

Interrogation of the Dichotomy Between Academic and Non-Academic Staff in Nigerian Universities

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Abstract

In Nigerian universities the relationship existing between the academic and the non-academic staff appears to be characterized by mutual suspicion and often unexpressed rivalry. It is in the context of the above that the study examined the dichotomy existing between the academic and the non-academic staff in Nigerian universities. It is a descriptive and analytic study which utilized secondary sources of data from journals, text books and newspapers. The systems theory provided the theoretical underpinning for the study. The study identified the causes of friction in the academic and non-academic staff interface to include unequal treatment, dominance of the decision making apparatus, narrowed apex, poaching of administrative offices and disdain by some members of one group for the other. The study recommends the broadening of the apex for non-teaching staff through the creation of directorates, the stoppage of the bifurcation of administration and the appointment of academics into purely administrative positions, and the need for synergy between academic and non-academic staff and their various unions on campus.

Keywords: Academic, dichotomy, interrogation, non-academic and university.

Introduction

As Fafunwa (2010) points out, university education commenced in Nigeria on 18th January 1948 when the 104 pioneer students at the University College Ibadan were admitted. The pioneer staff was 13. In the second year, the student population rose to 201 and the staff strength increased to 44. The personnel were composed of academic and non-academic staff. In organizational terms, academics can be likened to line officers who are directly involved in the production process while the non-academic personnel may be regarded as staff officers who provide support to the line officers. In his conceptualization of the university as a sacred institution, Omeire (2016) identified the Vice Chancellor as the Chief Priest, the academic staff as the Priests, the non-academic staff as the Aaron and Hur upholding and supporting the hands of the Chief Priest and the students as the Congregation. In the above categorization, the Chief Priest, the Priest and the support group are all integral members of the university community.

Universities are established for the purpose of generation of new knowledge through research, dissemination of knowledge through teaching and utilization of knowledge through community and public service to support socio-economic and technological growth and the overall development of society (Ogurunku, 2009). To achieve this over-arching mandate, it is imperative that all critical stakeholders in the university system, particularly the academic and non-academic staff, should work in concert. However, it thus appears that the relationship existing between the academic and the non-academic staff in most Nigerian universities has been characterized by

mutual distrust, suspicion and insidious antagonism. The study dissected the structure of both cadre of staff and examined the causes and manifestations of the dichotomy in the academic and non-academic staff interface.

Theoretical Framework

A common feature in any definition of the university is that the ivory tower is a system. Consequently, the study is anchored on the systems theory which has its conceptual beginning in the 19th century and is associated with scholars such as Emile Durkheim and Herbert Spencer. Other proponents of the theory include Talcott Parsons, Niklas Luhmann and Ludwig VonBertalanffy. Katz and Kahn (1966) emphasize that the systems theory is basically concerned with issues of relationship, of structure and interdependence. Ritzer (2008) points out that the interdependence of sub units as an essential ingredient of the functioning of a system, presupposes that the malfunctioning of a system affects not only the affected part but also the entire structure. The interconnectedness or organic nature of systems is best illustrated in the human body where there are many and varied parts, yet each function in a unique and complementary manner for the sustenance of man with none claiming superiority or threatening to overtly or obtrusively annihilate the other(s). Every component of a system is a stakeholder and must perforce be interested in the health and survival of the system.

The systems theory is relevant to this study because the university can be regarded as a social system. It comprises students whose education is one of the chief reasons for the establishment of the university. The second component is the academic staff who teach students and carry out research. The third element in this inextricably linked web is the non-academic staff, who as managers, function at various levels and also provide essential support services for teaching, learning and research to thrive. Afigbo (1995) affirmed the systemic nature of the university by indicating that the university may be a community but certainly not just of scholars because in that community we also have administrators, manual workers, plain traders/business men and students. The need for harmony in this relationship cannot be over-emphasized. Both the academic and non-academic staff play significant roles in the process of receiving, documenting, refining and graduating students. In the preparation of a standard cake, for example, sugar and baking powder are required. Both perform the important function of respectively enhancing taste and size, yet none would be justified in claiming monopoly in the making of a cake. In the same manner both the academic and non-academic staff are involved in the baking of students into finished products. As Biobaku (2002) aptly points out, it is the duty of professional administrators (non-academic staff) to coordinate the activities of the academic staff and students, without interfering with academic decisions.

