore, respondents expressed that government's participation in the provision of tertiary education should be limited to formulation of policies, regulatory, standards monitoring and evaluation, and the institution of transparent students loan schemes. A few in the minority however canvassed the position that if government can establish and own universities, it should be able to exert control over all aspects of such institutions.

The respondents opinion on changes desirable from the current model of the public universities reflected the strongest preference for free hand in the admission of students into both undergraduate and postgraduate programs. This was closely followed with the preference for financial autonomy which was mentioned by thirty-four respondents. The independence of the universities in designing their remuneration structure and conditions of service ranked third with twenty-nine mentions. Other areas suggested by the respondents for consideration of autonomy are the appointment and removal of vice chancellors, introduction and determination of fees including tuition fees, design of academic programs, and the appointment or dissolution of governing councils of the institutions. The least consideration for autonomy was given to the localisation of the activities of workers unions.

Research question 2: In what ways have the current ownership and management structure of public universities caused problems for tertiary education in the country?

This research question aimed at identifying the nature of problems which the current model of the ownership and management of the public universities have caused and their impacts on the tertiary education. The research question was evaluated with a combined twelve Likert scale and two open-ended items. These sets of questions were analyzed with descriptive statistics and content analysis respectively.

The Likert scale items had means ranging between 2.5 and 4.08. The mean of means for this category of questions was 3.64. This suggests that respondents tended to agree that the current model of the ownership and management of the public universities in the country to be inimical to tertiary education. Respondents buttressed this position through their responses to an open-ended question on the use of industrial strike actions to press home their demands on the government. The use of strikes was viewed by respondents as detrimental not only to the entire tertiary education system but to the human capital development progress of the country. Respondents suggestions on alternatives to the use of strikes are:

- i. Peaceful protests and rallies;
- ii. Continuous dialogue engagements with major stakeholders and interest groups;
- iii. Strict adherence and working within the limits of employment contracts;
- iv. Embracing of alternative disputes resolution mechanism; and
- v. Localization of unions and unions related activities to individual university level.

Furthermore, 65% of respondents were aligned in agreeing that industrial strikes have remained part of the public university

system due to the lack of full autonomy. In the same vein, 58% of them expressed that the incessant interferences of the government in the affairs of the public universities is adversarial to the students whose. Almost 75% of the respondents expressed that the heavy reliance on government funding has hampered the public universities ability to generate innovativeness and creative ideas that will boost their internally generated revenues. Sixty percent of the respondents were therefore unanimous in their agreement that the existing structures are responsible for the inadequate infrastructure to support teaching and learning at the public universities.

Research question 3 - What measures or changes should be made to the ownership and management structures to guarantee access to qualitative education in the Federal public universities?

This research question aimed at eliciting the views of the study participants on the changes they considered are necessary or measures that should be introduced to boost the level of confidence in the public tertiary universities in the country. The measures to address this research question were 9 Likert scale questions and 2 open-ended questions.

The means of the responses obtained from the Likert scale questions ranged between 2.87 and 4.18. The mean of means for all the nine Likert scale items was 3.26. This implies that respondents relatively agreed on the various important changes to the current model, that will guarantee the provision and access to quality tertiary level education in the country. Some of the measures which respondents agreed on are:

- i. The revision of each public university's establishing law to grant full autonomy;
- ii. Federal government to provide initial take-off funds at the establishment and yearly grants to own universities;
- iii. The public universities should be made to be less dependent on the government for funding;
- iv. Reduction of the interferences of the government in the affairs of the universities to the barest minimum.

The respondents expressed the view that the role of government in the administration of tertiary education should be limited to policy making, setting of standards, and monitoring and evaluation of quality.

Discussions and Recommendations

The findings indicate the following:

- i. That the model of current ownership and management of the public universities in Nigeria is no longer suitable for the provision of sustainable quality tertiary level education;
- ii. That the problems bedevilling the public universities in the country are borne out of a system that has remained perpetually tied to the apron strings of the government; and

iii. That the public universities should be given new lease of life by granting them full autonomy to make them more sustainable.

The study established that the current model of public universities administration is no longer suitable and their continued dependence on the government for funding is not sustainable for the services they provide. The problem of funding is critically central to all the problems and challenges of the public universities and have remained a major reason the workers, particularly ASUU embark on industrial strike actions (Nigerian Labour Congress, 2022) [26]. This over-dependence on the government for the funding of the public universities has given credence to the unabated interferences of successive government in the affairs of the universities, thus reinforcing the saying 'he who plays the piper dictates the tune' [33]. Unfortunately, the perceived meddlesomeness of governments in the administration of the public universities in Nigeria may be far from over. This is because discordant positions are being canvassed on the issue of the autonomy of the public universities, even by stakeholders who should know better. For instance while ASUU argues for the autonomy of public institutions, it still demands that government should improve and continue to provide the funds to run them (Nigeria Labour Congress, 2022; Bello & Isah, 2016; Aidelunuoghene, 2014).

These conflicting positions by a major stakeholder in the tertiary education ecosystem in the country have invariably contributed to the myriad of problems that have remained the bane of public universities. In the last twenty five years, the public universities in Nigeria have lost a cumulative of six academic sessions [12,13] to different forms of industrial actions called by ASUU to drive home its demands, which include improved funding. The implications of the various protracted strikes by the academic and non-academic workers in the public universities are far reaching on the students, their parents, the human capital development of the country, and the commercial activities on the campuses [23,24].

