

Effective University Leadership as Predictor of Academic Excellence in Southern Nigerian Universities

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Abstract

The University is an educational system where high level manpower is trained for socio-economic and political growth of any nation. The leadership of a University plays invaluable roles in achieving academic excellence in dissemination and acquisition of universal knowledge, values; functional, technical and scientific skills and competencies critical to global growth and development. The study therefore investigated the relationship between effective University leadership and academic excellence in Southern Nigerian Universities. The population of the study was made up of all the Vice chancellors from the seventeen federal Universities in Southern Nigeria. A random sampling technique was used to select nine (09) Universities and their Vice chancellors representing 52% of the studied population. 135 academic staff were also randomly selected from the sampled Universities as respondents. Questionnaire was the main instrument used for data collection. Descriptive statistics was used to analyse the data collected for the study. The analysis revealed that Vice chancellors from Southern Nigerian Universities were moderately effective in their leadership roles but the level of academic excellence in Southern Nigerian Universities was generally low. A further analysis revealed that there was a significant relationship between leadership effectiveness and academic excellence in Southern Nigerian Universities. It was therefore recommended among others that highly competent, effective and transformative University administrators should be selected for Vice chancellorship position in Southern Nigerian Universities. Federal Universities in Southern Nigeria should be resourceful in generating revenue to end the seemingly unending lamentation of poor funding.

Introduction

The University is the zenith of an educational system where high level manpower is trained for socio-economic and political growth of the nation. The training of teachers, civil servants, engineers, humanists, entrepreneurs, scientists and myriads of other personnel for every market economy is ensured by tertiary education (World Bank, 2002). In realization of the potency of tertiary education (University education especially) in human capital development Nigeria government unequivocally spelt out the goals of tertiary education in her National Policy on Education; Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN) (2012). They include to:

- i. contribute to national development through high level relevant manpower training;
- ii. develop and inculcate proper values for the survival of the individual and society;
- iii. develop the intellectual capacity of individuals to understand and appreciate their local and external environment;
- iv. acquire both physical and intellectual skills which will enable individuals to be self-reliant and useful members of the society;
- v. promote and encourage scholarship and community service;
- vi. forge and cement national unity; and
- vii. promote national and international understanding and interaction.

In order to achieve these laudable goals, academic excellence must be guaranteed by the University leadership. Academic excellence connotes effective teaching and learning, developmental researches, high impact community services, creativity and innovation, acquisition of self – independent economic skills by University graduates. It also indicates scientific and technological skills acquisition by both staff and students and high moral discipline.

Nwadiani (2014) however lamented the unintended and undesired decay or rots in Nigerian University which pose challenges to University administrators. University leadership which is proactive, pragmatic and transformational stimulates sustainable academic excellence. Academic leadership according to Altbach, Gumport and Johnstone (2001) and Thelin (2004) is a concept of higher education's typical blend of tasks, goals, employees, governance structures, values technologies and history. This implies that the onerous task of actualizing the vision and mission of any University lies on the University principal administrator, who is the Vice chancellor.

The University Vice chancellor is expected to be equipped with effective leadership skills in order to manage the limited funds available for his use. Ofoegbu and Alonge (2016) in their study established that scarcity of funds has remained a clog in the wheels of effective management of University education in Nigeria. The Universities require large capital outlay for their operation. Underfunding and the globally depressed economy has put a task of financial responsibility and ingenuity in the area of alternative sources of funding on

University administrators. Aggressive increase in Internally Generated Revenue (IGR) is the viable option to the problem of underfunding in Nigeria Universities for the purpose of academic excellence.

Universities are expected to be centres of academic excellence in teaching, knowledge dissemination and developmental researches. These tripod roles are handicapped in typical Sub Sahara Africa Universities due to the challenges of inadequate teaching and learning facilities. The existing facilities are overstretched by explosive students' population. The academia in Nigerian Universities also works in harrowing conditions. Besides lack of modern technological and pedagogical apparatus to meaningfully equip the undergraduates with skills and competencies, they are poorly and irregularly paid. They are therefore demotivated and willing to leave for greener pastures within or outside the country. All these challenges conspire against quality University education.

The Nigerian Universities Commission (N.U.C) reports of 2006 cited by Imogie (2014) on the comparative performance of the Nigerian University system over three governance periods observed decline in the quality of University education in Nigeria in the area of access, equity, relevance, facilities, and funding.