Conceptual Clarification

The Concept of Academic Staff

The word academic is an offshoot from academy. Etymologically the term academy is derived from the name of an olive grove outside ancient Athens where Plato taught philosophy. Gradually the term acquired the general meaning of a higher school. At the close of the Middle Ages academies began to be formed in Italy and other places. The Calvinists in France, Switzerland and the Netherlands called their higher institutions academies until the 18th century, when the term university was generally adapted (Academy, 1988). The Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike Conditions of Service for Senior Staff (2017:3) defines academic staff as

“members of the senior staff engaged in teaching and research, including professional librarians in the university”. This definition implies that academic staff are those cadre of employees recruited by a university to teach, conduct research and carry out community service.

Obilor (2010) regards an academic staff as a scholar who possesses deep systematized knowledge in a specific field and is equipped with a scientific and philosophic bent of mind, a mind that questions, that doubts, that searches and inquires methodically. Academic staff in Nigeria are generally referred to as lecturers. The career ladder for academic staff begins from Graduate Assistant, which is a training position, to Assistant Lecturer and to Lecturer 1. The elite or senior position in the ladder starts from Senior Lecturer to Reader or Associate Professor and terminates at the rank of Professor. In recent times without the possession of a PhD, an academic staff cannot rise to the position of a Senior Lecturer. The Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) is the union for academic staff in Nigerian public universities.

The Concept of Non-Academic Staff

The non-academic staff are those employees of the university who do not teach but carry out various support services. The Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike Conditions of Service for Senior Staff (2017) defines non-academic staff (senior) as “staff engaged in non-teaching or research activities and include the Administrative, Technical and Professional staff, Technologists, Para-Medical, Medical personnel, etc”. The secretarial cadre is also part of the non-academic cadre. Some of the non-academic staff are junior while others are senior. The administrative cadre is composed of administrators who are university graduates in the social sciences and other disciplines. Possession of a good bachelor’s degree is the minimum requirement for entry into this cadre, though some administrators hold M.Sc. and Ph.D degrees. The professional cadre comprises such professionals as engineers, architects, medical doctors, surveyors, pharmacists, accountants etc. The technical cadre comprises laboratory scientists and technologists of diverse disciplines. The secretarial cadre includes secretaries and others in that group. Included in the non-academic category are other staff who contribute their quota in oiling the wheel of progress in the university system such as clerical staff, office assistants, drivers, artisans, farm workers, field staff etc. The non-academic staff have three recognized staff unions in the university. These are the: Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities (SSANU), National Association of Academic Technologists (NAAT) and Non-Academic Staff Union (NASU).

The non-teaching staff had been wrongly designated as non-academic staff. This designation is indeed a misnomer. The characterization of this group as non-academic tends to have the derogatory connotation that they are inferior or uneducated. It is this misnomer that gives rise to the wrong notion in some quarters that they are squatters and not integral part of the university system. This is not true. The correct and appropriate title for staff who are not lecturers in the university system should be non-teaching staff. Some of these non-teaching staff, like the laboratory technologists, participate in the conduct of students’ practicals and collaborate with lecturers in research activities. Quite a number of the non-teaching staff possess Masters and Doctorate degrees. There are cases in certain universities where non-teaching staff professionals and experts lecture and supervise students while performing their regular non-teaching duties. Some categories of non-teaching staff also engage in research. If academic is defined in terms of possession of first and higher degrees and teaching in a university, it becomes apparent from the

above analysis that the non-teaching staff in universities cannot be regarded as non-academic or inconsequential appendages in the system.

Causes of Dichotomy/Friction

The following are some of the causes of friction in the relationship existing between academic and non-teaching staff.

Unequal Treatment

A veritable source of friction in the relationship between the academic and non-academic staff is the unequal treatment of equals which the former advocates. This tendency is best epitomized in the agitation by the academic staff for salary structure separate and higher than that of the non-academic staff. The non-academic staff on its part strongly maintains that the entry for individuals with similar qualifications in the same system should be the same, though there may be differences in allowances. For example, if two individuals complete their M.Sc. in political science (with PhD eligibility) and one decides to work in the university as an Assistant Lecturer whilst the other elects to work in the same system as an Administrative Officer they should begin on the same salary scale. The eminent academic cum legal luminary and one-time Minister of Education in Nigeria, Ben Nwabueze, saw that there was no basis or justification for salary differential and the unequal treatment of equals. During his tenure as Minister of Education this disparity was abolished. Ever since then, the academic staff worked hard to reinvent and perpetuate disparity in the system.

