

Research Article

Federal Government-ASUU Dispute Over University Autonomy and Industrial Disharmony in Federal Universities in Nigeria, 2009-2023

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The university is a citadel of academic excellence, a centre of learning, where knowledge is created and shared for the purpose of economic, social, political, scientific and technological development of society. It is therefore expected to operate in an atmosphere of peace, order and without tension or any form of disharmony to achieve its goals. Unfortunately, this is not the case with federal universities in Nigeria that have been in a perennial state of industrial disharmony. Extant literature attributes this situation to poor leadership and struggle for power and influence within the union as well as the conflict between the Federal Government of Nigeria and the Academic Staff Union of Universities over non-implementation of extant agreements. However, not much research has been done with respect to the impact of the FGN-ASUU dispute over university autonomy. Therefore, this study sought to examine the nexus between the FGN-ASUU dispute over university autonomy and industrial disharmony in federal universities in Nigeria based on a research question. This study is anchored on the Marxian conflict theory. A time series design was adopted for the study. Data were collected through qualitative and quantitative methods. The qualitative descriptive method was used for data analysis. Results of the analysis showed that the FGN-ASUU dispute over academic freedom, administrative autonomy and financial autonomy account for frequent strikes, frequent dialogue and negotiations, and protests and confrontations in federal universities in Nigeria between 2009 and 2023.

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Introduction

Since the advent of the Fourth Republic in 1999 up to the time of this research (2023), Nigerian public educational institutions, particularly federal universities, have been experiencing disharmony, instability, and various forms of industrial conflict. The university system is characterised by frequent strikes, work-to-rule actions, protests, confrontations between the government and labour unions, proscriptions of labour unions, intimidation and arrests of labour leaders, as well as manipulation of university unions through a divide-and-rule policy and incessant court actions. The system has been experiencing frequent and debilitating industrial unrest for many years. The emergence of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) in 1978 as a trade union for Nigerian university lecturers gave birth to the “permanent opposition party” of all governments from military to civil. The union has vehemently, vocally, and radically resisted all government policies that they consider detrimental to the social and educational development imperatives of the country. This radical opposition to the government’s mismanagement of education in the country has accounted for several strikes and other civil actions within the university system in Nigeria. Industrial disharmony is counter-productive and leads to inefficiency, ineffectiveness, or mental stress in the achievement of stated organisational goals and objectives. It also portends a great cost to the economy as a result of a reduction in productive hours (Enyi, 2001; Tongo & Osabuohien, 2007; Nworgu, 2005). However, in one of its attempts to quell the situation, the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) struck an agreement with ASUU in 2009. The major issue in contention addressed in the agreement was university autonomy.

University autonomy in Nigeria, according to the University Autonomy Bill (2004), is the “capacity of the university to govern itself.” It can also be defined as “self-determination and self-governance or self-rule... the right of the universities to determine the manner in, or the ground rules by which they are governed and their capacity to control their own affairs and shape their own destiny, free from external interference or control” (Azenabor, 2022). Accordingly, university autonomy can therefore be viewed as the right of universities to conduct their own affairs internally without external interference by the government or any of its agencies. Closely identified with, and in fact the soul of university autonomy, is the concept of academic freedom. The University Amendment Miscellaneous Provision Act (2003, p. 3) defines academic freedom as:

“The freedom of scholars to conduct research, advance the frontier of knowledge and disseminate the results of their research without let or hindrance. It is the right to hold any opinion, no matter how unpopular, to express it freely and the tradition of not only tolerating but also encouraging the holding of diverse and differing views on any issue, is the hallmark of academic freedom.”

Industrial relations in Nigerian universities have been a matter of grave concern to scholars, educational practitioners, and stakeholders, including the government, parents, lecturers, students, and indeed the society at large. These relations have far-reaching effects on the developmental trajectory of universities and the nation at large. The Academic Staff Union of Universities has been having altercations with the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) over various matters, chief among which is the issue of academic autonomy or academic freedom. The Proceedings of the International Conference on Academic Freedom and University Autonomy, Sinaia, Romania (1992) emphasised that a university is the repository of truth, be it historical, cultural, or scientific. It is the place where minds, embarking on the quest for truth, meet and clash in pursuit of this ideal. Minds so fashioned are the individual carriers and transmitters of past and future thought, of tradition, and of innovation. The university, by its very nature, is the collective mind that bears the truth of all who pass through it, continuously revising and improving scientific knowledge and concepts in a climate of, and according to, the principle of truthfulness. It is the place where the scholarly elite, the critical intellectual mind of a society, takes shape, discards obsolete findings, and affirms and reassesses other interpretations of truth. In order to function as a hotbed of knowledge, a university must benefit from, and respect, a number of basic norms of conduct. Such benefit and respect, according to the Conference Proceeding, is called academic freedom.

