

Autonomy, Unions, and Governance: The Nigerian University Experience

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Abstract

This article provides a critical analysis of university governance in Nigeria, examining the persistent tension between institutional autonomy, the advocacy of academic staff unions, and systemic political and economic pressures. Using a qualitative research design, this study draws on document and historical institutional analysis of formal agreements, university statutes, and policy documents to investigate this complex dynamic. The analysis is framed by a hybrid theoretical model integrating Stakeholder Theory and Principal-Agent Theory. It argues that the recurrent crises in Nigeria's university system stem from a fundamental misalignment of interests between the government (the principal), university administrations (the agents), and academic unions (key stakeholders). The Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) emerges not merely as a trade union but as a significant force that has reshaped governance through collective bargaining, influencing the composition of governing councils, democratising leadership appointments, and establishing oversight committees. However, these gains are consistently undermined by challenges such as chronic underfunding, political interference, corruption, and brain drain, which disrupt the academic environment and fuel industrial unrest. The study finds that while staff unions use strikes to hold the government accountable, this adversarial approach perpetuates instability. The paper concludes by recommending an integrated governance model that enforces collective bargaining agreements, respects university autonomy, promotes democratic leadership, and reframes unions as collaborative partners rather than adversaries. By viewing the governance dilemma through this dual theoretical lens, the paper offers new insights for policymakers and contributes to the limited literature on the intersection of unionism and university governance in developing nations.

Keywords: Autonomy, Governance, Union, & Nigerian University stem

Introduction

The governance of universities globally has undergone significant evolution, moving from traditional models towards complex systems that must balance institutional autonomy, stakeholder accountability, and new public management principles (Bleiklie & Michelsen, 2018; Shattock, 2017). This dynamic makes effective governance a critical determinant of academic quality, financial sustainability, and societal relevance (Capano et al., 2024). In Nigeria, this global paradigm is complicated by a persistent and unique tension. The central problem this study examines is the conflict between the desired ideal of university autonomy, the legitimate advocacy role of academic staff unions (particularly ASUU), and the practical realities of political interference and economic constraints. This tension manifests in frequent industrial disputes, contested leadership appointments, and conflicts over resource allocation, which collectively undermine the system's stability and effectiveness.

This governance dilemma is set against the backdrop of a rapidly expanding, yet underfunded university system. Since the country's independence, the number of

institutions has grown from one to over two hundred, creating a diverse landscape of federal, state, and private universities, each with varied governance structures (National Universities Commission [NUC], 2023). Despite this expansion, the system remains troubled by profound challenges, including inadequate funding, deteriorating infrastructure, and constrained academic freedom, all of which severely impact educational outcomes (Okebukola & Shabani, 2023; Oloyede, 2022). Within this context, the role of academic staff in governance is a subject of intense debate. Public perception often questions why a trade union would involve itself in institutional administration, expecting it to focus solely on member welfare. However, this view fails to appreciate the intricate link between participatory governance and the overall health of the university system, a connection that is critical for resolving Nigeria's higher education crisis.

Study Objectives and Contribution

Accordingly, this paper provides a critical analysis of the role of academic staff in Nigerian university governance. It sets out three primary objectives:

1. To analyse how union activities, particularly those of ASUU, influence governance structures and decision-making processes in universities in Nigeria.
2. To examine the extent to which institutional autonomy is upheld or compromised within Nigeria's regulatory and political framework.
3. To evaluate the effectiveness of current governance models in balancing the competing demands of autonomy, accountability, and stakeholder participation.

To guide this inquiry, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do university unions, particularly ASUU, influence governance practices and institutional decision-making in Nigeria?
2. To what extent is university autonomy genuinely practiced within Nigeria's centralized regulatory framework?
3. What governance models can best accommodate the legitimate interests of unions while preserving institutional autonomy and academic freedom?

This study contributes to the limited literature on the intersection of unionism and institutional governance in African higher education. By examining the Nigerian case, it provides insights into how developing nations can balance democratic participation with institutional autonomy, offering valuable lessons for similar contexts globally.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, utilizing document analysis and historical institutional analysis to investigate the evolution and dynamics of university governance in Nigeria. The methodology is centred on a systematic examination of key texts that have shaped the policy landscape.