It may be pertinent to provide a historical background on the above issue. From the very beginning of university education in Nigeria in 1948, the highest paid worker in the system was the Vice Chancellor. He was earning £4,550 per annum. The next in rank and earning was the Registrar who was paid £3,500 per annum. The next in line were the Bursar and University Librarian, who respectively earned £3,300 per annum. After these principal officers, the next in hierarchy were the Professors who earned £3,000 per annum and much later upgraded to the level of the Bursar/University Librarian. From the above, a single salary structure was worked out for all the workers in the system down the line.

In 1980 the Federal Government, in line with the Cookey Commission Report, harmonized the salaries of Bursars, University Librarian and Professors with that of the Registrar while the salary structure and allowances remained the same for all other staff. What informed the above harmonization was the need to promote industrial harmony and not necessarily a degradation of the office of the Registrar because the Commission after a thorough job evaluation indicated that the Registrar's work was not only more involving but more challenging than that of his Professor counterpart. It is noteworthy to retrospectively observe that the Committee of Vice-Chancellors (1980) in their submission to the Cookey Commission indicated thus:

"We believe that the system which had developed over a number of years of aligning the salary scales of University administrative staff with those of academic staff should be continued..."

The basic factor to be considered in our view is that Universities are organic bodies in which the academic and administrative staff have to work together in close cooperation..."

To divide them down the middle and align one part with an outside service or a different kind of structure would be destructive of the relationship. It would in any case be difficult to make such divisions"

The division in salary scale and allowances which the CVC cautioned against in 1980 was made in 1992 when the Federal Government conceded separate and higher salary/allowances structure to the academic staff, thus creating imbalance in the system. It took the intervention of Ben Nwabueze as Minister of Education in 1993 to abrogate disparity in basic salary while differences in allowances remained. This study shall conclude its historical analysis on this issue with a comment by Ben Nwabueze:

"In my view, disparity in basic salary scale and general fringe benefits has neither practice nor reason, nor principle to support it. It is a departure from long standing practice, so long continued as to have acquired the force of tradition. In the second place, it ignored the fact that the university in Nigeria is not just a collection of persons working together in the same office, as in the case of civil service. It is also a territorial community whose members, not only work together in the same institution but also live together in the contiguous house within an enclosed campus served by common facilities."

Dominance of Decision-Making Apparati:

Another cause of friction is the dominance, nay, monopoly of decision-making structures in the system by the academic staff. A very important organ such as the Senate which is charged with the responsibility of organizing and controlling teaching, admission, students' discipline and in some cases handling staff matters is composed exclusively of academics. Even where the University Act provides for the election of four Congregation representatives into Senate, universities deny non-academic staff, who are university graduates and members of congregation, the right to vie for such elections. It is indeed ironical that universities which should advocate and champion the democratization of processes and inclusiveness are preserving and perpetuating the politics of exclusion.

Partisan Posture of Some Vice Chancellors

The partisan posture of some Vice Chancellors in favour of academic staff also generates tension and creates disharmony in the system. Some Vice-Chancellors instead of acting as father/mother to all staff on campus tend to perceive themselves as members of academic staff and are influenced by this perception. Some of their policies in relation to staff are those that focus on improvement of academic staff at the detriment of others. In some cases, non-academic staff are not deemed eligible for staff development, approval for further studies, attendance to conferences, workshops, seminars and meetings of professional bodies. These are considered the exclusive right of academic staff. The emergence of the Tertiary Education Trust Fund, TETFUND, has mitigated the deprivation suffered by non-academic staff in the area of conference attendance. This is based on the fact that TETFUND accommodates non-academic staff in the funding of conference attendance in the ratio of 70:30, in favour of academic staff. The non-academic staff are clamouring that the ratio be reviewed to 60: 40 and for their members to be accommodated in TETFUND'S staff training support. Owing to its strategic position, the Committee of Vice-Chancellors (CVC) usually influences Government policies, sometimes in favour of their primary

constituency, the academics. Some Vice-Chancellors tend to be quick in implementing policies and circulars that are averse to non-academic staff but slow to implement those against academic staff.