The challenges faced by Nigeria Universities have affected it negatively in the world ranking of Universities. It is sad to note that none of the Nigeria Universities even from the southern oil producing states is ranked in the first tenth position among the top 100 Universities in Africa. According to the 2015/2016 Ranking Web of Universities in Africa, University of Benin, Benin City, and University of Port-Harcourt ranked 78 and 81 respectively. Nevertheless, University administrators in southern Nigeria are not unaware of their responsibilities toward the attainment of the core mandates of the University. The leadership and administrators of Universities globally are undergoing paradigm shifts. They do not merely manage all the resources in the Ivory towers but are passionate about how to use teaching and learning together with researches to solve the avalanches of problems threatening man's peaceful existence. Such problems or challenges include unemployment, poverty, diseases, climate change, global insecurity, global economic depression, political instability and religious intolerance. Genuine commitment to academic excellence in the Universities by those saddled with the task of University administration could help mitigate these challenges.

Literature Review

The study is anchored on transformational leadership behaviour. The transformational leader according to Downton (1973:14) is:

a dynamic amalgamation of spirit and heart, mind, will, character, savvy, wisdom and emotion to generate an increase in the level of congruity with the ethos, vision, conducts and values of the institution.

The characteristic leadership behaviour of a transformational leader therefore as observed by Rafferty and Griffin (2004); Barling, Webber & Kelloway; (1996) in Nwadiani (2014) include: individual consideration, intellectual stimulation, inspirational, motivation, fostering acceptance of group or institutional goals, high performance expectations, appropriate role modeling and contingent reward system.

A transformational leader sees leadership as a process that must and should continually be improved upon to maximally achieve the goals of the organization he leads. He is committed to the development of human minds, initiative, competent and knowledgeable in administration; financial prudence, recruitment, deployment and utilization of best pedagogues and above all promote academic and developmental researches. These are the hallmarks of an effective academic leader who is poised towards promoting academic excellence. A transformational leader forms a clear view of the future and is able to achieve a step change in the performance of their followers (Bass, 1985). The quality of staff in the University system and how they are utilized and motivated contribute substantially to academic excellence.

Schein (1980) cited by Chike-Okoli (2009) defines leadership as a function of the relationship between the leader, the follower and the task situational characteristic. It is therefore the exercise of interpersonal influence between the leader and the followers with the purpose of utilizing meaningfully the available resources in an institution towards the realization of the goals of the organization. The overall goal of a University is the training and production of human capital who are the key drivers of contemporary global economy. The process of achieving this is efficient and effective teaching, research, community service and relationship.

A leader could be assessed by its substance, process, purpose and intent. Nwankwo (2014) added that leadership implies influencing, motivating and relating (communicating with people towards specific group goals). In University leadership, academic and non academic staff could be motivated through guaranteed job security, academic freedom, regular payment of enhanced salaries, regular promotion of staff, and provision of modern pedagogical facilities and equipment, environment, conducive learning, scholarship opportunities and host of others.

Effective and excellent academic leaders develop and facilitate the achievement of the mission and vision of the University system. They develop organizational values and systems required for sustainable success and implement these via actions and behaviours. (European Foundation for Quality Management, 2003).

Academic excellence is manifested in the quality and excellence learning experiences of the students. This is because quality graduates will produce quality socio-economic growth and development of a country like Nigeria. According to Gibbs. (2010:12):

what best products educational gain is measures of educational process. What institutions do with their resources to make the most of whatever student they have. The process variables that best predict gains are not to do with student satisfaction with these facilities, but concern a small range of fairly well understood pedagogical practices that engender student engagement.

Consequently an effective University leadership should be idiographic in human behaviour and nomothetic in task performance in order to achieve sustainable educational gains. The students must acquire knowledge, values, entrepreneurial and scientific skills capable of making them functional and useful in their immediate environment and the world in general.

Statement of the Problem

In Nigerian Universities, the issue of academic excellence has come under serious scrutiny by core stakeholders in higher education business. There appears to be loss of faith in the efficacy of Universities in promoting economic growth and development. The high incidences of graduates unemployment and the syndrome of unemployable University graduates pose great challenge to University leadership and the government.