University autonomy grants individual universities the authority to select or admit their students, decide what to educate, and determine areas of study and research. However, these hallmarks of autonomy in Nigerian universities have been dissolved by specific public objectives and impediments. A significant blow was dealt to university autonomy when their staff became employees of the federal government instead of autonomous universities, transforming into government parastatals under the control of the Ministry of Education. With the National Universities Commission (NUC) monitoring and supervising the universities, the prestige, autonomous status, and effectiveness of the universities were diminished and eroded. Thus, the government introduced the NUC as a tool of its centralised control. It prescribes terms of accreditation for universities and minimum standards. Even where a separate salary scale has been established for university staff, it remains under government control. Another consequence of the loss of university autonomy and its subsequent integration into the civil service structure was the emergence of

the Visitor, Chancellors, and Pro-Chancellors as heads of the universities. However, nowhere does the original act of the universities list the Visitor among the constituent bodies making up the university.

Autonomy is a key feature of universities worldwide. It is one of the valued standards of a university system. According to Akinwumin and Olaniyan (2007), universities require autonomy in three basic areas: academic autonomy, administrative autonomy, and financial autonomy. Academic autonomy is anchored on academic freedom – the liberty to unbridle scientific inquiry and academic enterprise. It also means the full right of individual universities to determine their curriculum, establish research interests, publish and disseminate research findings, and award degrees on their own accord. Administrative autonomy entails the right to appoint, promote, and discipline its staff, set the school calendar, determine the language of instruction, and carry out general administrative duties without external incursions. Financial autonomy is conceived as the ability of universities to allocate their resources, not necessarily self-funding. This implies that financial autonomy does not absolve the government from funding universities.

The Academic Staff Union of Universities, the self-proclaimed vanguard of university educational development in Nigeria, has consistently been at loggerheads with the Federal Government of Nigeria due to its persistent and tenacious grip on the university system. ASUU has employed the instrumentality of strikes, negotiations, and confrontational protests to drive home its demands over the years. According to a 2007 ASUU 45 Press Release, the union entered into a negotiation with the Federal Government. The Release notes: “The democratisation of the universities, the autonomy of universities, the role of the National Universities Commission, Joint Admission and Matriculation Board and the Education Tax Fund are necessary aspects of the negotiations.” At instances where negotiations fail, ASUU resorts to industrial action. This has been the most potent tool used by ASUU and a catalyst for industrial disharmony in Nigerian universities.

Disharmony in an organisation is an albatross to an effective, functional, and productive organisation. Industrial disharmony reduces workers’ job satisfaction, job performance, productivity, and organisational profitability. Extant literature has attributed industrial disharmony in the university to many factors. Fejoh, Boyede, Adesanwan, and Onanuga (2021) opined that a major factor responsible for industrial disharmony in Nigerian universities has been linked to poor communication. This, on its own, has resulted in low productivity of university workers, including both the teaching and non-teaching staff. On the other hand, low productivity in any organisation has the propensity to bring disagreement between the management and the workers, the authors maintained. This is in line with Enyi (2001) and

Nworgu (2005), who affirmed that most tertiary institutions in Nigeria experience conflicts because of poor communication between the management and the staff. Universities, like other modern higher institutions, are not without discord and incompatible objectives and responses to issues concerning the welfare of employees, which are viable sources of dispute. Wokoma (2011) claimed that refusal of union recognition, public policies, failure of collective bargaining, etc., are responsible for industrial disharmony in the workplace. Ifah and Idris (2020) hinted that a grievance as a result of low wages, poor working conditions, and lack of promotion leads to conflict.

However, extant literature has not given adequate attention to the relationship between the Federal Government-ASUU dispute over university autonomy and industrial disharmony in federal universities in Nigeria. This apparent gap in literature is hoped to be filled by this study. It is instructive to note that ASUU has been in a long-drawn struggle with the federal government of Nigeria over issues negotiated and agreed upon in 2009. There is a marked failure in the implementation of the 2009 FGN-ASUU Agreement, hence the perpetual industrial unrest in the federal universities. Part of the agreement emphasised autonomy for Nigerian universities. However, ASUU has faulted the FGN over its interference with university academic activities, administrative processes, and financial transactions. This study was therefore set to interrogate the nexus between the government-ASUU dispute over academic freedom, dispute over administrative autonomy, and financial autonomy. Towards this end, the following research questions were posed to give focus to the study:

1. Does the Federal Government-ASUU dispute over academic freedom account for frequent strikes by lecturers in federal universities in Nigeria?
2. Does the Federal Government-ASUU dispute over administrative autonomy account for confrontations and negotiations in federal universities in Nigeria?
3. Does the Federal Government-ASUU dispute over financial autonomy account for protests and confrontations in federal universities in Nigeria?