Data Sources

The analysis draws on a diverse range of primary and secondary sources:

- **Primary Sources:** These include eight formal agreements between the Federal Government of Nigeria and the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) from 1992 to 2020; university statutes and enabling laws; policy documents from the National Universities Commission (NUC); and official statements from the Federal Ministry of Education.
- **Secondary Sources:** These comprise academic literature on higher education governance, historical accounts of Nigerian universities, union publications, and relevant government reports.

Analytical Approach

The data is analysed through a two-pronged approach. First, content analysis is used to identify key themes, patterns of conflict, and areas of accommodation within policy documents and agreements. Second, historical institutional analysis is employed to trace the development of governance structures over time, with a specific focus on how formal rules interact with the informal power dynamics exerted by academic unions.

Limitations

A primary limitation of this study is its reliance on documentary evidence, which does not capture the first-hand perspectives of key stakeholders through interviews. Future research could incorporate ethnographic methods to provide a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of those involved in university governance.

Theoretical Framework

To analyse the complex governance tensions in Nigerian universities, this paper employs a hybrid theoretical framework integrating Stakeholder Theory and Principal-Agent Theory.

The analysis is grounded in the Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984), which frames the university as an organization comprising multiple actors with competing interests. This lens is used to examine the tripartite struggle for influence among the government, university management, and powerful academic unions like ASUU. To specifically interrogate the state-university relationship, the paper applies the Principal-

Agent Theory (Jensen & Meckling, 1976; Ross, 1973). This theory sheds light on the fundamental tension between autonomy and accountability, by casting the government (the principal) and university administrations (the agents) in a relationship often characterized by goal misalignment and information asymmetry.

By integrating these frameworks, this paper argues that the persistent crises in Nigerian universities are a product of the unstable interplay between broad-based stakeholder conflicts and a dysfunctional principal-agent relationship. This is a dynamic that is continuously mediated and intensified by the assertive role of the academic union.

Overview of the Nigeria University System

The Nigerian university system is divided into three categories: federal, state, and private institutions. Each type has a distinct structure of ownership, funding, and governance (National Universities Commission, 2024).

Federal Universities

There are seventy-two (72) federal universities (NUC 2025) owned and funded by the federal government of Nigeria. This group includes universities such as the University of Jos, University of Lagos, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. They are typically governed by a public service bureaucratic model.

State Universities

There are 66 state universities, which are established by state governments. While they mirror the bureaucratic structure of federal institutions, their governance is more directly influenced by the state governor, particularly in appointing Vice-chancellors and managing labour relations. This often leads to a more authoritarian management style compared to federal universities, where staff unions have stronger negotiating power.

Private Universities

With 159 institutions, private universities now form the largest category. They generally fall into two groups: faith-based universities and corporate-model universities. Faith-based institutions integrate religious principles into their governance, while corporate-model ones operate on business principles. These universities often offer higher staff pay but also charge higher fees, making them less accessible. Consequently, despite their significant number, private universities have lower enrolment figures than their public counterparts.

Regulatory Framework for the Nigerian University System (Legislative and Policy)

The Nigerian university system operates under several key legal and regulatory frameworks. The basic structures are: The Universities (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2004, which serves as the primary federal law governing university establishment and operations (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004). This Act specifically mandates the creation of governing councils responsible for policy control, financial management, and property oversight in federally owned universities. It also establishes key leadership positions, such as those of the Chancellor, Pro-chancellor and vice-chancellor who serve as ceremonial head, head of governing council and as chief executive, respectively. It also creates governance bodies such as the Congregation and Convocation.

For centralised supervisory purposes, the National Universities Commission (NUC), established in 1962 and statutorily empowered in 1974, functions as the system's regulatory body (NUC, 2024). Its core responsibilities include approving academic programs and new institutions, ensuring quality assurance, and managing external support to universities.

Furthermore, individual universities operate under their own specific laws, exemplified by the University of Jos Act (Cap. U8, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, 2004), which establishes each institution's corporate status and governance structure. These laws detail the establishment of governing bodies such as the university senate, faculties and departmental boards, and appointment of principal officers.

