Impact of Principal Officers on Nigerian University Education

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Abstract: This paper reviews and evaluates the contribution of four major articles that have focused on the development of university education in Nigeria. They are all recent articles in the field of Nigerian university education. Most of these articles have focused on identifying problems in the system and creating possible solutions to these problems on the surface. However, their solutions have generated further problems, putting quality into question. However, this paper is not interested in identifying problems from the surface of an event nor in creating solutions to such problems at a glance: rather, it takes a critical realist approach to understand the cause of the problem leading to an event for which a solution has been created by these four articles. The methodological approach is to understand how the agents contribute to the challenges faced by Nigerian university education. Therefore, it is recommended that government should play a role in making agents' efforts more relevant in developing students. Principal officers should be supplied with the necessary tools that will gear them to think and commit to teaching and learning activities.

Keywords: *Principal Officers, University, Education, Critical realism, Nigeria.*

Introduction

University education is an important tool to drive the national social-political, creative, innovative and economic development of a nation. It involves the transformation of candidates into students and students into graduates. University graduates are important output of the university and are expected to drive the nation's economic force in whichever sector graduates find themselves. To this end, the process of producing graduates involves the meaningful contribution of the university management. University management, principal officers or agents, as they are referred to in this paper, are those in control of the university system using different mechanisms to drive the structure. Such mechanisms may include policies (internal or external), techniques, administrative systems, control and even quality, while the structure remains the university, organisation or institutions that are structured to produce rational output.

However, this structure does not function independently. It relies on the ability and professionalism of principal officers or agents. The structure requires the effectiveness of agents to use the mechanisms that are the best fit to drive the structure, and to maintain and promote good practice. To this end, agents' impact has become an important aspect

of the business. While students as input may change every four to five years depending on their program of studies, the structure remains the same. Agents in some cases are academics who serve a term of office, as the case may be, and who are expected to discharge their knowledge and skills in managing the institution.

This paper uncovers the involvement and activities of these agents who are directly or indirectly responsible for the day-to-day activities or business of the university. In doing so the paper investigates environmental factors and their impacts on agents' ability to produce quality service. The study reveals that the behaviour of agents is affected both positively and negatively, and consequently has an impact on how graduates are produced in the university. This also influences the ability of graduates to contribute meaningfully to the development of their community and to the workforce. Therefore, it is worth investigating these factors in order to understand the causes of event linked with principal officers' abilities.

Research

Ajayi and Ekundayo (2008) discuss in depth the deregulation of university education in Nigeria and its implication for quality assurance. The paper is well presented. The first key point from this study is the need to deregulate university education in Nigeria: in the authors' view, university freedom from government control is the best way forward to affect positive change in the development of Nigerian university education. However, Akinwumi et al. (2005) are clear that deregulation means removal of government control from the running of the university system. They mention that the implication of this approach for university education means that government rules and regulations governing the operation of the system are relaxed. Akinwumi et al. justify their belief that private schools are better than government-owned schools in light of their experience of lower level schools (primary and secondary). This is one of the justifications for establishing private universities in Nigeria. They also list seven reasons to suggest deregulation (which include increased access to university, the opening up of alternative ways to fund universities, addressing the problem of scarce resources, enhanced efficiency, alignment with practices in other parts of the world, irregular academic calendar and improving the quality of university education). This approach is good, but bringing in alternative causes of action without addressing the problems facing the present method of operation will simply mean that universities are just compounding their problems.

The effort made by Ajayi and Ekundayo is simply to discuss the events, without considering how or why these events have occurred. In the same vein, the approach generates three major problems: private universities are profit-making ventures, they widen the societal gap and quality may be sacrificed for profit. Although Ajayi and Ekundayo (2008) explain that the aim of quality assurance is to prevent quality problems and ensure that the products of the system conform to a standard, they ignore the fact that these products cannot learn on their own, as students in Nigerian universities rely solely on the knowledge of facilitators through the coordination of internal or external agencies. Ajayi and Ekundayo are referring to the fact that students are products of the service process. Likewise, Enaohwo (2003) points out clearly that the quality process should be

both internal and external: internal aspects will involve principal officers who drive the system internally and external elements will be agents that drive the structure through the use of many mechanisms that constitute this structure, such as policies, quality, standards and benchmarks, among others.

