

## Student Unrest in Nigerian Universities: Looking Back and Forward

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**ABSTRACT** The authors examined the policies and factors that have in the past and at the present precipitated student unrest in Nigerian university campuses. Predictions about the policies that are likely to produce student protest in Nigerian university campuses in the near future are advanced.

Nigerian higher educational institution is established with the aim of giving any student who enrolls, a very sound and qualitative education, to be able to function effectively in any environment in which he/she may find him/herself; so as to become more productive, self-fulfilling and attain self-actualization (Federal Government of Nigeria, 1981). Under the Nigerian Policy on Education of 1977, revised in 1981, higher education aims at:

- (a) the acquisition development and inculcation of the proper value – orientation for the survival of the individual and society;
- (b) the development of the intellectual capacities of individuals to understand and appreciate their environments;
- (c) the acquisition of both physical and intellectual skills which will enable individuals to develop into careful members of the community; and
- (d) the acquisition of an objective view of the local and external environment (Fafunwa, 1991).

Specifically, Nigerian universities are expected to pursue the above mentioned goals through: (i) teaching, (ii) research, (iii) dissemination of existing and new information (especially through publication); and (iv) the pursuit of service to the community and being a store house of knowledge (Fafunwa, 1991; Federal Government of Nigeria, 1981).

Despite the above stipulations, research (i.e., Akinade, 1993; Aluede and Aluede 1999; Aluede, 2000; Ehiametalor, 1979; Nwokwule, 1992; Tawari, 1986; Yalokwu, 1992) does indicate that many of Nigerian universities are finding it increasingly

difficult to achieve the highlighted goals because of the many attendant problems that they are made to face. These difficulties are largely due to the problems which students who enroll these institutions either face or cause irrespective of their home backgrounds (Tawari, 1986). These problems make students' life within and outside Nigerian university campuses, frequently a traumatic experience; which is the major reason why students of various Nigerian university campuses frequently demand an overhaul of the entire system (Tawari, 1986).

Today, in Nigeria, students' militancy in the Nigerian universities has come to be recognised as one of the most visible perennial problems of significance when compared with other social vices in Nigeria university campuses like campus cult activities, cases of examination malpractices, and drug abuse and addiction. Such that in the history of Nigeria, no group has established itself more in terms in frequency and intensity of such violent incidents as the student population. Hence, unrest is proving to be one of the most ubiquitous single factors characterizing these members of the society (Nwokwule, 1992). The intent of this paper is threefold: (a) to state the issues that had in the past precipitated student unrest in Nigeria; (b) current issues in student unrest; and (c) issues that are likely to generate student unrest in Nigerian universities in the near future.

### PAST ISSUES IN NIGERIAN STUDENT UNREST

In Nigeria, cases of student unrest were

reported as far back as 1945. Ezera 1960 (as cited in Onwuejeogwu, 1991) posits that between 1940 and 1945, the West Africa Students Union (WASU) had agitated in pamphlets and public lectures for political reforms in all British West African territories. In doing so, they aroused a fairly enthusiastic audience of the British public opinion in favour of Africa freedom. Similarly, Ajuluchukwu 1962 (as cited in Onwuejeogwu, 1991) note that from the inception, the National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS) embarked upon deliberate campaigns of fostering national consciousness and inspiring a strong sense of militancy in the Nigerian people's liberation struggle (Aluede, 1995; Babatope, 1974). Babatope (1974) and Onwuejeogwu (1991) note that the students' union was born and nurtured in the womb of colonial protest. Hence student unionism was more of a protest union rather than student union, which was aimed at far reaching changes in the society.