Theoretical framework

This study is anchored on conflict theory propounded by Karl Marx (1818-1883) in 1848 in his *The Communist Manifesto*. Marx argued that society is characterised by conflict between different social classes, namely the bourgeoisie (the owners of capital) and the proletariat (the working class). Conflict theory argues that society is characterised by conflict between different social groups. This conflict can

be over resources, power, or ideology. In the case of the government-ASUU dispute, conflict theory would argue that the dispute is a result of the conflict between the two social groups: the government and ASUU. The Federal Government and ASUU have different interests and goals. The government is interested in controlling universities and using them to promote its own political agenda. ASUU, on the other hand, is interested in protecting the autonomy of universities and ensuring that lecturers are treated fairly. These different interests have led to conflict between the two groups. Conflict theory would also argue that the Federal Government-ASUU dispute is a result of the unequal distribution of power between the two groups. The government has more power than ASUU, which gives it an advantage in the dispute. This unequal distribution of power makes it difficult for ASUU to achieve its goals.

Conflict theory can be a useful tool for understanding the Federal Government-ASUU dispute. It helps us understand the different interests and goals of the two groups, as well as the unequal distribution of power between them. This understanding can help us develop strategies for resolving the dispute.

Hypotheses

1. The Federal Government-ASUU dispute over academic freedom accounts for frequent strikes by lecturers in federal universities in Nigeria, 2009-2023.
2. The Federal Government-ASUU dispute over administrative autonomy accounts for confrontations and negotiations in federal universities in Nigeria, 2009-2023.
3. The Federal Government-ASUU dispute over financial autonomy accounts for protests and confrontations in federal universities in Nigeria, 2009-2023.

Method

This study adopted the time series research design. According to Ugwueze (2016), a time series design is a statistical methodology apt for research units that are measured repeatedly at regular intervals over a large number of observations. It also involves successive observations throughout a programmed intervention and assesses the characteristics of the change process. It is descriptive in application. The method of data collection to be adopted for this study will be a mixed method, which involves both survey (for primary data) and documentary methods (for secondary data). The population of this study comprised students and union (ASUU) leaders, members, university administrators, and government officials (civil servants in Federal Ministries of Education and Labour and Productivity). The researcher

obtained information through key informant interviews (KII) from these relevant individuals. This study adopted the simple random sampling technique and the purposive sampling techniques. The study area, Nigeria, was divided into six groups based on geopolitical zones. Using the simple random sampling technique, three zones were selected. The hat and draw method of simple random sampling was used. In this method, the names of the six geopolitical zones were written on pieces of paper, which were folded into balls, and then dropped into a container. After shaking and mixing the papers thoroughly, three papers were drawn from the container. The same hat and draw method was used to select one university from each of the three zones. For the first zone, the names of the federal universities found there were written on pieces of paper, folded, mixed, and one was picked. The choice of federal university is informed by the fact that they have a higher propensity for ethnic, religious, and social diversities compared to state-owned universities, whose staff are mostly indigenous people with more convergent views. It is for this purpose as well that the population was divided. The researcher purposively sampled and interviewed 100 persons (20 students and 10 lecturers each from the three universities and five each from the two ministries). This study adopted the qualitative descriptive method of analysis for both primary data and secondary/documented materials data (qualitative approach).

Findings/Discussion

Based on the method described above, the findings of the current study have been merged with discussions of findings based on previous studies related to the current research. Findings and discussions are done thematically based on the hypotheses directing the studies.

Federal Government-ASUU dispute over academic freedom and frequent strike actions

Strikes have been a major feature of Nigerian universities. Federal Government-ASUU relations have been anything but harmonious. Bello and Isah (2016) reveal that since 1992, ASUU has embarked on strikes over 23 times to drive home its demands, which include granting autonomy to the universities. The dispute took a more radical and dogged dimension after the endorsement of the 2009 agreement, and since then, ASUU has gone on strikes about four times (Bello & Isah, 2016). Fatunmole (2022) stated that the union downed tools for 57 months (about five years) in the 23-year period between 1999 and 2022.

