INFLUENCE OF UNIVERSITY AUTONOMY ON THE ADMINISTRATION OF PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES IN NORTH-CENTRAL NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study investigated the influence of university autonomy on the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria. five research questions were raised in line with five specific objectives to guide the study. Five null hypotheses were formulated and tested at 0.05 level of significance. The study adopted a survey research design. The population of the study was 25,353, comprising academic and non-academic staff from public universities in North-Central Nigeria. The sample size of the study was 394 which was determined by the application Taro Yamane's formula. Proportionate stratified random sampling technique was adopted for the study. Self-structured questionnaire titled 'Influence of University Autonomy on the Administration of Public Universities Questionnaire" (IUAAPUQ) was used as instrument for data collection. The instrument was validated by five experts from Joseph Sarwuan Tarka University, Makurdi. The Cronbach Reliability Coefficient obtained for the various clusters were 0.65, 0.68,0.79,0.74,0.73 and the overall reliability coefficient was 0.89, which was considered reliable for the study. Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions while Chi-square of goodness of fit was used to test the null hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance. The findings of the study revealed that, organisational autonomy, financial autonomy, staffing autonomy, academic autonomy and autonomy of student's admission have positive significant influence on the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria. Based on the findings, it was recommended government should grant public universities organisational, financial, academic. staffing, and students' admission autonomy to enhance the smooth administration of Public Universities in North-Central Nigeria.

Keywords: Influence, university autonomy, administration, public universities, north-central Nigeria

Introduction

Education remains a central driver of national development. It enhances human capacity, unlocks individual potential, and facilitates societal transformation. Nigeria's education system is structured into three levels: primary, secondary, and post-secondary, with university education at the apex due to its role in manpower training. Universities are expected to produce skilled professionals, researchers, and intellectuals needed for national progress (Paul & Amadi, 2017). Consequently, the quality of university education directly influences a nation's growth and development. Recognizing this, the Federal Republic of Nigeria, in its National Policy on Education (2014), outlined goals for tertiary education, including manpower development, value inculcation, intellectual growth, promotion of scholarship and community service, unity, and global understanding.

Despite these expectations, Nigerian universities face major challenges, especially in university autonomy. Autonomy allows institutions to make independent decisions in administration, finance, staffing, and academics without undue government interference. According to UNESCO (1950) in Mukoro (2017), emphasised that universities must operate under principles of academic freedom, pursuit of truth, and insulation from political influence. Weak autonomy undermines these principles and hinders effective administration. University administration involves mobilizing and managing resources to achieve institutional objectives. Effective administration enhances teaching, learning, morale of staff and students, and institutional productivity (John, 2016; Usman, 2015). However, studies reveal that Nigerian universities face excessive interference from government and regulatory bodies (Arikewuyo

& Ilusanya, 2019). While the National Policy on Education (2014) affirms institutional independence, in practice, government agencies such as the NUC, JAMB, TETFUND, and the Ministries of Education exert significant control over appointments, admissions, funding, and policy implementation (Okwor, 2016). This external influence often compromises university goals and erodes autonomy (Micah, 2020).

Although the University Autonomy Act of 2007 sought to strengthen independence, successive governments have undermined its provisions. Public lectures and scholarly contributions highlight persistent issues such as political control of leadership appointments, budget restrictions, and localized recruitment processes (Oloyede, 2015; Olukoju, 2021; Ogunode & Abubakar, 2020). Scholars recommend granting universities more autonomy in admissions, staffing, funding, and curriculum development to enhance efficiency and global competitiveness (Ekpoafia & Amadi, 2018)

Autonomy can be categorized into several dimensions. Organizational autonomy refers to decision-making freedom within governance structures, usually bicameral in Nigerian universities (Akinwumi & Olaniyan, 2020). Financial autonomy involves the power to generate, allocate, and utilize funds without external interference (Atibuni, 2020; Bergan et al., 2020). Staffing autonomy allows institutions to recruit, train, and manage personnel in line with institutional needs (Nguyen et al., 2022). Academic autonomy enables universities to design curricula, conduct research, and determine assessment systems (Roberts et al., 2023; UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1999). Admission autonomy, on the other hand, remains highly restricted in Nigeria due to JAMB's central role and the quota system, limiting universities' ability to set independent criteria. The struggle for autonomy has been long-standing in Nigeria, dating back to the military era (Olorunsola, 2018). The Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) has consistently pushed for greater independence to align Nigerian universities with global best practices (Obia & Bassey, 2020). However, government control persists, largely because public universities rely heavily on state funding. As Okai and Worlu (2014) observed, government dominance is driven by the philosophy that "he who pays the piper dictates the tune." This dependency has transformed universities into extensions of government agencies rather than engines of innovation and transformation.