Finally, the Federal Ministry of Education oversees broader policy direction through instruments like the National Policy on Education (Federal Ministry of Education, 2004), which established the national council on education to coordinate policies and programmes at the national level.

Historical Evolution of University Governance in Nigeria

Nigeria's university governance has evolved through four distinct periods. The colonial era (1948-1960) began with the setting up of the University of Ibadan. It was established based on British governance models with colonial administrators maintaining control while Nigerian academics held junior positions (Ashby, 1966; Fafunwa, 1971).

In the First Republic (1960-1966), a transition to indigenous control following independence, led to the establishment regional universities such as the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria and the University of Lagos, and the replacement of British expatriates with Nigerian academics in leadership roles (Babs, 2008). This period saw the strengthening of university Senates and development of faculty structures for academic organisation (University of Lagos, 1962).

The advent of Military rule between (1966-1999) led to centralised university control through the Universities Decree of 1974 (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1974). While this era saw the establishment 'second generation universities' (Mohammed, 2016), it also saw the challenges of declining autonomy and infrastructure (Babs, 2008). ASUU was formed in 1978 to advocate for academic freedom (ASUU, 2022), although, structural adjustment policies in the 1980s further strained the system due to reduction in revenues and government spending on education.

The Fourth Republic (1999-present) brought democratic reforms, with the NUC gaining expanded oversight responsibilities (NUC, 2022). The system further diversified through establishment of private institutions, beginning with Igbinedion University in 1999, and increased state universities, thereby broadening access to higher education (Okebukola, 2002).

Models of University Governance

There are several models of university governance that have been identified in the literature. These models include the collegial, bureaucratic, political, and corporate/managerial models.

- a) **The Collegial Model:** The collegial model of university governance is based on the idea of shared governance between academic staff and administrators (Baldridge, 1971). In this model, decision-making is distributed among various stakeholders, including academic staff, administrators, and students. The collegial model is characterized by a flat organizational structure, with minimal hierarchy and maximum participation. The University of Ibadan in Nigeria as an example, has a strong tradition of collegial governance, with academic staff playing a significant role in decision-making processes. The university's senate, which is composed of academic staff and administrators, is responsible for making key decisions on academic matters. While the university governing council is in charge of policy, discipline and finance.
- b) **The Bureaucratic Model:** The bureaucratic model of university governance is based on the idea of a hierarchical structure, with clear lines of authority and decision-making processes which is essentially Weberian (Weber, 1947). In this model, decision-making is concentrated in the hands of administrators, with minimal participation from academic staff and students. The bureaucratic model is characterized by a vast organizational structure, with multiple layers of hierarchy, offices and officials with minimal flexibility. All universities operate a bureaucratic

model with strict lines of authority even as they are collegial in their decision-making processes.

- c) **The Political Model:** The political model of university governance is based on the idea of power and influence, with different stakeholders vying for control and decision-making authority (Pfeffer, 1981). In this model, decision-making is influenced by political considerations, such as the interests of external stakeholders and the distribution of power within the university. The political model is characterized by a complex web of alliances and rivalries, with multiple stakeholders competing for influence. Historically, in the Nigeria system, the Ahmadu Bello University in Nigeria had a governance structure that was influenced by political considerations given that it was established purely to help the north catch up with the south in the area of tertiary education. The university's governing council, which was composed of external stakeholders and university administrators, had significant influence over decision-making processes. However, the council's decisions were often influenced by political considerations, such as the interests of northern region before the advent of unitary government in the aftermath of the 1966 military coup-detat.
- d) **The Corporate/Managerial Model:** The corporate/managerial model of university governance is based on the idea of efficiency and effectiveness, with a focus on *managerialism* and the use of corporate-style management techniques (Deem, 2001). In this model, decision-making is concentrated in the hands of administrators, who are responsible for managing the university like a business. The corporate/managerial model is characterized by a focus on productivity and efficiency, with minimal attention paid to traditional academic values. As an example, the Covenant University in Nigeria has a governance structure that is influenced by the corporate/managerial model. The university's chancellor, who is also the founder of the university, has significant influence over decision-making processes. The university's administrators are responsible for managing the institution like a business, with a focus on efficiency and effectiveness in terms of providing seamless academic sessions for students in contrast to the public universities that are often plagued by strikes.