The findings also showed that the workers unions particularly ASUU contributed to the perceived 'rot' of the university system in the bid of pushing their demands through. While strikes are recognised as the most potent instrument in the hands of workers unions, the study participants perceived it as destructive in the way and manner ASUU has employed its use over time. This position reflects the views of Shimawua [5], Chidi [18] and Okpala [19] that strikes have more negative consequences than the benefits they supposedly bring. Therefore, the labour unions are advised to devise other strategies that will be impactful and not as destructive as strikes in their pushing for government's attention on issues that affect them. In the expressed views of the study participants, the systemic changes required include the decentralisation of labour union activities in the university system, that is, the powers of a national body of workers unions

should be discontinued. The localisation of universities workers unions will enable quicker resolutions of grievances and reduce the negative impact of national total strikes which are detrimental to the public universities as a whole.

It is imperative that the public university system be reappraised with all stakeholders coming on board to achieve one objective, that is to make the institutions sustainable. This can only be possible where they are granted the full autonomy that is much desirable. The autonomy must cover all the facets of university administration including: the employment of workers and the determination of their conditions of service; design and determination of salary scales of all employees; introduction and collection of tuition fees, and such other areas that will guarantee efficient and sustainable operations. While a few of the respondents in the study expressed their views against granting public universities full autonomy and desire that the government should retain some degree of control, the majority support full autonomy.

Conclusion

The state of public tertiary education in Nigeria continues to be a major sour point and one that requires the collective attention of all the stakeholders in the system. It is important to point out that the demands on the government for the provision of social infrastructure and services in this present day far outweigh the resources generated by it. Tertiary level education is an important element in the human development capacity and index of any country, as such, it requires policies that will guarantee its sustainability. The current imbalance between government resources and the public expenditure required to make living meaningful for citizens is hindering the provision of services hitherto considered to be part of citizens welfare rights.

While the right of the Nigerian citizen to quality education is fundamental, it is imperative at this material time, that stakeholders understand that the resources required for the provision of quality tertiary education at the public level has really reduced. The number of public tertiary institutions, population of students yearning for tertiary education on an annual basis and the pressure faced by the public institutions have clearly shown that the current model needs to be rejigged. Where tertiary institutions remain largely funded by the government, stakeholders including their workers unions will only be mocking themselves by demanding any form of autonomy that is devoid of government intervention.

The first set of private universities in the country were licensed in 1999. These private universities have since demonstrated stability in terms of peaceful learning and teaching environment, tenure of studies, sustainable terms and conditions of workers employment, threats of disruptions due to workers strike actions and quality of graduates produced. They have essentially grown and keep developing from the seed capitals of their founders,

introduction and collection of school fees which are reflective of the resources required to provide quality tertiary education. In addition to these, many of these private institutions have courted the goodwill notable persons from within and outside the country, to support the institutions in one way or the other. They have also been more creative than their public counterparts in their internally generated revenues, as part of ensuring the availability of funds for their administration, infrastructure development and provision of quality education.

It is in the light of the above, that this study argues that the only way forward out of the problems that are challenging the public universities in the country is a change of their operating model. The current model where ownership and management responsibilities are on the federal or state governments can no longer support the sustainable running of their affairs. It is also not feasible to expect the governments not to have any form of interference or influence on the administration and internal affairs of the institutions which are solely funded by them. As long as the public universities in Nigeria depend on the government for their funding, it would be normal to expect the government to exercise significant control over them. Government funds are public funds, so the government must demand accountability from public universities as they would for other public agencies and also be involved in the appointments of the universities' management teams.

In order for the public tertiary institutions to wean themselves off government interferences, they must evolve ways to sustainably fund their activities. In other words, they must be funded and managed just as their private counterparts are. Tertiary education provided by public owned institutions must be allowed to operate on a business model that allows them to efficiently and effectively cover the costs of services provided. They must be made to operate under a model that gives room for government to set, monitor and evaluate policies, rules, regulations, standards and provision of limited funding through grants. Models like what is obtainable in other countries where their governments set the immigration rules for international students' entry into the country and support for the education of home students by offering student loans, which the beneficiaries repay during their working lives. This way, the universities charge appropriate fees from both home and international students, while offering good quality education.

Limitation of the study

The relevance of this study cannot be underemphasized. However, it is important to state that it is not exhaustive in its coverage of the subject matter. There have been several studies conducted with the objective of contributing to suggesting solutions to the problem of tertiary education provided by public owned institutions in the country. This is another of such efforts and one with a divergent position from many previous studies that have laid the blames on the government actor alone.

It is impracticable for this study to have covered all the possible angles on this subject matter but given its contributions, other studies may find it worthy as a pointer worthy to be improved upon. The methodology adopted for the study, data collection and analysis may have some limitations or perceived to be inadequate.

Gaps in the literature and suggestions for future studies

As much as this study contributes to the body of knowledge seeking to advance options that will improve tertiary level education provided by public owned institutions in Nigeria. The study concludes on the imperative for a change of model and alludes to the granting of full autonomy to these institutions. This conclusion, however, props up issues which are germane even for the smooth running of the institutions in an era of full autonomy. Some possible gaps which might be relevant for future studies are: what options are there for checks and balances of the tertiary institutions after the grant of full autonomy? What are the implications of granting full autonomy to tertiary institutions on the introduction and amount of fees charged as well as the fate of indigent students? The argument that university level education will be priced out of the reach of the poor has been one of the reasons ASUU has opposed the introduction of tuition fees in public universities in the country [61-68].

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