For Nigerian universities to remain competitive, they must move away from excessive state regulation towards greater institutional freedom. Autonomy is not an end but a prerequisite for quality education, innovation, and effective administration. Without it, universities risk stagnation, inefficiency, and declining relevance in an increasingly globalized academic environment.

However, Nigerian universities face persistent government interference in areas such as governing council appointments, staff recruitment, funding, program design, and admissions, which undermines effective management (Altbach, 2020). Recruitment processes have been politicized, financial autonomy is limited, and academic freedom remains constrained. Over the years, university unions, particularly ASUU, have demanded autonomy, but conflicts such as the Federal Government's insistence on using the Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS) against the union's Universities Transparency and Accountability Solution (UTAS) led to prolonged strike actions, notably the eight-month strike of February to October 2022. Such interference continues to affect university management and the quality of education, raising the central question of whether autonomy can enhance the management of public universities in North-Central Nigeria.

This study therefore examined the impact of university autonomy on the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria, with the aim of understanding how institutional independence (or lack thereof) shapes governance, academic quality, and national development. Universities are established to produce intellectuals, researchers, and the skilled workforce necessary for national development. Public universities are expected to operate with autonomy finance, staffing, organization, academic programs, and student admissions to function effectively.

Research Questions

The following research questions were raised to guide the study.

1. What is the influence of organisational autonomy on the administration of public universities in North -Central Nigeria?

2. What is the influence of financial autonomy on the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria?
3. What is the influence of staffing autonomy on the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria?
4. What is the influence of academic autonomy on the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria?
5. What is the influence of autonomy of students' admission on the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria?

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were formulated and tested at the 0.05 level of significance.

1. Organisational autonomy does not significantly influence the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria.
2. Financial autonomy does not significantly influence the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria.
3. Staffing autonomy does not significantly influence the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria.
4. Academic autonomy does not significantly influence the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria.
5. Autonomy of students' admission does not significantly influence the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria.

Literature Review

Research on university autonomy and administration has produced consistent findings across different contexts. For instance, Ngafi, Odeh, Tyokyaa, and Kajo (2024) investigated public universities in North-Central Nigeria and reported that admission autonomy had a significant positive effect on university administration. In a related study, Ngafi and Odeh (2024) found that staffing and academic autonomy significantly influenced the administration of universities in the same region. Similarly, Ogunode and Okwelogu (2022) examined inadequate staffing in North-Central public universities and established a significant relationship between staffing shortages and overall institutional performance.
Outside Nigeria, Belgaroui and Hamad (2021) explored academic autonomy as a governance and performance mechanism at the University of Sfax, Tunisia, and emphasised that genuine academic autonomy is essential for improving institutional outcomes. Within Nigeria, Obia and Bassey (2020) analysed organizational autonomy in university management in Cross River State and found a significant association between organizational independence and effective management. In a study focused on South-West Nigerian universities, Olorunsola (2018) warned that the erosion of university autonomy undermines effective administration, stressing its importance for sound governance. In addition, Odigwe and Swen (2016) asserted that the Nigerian quota admission system into universities contributes to the decrease in the standard education while merit-based admissions improved educational quality.

Methodology

This study used a survey research design. The study's population was 25353, with a sample size of 394 (155 academic and 239 non-academic) staff. This study collected data via a self-structured questionnaire. The researcher designed and used the "University Autonomy and Administration and Public Universities Questionnaire (UAAPUQ)" instrument to collect data from respondents, particularly focusing on staffing autonomy and academic autonomy. The instrument was validated by five experts from Joseph Sarwuan Tarka University's Department of Educational Administration. The validated

instrument was trial tested and a reliability coefficient of 0.89 was obtained using Cronbach Alpha coefficient reliability test, which was considered suitable for the investigation. Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) answered the research questions, while the null hypotheses were tested using the Chi-square ($\chi 2$) goodness of fit test at a significance level of 0.05. Items with a mean rating of 2.5 or higher were considered to have a considerable influence, while those with a mean rating of 2.49 or lower were deemed to have no significant influence. The null hypothesis choice criterion was a p-value less than or equal to the alpha value of (0.05), which indicated a substantial influence. A p-value larger than or equal to the alpha value (0.05) was regarded as statistically insignificant, implying no meaningful influence. This study used the Chi-square (χ^2) goodness-of-fit test to analyse categorical data and determine if observed frequency distributions differed significantly from expected distributions.