The following table indicates the number of strikes embarked upon by ASUU at different times on account of its demands.

| S/N | YEAR | PERIOD OF STRIKE | S/N | YEAR | PERIOD OF STRIKE |
|-----|------|------------------|-----|------|------------------|
| 1 | 1999 | 5 months | 11 | 2010 | 5 months |
| 2 | 2001 | 3 months | 12 | 2011 | 2 months |
| 3 | 2002 | 2 weeks | 13 | 2012 | 2 months |
| 4 | 2003 | 6 months | 14 | 2013 | 5 months |
| 5 | 2004 | 3 days | 15 | 2016 | 1 week |
| 6 | 2005 | 2 weeks | 16 | 2017 | 1 month |
| 7 | 2006 | 1 week | 17 | 2018 | 3 months |
| 8 | 2007 | 3 months | 18 | 2019 | 1 month |
| 9 | 2008 | 1 week | 19 | 2020 | 9 months |
| 10 | 2009 | 4 months | 20 | 2022 | 8 months |

Table 1. Number and duration of ASUU strikes from 1999 to 2023

Source: Author's adaptation from Statisense (www.statisense.info)

The data in Table 1 above shows that ASUU has embarked on 20 strikes from 1999 to 2023. This dreadful industrial atmosphere in the university is a development with apparent far-reaching implications on the academic well-being of students. Moreover, the impacts of these strike actions on the achievement of their demands have been found to be less effective as time went on. The table above shows that after 2019, strike actions lasted for many months. Although Professor Ifeanyichukwu Abada, who was interviewed by this researcher, stated that a strike is usually the last resort for ASUU, “results of the strikes have shown that an alternative should be sourced.” Braimah (2022) posited that frequent strike actions by ASUU have been more of a “struggle” to save public education in Nigeria not only from the strangulating grips of the government but also to ensure that universities achieve their goals. However,

he also argued that long strike actions do not serve any purpose. According to the report of Braimah (2022), the use of strike actions in ASUU struggles is outdated and ineffective as no one does the same thing and expects a different result.

In a speech by Professor Federico Mayor, the Director-General of UNESCO at the International Conference on Academic Freedom and University Autonomy, Sinaia, Romania (1992), it was noted that universities are under the pressure of society to educate its members. The consistent interference in the academic life of the university in Nigeria is a setback to university education in the country. The attendant consequences are myriad and have constituted a clog on the developmental wheels of the university. A typical case in point is the control of the admission process by the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) on behalf of all public universities in Nigeria. JAMB sets admission quotas without recourse to the carrying capacity or availability of infrastructures in universities. This has caused the lecturers to pay more attention to teaching and less on research. Worse still, it has watered down the quality of the teaching and learning process itself.

Corroborating the above submission, Aideluoghene (2014, p. 7) maintained that the teaching and learning condition is the bane of the Nigerian university's global ranking. According to the author, "the condition for teaching and learning in many schools is horrible, grossly unacceptable." The author posited further:

"The ratio of teaching staff to students in many universities is 1:100. National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) teaching staff to students is 1:363, University of Abuja (UNIABUJA) teaching staff to students is 1:122; Lagos State University (LASU) teaching staff to students is 1:144. In contrast, in Harvard University, teaching staff ratio to students is 1:4; Massachusetts Institute of Technology is 1:9; and Cambridge University is 1:3. In Nigeria, some engineering workshops operate under zinc sheds and trees. Many science-based faculties are running what is referred to as "Dry Labs", due to lack of reagents and tools to conduct real experiments. According to ASUU Strike Presentation Transcript there are a total of 1,252,913 students in the public universities. Of these 5% are running sub-degree programmes, 85 percent undergraduates, 3.0 percent postgraduate; 5.0 percent Masters and 2.0 percent Ph.D. As against the National Policy on Education that stipulates 60:40 enrolments in favour of science based programmes, of this, 66.1 percent of them are studying Arts, Social Sciences and Management and Education courses. Only 16 percent of students are studying science and science-education course; 6.3 percent Engineering; 5 percent Medicine, while 6.6 percent are studying agriculture, Pharmacy and Law."

The statistics above show a sharp contravention of the National Policy on Education, an education policy document that outlines Nigerian educational goals and philosophy. It sets the Nigerian society's standard for education, which individual universities are supposed to abide by according to their respective capacities. However, JAMB has taken over the responsibility and dictates to universities how many students they must admit into different fields of study. This singular usurpation of the right of universities to choose their students is a flagrant erosion of the autonomy of universities, and a disservice to the essence of the university system. The greater problem here is that while the Federal Government, through JAMB, is now responsible for admission, which it does without recourse to the available human resources, the lecturer-student ratio is embarrassingly alarming. The administration of President Goodluck Jonathan set up a Needs Assessment Committee in 2012 at the call of ASUU to assess the Nigerian university and its needs. Aidelunuoghene (2014) recorded that the report presented by the Committee before the Federal Executive Council indicated that the lecturer-student ratio was 1-400 on average, instead of being 1 – 40, and that classrooms were grossly inadequate such that only about 30% of the number of students could really be accommodated in the classrooms. This implies that the enrolment rate was higher than the available facilities. The Committee on Needs Assessment of Nigerian Public Universities, Main report (2012) reported further that:

"There are 37,504 academics in the country's public universities. Out of these, 23,030 or 61 per cent are in federal universities while, 14,474 or 38.6 percent teach in state owned universities. Total male academic are 31,128 or 83 percent. Only about 16,127 (43%) of Nigerian universities teaching staffs have doctorate degree, instead of 75 percent. Only about 16,502 or 44.0 percent are within the bracket of senior lecturer and professors. Only 7 universities that is, IMSU, UNICAL, OSUST, NOUN, UNIPORT, UNILORIN and UNIUYO have up to 60% of their teaching staffs with Ph.D qualification. Kano State University which is 11 years old, has one professor and 250 lecturers with Ph.D, Kebbi State University has two professors and five lecturers with Ph.D. 74 percent of lecturers in the Plateau State University (Bokko) are visiting."

Furthermore, the manpower crisis shows that:

"Instead of having no less than 80% of the academics with Ph.Ds, only 43% are Ph.D holders while the remaining 57% are not. And instead of 75% of the academics to be between Senior Lecturers and Professors, only about 44% are within the bracket while the remaining 56% are not. The staff

mix in some universities is alarming ... Kano State University, Wudil (established in 2001) has only one professor and 25 Ph.Ds.”

The problem above is an offshoot of the government's interference in the academic autonomy of universities. ASUU has stood up against the proliferation of universities without the requisite funding to provide or enhance staff training. This is one of the items in the 2009 agreements. The ongoing dispute persists because the problem has not been resolved. Strikes have always trailed the dispute to drive home the point. Universities need to determine the number of academic staff they can afford to pay, and the number required for the number of students they can admit. The politics of staff employment has also hampered the freedom of universities to appoint suitably qualified lecturers because the political class has an interest in engaging their cronies. This gives room for all manner of persons to be appointed.

Another major way the Federal Government controls Federal Universities in Nigeria is through the National Universities Commission (NUC). Addeh (2023) said that “in Nigeria, universities are governed by the National Universities Commission (NUC), whose establishment Act of 1974 gives it controlling power over the university education system, including what departments or academic units they run and what they teach.” This is too much for a university regulatory body. Its initial role was as a buffer between the universities and the government, but due to the military centralisation of power in the 1970s, the university system was affected. One of our key informants interviewed, Professor Ifeanyichukwu Michael Abada, a former Chairman of ASUU in the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, opined that the universities were established by the Federal Government, which monitors, supervises, and controls the universities through the NUC. According to the union leader, while the government is the founder of the universities, it is not impossible for the government to be interested in the activities of the institution. The Professor of Political Science further noted that the conflict between ASUU and the FG is mostly favourable to the latter since it funds the university, and he who pays the piper dictates the tune. A group of students at the University of Calabar, in a focused group discussion, expressed their disaffection over the incessant strike actions. They argued that, as the founder of the universities, the government has the right to intervene in certain decisions of the university.

Federal Government-ASUU Dispute over Administrative Autonomy and Engagements and Negotiations

Nigerian universities have “partial autonomy,” according to Dr Michael Adadu, one of our key informant interviewees at Federal University, Lokoja, Kogi State. He noted that universities do not have full autonomy since they are funded by the Federal Government. As a way of addressing the situation, the union has been engaging the government and conducting numerous negotiations. His interview revealed that ASUU leaders meet with the Federal Government through its representatives and then return to inform their members at the Zonal level and at the branch levels. The Zone comprises universities in at least two states. The zone is headed by a Zonal Coordinator, who is usually a former Branch Chairperson/Chairman. A Branch comprises members in a particular university. Apart from meetings and negotiations, ASUU also involves itself in organising press conferences at the three strata: National, Zonal, and Branch levels. These activities keep union leaders busy at all times. As long as their demands are not met, there is no positive peace in the polity. The union has never rested on its oars in the attempt to free the university from the stronghold of the government. In a report by Kanabe, Suleiman and Illeyemi (2022), the dispute between the federal government and ASUU has attracted the attention of all stakeholders, who have made frantic efforts in bringing them to consensus. But they fail most times because both parties are obstinate in their position. According to the report, the Minister of Labour and Employment, Dr Chris Ngige, and the President of ASUU, Professor Emmanuel Osodeke:

“Had engaged in hot arguments at a meeting on Thursday conveyed by the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Femi Gbajabiamila. The minister had accused Mr Osodeke of deliberately frustrating the government’s efforts at resolving the crisis and mobilising Nigerians against the government but the union leader said Mr Ngige was peddling lies against the union. Both Mr Ngige and the leadership of ASUU have constantly engaged in confrontation, a development that may have informed President Muhammadu Buhari’s directive that the Minister of Education, Adamu Adamu, should take over the negotiations.”

