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Towards Strengthening the Relationship between Trade Unions and University Management in Nigeria

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Abstract

Universities are a repository of the most specialised and skilled manpowers. They are places where the manpower needs of a nation are nurtured. However, the management of these institutions is becoming complex nowadays because of the ravaging conflicts between the universities management and the various trade unions in the system. This paper therefore examined the various causes of conflicts between the trade unions and the university managements, which include: poor funding of the system, poor condition of service, and bad leadership style of university administrators. Recommendations were made on how to strengthen the relationship between the unions and the university authorities. They are proper funding and judicious uses of the fund allocated; better condition of service; principle of democratic governance; conducive teaching-learning environment and better information channel.

Key words: trade unions, university administrators, conflicts, democratic governance, committee system

Introduction

The university occupies a very strategic place in the production of high level manpower for the sustenance of any nation. Universities represent the most important part of the educational system because it is at this level the future is not only anticipated but made through the kind of knowledge generated and disseminated to all other members of society (Awuzie, 2010). The National Policy on Education (2004) gave credence to this when it highlighted the objectives of the university education to include contributing to national development through high level relevant manpower training and developing and inculcating proper values for the survival of the individual and society among others.

University education equips the young people with knowledge, competence and confidence they need for both self-fulfilment and self-realisation and for contribution to the process of national development. This suggests that any nation that wants to develop economically, socially and industrially needs to guard jealously the soul of the university system.

Despite the immense benefits of the university education to nation building, the potentials of the system in developing countries to fulfil these responsibilities is frequently thwarted by long-standing problems bedevilling the university system. Prominent among the problems facing the university system is the constant conflict between the various unions in the system and the university management/administrators. Unions and management tend to have opposite views because of the divergence between the expectations of management and labour in organisations, which often leads to conflicts.

Asiyai (2006) posited that workers in the university system organise themselves into different unions among which are the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), the Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities (SSANU), the Non-Academic Staff Union of Universities (NASU), Association of University Technologists of Nigeria (ASUTON), the Senior Staff Association of the Universities Teaching Hospitals, Research Institutes and Allied Institutions (SSAUTHRIAI) among others, with the purpose of protecting and furthering its group interest. It is to be noted that these unions, though distinct, are interdependent, this means that a breakdown in the activity of one can affect the entire university system.

Industrial conflict is the inability of two conflicting parties to reach agreement on any issue connected with object of industrial interaction, whether or not, this conflict results into a strike, lock-out or other forms of

protestation. Amusan (1996) opined that industrial conflict is a situation of disagreement between two parties. This situation is characterised by the inability of those concerned to iron out their differences and reach an agreement on issues of common interest.

Meanwhile, the task of managing conflict is major preoccupation of the university managers/administrators. Conflict management is essentially about the ability to balance the primary interests of the employers with those of the employees such that tensions are descalated and disharmony in industrial relations avoided.

Causes of conflicts between trade unions and university management

The three dominant trade unions in the university system are the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), the Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities (SSANU), the Non-Academic Staff Union of Universities (NASU). These three unions though distinct, are very interdependent and they play crucial role in the administration of the university system.

Meanwhile, Olujide, Akindele & Olorunleke (2006) lamented that university authorities do not always pay attention to unions when they raise issues, which concern the union members and the society at large. However, the following are some of the areas that cause disharmony between the unions and the university management.

- i. Need for funding the university system:* Underfunding is a factor responsible for trade union disputes in Nigerian universities. Various stakeholders in the education sector have pointed accusing fingers on the government at the gross inadequacy of funds in the university system. Awuzie (2010) lamented that the crisis of funding in the universities had worsened, vice-chancellors could barely pay salaries and allowances. Awuzie lamented that staff training was at low ebb. Still on funding, Arikewuyo (2004) reported that since the advent of democracy in 1999, the funding of education had dropped considerably. According to Ajayi & Ekundayo (2009), the apparent shortage of fund available to the university system has been responsible for declining library, social and laboratory facilities in recent years. This has made the governance of the university system a Herculean task. The authors lamented that the equipment for teaching research and learning are either lacking or very inadequate and in a bad shape to permit the universities the freedom to carry out the basic functions of academics.

Besides, the effect of poor funding of the university system is evidence in the brain drain of many academics/professors, evidenced in the rate at which Nigerians are leaving the country to study abroad. According to Olanipekun (2011), recent data have shown that there are about 71,000 Nigerian students studying in Ghana paying about N155 billion annually as tuition fees as against the annual budget of N121 billion for all federal universities in Nigeria.