In some developed countries, the post of Vice-Chancellor or University President as they are sometimes called is not the exclusive preserve of Professors or academic staff. In the current dispensation where the direction is towards revamping our universities for self-sustenance, it may not be out of place to try technocrats and proven business managers as Vice-Chancellors. Who knows this may provide the much sought-after panacea in the system? Ladipo (2002), a former Registrar of the University of Ibadan, appears to hold this view when she postulated that "the Vice-Chancellor of the future need not be an academic, but someone from a business background, i.e, a manager/chief executive who can run the university as a successful business outfit". We look forward to a time when a seasoned professional who may not be a professor will be appointed as Vice-Chancellor in a Nigerian University.

Narrowed Apex

The contraction of the apex for non-academic staff is another source of friction. Unlike their academic counterparts, the top posts for the non-academic staff are very few. Whereas a faculty or college may have up to twenty Professors who in terms of salary grading are the equivalent of the Registrar on CONTISS 15, the entire non-academic staff may not have more than seven officers on that level. These include the Registrar, the Bursar, the Director of Works, the Director, Medical services. The result of this narrowed apex is that most non-academic staff stagnate without making it to the apex, with the attendant frustrations and tensions.

Poaching of Administrative Positions

Another palpable source of friction is the encroachment on non-teaching position by the academic staff. Initially this was done surreptitiously and later abrasively. In many Universities such positions as Director of Consultancy Services, Director, Students Affairs and Director of Academic Planning which were held by qualified non-academic staff have been taken over by academic staff thus further limiting the number of non-academic staff in the upper echelon of university administration. This encroachment continues unabated as in some Universities academic staff have been appointed into such purely administrative post as Admissions Officer. If the present tendency is not checked, it might soon culminate in professors and other academic staff being appointed as Registrars of Universities.

Afigbo (1995), observed this ugly development in a public lecture and cautioned against what he referred to as the cannibalization of the office of the Registrar by the creation of such offices as the Executive Assistant to the Vice-Chancellor and the transfer of the Public Relations Office from the Registrar to the Vice-Chancellor's office. Expressing a similar sentiment, Biobaku (2002) maintained that if university management is to cope successfully with the demands of modern developing society, it needs to be rationalized so as to permit the academic to concentrate upon academic matters and the professional administrators to concentrate upon internal administration. Emeritus Registrar, Ukaga (2008) concurred with the above assertion and stated that the infiltration of university teachers into areas that are largely regarded as administrative has not brought much sanity into these areas. The current trend of appointing multiple Deputy Vice-Chancellors in a university is another evidence of the decimation of the Registrar's jurisdictional province.

Reasons for Disdain

It might be pertinent to pose the question as to the possible reason(s) for the disdain of non-academic staff by some of their colleagues who are lecturers. The reasons may include:

Promotion Criteria

One of the reasons for the disdain of non-academic staff by some academics is the perception that the promotion criteria for the non-teaching staff is subjective and time-based. Some academic staff maintain that the Annual Performance Evaluation Report (APER) which is used to assess non-academic staff for promotion is mere formality as virtually all of them are promoted after every three years whereas an academic staff can remain in a position for up to ten years if he/she did not publish enough to merit promotion. This assertion can easily be faulted. Promotion is not automatic for non-academic staff after three years as some remain in the same rank for over ten years. For example, in some old generation Nigerian universities some non-academic staff have been Deputy Registrars for more than fifteen years. Furthermore, in recent times non-academic staff are subjected to written examinations and oral interviews before they are promoted to certain senior positions. It is also true that in the recent past a prolific academic staff can publish and get promoted twice within three years. Whatever be the case, subjectivity could still be seen in academic staff appraisal. This is because it is normally the quality of one's output that should determine promotion. However, cases where people with substandard and inadequate papers got promoted might not be ruled out.

Lack of Productivity

There is also the perception that the non-academic staff is bloated, generally inefficient and unproductive. This is obviously a fallacy of faulty generalization as majority of these cadre of staff are assiduous and highly productive. It is not unlikely that there is also paucity of non-academic staff in some universities. Just as there may be individuals among the academic staff who are indolent, same might apply to the non-academic staff. It is, therefore, patently unfair to pigeon-hole or categorize most non-academic staff as unproductive deadwoods.

Commodious Offices

Some academic staff are irked by the paraphernalia of bureaucracy. These lecturers frown at situations where some non-academic staff are accommodated in air-conditioned offices with big tables whilst lecturers are made to share offices that are ill-furnished. In general terms it is true that in the past some categories of non-academic staff were given preference in office accommodation because of the nature of their jobs, this practice has ceased. These days it is not uncommon to find an Assistant lecturer in a furnished office while a Deputy Registrar is made to share office with subordinate staff.