To further disrupt the industrial harmony in the university, the aforementioned Minister of Labour and Employment publicly recognised and registered new unions of lecturers to operate in parallel to ASUU. These included the Congress of Nigerian University Academics (CONUA) and the Nigerian Association of Medical and Dental Academics (NAMDA). This act has thrown the university community into confusion

as academics are pitted against each other in a frenzied competition to outdo each other and curry the favour of the Federal Government, especially during the “no work, no pay” policy. CONUA, led by ‘Niyi Sunmonu, a lecturer at Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU), has consistently distanced itself from the strike actions of ASUU (Suleiman, 2022). The dispute between the FGN and ASUU on the grounds of university autonomy, or more precisely administrative autonomy, has spelled doom for industrial harmony, especially with the registration of CONUA and NAMDA. This was disclosed by the President of the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC), Comrade Ayuba Wabba, when he stated that the recognition of the two academic unions at the time talks between ASUU and the FG were ongoing, was designed to destroy the cordial relations and industrial harmony in the university system.

The registration of the two unions can be seen as FG’s divide and rule policy to entrench itself in the administrative arm of the university. This is not a new thing altogether. It is from Decree 16 of 1985 and Decree 49 of 1988 that the Nigerian Universities Commission (NUC) took so much administrative power from the universities. According to Lawal (2019), “these laws did not only subtly empower the NUC to usurp the functions of the senate, council, faculty boards of universities and professional accreditation bodies, they implicitly also ensured a covert control of the universities by the Nigerian state.” The day-to-day running of the university lies with the Vice-Chancellor and the other principal officers of the university such as Deputy Vice-Chancellors (Academics and Administration), Registrar, Bursar and the University Librarian. The Vice-Chancellor is the highest principal officer in the university and is saddled with the daily running of the institution, and is also the Chairman of Senate and Congregation (Akindutire, 2004, Akpan, 2011 and Meenyini & Eme, 2016). The Vice-Chancellor is therefore the head, chief accounting and chief security officer of the university. Evidently, the Deputy Vice-Chancellors are appointed assistants to the VC, responsible for academic and administrative matters incidental to the Office of the Vice-Chancellor. The Registrar is the custodian of all the important documents, records and proceedings of all statutory gatherings of the university. He is the head of university administration and all administrative staff (Ebi-Ekiyor, 2015). He is in charge of staff employment, deployment, promotion and discipline. He is also in charge of students’ admission. He is a member and secretary of the Governing Council, the highest decision-making organ of the university. The university librarian is the principal officer of the university charged with “the responsibility of safe keeping and Acquisition/purchase all the publications and academic documents either to or from/by the university” (Omoike & Ogunu, 2007, p. 5). He custodies such publications as charts, prints, films, visuals, books, magazines, journals, research publications, tapes, manuals, etc. on behalf of the university.

Each of these officials, along with their subordinates, has well-defined functions, roles, and responsibilities. “It is the university principal officers’ functionalism that enhances the effective and efficient achievement of university goals not only in Nigeria particularly but also all over the world generally” (Meenyinikor & Eme, 2016). However, they cannot carry out their functions on their own because powers “from above” have vested interests that must be protected and therefore have to dictate to them what to do. However, one of our interviewees, the Secretary of ASUU, University of Calabar Branch (ASUU-UCB), Dr Ajigo Ikutal, who also doubles as the Sub-Dean of the Faculty of Vocational and Science Education, stated that the Governing Council is the highest decision-making body in the university, although it is largely a brainchild of the government to give the university its autonomy. In his view, the autonomy of the university is tied to the Council, which administers the university in place of the Ministry of Education. To him, the mark of university autonomy is the establishment of the Council, which rules the university independently. According to the Associate Professor of Agricultural Education, the Chairman of the Governing Council is appointed by the Minister of Education through the approval of the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. He also posited that it is the Governing Council that elects the Vice-Chancellor on behalf of the entire university community. The table below shows the composition of the University Governing Council in a federal university in Nigeria.