Across Nigerian universities, an admixture of these models is what obtains with government owned institutions running largely the collegial/bureaucratic/political models and the privately owned institutions employing the corporate/managerial model.

Formal Governance Structures in Nigerian Universities

The governance structure of Nigerian universities operates through a hierarchical system of leadership roles and representative bodies. At the apex, is the Visitor - who is the President of Nigeria, for federal universities, the Governor for state universities, or the Founder for private universities. He holds overall oversight authority, and sends visitation panels once every five years to undertake an assessment of how the institutions are administered. The Chancellor, typically a first-class traditional ruler, serves as the highest principal officer, presiding over ceremonial functions and conferring degrees. Working alongside these roles, is the Pro-Chancellor who chairs the university governing council, and is expected to bring top-level management experience to deliver institutional development.

The core governance functions in Nigerian universities operate through two main bodies: the University Council and the Senate. While the Council manages the institution's financial and policy matters, including assets management and staff affairs, the Senate oversees all academic matters, from course approval to undergraduate student progression and award of honorary degrees. The Senate's membership includes top administrators (vice-chancellor and other principal officers), Deans of faculties, Heads of Departments, full professors, and faculty representatives.

At the operational level, academic governance functions through Faculty and Departmental Boards. Faculty Boards, comprising all academic staff within a school or college, handle admissions, curricula, and examination procedures, while also making recommendations for appointments and promotions. Departmental Boards, consisting of departmental academic staff, manage specific academic programmes, make recommendations on student matters and also recommend staff for promotion or discipline.

Two representative bodies complete the governance structure; the Convocation and Congregation. The Convocation, which includes principal officers, graduates, and alumni, provides a platform for university-alumni interaction and nominates a representative to the governing council while the Congregation, made up of graduate-level staff, serves as a forum for discussing institutional well-being and also elects two council members, while also monitoring university opinion on various issues of interest and concern to the university.

Staff Unions and University Governance in Nigeria

There are currently five staff unions that are recognised and which operate with membership in Nigerian universities. They are: Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) which was founded in 1978, this union represents university academic staff. Its objectives include regulating relations between academic staff and employers, and establishing just conditions of service for its members; Senior Staff Association of

Nigerian Universities (SSANU) which represents senior administrative staff in universities, including technical, executive, and professional groups; Congress of Nigeria University Academics (CONUA) registered by the Federal Government of Nigeria in an attempt to whittle down the perceived stranglehold of ASUU on university campuses with the breakaway members citing irreconcilable differences with ASUU; National Association of Medical and Dental Academics (NAMDA): registered by the Federal Government of Nigeria to represent medical teachers in the university system; the Non-Academic Staff Union (NASU) which represents non-academic staff in universities and the National Association of Academic Technologists (NAAT), which represents academic technologists who work specifically in laboratories but who are not considered strictly as academic staff.

As staff unions, these groups are involved in the pursuit of better conditions of service for their members and have over the years been able to negotiate a place for themselves on the table when it comes to university governance. Of these groups, ASUU stands out as the most visible and vocal as the union has come to consider itself as the guardian of the Nigerian university system in the face of increasing government neglect and adoption of neoliberal economic policies that is gradually pushing quality university education out of the public sphere and into the hands of those who only view it as an avenue to cash in on a market where demand outstrips supply.

The Academic Staff Union of Universities and University Governance in Nigeria

ASUU was formed in 1978, with the primary objective of promoting the welfare and interests of academic staff in Nigerian universities (ASUU, 2022). However, over the years, ASUU has undergone significant transformation by adapting to changing political and economic contexts. In its quest for a better university system in Nigeria, and while seeking a voice in how that should be attained, ASUU has used the most effective weapon in its arsenal which is strikes, to make successive governments to either come to the negotiating table or implement agreements already reached.