It doesn't stop there: Ajayi and Ekundayo suggested strategies for quality assurance in private universities, which include ensuring the availability of adequate and modern facilities, adequate funding, appraisal of educational programmes, quality of teaching personnel, prevention of illegal campuses and proper monitoring as ways forward to improve universities in Nigeria. They conclude their study by suggesting that the reason for deregulation is to create access among others. The study totally ignores the presence of existing universities and their impacts on society and those involved in its running. A major concern is that the study does not expand our knowledge on how the new universities should be managed, how those who manage them should be composed, where they should come from and what qualifications or attitudes they should possess that are different to those in government-owned institutions if there is need for change.

Another article by Ekundayo and Ajayi (2009) is titled "Towards effective management of university education in Nigeria". Here, they focus their attention on problems overwhelming the system and solutions to such problems in the Nigerian university context. Their study identifies eight major problems (p.354) and suggests seven solutions (p.357) to these problems. However, the authors totally ignore the fact that problems do not create themselves. This was the first statement and a key point in the work of Jura (2002), who explained that problems in the system are faults of system management. They also focus on creating solutions to the problems, ignoring their cause. Their study total fails to involve those who are responsible in ensuring that the system functions properly. This means that the solutions suggested by Ekundayo and Ajayi (2009) are more theoretical, rather than being practicable for the system to adopt.

Likewise, the work carried out in this field by Oni and Alade (2010), titled 'Toward improving the status of higher education in Nigeria', highlighted major problems confronting Nigerian higher education. The authors start by mentioning seven major goals of university education in Nigeria, as stated clearly in the national policy of education, section b and subsection 59. These goals are to contribute to national development through higher level of manpower training, develop proper values for the survival of individuals and society, develop the intellectual capability of individuals to enable them to be self-reliant and useful members of the society, promote scholar services, cement national unity and promote national and international understanding. Unfortunately, in the current state of the Nigerian education system, the reverse is the case.

No wonder Adekola (2012) took a step back in discussing the problems in an attempt to bridge the gaps identifies above. He expressed that lack of planning and prudence, incompetence of both academic and administrative staff, lack of commitment on the part of stakeholders, fraud, unsuitable environments and poor quality students, among others, are the major worries faced by Nigerian universities. He concluded with a remark that the

key ingredient required for change in Nigeria is human resources to move the country forward. Surprisingly, he agreed that university education is a vehicle to achieve this goal, even in these times of crisis. But he also pointed out that the country needs an education friendly government, a civil society and a public sector that is ready and willing to invest in university education and give recognition to those who have chosen the path of the knowledge industry.

Even though Adekola's conclusion is clear and important, his work has not been effectively taken into full consideration by the parties involved, both internally and externally. This is because researchers in the field have failed to understand that organisational structures do not function in isolation. They fail to consider those involved in the transformation of knowledge. They observe the study with the hope of creating a solution to the problem, which has led to the quality of the process being questioned. Therefore, the present study takes another approach by studying the root cause of problems in Nigerian higher education, rather than discussing the event. The belief is that the structures do not exist independently. They are informed by agents and mechanisms, which are key factors that determine whether change in universities will occur.

Critical Realist Approach
Having observed that many studies in the field have focused mainly on problem-solving without studying the cause of the problem, creating a huge gap in our knowledge and efforts to resolve the problems in the Nigerian university sector, this paper takes another approach by studying the causes of the events for which past researchers have created solutions rather than suggesting solutions from the surface of what is measurable. The paper takes a deep approach to probe into the work and experience of past researchers by reviewing four major relevant articles out of the fourteen articles available in the field. A critical realist approach is used to investigate the phenomena. This approach is assumed to be the best way to study the phenomena because it attends to discourse as a structured system of differential positions that has a material character and confers meaning to its elements (Al-Amoudi and Willmott, 2011). This approach, while it may alarm those who mistakenly, in our view, conflate interest in discourse with idealism or with the analysis of texts abstracted from their constitutive embeddedness in the materiality of social relations, might make or suggest meaningful contributions to the topic.