Coupled with the issue of underfunding is the financial improprieties levelled against some university administrators. Awuzie (2010) lamented that some governing council lost their university money in huge sums to investment in failed banks. These cases of underfunding, financial improprieties do not go down well with the unions in the university system and always tend to generate bad blood in the system.

ii. Poor condition of service: Another contentious issue between university management and the various trade unions in the university system bothers on conditions of service. This covers such areas as salary and allowances, pension, retirement, appointment and promotion, discipline and other conditions of service. It is worrisome to note lecturers as well as other workers in the university system are not well taken care of. As a matter of fact, this poor pay has led to the brain-drain in the university system. Akindutire (2004) condemned a situation where a young graduate who is fortunate to take up a job outside the unified public service immediately starts to earn twice his professor's annual income. Besides, some university managements are not even helping the matter as some even denied the workers of their entitlements.

iii. Leadership style of university administrators: Besides, the conditions of service of university workers, another major issue that causes conflict between the university managers and the trade unions is the high-handedness of staffers by school administrators. There have been allegations of gross abuse and misuse of power and arbitrariness by some university managers in Nigeria. Asiyai (2006) lamented that the autocratic leadership, high-handedness and sack of staff without following due process had been a demoralising factor propelling staff unions to embark on trade disputes.

Egbokhare (2000) cited the example of the Vice-Chancellor of University of Abuja—Prof. Isa Mohammed, who unilaterally sacked thirty-five lecturers,

dissolved the senate of the university, created programmes and altered the academic structure of the university.

The high-handedness of the university managers emanates from the believe that they (university managers) are not accountable to anybody in the university. These and many more trivial issues cause disharmony between the unions and the university administrators.

The ways forward

The unwholesome disharmony between the university administrators and the various trade unions in the university system can be reduced drastically by adopting the principles explained hereunder:

1. ***Proper funding of the university system:*** Nigerian universities need to be adequately funded as the gross underfunding of the system has been rendering the university incapacitated. Funds should be made available to the universities as and when due so that the university managers can give prompt attention to the needs of the university staffers. While this is done, trade union disputes will be minimised.

In addition, universities should also seek alternative sources of revenue generation to argument whatever the government allocates to them. Besides the issue of proper funding is the principle of accountability and transparency. There is the need for accountability and transparency on the part of the university administrators. Unions will always complain when they are 'kept in the dark' as regards how fund allocated to the university system is being spent. There is the need for an effective monitoring of the fund allocated to the sector. Mgbeke (2004) suggested that a reliable accounting system should be established in each Nigerian university in order to guarantee accountability, honesty and transparency.

2. ***Principles of democratic governance:*** There is the need for the university administrators to embrace the spirit of democratic governance in their day-to-day administration. Democratic governance presupposes that: (i) the major unions in the school system should be carried along in the scheme of administration. This will help erase prejudice; (ii) there is the need to enhance existing avenues for regular consultations and dialogue between the unions and the university administrators. This will also help in preventing conflicts; (iii) rigidity on the part of university administrators during

negotiation should be eschewed; (iv) arbitrariness and high-handedness be eschewed by the administrators. It is imperative for the university administrators to show high level of maturity and understanding in dealing with staff unions whenever they make demands.

3. ***Better condition of service for staffers:*** Several literature has reviewed that prominent among the demands of the trade unions in the universities are better funding and better conditions of service for university workers. It is no understatement to say that lecturers in the nation's universities are not well-remunerated compared to their counterparts in other parts of the world. In order to attract best brains to the university system the personal emoluments of university staff needs to be reviewed upwardly. The university teacher, more than anybody else, needs a very peaceful, comfortable and conducive working environment to attain a healthy and efficient mind as the beacon of enlightenment.
4. ***Conducive teaching-learning environment:*** Another way to redress the wrangling between the trade unions in the universities and the university administrators is to improve the teaching-learning environment. Dilapidated structures, obsolete laboratory and workshop equipment have converged to make teaching of poor quality. A massive overhaul of the infrastructure in the university system therefore becomes imperative. Bandele (2011) suggested that the quality of infrastructure in form of buildings, furniture, equipment, among others, must be assured in order to meet minimum standards.
5. ***Better information channel:*** Information is very essential for organisational effectiveness. It is needed to avoid blocking of communication flow that may lead to difference in perceptions. Alibi (1999) submitted that effective Management Information System (MIS) is essential to provide requisite information which minimises delays and ensures maximum utilisation of resources.

Conclusion and recommendations

Conflict is unavoidable in organisation. There will always be conflicts and disagreements between employers and employees. Unfortunately, conflict is a hindrance to productivity as a result it is expedient of the university administrators to guide against frequent occurrence of these conflicts. It is

therefore recommended that Nigeria's universities should be properly funded, as majority of the conflict situations bother on inadequate finance to carry out the expected functions of the universities.

Besides, Nigeria's universities need to be properly and thoroughly democratised. The committee system needs to be revived and strengthened as the administrative method of running these institutions. The committees must not only be strengthened in decision making, but the university administrators must also be seen to be making use of ideas and recommendations of these committees.

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