| S/N | MEMBERS | BACKGROUND | MEMBERSHIP |
|-----|--|--|--|
| 1 | Pro-Chancellor | External: Representative of the University Visitor (the President) | Appointment (President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria) |
| 2 | Vice-Chancellor | Internal: Representative of University Management | Vice chancellorship |
| 3 | Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academics) | Internal: Representative of University Management | Appointment (The Vice Chancellor) |
| 4 | Deputy Vice Chancellor (Administration) | Internal: Representative of University Management | Appointment (The Vice Chancellor) |
| 5 | 1 Member | External: representative of the Federal Ministry of Education | Appointment (Minister of Education) |
| 6 | 4 members | External: Representative of the whole Federation for diverse areas | Appointment (The National Council of Ministers) |
| 7 | 4 members | Internal: Representatives of the University Senate | Election |
| 8 | 2 members | Internal: Representatives of the University Congregation | Election |
| 9 | 1 member | Internal: Representative of the University Convocation | Election |

Table 2. Composition of a Federal University Governing Council in Nigeria

Table 2 shows that of the 16 members that make up the University Governing Council, 6 (about 40%) of the members, including the Chairman (Pro-Chancellor), are external members appointed by the Federal Government. The Universities Miscellaneous Provisions Amendment Act 2003 gives the university Governing Council the powers to govern the university. With this, the finding of this study is that external influence in the decision-making organ of the university is quite high.

Federal Government-ASUU Dispute Over Financial Autonomy and Protests and Confrontations

Protests and confrontations are two major tools at the disposal of ASUU in its industrial relations with the Federal Government. ASUU has, on several occasions, resisted FG's policies it considers obnoxious and anti-educational. In many cases, ASUU has gathered its members across the various branches and launched a public protest in the full glare of the media. There are cases where they abandon their academic activities and march through the university to the gate and through the city centres. All of this is meant to oppose the government's penchant for interfering in the affairs of universities. According to Emmanuel (2020, p. 8), "ASUU have been the only consistent source of opposition to the structural imbalance that has resulted from decades of government interference in public higher education in Nigeria. ASUU's role as the main source of opposition to government interference in public education started in the late 70s and has continued till this day, as evidenced by the frequent protests and confrontations." This interference in the internal affairs of Nigerian universities by the government has been blamed for the decline in the educational system at the university level. Tracing the history of the problem, Emmanuel (2020) hinted that:

"The decline of public higher education didn't start until the advent of military rule in Nigeria and the centralized way of thinking that came with it. The military incorporated public tertiary institutions under centralized control, partly because it needed to suppress dissenting opinions and partly for reasons similar to the ones that the government of the day is using to champion IPPIS (i.e financial probity, transparency and accountability)."

The financial autonomy of Nigerian universities has been severely breached by the financial control power exercised by the federal government through funding, payment of salaries, and determination of

wages for university staff. The most contentious issue in recent times, especially the latter part of this research period, is the introduction of the Integrated Personnel and Payroll Information System (IPPIS). IPPIS is a salary payment platform created to address certain shortcomings in the previous payment method. Tracing the origin of IPPIS, Iloanya, Udunze and Nebo (2020) explained that to streamline the payment system, which over the years has become a significant burden, the government developed a payment software known as the Government Integrated Financial Management Information System (GIFMIS). Through this system, data for all categories of university staff (teaching and non-teaching) are captured and funds are released to the respective university bursaries for the payment of monthly salaries.

However, the Federal Government of Nigeria raised concerns that the GIFMIS payment system needed improvement or outright change. The government complained that the system was fraught with many irregularities and leakages, including the inability to capture and eliminate ghost workers, the inability to easily track and eliminate deceased or retired workers, illegal accommodation and double payment to some Nigerian university teaching staff who teach in more than two institutions in contravention of extant laws, and the inability to accurately capture tax deductions due to subnational governments in Nigeria. To address these shortcomings, the government considered creating a more robust and serviceable payment system, known as the Integrated Personnel and Payroll Information System (IPPIS), for the payment of salaries of workers on its payroll. Since the introduction of the payment system, which was first proposed in 2006 (Mela, 2019) and rolled out in phases until 2019 when the last tranche of federal ministries, departments and agencies (MDAs) were ordered to join the payment platform, federal university lecturers have been embroiled in a battle of wits with the Federal Government of Nigeria over the implementation of the system in Nigerian universities. The Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) – the umbrella body of all university teachers in Nigeria – has vehemently refused to be migrated into the payment platform, citing a backdoor withdrawal of the hard-won and much-needed university autonomy and several other reasons for their opposition.