Having outlined our position, it is observed that generative mechanisms are located within stratified depth ontology where the intransitive dimension is conceived to comprise three domains that are useful for this study, as discussed by Fleetwood (2005). The first such domain is the empirical, which refers to experience (e.g. principal officers' perceptions of the university education); the second is the actual, which refers to events as well as experience (e.g. principal officers' impact on university education) and the third is the real, which includes agents and mechanisms in addition to experience and events (e.g. the university structure including public or private, government policies and other external factors that allow the principal officers to function). The generative mechanisms are conceived to be real and distinct from the experiences in which they are apprehended (Smith and Elger, 2014). These generative mechanisms are in reality generated from principal officers' practical knowledge of an event and whether it

improves their abilities or affects their efficiency. The study was carried out in six Nigerian universities (three public and three private), from which twenty-nine principal officers were interviewed. The outcomes of the discussion are presented below.

Factors Affecting Principal Officers' Ability to Produce Quality Service
Many participants agreed that their ability to respond to things that matter is affected in one way or the other, which has impacts on how principal officers discharge their duties. One registrar was not sure whether or not his ability had been affected, but he claimed that the workplace environment might affect anybody's ability to function properly or otherwise. The other respondents who participated in the study came up with the following points.

a. Funding:
Significantly, all the participants talked about funding in one way or another, and a majority of the respondents complained that Nigerian universities are not well funded, and as a result, are lacking up-to-date facilities. A registrar articulated that up-to-date facilities could help universities to sustain, as well as motivate, both teachers and learners to stimulate the learning process (B2). Five informants explained that they have not been able to carry out proper research work because funding is not available to them (D2, D4, E1, E5 and F1). One of the informants elucidated that "no doubt a lack of funding to carry out current research work will affect our own exposure." He expressed further that:

> *"I am very sure that as academics, we cannot rely solely on theoretical knowledge: even the theory that we will teach is the work of another researcher. As a good lecturer, one needs to test the theory before going to class" (D4).*

All these activities involve funding: if students are to be properly transformed, then the lecturer must first be well equipped for quality graduates. Another three principal officers (A3, B4 and C3) acknowledged that money answered all things and that if the government could support private universities with research funds, similar to the Education Trust Funds (ETF) from which academics at public universities benefit, then this would go a long way to develop principal officers' best practices. A bursar from a private university suggested that such assistance from the government to the private universities would go a long way in terms of staff capacity development (C3). On one hand, an informant suggested that although funding is a key issue that affects principal officers' ability, it should be the government's responsibility to develop all academic staff, irrespective of where they are practicing. This was because academic staff migrate from public to private universities and vice-versa at various points in their career. A vice-chancellor maintained that if government funding is spent on university education, then there will be enthusiasm in staff attitudes (A4).

On the other hand, a director of academic planning postulated that funding is a major problem that affects everyone (E3). The way the society has been involved in politically corrupt practices has affected every individual. He pointed out that, "every citizen now looks forward to money, whereas in the last two decades you would never think of money: people were so committed to their work." The population has increased and

many factors that need to be increased have been neglected, due to lack of financial support to the education sector. A university librarian gave an illustration:

> *"…if I stay in this office and there's no light, I won't be able to stay because of the heat and even the students will not cope in class if there is no light. I believe all these factors are as a result of poor funding" (F3).*

One vice-chancellor (A1) also mentioned that although funding is the major factor affecting all principal officers in all departments of the education sector, funding is a major issue even in developed countries such as the United Kingdom or the United States of America and that this is why they scout for international students abroad: to help fund their universities. Similarly, a vice-chancellor from a private university supported the assertion that funding is a major issue, but clearly mentioned that in some cases, accountability is the issue, not realising funds (A3). He mentioned that some staff are dishonest, in that when they are given funds to do a project, they divert the funds into other things that are unrelated to the reason for which the funds were allocated.

b. Government policies:
Overall, six participants mentioned that the government's policies themselves affect their ability to provide quality services; they gave examples such as 'free education'. A registrar from a public university lamented that if the government knew that they would not keep to their mandate in terms of free education, they should allow universities to charge appropriate fees (B1). A dean of faculty from a private university also pointed out that government policies are really affecting principal officers' ability to function properly, because the government has failed to provide the support necessary for the smooth running of the institutions, but has instructed the university not to charge fees (D4). Three of the respondents commented that government policies established the public universities and then the mandate to the general public by the government was that there would be no tuition fees, while a vice-chancellor (A2) mentioned that as a result of the government wanting education to be free in public universities, many of their facilities have become obsolete and need replacement. A dean of faculty also put forward that if the government would continue funding the public universities in this manner, then there would be more problems beyond the principal officers' control (D4).

