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ACADEMIC FREEDOM (AF) AND TEACHING AND LEARNING (TL) IN UNIVERSITIES IN NIGERIA*

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Abstract:

The research was conducted to determine the impact of the exercise of academic freedom of lecturers on teaching and learning in tertiary educational institutions in Nigeria. 110 lecturers from eleven universities selected from the northern, eastern, southern and western parts of Nigeria as well as federal, state and private made up the sample for the study. The two research questions posed and two hypotheses formulated were answered and tested respectively. A questionnaire titled "AFTeL" was used to collect data. Analysis of data revealed that lecturers exercised academic freedom to a large extent but it has some negative impact on teaching and learning. Based on the findings, the researcher recommended that Academic Freedom should continue to be encouraged but that there should be strict enforcement of professional ethics and lecturers checked to remove the negative impact.

1. Introduction:

Academic freedom implies that lecturers have the freedom to investigate, teach, write and speak consistent with their learning, inside and outside the college without undue influence or control. The concept of academic freedom has featured prominently in writings and recommendations of many experts in Nigeria and African Higher education [12]; [5]; [10]; [2], who have emphasized its absolute necessity, if a university is to develop into a proper university. United Nations Educational and Scientific Organization UNESCO (1963) in a seminar on the

development of higher education in Africa, stressed that in order to perform their task effectively, African universities must enjoy the traditional academic freedom to the fullest extent possible and must have the freedom to teach, to advance the frontiers of knowledge through research and to disseminate as widely as possible the results of their research.

American Association of university professors sees institutional academic freedom as the right of the schools to select their students, as well as issues in curriculum, such as the content of the syllabus in each class. The clearest definition of institutional academic freedom in the United States of America (U.S.A.) appears in a Supreme Court opinion where it is said that academic freedom means that the university can determine for itself on academic grounds, who may teach; what may be taught; how it shall be taught; and who may be admitted to study [6]. Institutional academic freedom protects universities from interference by government, a right that applies to the community of scholars, not to individual faculty. Mountford's [7] and Eze and Ejiofor's [3] definitions covered institutional as well as individual freedom. They asserted, and this means that academic freedom ensures the right of the institution itself and of each member of academic staff to teach, research and make public the results of scholarly work in the interests of

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truth and advancement of learning alone, uninhibited and unfettered by any extraneous considerations whatsoever.

The National Policy on Education (2004) articulates the essentials of academic freedom to include: the internal organization and administration of each university (autonomy), freedom to select students; freedom to appoint staff to teach; freedom to select research areas; freedom to determine the content of courses. These are the elements of academic freedom. Bako [2] is of the opinion that crisis in the university system in Nigeria is triggered off by what is considered to be the denial or deliberate abuse of academic freedom. The crisis could result from the breach of one or more of the elements of academic freedom such as undue interference in the internal administration of universities occasioned by establishment circulars from the Federal Ministry of Education or the National Universities Commission (NUC).

The relationship between government and universities has been dominated by two phrases – academic freedom and university autonomy. Basically, what the university people insist upon is that the universities are special institutions anywhere in the world and must be allowed the freedom to carry on with their legitimate business without hindrance [10]. University autonomy is not a pre-requisite to academic freedom and in Nigeria; government allows universities to run their own affairs except in certain areas such as appointment of principal officers, admissions, financial management, grievance handling and such other areas that have important political repercussions, or which affect peace, order and good governance.

Harman [5] believes that autonomy and academic freedom in higher institutions is indispensable. According to him, autonomy, in the first place, for most universities is a traditional right which has worked well over the years. Secondly, the responsibilities of creating new knowledge through scholarship and research, transmitting and preserving culture, developing the capacity in students and cultivating aesthetic sensitivities are best carried out

in an environment free from direct external control and domination. Thirdly, the complexities of academic work require a fair measure of independence. Fourth, autonomy provides for both staff and students checks and balances in a democratic society. McConnell [7] agrees that education at higher level is far more intricate and complicated than any industrial enterprise. These intricacies and unpredictability of both learning and investigation are factors that require a higher degree of freedom from external interventions and control if an institution is to perform effectively. Practice of academic freedom leads to greater efficiency, economic and better morale among staff and students.