Some University administrators have often been blamed of poor management of the resources available to them. Cases of student' unrest, academic and non-academic staff disputes with University authorities; poor learning facilities provisions have often led to disruption of academic activities in some Universities. It is assumed that if University leadership is pragmatic, innovative and proactive in its administration, it will stimulate academic excellence in teaching and learning, research and community services. These will further engender creativity, innovation, acquisition of self independent, professional and economic skills capable of turning around the fortune of a nation by the students. It is therefore imperative to investigate if effective University leadership is a predictor of academic excellence in southern Nigerian Universities.

Research Questions and Hypothesis

1. What is the level of leadership effectiveness of Vice chancellors in Southern Nigerian Universities?
2. What are the lecturers perceived rating of academic excellence in Southern Nigerian Universities?
3. There is no significant relationship between Vice chancellors leadership effectiveness and academic excellence in Southern Nigerian Universities.

Purpose

Basically, the study investigated the relationship between effective University leadership and academic excellence in Southern Nigerian Universities. It also investigated the level of academic leadership effectiveness of Vice chancellors in Southern Nigerian Universities. It also documented the lecturers' perceived indices of academic excellence in Southern Nigerian Universities.

Methodology

The study adopted the descriptive survey design. The population of the study comprised all the seventeen (17) Vice chancellors from the 17 federal Universities in Southern Nigerian. Nine (09) federal Universities and their Vice chancellors were however selected for the study through a random sampling procedure. The sampled Vice chancellors and their institutions represented 52% of the study population. In each of the sampled Universities, fifteen (15) lecturers were selected randomly to assess the leadership effectiveness of their principal- Vice chancellors and the academic excellence of their respective Universities. A total of 135 academic staff of the sampled Universities were used as respondents to the instrument.

An instrument tagged: University Leadership Effectiveness and Academic Excellence of Southern Nigerian Universities Questionnaire (ULEAESNUQ) was used to collect data for the study. The instrument was made up of three sections. Section A sought for demographic information from the respondents while section B was used to extract information from the respondents on the leadership effectiveness of Vice chancellors. Section C was used to collect information on the rating of academic excellence as perceived by the respondents from Southern Nigerian Universities.

Three lecturers(an associate professor and two professors) from the Faculty of Education, University of Benin, Benin city, Nigeria validated the instrument before it was administered. The reliability of the instrument was determined through a test retest method within an interval of two weeks to a group of twenty lecturers who were no part of the main study. Thereafter, Cronbach alpha was used to establish its level of reliability which was computed to be 0.68. Descriptive statistics was used to analyze data collected for the research questions and hypothesis formulated for the study.

Results

The results of the data analyzed are presented in tables below:

Table 1: Lecturers' perceived levels of leadership effectiveness of Vice chancellors in Southern Nigerian Universities

Level	Frequency	Percentage (%)
High	46	34.07
Moderate	71	52.59
Low	18	13.33
Total	135	99.99

Result in table 1 revealed that 34.07 of the total respondents rated Vice chancellor in Southern Nigerian Universities high in their leadership effectiveness. 52.59% of the respondents rated the Vice chancellors moderate, 13.3% of the respondents rated them low. The findings therefore suggested that the leadership effectiveness of the Vice chancellors in Southern Nigerian Universities is not as high as expected.

Table 2: Lecturer' perceived rating of academic excellence in Southern Nigerian Universities

Indices	High		Low	
	N	%	N	%
Excellence in research	51	37.77	84	62.23
Quality of academic and non-academic staff	72	53.33	63	46.67
Adequate facilities	58	42.96	77	57.04
Good working condition	54	40	81	60
Good remuneration	60	44.44	75	55.56
Adequate funding	46	34.07	89	65.93
Academic freedom	63	46.66	72	53.34
Excellence in science and technology	39	28.88	96	71.12
Scholarship and training opportunities	75	55.55	60	44.4
Admission of students based on merit	69	51.11	66	48.89

Table 2 showed the rating of Southern Nigerian Universities in terms of academic excellence as perceived by the respondents. With regard to academic excellence in research, 62.23% of the respondents rated Southern Universities low while 53.33% of the respondents rated the Universities high in the institutions. In the areas of adequate facilities, good working conditions and remunerations, the respondents scored the Southern Universities low on a percentage of 57.04, 60 and 55.56 respectively. Also, 65.93% of the respondents scored Universities low in terms of adequate funding. While 53.34 and 71.12% of them were of the opinion that the ivory towers in Southern Nigeria were not excellent in the areas of academic freedom and the use of science and technology for pedagogy and general institutions administration. However, 55.55% and 51.11% of the respondents rated Southern Nigerian Universities high in scholarship and training opportunities given to the academic staff especially and the process of admission of students respectively.