Results

Research Question 1: What is the influence of organisational autonomy on the administration of public universities in North -Central Nigeria.

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation of influence of organisational autonomy on the administration of public universities in North -Central Nigeria

S/No	Items	N	Mean	SD	Remark
1	The university's freedom to select its executive head enhances planning.	394	3.53	0.62	Agree
2	The university's liberty to establish the structure of its governing council fosters directing as a function of administration.	394	3.37	0.61	Agree
3	The university's discretion to select its members of the governing council enhances the coordination of both human and material resources.	394	3.38	0.62	Agree
4	The university's freedom to determine its internal academic structure enhances adequate staffing.	394	3.33	0.60	Agree
5	The university's independence to determine its internal administrative structure fosters decision-making.	394	3.38	0.59	Agree
	Grand Mean		**3.39**	**0.60**	**Agree**

Key: (Criterion mean =2.50), Mean Score >2.50=Agree, Mean Score<2.50=Disagree.

The result presented in Table 1 shows that the mean score of items 1-5 ranged from 3.33 to 3.53 and the cluster mean was 3.39. This indicates that both the mean scores of items 1-5 and the cluster mean of 3.39 were above the criterion mean of 2.50. This implies that the respondents agreed that organisational autonomy has positive influence on the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria. The Standard Deviation of items 1-5 ranged from 0.59 to 0.62 indicating that the respondents were homogenous in their responses.

Research Questions 2: What is the influence of financial autonomy on the administration of public universities in North- Central Nigeria

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation of the respondents on the influence of financial autonomy on the administration of public universities in North- Central Nigeria

S/No	Item	N	Mean	SD	Remark

6	The university's financial independence enhances planning.	394	3.54	0.65	Agree
7	The university's ability to exercise control over its internally generated revenue (IGR) enhances accountability.	394	3.28	0.62	Agree
8	The university's financial freedom to allocate resources enhances adequate staffing.	394	3.38	0.67	Agree
9	The university's independence to determine the salaries of its personnel motivates both academic and non-academic staff.	394	3.24	0.70	Agree
10	University's liberty to manage its funds independently enhances budgeting.	394	3.28	0.62	Agree
	Grand Mean		**3.34**	**0.65**	**Agree**

The result presented in Table 2 shows that the mean scores of items 6-10 ranged from 3.24 to 3.54 and the cluster mean was 3.34. This indicates that both the mean scores of items 6-10 were above the criterion mean of 2.50. This implies that the respondents agreed that financial autonomy has positive influence on the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria. The Standard deviation of items 6-10 ranged from 0.62 to 0.70 indicating that the respondents were homogenous in their responses.

Research question 3: What is the influence of staffing autonomy on the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria

Table 3: Mean and Standard Deviation of the respondents on the influence of staffing autonomy on the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria

S/No	Item	N	Mean	SD	Remark
11	The university's rights to recruit its staff enhances manpower planning.	394	3.60	0.59	Agree
12	The university's freedom to determine the status (rank) of its employees improves cooperation among staff.	394	3.34	0.56	Agree
13	The university's capacity to provide staff training enhances professional development.	394	3.44	0.55	Agree
14	The freedom of the university to facilitate staff promotion enhances motivation.	394	3.37	0.56	Agree
15	University's freedom to determine its recruitment procedures improves staffing.	394	3.34	0.62	Agree
	Grand Mean		**3.41**	**0.57**	**Agree**

The data presented in Table three shows that the mean scores of items 11-15 ranged from 3.34 to 3.60 and the cluster mean was 3.41. This indicates that both the mean scores of items 11-15 were above the criterion mean of 2.50. This implies that the respondents agreed that staffing autonomy has positive influence on the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria. The Standard deviation of items that are 11-15 ranged from 0.59 to 0.62 indicating that the respondents were homogenous in their responses.

Research question 4: What is the influence of academic autonomy on the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria

Table 4: Mean and Standard Deviation of the influence of academic autonomy on the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria?