Between 1992 and 2020, ASUU and the Federal government of Nigeria have entered in eight different agreements. While the 1992 agreement was entered into under the military government of General Ibrahim Babangida, the most recent agreement was entered into with the democratic administration of President Goodluck Jonathan in 2009 with subsequent memoranda for implementation in 2013, 2017, 2019 and 2020 respectively (FGN/ASUU, 1992, 1999, 2001, 2013, 2009, 2013, 2017, 2019 and 2020).

While the crux of the agreements border on improved welfare and conditions of service of academic staff in Nigeria universities, significant portions were devoted to questions of university governance. The agreements between the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) and ASUU address university governance and the role of ASUU within such arrangements. An important aspect is the composition of University Governing Councils, with the agreements emphasizing the need for a balance of external and internal representation (FGN ASUU, 2001). It was agreed that external members should include the Pro-Chancellor and a representative of Alumni Associations. The agreements further specify the number of external and internal members, including representatives of Congregation, Senate, and Convocation, while excluding the Vice-Chancellors and their Deputies as ex-officio members (FGN ASUU, 2001). It was understood that Council members should be knowledgeable, possess proven integrity, courage, and stature, and be able to command respect within the university community. The agreements also define the powers of the Governing Councils, which are basically responsibility for the good management, growth, and development of their respective universities as provided for in their laws.

Regarding the day-to-day governance of the universities, the appointment and removal of Vice-Chancellors was addressed, with the power of appointment being vested in the Governing Council of each University. The agreements outline a detailed procedure for the appointment of a Vice-Chancellor, including the use of a *Search Team* to identify and nominate suitable candidates who may not have applied for the position. Similarly, the agreements made the appointment of deans of faculties and heads of departments democratic as opposed to the former system where these positions were filled at the discretion of the vice-chancellor. The Council was also granted the power to remove the Vice-Chancellor, after due process and consultation with the Senate. The powers of the University Senate over all academic matters, including teaching, examinations, and the promotion of research was reiterated as was the primacy of each university Senate to determine additional requirements and procedures for admission.

University autonomy and academic freedom are central themes in all the agreements, with particular emphasis on the importance of genuine autonomy and academic freedom. Laws that impinge on university autonomy and academic freedom of lecturers were to be repealed or reviewed. The agreements stipulate that while universities should operate in accordance with enabling laws, statutes, rules, and regulations, the autonomy of universities and academic freedom should be protected from political interference.

In line with the desire of ASUU to participate and partake in ensuring that public universities were run in the overall interest of the majority of citizens, the union pushed for the establishment of an Implementation Monitoring Committee (IMC) in each university to monitor the implementation timelines of the agreements. The agreements

further include requiring an ASUU representative(s) as part of the team responsible for selecting a Vice-Chancellor and in other council committees. ASUU also sought and has been given, representation on the Board of Trustees for the Education Tax Fund (ETF), a fund initiated by the union ad setup by the government to fill the gap in infrastructure deficit in Nigerian universities.

Other aspects of university governance covered in the agreements include the need for a single tier university system for the purposes of maintaining consistent academic standards across board, provision for the establishment of a budget monitoring committee in each university to monitor how budgetary allocations were been expended, and the restructuring of the National Universities Commission (NUC) to serve as an advisory body on university education and not as a supervisory body as currently obtains, as this runs afoul of the demand for autonomy. Along these lines, the accreditation of degrees and programmes was proposed to be done by professional bodies or a Universities Accreditation Committee, not by the NUC as is the current practice.

The quest for improved salaries and benefits for academic staff in Nigerian universities has been a consistent feature of all negotiations between the federal government of Nigeria and ASUU. These negotiations have resulted in several agreements, which have incrementally but not significantly changed the earnings of academics in Nigerian. Currently, a professor in Nigeria earns less than \$600 per month.

In addition to the above, ASUU has advocated for increased funding for research in Nigerian universities as well as improved budgetary allocation for education as a whole. The union has worked with the Federal Government and university administrators to secure funding for research projects and promote a culture of research and innovation particularly through the establishment of a national research fund by the TETFUND.