ASUU vehemently opposed and resisted the deployment of IPPIS as a payment platform for university lecturers on the grounds that IPPIS violates university autonomy as enshrined in section 2AA of the University (Miscellaneous) Provisions Amendment Act 2003, which states that the powers of the Council shall be exercised as in the law and statutes of each University and to that extent, establishment circulars that are inconsistent with the laws and statutes of the university shall not apply to the universities. To press home their point, in the month of November 2022, all ASUU branches and student unions across

the federation picked a day and took turns to embark on protests. Regrettably, the FGN is still foot-dragging over its adoption, contrary to an earlier agreement with the union, thereby allowing the financial chaos heralded by IPPIS to continue (Iremeka, 2022). The dispute over the deployment of IPPIS instead of the UTAS (University Transparency and Accountability System) proposed by ASUU as a replacement for IPPIS reached its peak when the Federal Government, through the Office of the Accountant-General of the Federation (OAGF), decided to delist from the payroll all lecturers who did not enrol on the government's payment platform. This resulted in more altercations, protests, and confrontations between the two parties. ASUU identified the problems with IPPIS as regards the academia to include:

- i. Non-enrolment/payment of staff on overseas training.
- ii. Impediment of a university's ability to quickly hire new staff.
- iii. No provision for outsourced services (cleaning, security, etc.).
- iv. May hamper the ability of each institution to discipline its staff.
- v. Payroll adjustments will now be done centrally, requiring expensive staff travels to Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory.
- vi. Difficulty of making third-party deductions (Unions, Cooperatives, Associations, etc.) at source.
- vii. The government can withhold salaries due to strikes, collective bargaining, etc.
- viii. Impediment of a university's ability to staff new programmes.
- ix. Erosion of university autonomy Non-permanent staff appointments (sabbatical, contracts, honorary, visiting/part-time lecturers).
- x. Professorial promotions (payments of arrears) (IPPIS, 2014).

Olowu and Adeyemi (2021, p.8) revealed that "about 1.2 million Public Servants are expected to be captured on IPPIS but with exclusion of Security Agencies, Para Military Organizations as well as others self-funding Agencies/Companies of the Federal Government." Table 3 represents the details of government Ministries, Departments, and Agencies (MDAs) that already have their staff enrolled on the platform as of July 2020.

| S/N | Workforce | Number | Staff count |
|-----|---|--------|-------------|
| 1 | MDAs | 558 | 389,758 |
| 2 | Rtd. Heads of Service and Permanent Secretaries | 1 | 266 |
| 3 | Nigeria Police | 43 | 292,653 |
| 4 | Nigeria Army | 1 | 120,368 |
| 5 | Nigeria Navy | 1 | 23,685 |
| 6 | Nigeria Air Force | 1 | 21,653 |
| 7 | Nigeria Immigration Service | 1 | 24,434 |
| 8 | Nigeria Correctional Service | 1 | 30,478 |
| 9 | NSCDC | 1 | 55,396 |
| 10 | Universities, Research Institutions | 435 | 106,280 |
| 11 | National Open University of Nigeria | 1 | 4,065 |
| 12 | Federal Polytechnics | 23 | 28,894 |
| 13 | Federal Colleges of Education | 21 | 23,100 |
| | TOTAL | 701 | 1,121,031 |

Table 3. Enrolment status of federal government employees on IPPIS

Source: Office of the Accountant-General of the Federation (OAGF), 2020.

Table 3 shows that as of July 2020, 1,121,031 employees of the federal government had been enrolled on IPPIS. Of this number, 106,280 are staff of universities and research institutions, including another 4,065 from the National Open University of Nigeria. However, the government decided to exclude another set of its employees in 9 MDAs from the platform.

Writing on the dangers of the government's continuous overbearing influence on universities, Iremeka (2022) said:

“IPPIS is the latest attempt, sadly by a democratically elected government, to further implant itself in the affairs of public tertiary institutions in Nigeria and thankfully the leaders of ASUU have decided to resist it. But ASUU’s resistance of IPPIS is taking place at the same time that they are calling for better welfare of academic staff and better funding of public higher education from the government. On the EAA, ASUU said the Federal Government promised to mainstream it into the annual federal budget in the various memoranda signed with ASUU and it recently released N221 billion for payment of part of the allowances. However, many years of unpaid entitlements are outstanding, serving as triggers for industrial crisis in our universities.”

Conclusion and recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, it was concluded that the Federal Government-ASUU conflict over university autonomy accounts for industrial disharmony in federal universities in Nigeria from 2009 to 2023. Specifically, the study reveals that the dispute over the government’s interference with the university’s academic freedom or autonomy, administrative autonomy, and financial autonomy account for frequent strikes, frequent engagements, protests, and confrontations respectively. Based on these premises, it is hereby recommended that:

The Federal Government of Nigeria implements the part of the 2009 FGN-ASUU Agreement that demanded that the FGN amend the laws establishing JAMB and NUC and also accept UTAS in place of IPPIS in order to grant universities full autonomy to operate as obtains in other parts of the world.

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