S/No	Item	N	Mean	SD	Remark
16	University's freedom to introduce new academic programmes maintains standard of education.	394	3.58	0.57	Agree

17	University's freedom to terminate programmes maintains standard of education.	394	3.30	0.64	Agree
18	The university's ability to encourage award-winning research in chosen directions motivates its staff.	394	3.38	0.57	Agree
19	The university's freedom to design the content of its degree programmes academic planning.	394	3.38	0.55	Agree
20	The university's independence over its academic programmes enhances quality assurance.	394	3.36	0.61	Agree
	Grand Mean		**3.40**	**0.58**	**Agree**

The data presented in Table 4 shows that the mean scores of items 16-20 ranged from 3.30 to 3.58 and the cluster mean was 3.40. This indicates that both the mean scores of items 16-20 were above the criterion mean of 2.50. This implies that the respondents agreed that academic autonomy has positive influence on the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria. The Standard deviation of items 16-20 ranged from 0.55 to 0.64 indicating that the respondents were homogenous in their responses.

Research question 5: What is the influence of autonomy students' admission on the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria

Research 5: Mean and Standard Deviation of the respondents on the influence of autonomy students' admission on the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria

S/No	Item	N	Mean	SD	Remark
21	University's freedom to set its own admission policies enhances planning.	394	3.58	0.63	Agree
22	The university's liberty over its admission procedures enhances enrolment.	394	3.38	0.60	Agree
23	University's right to determine the overall number of students to be admitted improves provision of facilities.	394	3.36	0.56	Agree
24	The university's freedom to determine the number of students to be admitted per discipline improves staffing.	394	3.31	0.52	Agree
25	The university's liberty to admits students based on merit enhances maintenance of academic standard.	394	3.38	0.53	Agree
	Grand Mean		**2.83**	**0.90**	**Agree**

The result presented in Table 5 shows that the mean scores of items 21-25 ranged from 3.31 to 3.58 and the cluster mean was 3.40. This indicates that both the mean scores of items 21-25 were above the criterion mean of 2.50. This implies that the respondents agreed that autonomy of students' admission has positive influence on the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria. The Standard deviation of items 6-10 ranged from 0.52 to 0.63 indicating that the respondents were homogenous in their responses.

Hypotheses Testing

The hypotheses of the study are tested using chi-square at 0.05 level of significance.

4.2.1 Hypothesis 1: Organisational autonomy does not significantly influence the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria.

Table 7: Chi-square test goodness of fit of influence of organisational autonomy on administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria.

Response option	Observed N	Expected N	df	x^2	P	Sig level	Remarks
SA	180	98.5	3	319.78	0.00	0.05	Significant

A	194	98.5
D	16	98.5
SD	4	98.5
Total	394	

The result presented in Table 7 shows that the Chi-square calculated value is 319.78 at a degree of freedom (Df) of 3 and the p-value of 0.00 is less than the alpha- value (α) of 0.05 (P<0.05). Therefore, the null hypothesis which states that organisational autonomy does not significantly influence the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria is rejected. This

implies that organisational autonomy has significant positive influence on the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria.

Hypothesis 2: Financial autonomy does not significantly influence the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria.

Table 8: Chi-square test goodness of fit of financial autonomy influence on the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria.

Response option	Observed N	Expected N	df	x^2	P	Sig level	Remark
SA	172	98.5	3	283.42	0.00	0.05	Significant
A	191	98.5					
D	25	98.5					
SD	6	98.5					
Total	394						

The result presented in Table 8 shows that the Chi-square calculated value is 283.42 at a degree of freedom (Df) of 3 and the P-value of 0.00 is less than the alpha- value (α) of 0.05 (P<0.05). Therefore, the null hypothesis which states that financial autonomy does not significantly influence the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria is rejected. This implies that financial autonomy has significant positive influence on the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria.

Hypothesis 3: Staffing autonomy does not significantly influence the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria.

Table 9: Chi-square test goodness of fit of staffing autonomy influence on the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria

Responses option	Observed N	Expected N	df	x^2	P	Sig level	Remark
SA	182	98.5	3	327.01	0.00	0.05	Significant
A	194	98.5					
D	16	98.5					
SD	2	98.5					
Total	394						

The result presented on Table 9 shows that the Chi-square calculated value is 327.01 at a degree of freedom (Df) of 3 and the p-value of 0.00 is less than the alpha- value (α) of 0.05 (P<0.05). Therefore, the null hypothesis which states that staffing autonomy does not significantly influence the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria is rejected. This implies that staffing

autonomy has significant positive influence on the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria.