One incident of student unrest in 1960 was essentially due to students' dissatisfaction with government insensitivity to national issues, and its inability to address them appropriately. Nigerian students aware of the British government's intention to establish a military base in Nigeria and by so doing perpetuate a neo-colonial state, decided to stage a protest against the

proposed Anglo-Nigerian Defence pact in Lagos on November 14, 1960. Another incident was students' dissatisfaction with newly introduced educational policies. Before independence, only mature students were admitted into the few existing tertiary institutions. Although, they paid minimal fees, their clothes, including bedding were laundered at government expense. At independence, and thereafter, there occurred an explosion in student population and proliferation of higher education, which brought in its train a teeming population of adolescents (Ehiamezor, 1979). Added to this, was the withdrawal of tuition fees in all tertiary institutions in Nigeria. This act of the government led to the 1978 student crisis "Ali Must Go". Since these events, students have used several opportunities to express their grievances. Table 1 below indicates a very brief sketch of the prevalence of student unrest in Nigeria.

It is evident from the table 1, that protest and unrest are regular features in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

### **CURRENT ISSUES IN NIGERIAN STUDENT UNREST**

Revolts, protests, unrests and violence, as well as incessant closure of schools for months in the wake of unrest or protest have become a

**Table 1: Incidents of student unrest in Nigeria**

<i>Year</i>	<i>Institutions</i>	<i>Stated Causes of Unrest</i>	<i>Consequences</i>
1981	Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria	Religion and against Vice-Chancellor over alleged Rice deal	Student died and Vice-Chancellor dismissed.
1984	Many Nigerian tertiary institutions	Proposed introduction of tuition fees and the scrapping of catering services	Many Universities were closed down for months
1986	Many Universities in Nigeria	High handedness of the Vice-Chancellor of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria	Most Universities in Nigeria were closed down for months. While several students were expelled.
1988	Many Nigerian Universities	Removal of subsidy from petroleum and allied products	Many schools were closed for a period of Six months.
1989	Several schools In many parts of Nigeria	Introduction of Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) by the military Government	Improved conditions of service for workers closure of several institution for about six months. Many students lost their lives during the protest as a result of open shooting by Police/Army
1992	Many Universities in Nigeria	Deregulations of Nigerian currency and mounting hardship	Several students died, workers' conditions of service were improved, while several schools were closed for months
1998	Ambrose Alli Uni., Ekpoma, Nigeria	Cult Activities	Violent leading to the death many students
2003	Many universities in Nigeria	increase in the prices of petroleum products	Peaceful in some campuses violent in others

regular feature of Nigerian universities. Today, if there were any thing most predictable about Nigerian universities is that the students who are enrolled in them would riot in any academic semester or academic year. Such incessant incidents of unrest seem to affect the scope of areas being covered and the content of courses in the school curriculum (Aluede, 1995; Aluede, 2001).

A cursory look at Nigerian universities reveals that several issues precipitate student unrest in recent times. These issues include students' non-participation in decision – making processes in the university. Accordingly, the degree of students' involvement in the decision-making processes has been recognised to be inversely related to the frequency of student unrest. Hence, greater involvement of students in decision-making processes may probably reduce the frequency of campus unrest (Aluede, 2001; Ojo, 1995). This is because students would be seen to be working against policies they had helped to formulate.

Academic stress is another factor that precipitates student unrest in Nigerian universities, which is attributable in many direct ways to the mounting academic pressures and stresses (Aluede, 1996; Denga, 1982, 1993; Emenyonu, 1991; Keniston, 1967; Sampson, 1967). These stressors include overcrowded hostels and lecture halls, lecture halls and common rooms now turned (by some students who are not accommodated in the residential halls) into residential apartments.

Welfare problems brought about by lack of basic amenities are another factor currently producing student unrest in Nigerian universities. The inadequate hostel accommodation; unsatisfactory supply of food and catering services; overcrowded lecture halls and hostels; lack of financial aid and poor sanitary conditions tend to make students' campus life and experience a very traumatic one. Students studying under these dehumanizing conditions tend to lose sleep, lose concentration and as a result, may behave in manners not generally approved by the authorities their institutions (Aluede and Aluede, 1999; Uzoka 1993; Yalokwu, 1992).