The justification for academic freedom of teaching and learning, and the freedom to carry out research and to disseminate and publish results is that, they are vital to the growth of knowledge and its dissemination. Nwafor [10] highlighted the following principles of academic freedom: freedom of expression to enable the university advance and transmit knowledge; academic staff have the right to be un-orthodox but they can objectively possess due respect for fact, integrity and be honest in search for truth; academic staff must be free to express their views on any issue and ensure that their teachings are in conformity with the professional requirements, and must desist from using their classrooms as propaganda; academic staff must be free to think, investigate and publish their writing at the time and in a place they choose; and no censorship of controversial views expressed by academic staff as they are free to express with impunity their political, social, religious and other views. He however warned that academic freedom can be abused where there are no binding ethics. Such abuses are lecturers not teaching and students getting unearned grades [1]. The issue of abuse is the bane of this study which attempted to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent do lecturers practice academic freedom in Nigerian Universities?
2. What is the impact of academic freedom on teaching and learning in Nigerian Universities?

And to test the following hypotheses:

1. There is no significant difference in the exercise of academic freedom in Federal, State and Private universities in Nigeria.
2. There is no significant difference in the impact of academic freedom on teaching and learning in Federal, State and Private universities in Nigeria.

2. Methodology:

Academic Freedom and Teaching and Learning (AFTeL) is the name of the instrument used for data collection. It was constructed to elicit information concerning extent of exercise of Academic Freedom (AF) and impact of AF on teaching and learning. All universities in Nigeria totaling 47 [9] made up the population of the study. These include 25 Federal, 15 States and 7 Private. Of the Federal and State universities, one each of both was chosen from Northern, Eastern, Southern and Western Nigeria, making 8. For Private, one each was chosen from Eastern, Southern and Western Nigeria since there was none in Northern Nigeria. This gave a total of 11 universities (Table 1).

Table 1: Sample of the study

Region	Federal	State	Private	Total
Northern	Bayero University, Kano	Nasarawa State University	-	2
Eastern	University of Nigeria, Nsukka	Enugu State University	Madonna University	3
Southern	University of Calabar	Delta State University	Benson Idahosa University	3
Western	Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife	Lagos State University	Babcock University	3
Total	4	4	3	11

Source: Research data 2007

Irrespective of the number of lecturers in each university, bearing in mind that none has academic staff strength of less than 10, 10 copies of the questionnaire were administered to 10 randomly selected lecturers in each of the selected universities. There were 110 respondents made up of 40 federal, 40 state and 30 private university lecturers. Validity of the instrument was certified by experts and reliability was established using test retest method to obtain a coefficient of 0.798. Percentage and chi square of non-parametric statistic were the statistical

tools employed in the data analysis. Response rate was 100 per cent.

3. Data Analysis/Results:

Universities	Large Extent (LE)	Small Extent (SE)	No Extent (NE)	Total
Federal	33 (82%)	7 (18%)	0 (0%)	40 (100%)
State	29 (72%)	9 (23%)	2 (5%)	40 (100%)
Private	10 (33%)	8 (27%)	12 (40%)	30 (100%)
Total	72	24	14	110 (100%)

Source: Research data 2007.

To a large extent, lecturers exercised academic freedom, which means, they are allowed to decide on how to teach course contents and carry out research and publish articles at will (Table 2). For federal and state universities, 82% and 72% respectively agreed that they are allowed academic freedom. For private universities, 40% of the respondents said they are not allowed to exercise academic freedom.

Table 3: Impact of Academic Freedom (AF) on Teaching/Learning (TL)

Variables	Federal	State	Private
1. Some lecturers teach at will to the detriment of the students	24 (60%)	28 (70%)	14 (47%)
2. Some lecturers do not cover the contents of their syllabi	31 (78%)	32 (80%)	10 (33%)
3. There is general fall in standards	29 (73%)	34 (85%)	8 (27%)
Total	84	94	32

Source: Research data 2007

Academic freedom has greatly impacted on teaching and learning. 70 per cent of lecturers in state universities said lecturers teach at will which is to the detriment of the students. 80 per cent of the same group agreed to the fact that some lecturers do not cover the contents of their syllabi while 85 per cent affirmed to the general fall in standards as a result of academic freedom. For federal universities, variable

2 takes the lead with 78 percent, followed by variable 3 with 73 percent and variable 1 with 60 per cent. As for the private universities, 47 per cent attested to variable 1, 33 percent to variable 2 and 27 per cent to variable 3. (Table 3).

Table 4: Mean impact of Academic Freedom (AF) on Teaching and Learning (TL)

Variables of impact of academic freedom	Federal	State	Private
1. Some lecturers teach at will to the detriment of the students	2.53	2.70	2.43
2. Some lecturers do not cover the contents of their syllabi	2.73	2.75	2.33
3. There is general fall in standards	2.53	2.80	2.07

Source: Research data 2007

For a 3-point scale, the cut-off is 2.00. Respondents agreed to the three variables as impacting on academic freedom of teaching and learning in private, state and federal universities in Nigeria.