At individual university levels, ASUU members in their capacities as academic staff are members of senate, faculty and departmental boards. They are also heads of all academic units and departments where they serve as deans, directors or heads of departments. While they do not formally represent ASUU in these positions, the fact of their being union members is often leveraged upon by the union when it seeks to press forward its demands.

Contemporary Challenges facing University Governance in Nigeria

Nigerian universities face several contemporary challenges that affect their ability to provide high-quality education and conduct research. These challenges can be classified into external and internal challenges.

External Challenges

External challenges are those that originate from outside the university system and some of them include:

Political Interference: Nigerian universities have historically been vulnerable to political interference, which can undermine their autonomy and academic freedom (Okebukola, 2002). Politicians and government officials often attempt to influence university policies, appointments, and decisions. This can compromise the integrity of the university. The appointment of vice-chancellors is especially vulnerable to political interference as is the setting of new universities even in the face of insufficient resources that are being channelled to existing universities.

Funding Constraints: Nigerian universities face significant funding constraints. This often limit their ability to provide high-quality education and conduct research or even attract the best brains into the university system. (Babalola, 2017). The government's allocation to education is often inadequate, and universities struggle to generate revenue from other sources.

Brain Drain: Due to poor remuneration and lack of equipment and facilities, Nigerian universities continue to experience significant brain drain in recent years, with many academics and professionals emigrating to other countries in search of better opportunities (Akinyemi, 2016). This brain drain deprives Nigerian universities of experienced and skilled academics. This undermines their ability to provide high-quality education and conduct research.

Infrastructure Deficits: Nigerian universities face significant infrastructure deficits, including inadequate classrooms, laboratories, and libraries (Babalola, 2017). These infrastructure deficits limit the ability of universities to provide high-quality education and conduct research.

Strike Actions: Nigerian universities have experienced several strike actions in recent years, including strikes by academic staff and non-academic staff. Between 1999-2022, ASUU embarked of strike actions for a combined 1452 days to press home its demand for government to fulfil its part of the agreements entered into (Dataphyte, 2022). These strike actions disrupt the academic calendar and undermine the ability of universities to provide high-quality education.

Internal Challenges

Nigerian universities also face several internal dynamics that affect their governance, management, and overall performance. Some of the key internal dynamics that sometimes impact on governance include:

Federal Character Principle: The federal character principle is a policy that aims to promote national unity and integration by ensuring that all regions of Nigeria are represented in the governance and management of universities (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999). University administrators often have to ensure that this principle is applied in the appointment of staff, the admission of students, and the allocation of resources.

Corruption and Nepotism: Corruption and nepotism are significant challenges facing Nigerian universities, and often affect the governance, management, and overall performance of the university (Babalola, 2017). The challenge is to ensure that all appointments, promotions, and allocations of resources are based on merit and transparency and that corrupt practices are reduced to a minimum. The creation of the Budget Monitoring and Implementation Monitoring committees both of which are initiatives of ASUU is aimed at curbing this menace.

Taken together, these external and internal challenges confronting the mechanisms of university governance in Nigeria are responsible for the increasing lack of faith shown by many parents and students in public universities in Nigeria. The seemingly endless cycles of strikes occasioned by non-implementation of agreements signed between ASUU and the successive federal governments have fostered an environment of uncertainty within the public university system with students experiencing ambiguity as to when they are likely to commence and conclude their programmes. Repeated industrial unrest in the public university sector has manifested in brain drain, where many university lecturers seek greener pastures abroad or where they have become less committed to their jobs as they seek alternative means of augmenting their incomes.

Staff Unions and University Governance in Nigeria: A Stakeholder and Principal-Agent Analysis

The governance of Nigerian universities is a complex and often contentious issue, with various staff unions acting as key stakeholders in a system where the government is the principal and the university administration acts as its agent. At the core of this dynamic are five recognized staff unions: the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), the Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities (SSANU), the Congress of Nigeria University Academics (CONUA), the National Association of Medical and Dental Academics (NAMDA), and the Non-Academic Staff Union (NASU). Additionally, the National Association of Academic Technologists (NAAT) represents a specific cadre of non-academic staff.