Students in Nigerian tertiary institutions now have values that are generationally at variance with those of the adults who are in charge of the administration of the campuses. These students make demands that the socio-economic climate of the larger society cannot satisfy (Animba,

1993). In the past, the values of students were personal development, service to others, and the like. But conceivably, these values are now being discarded and replaced by those of: orientation for security, success discarded and replaced by orientation for security, success as all cost, massive acquisition of wealth by any means and attainment of enviable status in the society by whatever means.

It is also reported (i.e., Aluede and Aluede, 1999; Aluede, 2001; Ojo, 1995; Uzoka, 1993) that students no longer demonstrate about trivialities but have graduated into a higher plane of demands. Students these days are rarely concerned with improving their conditions and are easily motivated to identify with movements that fight the oppression of others. For example, the annulment of June 12, 1993 Presidential Elections in Nigeria, elicited at various times violent demonstrations from students in several tertiary institutions and even gained support from other tertiary institutions around the world (Ojo, 1995). Thus, the patterns of student protests have now changed and burning political and national issues take the central stage (Nwokwule, 1992).

#### **FUTURE ISSUES IN NIGERIAN STUDENT UNREST**

It is very clear from records that the issues, which have over the years resulted in student unrest in higher educational institutions, have had a clear consistence overtime (Brown, 1992). For example, students' life issues such as, students involvement in decision-making process especially in matters affecting them, the impact of discipline system of students, provision of good and adequate support services for majority of the students, have ever been present components in students' activism. Other issues have been government policies and actions, government engagement in war and peace keeping missions, social unrest, absence of welfare amenities, such as, residential facilities for a sizeable number of students, academic stress, etc, have constantly been issues that have largely dominated student protest actions in higher educational institutions (Altbach and Cohen, 1990; Novak, 1977; Ojo, 1995).

Funding of education in Nigeria is an issue that is likely to generate student unrest in the near future. Funding of universities in Nigeria has for over twenty years (beginning from the period Nigeria adopted Austerity Measure in

1982) depreciated a great deal. Contrary to UNESCO stipulation that governments of developing countries allocate a minimum of 26 percent of their annual budget on education, the Federal Government of Nigeria allocated 5.3 percent and 1.083 percent of the annual budget to all levels of education during the 2002 and 2003 fiscal years. Thus, poor funding has led the facilities to deteriorate to a very near frightening /appalling level. Today, universities are not able to maintain their basic facilities, to the extent that the laboratories, libraries, accommodation facilities available for students and the lecture halls are in a very deplorable condition. Specifically, the libraries can no longer subscribe to current books and periodicals. All these lead students to contemplate about the future security and existence of these universities; and their ability to provide quality education.

Connected with the above, is the staff's (particularly academic staff) fear about the security of their employment. With poor funding, staff are continuously going to experience poor remuneration and the inability of these universities to settle their monthly salaries. Apart from salaries, universities in Nigeria will find it difficult to provide necessary environment for effective teaching, research and dissemination of existing and new information (including publications). Universities will find it difficult to sponsor their academic staff for either local or international conferences, undertake the sponsorship of staff publications or even assist staff in the payment of publication costs for articles accepted in self-supporting refereed journals. These appalling conditions are likely going to make many Nigerian universities' staff to further relocate. Although many are already scattered around Southern and Eastern African universities, with others in Europe and North America, if these prevailing conditions remain unchecked, many are likely to join the train. Thus, brain drain is likely to top the agenda of student protest actions in the near future.

Government plan to commercialize the university system in Nigeria, which if fully implemented, will make all universities to be self-sustaining. By this plan, the government will have hands off from the practice of sending monthly subvention (to cater for workers' monthly emoluments, maintenance of infrastructures, capital development, provision of welfare facilities for both staff and students, etc.) to take care of the day-to-day

administration of such university. In that case, universities will be left with no option other than to charge students exorbitant fees to keep the universities alive. Given the basic fact that majority of Nigerian students come from poor backgrounds, many of these students will certainly not be able to meet the new school fees requirement and may be forced to withdraw, while others are likely to vehemently oppose this new policy of the government.