A vice-chancellor from a public university (A2) declared that one of the reasons why he disagrees with the definition of quality as value for money was "when you do not pay for the service and the government pays for you, how can you quantify what you do not pay for?" He claimed that students in public universities cannot justify what they are paying with what they receive, because the tuition fees they are asked to pay are less than one hundred and twenty dollars per session. He re-emphasised that what one hundred and twenty dollars will achieve in Nigeria, the same amount cannot achieve in the United Kingdom. On the contrary, two participants mentioned that government policies on university education do not affect the universities, but other government policies in the communities within which the universities operate are in conflict with how to run a university.

A dean of faculty mentioned that, at the government level, the NUC is the primary organ that monitors the affairs of the university, but today:

> *"I think the NUC is becoming very powerful, which it is not supposed to be, because universities are supposed to be autonomous. We have a group dictating almost everything to us; we think the NUC is overdoing it. Universities are supposed to be international centres of discourse. Anyway, that's my own little criticism of the NUC" (D1).*

A director of academic planning (E3) revealed that "government policies are sometimes unbalanced, in that when we make a budget of our spending, we base the cost on the current price of commodities, but suddenly all these prices can change by up to fifty percept within six months (for example petroleum). This will not only affect the society: it will affect us as an institution because we all pay for the commodities. It is not free, even though government has forced us to render our own services for free." On a different note, another director of academic planning (E5) pointed out that government policies have encouraged the establishment of new universities, while the existing universities are over-stretched because their staff, including principal officers, are moving to new universities for promotion or better pay. He said: "The government is not even helping matters by delaying salaries of the public university staff, which has caused many of our colleagues to travel abroad for good pay and a good working environment, as they claimed. All these are the effects of government policies on our ability to produce quality service to our consumers."

Moreover, another participant pointed out that, "the government's policies conflict with normal practices, in that the government policies state one thing today and tomorrow another government policy says something different: these on their own affect our abilities as human beings" (G3), while a director of academic planning expressed that, "a major area where our ability is most affected as principal officers is the issue of students-to-teachers ratio. Universities cannot meet the demand due to lack of funding: for example, the curriculum states that the staff-to-student ratio should be one (1) to ten (10) for medicine, and for other subject areas one (1) to thirty (30). This means that one lecturer should have direct contact with ten (10) students, but it's not achievable because one lecture has at least two-fifty (250) and above in a reasonable class, which can go up to one thousand five hundred (1500) in a lecture hall" (E3). One director of academic planning (E2) stated that "to make matters worse, the Federal Government of Nigeria has mandated that every lecturer who teaches in the university must have at least PhD qualification and there is no money to employ PhD holders. Likewise, another director of academic planning (E5) stressed that "it is very difficult to meet staff-to-student ratios with PhD holders, even if we have lesser qualified PhD holders who are ready to supervise students up to PhD level. We are trying as much as possible to meet up with these demands, but it's not possible for now. These are major areas affecting our ability to focus solely on developing ourselves as well as the students."

c. Shortage of manpower and overworked staff:

This sub-theme first emerged during an interview with a dean of faculty from a private university, who stated that;

> *"I can only give you ten minutes for the interview: as you can see, I am worn out for the day" (D4).*

Another dean of faculty also complained at the beginning of the interview session that;

> *"I would have loved to have spent more time with you for the interview session, as your topic interests me personally, but I am overworked for the day. I have been teaching since 7am, I just have one hour break before the next class: I am sorry I cannot talk to you" (D2).*

Another arrangement was made to meet with the participant outside work and see if he was happy to contribute to the research. When the researcher met with the dean of faculty (D2) again, he claimed that he had been working all day, teaching different courses that had lasted for two, one and three hours respectively, with an attendance of 500, 2500 and 750 respectively, and with at least 80% attendance. He was asked about the factors affecting his ability to produce quality service. His response was