Superiority Complex

Some academic staff who perhaps were employed as Graduate Assistants and on the basis of acquisition of higher degrees rose to become Ph.D holders and professors do regard their non-academic counterpart as inferior to them. Academic staff in this category pay little or no respect to the experience, rank or exposure of any non-academic staff. These academics exhibit what Blair (2003) refers to as academic elitism. According to Albert (2010), academic elitism refers to orthodoxy in university leadership and manifests in how some highly educated people in the

academia form themselves into an isolated group and try to dominate discourses in human development from this lens. The story is told of a certain professor in a Nigerian university who when he enters into the office of any non-academic staff will snobbishly declare "I am Professor... and you are Mister...?". This is an example of what a former Registrar, Igwe (2008) refers to as "superiority complex" on the part of some academic staff. The import of that gloating or intimidating self-introduction is to rub it on the officer the Professor has come to see that his superior has just entered and the non-academic staff was expected to genuflect at the presence of his master. A feeling of superiority is one of the reasons why some academic staff disregard their non-academic colleagues. This tendency to spite non-academic staff has negative implication. For example, certain research projects may have been stalled because some lecturers avoid the inclusion of technologists and other non-academic staff whose participation are instrumental to the success of such projects. On their part many non-academic staff take offense to being regarded as inferior to their academic counterparts. Some of the non-academic staff tend to be defensive and aggressive while relating to academic staff based on the perception that academics snub them. This frosty relationship is inimical to productivity and progress. As Igali (2021) points out "members of the teaching and non-teaching staff have to join hands in consensus building in order to avoid any fears and misapprehension". This is a task that has to be achieved for the good of the university system. Akobundu (2014) also stressed the need for synergy and advised that "the notion of superiority and unsustainable pride should give way to synergy and hard work". According to him, this will go a long way in achieving the university culture.

Conclusion

The dichotomy existing between the academic and non-academic staff has obviously had negative effect on the health of the system. The frosty relationship also impedes the development of organic solidarity, which involves a collective consciousness resting on the need members of the two groups have for one another. The lack of organic solidarity makes both groups vulnerable to external predators.

For systemic wellness, there is the need for the academic and non-academic staff in the university system to have mutual respect for one another and relate harmoniously. Esprit de corps and comradeship should replace the incipient antagonism, mutual suspicion and bottled up hostility that characterizes relationship between the two. Both groups should see themselves as co-labourers in God's vineyard. The possibility of inter mobility ensures that a non-academic today can become an academic staff tomorrow and vice versa. Moreover, the existence of informal ties between both groups such as marriage, club, associational membership, residential neighborhood etc make the need for harmonious relationship imperative. In conclusion, it needs to be unequivocally asserted that both the academic and non-academic staff are important and integral part of the labour force in the university system. They should, therefore, allow brotherly love to reign in their relationship.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommends the following:

- i. In line with globally cherished principle of inclusiveness and participation, it is proposed that the decision-making structure in the Nigerian university system should be expanded to accommodate the non-academic staff. Consequently, it is suggested that the legislation establishing Nigerian Universities (federal, state and private) be amended such that the congregational representatives to Senate should be reserved for

- senior non-academic, not below the rank of Principal Assistant Registrar or its equivalent.
- ii Chief executives in the university system should be non-partisan in their policies and dispositions. They should play the noble role of fathers (and mothers) to all.
 - iii The four recognized unions in the Nigerian Universities (Academic Staff Union of Universities ASUU, Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities SSANU, National Association of Academic Technologist NAAT, and the Non-Academic Staff Union NASU) should synergize and stop regarding one another with mutual suspicion. The non-academic staff union should desist from sabotaging ASUU, as was the case in the Integrated Personal Payroll Information System (IPPIS) saga. On its part, ASUU should carry the other unions along while pursuing matters of common interest.
 - iv. Governing Councils of Nigerian universities should widen the apex for non-academic staff by creating directorates from existing departments in the Registry, Bursary, Health Services, Works/ Physical Planning etc. Directors appointed from suitable non-academic staff should be in charge of the directorates. This action will greatly reduce the frustration arising from the stagnation suffered by many senior non-academic staff based on constricted apex.
 - v. Stoppage to bifurcation of administration and the appointment of academic staff to purely administrative positions. Academics should be allowed to concentrate on their core duties of teaching, research and community service. They should not be encumbered or distracted with administrative assignments which non-academic staff can effectively handle.

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