Hypothesis 4: Academic autonomy does not significantly influence the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria.

Table 10: Chi-square test goodness of fit of academic autonomy influence on the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria.

Responses option	Observed N	Expected N	df	x^2	P	Sig level	Remark
SA	178	98.5	3	324.35	0.00	0.05	Significant
A	197	98.5					
D	16	98.5					
SD	3	98.5					
Total	394						

The result presented in Table 10 shows that the Chi-square calculated value is 324.35 at a degree of freedom (Df) of 3 and the p-value of 0.00 is less than the alpha- value (α) of 0.05 (P<0.05). Therefore, the null hypothesis which states that academic autonomy does not significantly influence the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria is rejected. This implies that academic autonomy has significant positive influence on the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria.

Hypothesis 5: Autonomy of students' admission autonomy does not significantly influence the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria.

Table 11: Chi-square test goodness of fit of autonomy of students' admission influence on the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria

Responses option	Observed N	Expected N	df	x^2	P	Sig level	Remark
SA	175	98.5	3	337.31	0.00	0.05	Significant
A	203	98.5					
D	14	98.5					
SD	2	98.5					
Total	394						

The result presented in Table 11 shows that the Chi-square calculated value is 337.31 at a degree of freedom (Df) of 3 and the P-value of 0.00 is less than the alpha- value (α) of 0.05 (P<0.05). Therefore, the null hypothesis which states that autonomy of students' admission does not significantly influence the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria is rejected. This implies that autonomy of students' admission has significant positive influence on the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria.

Discussion

The study revealed that organizational autonomy positively influences the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria. The ability of universities to appoint their executive heads, structure governing councils, and design internal academic and administrative frameworks significantly improved institutional administration. This finding supports earlier research by Olorunsola (2018), who emphasized that organizational autonomy strengthens university management, and by Obia and Bassey (2020), who demonstrated a strong link between autonomy and effective administration.

Similarly, the study found that financial autonomy had a positive significant impact on university administration in North-Central Nigeria. The findings revealed that, institutional freedom in budgeting, planning, staff remuneration, accountability, and control of Internally Generated Revenue (IGR) enhanced administrative effectiveness. This aligns with Orunsola (2018), who stressed that reduced financial autonomy adversely affects university management.

The findings also indicated that staffing autonomy significantly influences university administration. The findings showed that, the institution's ability to recruit, manage, and deploy staff effectively improves institutional outcomes in North-Central. This agrees with Ogunode and Okwelogu (2022), who noted that understaffing undermines university management, and with Ngafi and Odeh (2024), who confirmed that staffing autonomy strongly impacts administration in North-Central Nigerian universities.

Furthermore, academic autonomy was found to have a positive influence on administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria. The findings showed that, university's freedom to introduce or terminate programmes, design curricula, and promote academic excellence experienced improved the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria. This is consistent with Belgaroui and Hamad (2021), who argued that genuine academic freedom enhances student performance, and with Ngafi, Odeh, Tyokyaa, and Kajo (2024), who reported that academic autonomy strengthens public university administration.

Finally, the study established that admission autonomy positively affects administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria. The result showed that, institutional freedom to set admission policies, determine student numbers, and select candidates based on merit improved administrative efficiency of public universities in North-Central Nigeria.This supports the findings of Ngafi, Odeh, Tyokyaa, and Kajo (2024), as well as Odigwe and Swen (2016), who asserted that merit-based admissions raise educational standards

Conclusion

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that autonomy, academic autonomy, staffing autonomy, autonomy of students' admission, and conditions of service autonomy have significant positive influence on the administration of public universities in North-Central Nigeria.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following were recommended.

1. The government should grant public universities organisational autonomy to enable them respond to the unique challenges and demand of their respective institutions, ultimately leading to improved overall performance and quality education.
2. The government should grant public universities financial autonomy to enhance financial accountability and transparency, promote strategic financial planning, and foster partnership with private sector, alumni, and international organisation to diversify funding resources and reduce overdependence on government allocation.

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