> *"When you talk about quality service, we are trying, but it's not good enough, we all know, because take for example my own case: I am not teaching tomorrow but I will be busy marking their scripts for continuous assessment. I have also been allocated ten PhD students for supervision. When do I have time to improve myself? We are all overworked and some staff are still leaving for better jobs, which creates a compounding problem for us to cover their subjects" (D2).*

A dean of student affairs with a similar experience mentioned that his lifestyle has been affected by his workload and as a result he is looking for another job in the industrial sector, rather than academia. He said that academics are always overstretched, which affects the time they spend in conducting meaningful research or even preparing for lectures. He stressed further that:

> *"I was supposed to go on sabbatical leave six months ago but the faculty has been looking for another person to cover my duties, which they have not found at the moment. I cannot wait to get another job: lecturing here is too stressful" (G3).*

A dean of faculty held the opinion that "student-teacher ratios/student population in class outrange both quality criteria and government standards, which affects the disposition of lecturers to students" (D1). He mentioned that "in a Nigerian university, only the good student survives, because they are not mentored; rather, students are overloaded with theories, which will cause their employers more money to re-train them when employed." A university librarian from a public university (F3) also argued that when teachers do not

know their students, they cannot impact meaningfully on them. One bursar (C4) said, "talking about shortage of manpower is a factor of lack of funding: we know what our capacity can carry, but the university needs more money to operate, therefore pushing us to work toward survival rather than being centres of knowledge."

However, a director of academic planning mentioned that strikes affect principal officers'; ability to provide quality service, because they do not allow students to graduate at the right time and also the lecturers have to rush their work when they resume after the strikes (E2). Likewise, a university librarian (F3) agreed that "the major problem is, either we do not have enough staff or we do not have competent staff. We keep going back and forth on staff issues, but the fact remains that an academic institution is not a robotic industry. We need competent hands to work with." A director of academic planning from a private university supported this argument by saying:

> *"I think it's the shortage of manpower. I think that the major issue*
> *is the shortage of manpower. For instance, the NUC came up with*
> *a report in 2012 that Nigerian universities are lacking 32,000 PhD*
> *holders: you can imagine what that means" (E5).*

Similarly, two registrars mentioned the non-availability of infrastructure, teaching aids and funding, explaining that it may be difficult to get all that you need to deliver quality service (B1 and B3). One stated "The major factor affecting my own ability to provide quality service will be the quality of the people that run the institution, how they approach things that matter and their integrity as well" (B3). The stakeholders also have an influence:

> *"When I say stakeholders, you know I mean both the students, the*
> *staff, their parents and even the society and the community" (B3).*

All these people would produce influence and corrupt this system with one decision or another. A registrar from a public university also maintained that stakeholders need to avoid negatively influencing the principal officers (B1). He stressed that universities should be autonomous and should be run independently. He also explained that the fact that a stakeholder has a say in the affairs of the university does not place them in any position of authority or dictatorship.

d. Environmental factors:
Three informants (F1, F2 and G1) discussed the environment where learning is conducted as a key issue that affects their ability to produce quality service. They revealed that in most cases, students are overcrowded in classrooms, lecture halls or libraries with no cross ventilation, bad lighting and no quiet room for reading in the library - although in theory spaces are created, in practice the library is overcrowded. One of the informants mentioned that the community that students and staff come from also plays a key role in their degree of participation in class activities, which affects the principal officers. A dean of student affairs from a private university also commented that the environmental issue is a problem: "A lot of students now live outside the campus, and as a result some of them get into trouble, which takes much of our useful time to resolve"

(G2). A registrar also identified political instability, changes in principal officers and the lack of continuity on the part of new officers as factors affecting principal officers' ability to produce quality service (B4). He lamented that universities should not be run like any other sector, because a university is classified as a knowledge-based institution. He assumed that it would be wrong for universities to be imitating other sectors: rather, they should follow the good example of universities.

In furtherance, a dean of faculty (D2) and a director of academic planning (E3) highlighted a few environmental factors that have directly impacted on their own ability to be religious. A dean of faculty from a public university cited the crisis going on in the northern part of the country as an example of the environmental factors that affect the ability of principal officers in that part of the country (D2). He mentioned that he had relocated back to the west as a result of this crisis. Additionally, a director of academic planning added that the environment in which the students study is important, because it can motivate or demotivate student learning. He said:

> "I remember when I was at university in the 1970s, we all had good accommodation, conducive environment suitable for learning and many more facilities to enjoy, but now I pity the students sometimes when I see them struggling for chairs in the lecture hall" (E3).