While all these unions advocate for the welfare of their members, ASUU has emerged as the most prominent and vocal player. It operates as a critical stakeholder, not just for its members' interests, but as a self-proclaimed "guardian" of the entire Nigerian university system. ASUU's advocacy is framed as a defence against increasing government neglect and the rise of neoliberal policies that threaten to commodify education and push it out of the public sphere.

The Principal-Agent Framework and ASUU's Role

The relationship between the Federal Government of Nigeria (the principal), the university administration (the agent), and ASUU (a powerful stakeholder) can be effectively analysed using the principal-agent theory. In this model, the government delegates the responsibility of managing universities to the university administration. However, a significant conflict of interest often arises. The government's objectives (e.g., fiscal austerity) seems not to be aligned with the university's needs (e.g., adequate funding for research and infrastructure) or ASUU's demands (e.g., improved staff welfare and institutional autonomy).

ASUU has thus leveraged its power through frequent strike actions, which is a key tool in this principal-agent dynamic, to force the government to the negotiating table several times over the years. These strikes, totalling over 1,452 days between 1999 and 2022, represent a breakdown in the principal-agent relationship and highlight the persistent tension. The series of agreements between the Federal Government and ASUU, from 1992 to 2020, have attempted to resolve these conflicts but with no end in sight.

These agreements fundamentally reshape university governance by incorporating ASUU's demands as a stakeholder with a vested interest in the system's management. Some of the key governance changes include:

- **Governing Councils:** The agreements specify a balanced composition for University Governing Councils, ensuring representation from various stakeholders, including alumni, Senate, and Convocation, rather than being solely controlled by the government's appointees.
- **Appointment of Leadership:** The process for appointing Vice-Chancellors and other academic leaders has been democratized. Instead of a unilateral decision by the government, a search team is now involved, and ASUU representatives are included on selection committees. This reduces the risk of political interference and strengthens the institution's autonomy.

- **University Autonomy:** A central theme of the agreements is the protection of university autonomy and academic freedom from political interference. This ensures that the agent (university administration) can act in the best interest of the institution without undue influence from the principal (the government).
- **Financial Oversight:** ASUU's stakeholder role has led to the creation of budget monitoring and implementation committees at the university level. These committees, which include ASUU representatives, serve to hold the university administration accountable for how funds are spent, thereby mitigating the risk of corruption and nepotism, a significant challenge in the principal-agent relationship.

Contemporary Challenges Through a Stakeholder Lens

Despite these negotiated changes, university governance in Nigeria faces significant external and internal challenges that affect all stakeholders, the government, university administration, academic staff, and students. These include:

External Challenges:

- **Political Interference:** The ongoing vulnerability to political interference undermines the university's autonomy and academic freedom, frustrating ASUU's efforts to safeguard the system.
- **Inadequate Funding:** The persistent lack of funding is a core point of contention. From a stakeholder theory perspective, the government's failure to provide adequate resources is a breach of its responsibility to the entire system, leading to a breakdown in trust and fueling industrial action.
- **Brain Drain:** Poor remuneration and a lack of facilities drive a significant brain drain, weakening the academic staff, a critical stakeholder and further eroding the quality of education.
- **Strike Actions:** The cycle of strikes, while a tool for ASUU, creates uncertainty for students and parents (also key stakeholders) and undermines public confidence in the system.

Internal Challenges:

- **Corruption and Nepotism:** These internal issues, which ASUU has tried to address through its advocacy for monitoring committees, represent a failure of the agent (university administration) to act in the best interests of the principal (the public) and other stakeholders.

- Federal Character Principle: The application of this policy in appointments and admissions can sometimes conflict with the principle of merit, creating internal friction and raising concerns among various academic stakeholders.

The dynamic between ASUU and the Nigerian government is a classic example of principal-agent conflict, where a powerful stakeholder (ASUU) acts to realign the agent's (university administration) actions with the interests of its members and the broader academic community. The recurrent industrial unrest and systemic challenges are a direct consequence of the government's failure to fully address the concerns of key stakeholders, leading to a crisis of confidence in the Nigerian public university system.