Hypothesis

There is no significant relationship between Vice chancellors' leadership effectiveness and academic excellence in Southern Nigerian Universities.

Table 3: Pearson 'r' analysis of relationship between Vice chancellors leadership effectiveness and academic excellence in Southern Nigerian Universities

Variable	N	Pearson 'r'	Sig.	Decision
Vice chancellors' leadership effectiveness	135	0.146	.000	Significant
Academic excellence	135			

P<0.05

Table 3 revealed that a calculated Pearson 'r' of 0.146 is significant at P< 0.05 alpha level. Consequently, the hypothesis which states that there is no significant relationship between Vice chancellors' leadership effectiveness and academic excellence in Southern Nigeria Universities is rejected.

Discussion

The result from the study revealed that the extent to which the University consciously or unconsciously achieve its mission and vision is dependent on the variables of leadership effectiveness and academic excellence. This places an onerous task on the University administrator. The study however revealed that the level of effectiveness of University leadership in Southern Nigeria was generally moderate. This finding is in tandem with Simeon (2015) who observed that high education administrators might be experiencing change globally due to increase in students enrolment with inverse decrease in funding coupled with the issue of globalization of

learning and functionality of the learning and skills acquired by the students. The finding explains why the European Foundation for Quality Management (2003) recommended that effective and excellent academic leaders should develop organizational values and systems required for sustainable success.

It was also revealed from the study that academic excellence in Southern Nigerian Universities as perceived by the respondents was low on the average. This is prominent in the areas of excellence in science and technology, funding, academic researches, and working conditions. This low rating justifies the Ranking Web of Universities in Africa (2015/2016) that place Nigerian Universities on a low ranking table. This finding further agrees with Imogie (2014); Ofoegu and Alonge (2016) who found that there is scarcity of funds and general decline in the quality of University education in Nigeria in the areas of access, equity relevance, quality and facilities.

Nevertheless, the study found that Nigerian Universities especially those in Southern Nigeria have quality human resources in the system and the leadership of these Universities place high premium on staff development through scholarship and training opportunities given to both academic and non-academic members.

Lastly, the study revealed that there is a significant relationship between Vice chancellors' leadership effectiveness and academic excellence in Southern Nigerian Universities. These findings corroborates Nwadiani (2014) and Gibbs 2010 that effective leadership which is transformational can best predict educational gains which could be measured in excellent input, process and output of a University system.

Conclusion

It can be concluded from the study that the level of leadership effectiveness of Vice chancellors in Southern Nigerian Universities is moderate. While academic excellence in Southern Nigerian Universities as perceived by the respondents is generally low. It is also concluded from the study that there is a significant relationship between Vice chancellors' leadership effectiveness and academic excellence in Southern Nigerian Universities

Recommendations

Since there is a strong relationship between leadership effectiveness and academic excellence in University system, the following recommendation are consequently made:

1. The University Governing Council, Senate and those saddled with the responsibility of Vice chancellors appointment should always endeavour to appoint the right calibre of persons to such leadership position; they should be those who have administrative pedigree of effectiveness in goals attainment. Such persons should be highly transformative in leadership behaviour, intellectually competent; and should possess analytical and proactive skills to be able to manage the dynamic institution of a University system.
2. The present funding system of Universities in Nigeria and those in southern Nigeria especially should be improved upon by the key stakeholders. The current Treasury Single Account (TSA) system operated by the Federal Republic of Nigeria is not healthy for the growth and development of Federal Universities.
3. Also, Vice Chancellors should be resourceful in seeking for alternative sources of funding while prudence and accountability in University management should be their watchwords.
4. Lastly, the University management team, the Vice chancellors especially should be committed to the promotion of academic excellence in their respective institutions. Academic excellence guarantees success of an individual in his/her chosen endeavour which certainly will improve on the socio-economic and political development of the world in general.

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