Hypotheses testing

Table 5: Contingency table for testing the extent of exercise of academic freedom (AF)

University	Large Extent	Small Extent	No Extent	Total
Federal	33 (26.2)	7 (8.7)	0 (5.1)	40
State	29 (26.2)	9 (8.7)	2 (5.1)	40
Private	10 (19.6)	8 (6.6)	12 (3.8)	30
Total	72	24	14	110

Source: Research data 2007

Decision: We do not accept the null hypothesis as the calculated value of χ^2 (32.084) is greater than the tabulated value at 95% level of significance and $df=4$. Therefore, we state that there is a significant difference in the exercise of academic freedom in Federal, State and Private universities in Nigeria.

Table 6: Contingency table on impact of Academic Freedom (AF) on Teaching and Learning (TL)

Variables of impact of academic freedom	Federal	State	Private	Total
1. Some lecturers teach at will to the detriment of the students	2.53(2.61)	2.70(2.76)	2.43(2.29)	7.66
2. Some lecturers do not cover the contents of their syllabi	2.73(2.66)	2.75(2.82)	2.33(2.33)	7.81
3. There is general fall in standards	2.53(2.52)	2.80(2.67)	2.07(2.21)	7.40
Total	7.79	8.25	6.83	22.82

Source: Research data 2007

$$\chi^2 = 0.03$$

$$\chi^2_{1, 0.05, 4} = 9.49$$

Since χ^2_{cal} is less than $\chi^2_{tabulated}$, we accept the null hypothesis that there is no significant difference in the impact of academic freedom on teaching and learning (TL) in federal, state and private universities in Nigeria. The implication is that all three variables hold in federal, state and private universities.

4. Discussion

Results showed that Academic Freedom (AF) is exercised by lecturers in our universities. (Table 2). There is freedom to teach, carry out research and publish papers based on the truth without external interference. This is a right that has not been infringed upon by any authority either within or outside the university community. For private universities, lecturers are allowed academic freedom in the area of research and publication but monitored in the areas of deciding the course content and when and how to teach the course content.

This exercise of academic freedom (AF) has impacted negatively on teaching and learning (TL) in universities in Nigeria, especially in the federal and state. The negative impact on private universities is low (Tables 3, 4, 5 and 6). As a result of academic freedom, we find situations where some lecturers teach at will, that is, they reschedule their lecture times outside the approved time-tables, fix tests at will and sometimes also

reschedule examinations – all to the detriment of some students. When such rescheduling or alterations are made, not all the students might be on hand and this can result in students missing lectures, tests and sometimes examinations. For the private universities, the impact is low because the authorities do not allow the freedom to the extent the federal and state universities allow. Lecturers in private universities, as in private owned organizations world wide, are under strict supervision and do their jobs as dictated by their employers. Lecture and examination time-tables are strictly adhered to, which has resulted in the low negative impact on teaching and learning.

In some cases, mostly in the federal and state universities, contents of syllabi are not covered since lecturers are allowed to alter time-tables and teach at their own paces. This is also encouraged by the nature of examinations which are internal (examinations based on coverage of course contents). This is however; not very true with the private universities as a result of the monitoring and supervision exercised by the authorities.

The overall impact of academic freedom (AF) on teaching and learning (TL) is that there is a general fall in standards of university education. This is expected when lecturers are left to decide on course contents, teach at will and do not cover syllabi. Again, this is rampant with the federal and state universities. The general fall in standards is not as bad in private universities.

On the aspect of academic freedom (AF) concerned with research and publication of articles, the university lecturers at federal, state and private levels have exercised this without interference.

5. Recommendations:

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were made:

1. The exercise of AF should continue to be encouraged in Nigerian universities but ethics of the teaching profession should be enforced. Lecturers themselves should make sure their professional ethics are not sacrificed for AF. University authority should ensure enforcement of such ethics.
2. Heads of departments, especially in federal and state universities, backed by authority, should take up the responsibility of checking lecturers from time to time as stipulated by the university senate to ensure that schemes of work and contents of syllabi are covered.
3. The university authorities should from time to time organize workshops/seminars on the exercise of AF and the limit of lecturers in exercising it. This will place lecturers on check.
4. Evaluation of lecturers by students, especially in the areas of attending lectures and teaching and coverage of contents of syllabus, should be done regularly and religiously too. This should be done with the intention of fishing out erring lecturers and sanctioning them.

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