Collectively, three informants listed poor funding, little or no space in the classroom, not enough textbooks and even students wanting to be accommodated on campus and not getting beds as environmental factors that will impact on student learning (F3, E3 and G3). They voiced that all these factors will affect output in one way or another.

On the other hand, two directors of academic planning (E1 and E4) identified societal issues as factors that affect principal officers' ability to provide quality service. A director of academic planning (E1) explained that, "In some situations you will find out that you are begging students to come to lectures, do their assignments and many more things which should have been their responsibility or duties, and if you as a lecturer correct them, your life may be in danger, with cultism and all sorts around: students may even go and kill the lecturer and nothing will happen." The other director of academic planning mentioned that, "Although cultism has reduced drastically because of the high discipline in the private university, you as a lecturer need to fear for your life because the university cannot guarantee your security" (E4).

A dean of student affairs from a private university also postulated that, "lack of discipline is a societal issue that has transferred into the institution, so also if you are talking about road networks, light and many others" (G2). Likewise, a supporting statement was raised by another dean of student affairs, who held that, "you need electricity, water, good road networks. Even when you are reading, you need to be assured that you have money for food at the end of the day." She lamented that all the basic things driven by money are not there - that is the cry of all major universities;

> *"I think there is a United Nations policy on education, which tries to influence government by dictating a percentage of the income by the budget of government that should be devoted to education; Nigeria is not there" (G3).*

Rather, political office-holders embezzle the money and travel abroad with it to develop other countries while the future of Nigerians is in question (B3). Likewise, a director of academic planning discussed his experience overseas:

> *"When I went to the America last year, in a small city I saw up to forty PhD holders - all of them are Nigerians - in one small university. Can you imagine?" (E5).*

He explicated that if such numbers of academics were allowed to stay in Nigeria, the impact would be huge, but they have gone abroad to help others instead of staying at home because the government is not helping matters and there is no motivation for them to stay (E5).

In summary, the findings presented by this research represent an exploration of principal officers' practical experiences. They have all contributed deeply and suggested meaningful cause for the failure to use the mechanisms to drive the structure effectively, which is not their fault but has a negative impact on their abilities.

Research limitations/implications
This research is limited to only available materials on university management in the Nigerian context, and likewise to the practical knowledge and opinions of the twenty-nine agents who took part in the study. Although these agents are responsible for university decision-making on a daily basis, this does not necessarily mean that they are telling the truth, but the research had been able to probe into their minds and explore their practical knowledge through discussion. Therefore, the onus and responsibility lie with the users of this information to confirm the appropriateness and acceptability of the results for their institutions and situations. Likewise, it is the responsibility of the users to check for available resources and other environmental factors before using the information.

Originality/value
No other study of this type has been conducted in the literature relating to universities international or locally, particularly involving Nigerian universities. It has been observed that researchers in the field have failed to study the impact of agents in the university context. Likewise, the use of the critical realist approach remains unexplored in literature of this nature. The study is an eye-opener for other researchers in the field. It hopes to re-educate other researchers and practitioners to study the reality of an event rather than discussing the event or creating solutions for it without knowing what has caused the event to happen. While approaches suggested by earlier researchers have failed to address or solve the problem permanently, this may be as a result of the methods used to explore the research and the quest to propound or resolve the problem.

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Appendix 1: Principal officers and their codes

PRINCIPAL OFFICERS	NO. OF PRINCIPAL OFFICERS	CODES	Public University	Private University
Vice-Chancellor	4	A1 – A4	A1, A2	A3, A4
Registrar	4	B1 – B4	B1, B2	B3, B4
Bursar	4	C1 – C4	C1, C2	C3, C4
Dean of Faculties	5	D1 – D5	D1, D2, D3	D4, D5
Director of Academic Planning	5	E1 – E5	E1, E2	E3, E4, E5
University Librarian	4	F1 – F4	F1, F2, F3	F4
Dean of Students Affairs	3	G1 – G3	G1	G2, G3