Conclusion: A Theoretical Framework for University Governance

This paper has demonstrated that Nigerian university governance is best understood through a combined stakeholder theory and principal-agent theory lens. This dual framework helps explain the persistent conflicts, recurring strikes, and institutional challenges that plague the system. At its core, the crisis stems from fundamental misalignments in interests and a lack of effective mechanisms for balancing power and ensuring accountability among all key players.

From a stakeholder perspective, a university is not just a government entity, but a complex organization with a wide range of legitimate interests. This includes the government, academic and non-academic staff unions, students, administrators, and the broader public. The frequent conflicts are not merely power struggles; they represent genuine disagreements over priorities and resource allocation. ASUU's demands for representation on hiring committees or budget-monitoring bodies directly reflect the stakeholder principle that those affected by decisions should have a voice in making them.

However, the current system lacks formalized, non-adversarial channels for these stakeholders to engage. This forces unions like ASUU to resort to disruptive measures, such as strikes, to have their concerns heard, turning what could be a collaborative relationship into a confrontational one. The emergence of new private universities can be seen as a market-based response to this failure, but this approach risks fragmenting the public education system and undermining the shared societal value of university education. Additionally, the high cost of sending students to these universities, in the light of persistent economic hardships, have ensured that their capacities remain low even with the high demand for university education.

Complementing the stakeholder theory, the principal-agent theory reveals the structural flaws underlying these stakeholder conflicts. In the Nigerian university system, multiple, overlapping principal-agent relationships create confusion and misaligned incentives. The government (the principal) delegates authority to university administrators (the agent), who in turn act as principals to academic staff and other

employees. This creates a complex chain of command where agents often receive contradictory directives from different principals.

For example, government fiscal policies may clash with the university administration's need for educational quality, creating a dilemma. Information imbalance further complicates matters, as university administrators may withhold information from the government, and the government may lack a subtle understanding of academic operations. ASUU's role as a monitoring agent for its members' interests acts as a check on both the government and the administration, with strikes serving as a costly but effective way to signal dissatisfaction when other communication channels fail.

Recommendations for a New Governance Model

To address these challenges, an integrated approach is proposed that simultaneously tackles both stakeholder legitimacy and principal-agent alignment.

1. Enforcement of Collective Bargaining Agreements: Governments must honour agreements reached through collective bargaining with staff unions. These agreements should be legally binding, with clear penalties for non-compliance. This builds trust and reduces the need for disruptive strikes.
2. Ensuring Realistic Funding Commitments: The government should make realistic and achievable financial commitments to universities, rather than promising funds it cannot deliver. A reliable funding stream is essential for long-term planning and institutional stability.
3. Upholding Institutional Autonomy: The legal autonomy of universities must be respected, particularly regarding the appointment and removal of institutional heads. This reduces political interference and allows for merit-based leadership selection. While financial autonomy remains a point of contention, a middle-ground approach can ensure quality public education remains accessible while encouraging sustainable financial practices.
4. Promotion of Democratic and Collegial Leadership: University governance should be transparent and democratic, resisting the trend toward authoritarianism in which vice-chancellors accrue excessive power. ASUU's push for the election of deans and heads of departments is a step in the right direction, but all academics must actively champion these principles to ensure decisions are made by consensus and not dictatorial whim.
5. Strengthening Governance from Within: Universities must adopt meritocratic and transparent practices that are insulated from political influence. Systems like the Integrated Personnel Payroll Information System (IPPIS), which centralize

control and erode autonomy, have now been discontinued, should be avoided to allow universities to manage their own human resources and finances effectively.

6. Embracing Unions as Partners: The government and university administration should view staff unions like ASUU not as adversaries, but as valuable stakeholders with constructive contributions to make. The success of initiatives like the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFUND), which was championed by ASUU, demonstrates the potential for positive collaboration.
7. Ensure Oversight of Governing Councils: To prevent the abuse of power, a clear oversight mechanism, perhaps involving the Ministry of Education, should exist to ensure that university governing councils adhere to established procedures for appointing vice-chancellors and other principal officers. Oversight should not however end with appointment. It should be all encompassing and especially financial in the face of insufficient allocation of funds. This prevents arbitrary decision-making and reinforces the principles of good governance.

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