The federal government of Nigeria's frequent increase of petroleum products and intended desire to fully deregulate petroleum products, thus making market forces decide the pump price, which will lead vehicle operators to pay exorbitant amount for petroleum products is very likely to generate students' violent reaction. Students are the group most vulnerable to the hardship that will arise from this increase in petroleum products especially now that no university in Nigeria has a functional transportation system in place for the students.

Another issue that is likely to generate student crisis is that of the proposed privatization of the National Electric Power Authority (the sole agency that provides electricity for the country) and the Nigerian Telecommunication (the sole agency that provides telephone and allied services for Nigerians). Students believe that with such privatization, the amount payable to enjoy their services will drastically shoot up. If considered from the point of view that today we talk of information technology, students would need electricity and functional telecommunication services to be able to carry out their research efforts with little difficulty. They would need to surf the Internet, communicate with other students and experts through e-mail communication, carryout an exhaustive literature search, etc. All these will certainly rely on the services provided by the agencies in charges of electricity and telecommunications. When they are privatized, their charges will be too much for the students to bear. Students therefore are very likely to adopt much uncivilized means to seek redress.

Students' demand for participatory democracy, especially on matters affecting their academic life are likely to continue and even be on the increase. Although the demand has been an on going matter (Aluede, 1995, 2001), we are going to find that such demand is going to be intense. This development will not be too surprising because students are observing the

benefits of democracy in the larger community and would believe that an extension of that to the university campuses will afford them an opportunity to reap from the dividends of democracy.

With the ever-increasing enrollment of students in Nigerian universities and the increase in the number of universities from only six in 1970 to fifty-three in 2003, the potential base of student's power has expanded to an unprecedented level. In addition, with the increase in students' enrolment in Nigerian universities, essentially due to the proliferation of admission policies and introduction of diploma and pre-degree courses (which originally are not the statutory responsibilities of the universities), the campuses now witness the presence of several adolescents many of them are most of the time experiencing adolescent crisis (Nwokwule, 1992), usually translated in violent protests against superior significant others

Over education and underemployment of university graduates is likely to generate student unrest in Nigerian university campuses in the near future. In the past, acquiring a university degree meant automatic employment at any level in the Nigerian public service. Such employment attracted better incentives like car loans and housing loan (which were to be repaid over a very long period with very minimal interest rate), annual overseas holidays for self and family, medical services for self and family, etc. In Nigeria today, acquiring a university degree no longer guarantees any gainful and attractive position in the public service. More perplexing is the newly introduced National Poverty Alleviation Scheme by the Federal Government of Nigeria, where by graduates are employed on a monthly salary of ten thousand Naira only (₦10, 000.00) which is the salary a clerical assistant (secondary school certificate holder) earns in the public service. Even at that, this employment is usually for two years only. The question often asked is what becomes of the graduate at the expiration of the two years contract. Thus, being over educated or underemployed, which is a prevailing condition could culminate into a full-fledged outburst in Nigerian university campuses.

Potential issues that would likely to generate student unrest in Nigerian universities in the near future are increased involvement of the Nigerian government in peacekeeping missions abroad. Students believe that a lot of national resources are being wasted in supporting /sponsoring

military presence in Sierra-Leone, and Liberia. It is on record that Nigerian government single-handedly provided all the funds for the Economic of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) – a military unit set-up by the Economic Union of West African States – to quell the crisis in some of its member states. The other issue has to do with Nigerian government's regular funding of the Technical Aid Scheme (providing other developing nations with highly skilled manpower from Nigeria, with the Nigerian government bearing all the financial responsibilities of the assistance-salaries, travels and health services). Even with all these generous assistance to other nations, Nigerian universities today are still in a very sorrowful state, which is resulting from under funding. Students believe that the under funding of universities in Nigeria is only a deliberate attempt to under educate them. Students are likely to believe that the government is rich enough, judging from its generosity to other developing nations by provision of technical support, to be able to provide all that universities would require for effective learning/administration. It is very likely that this issue shall continue to be one of the issues that may precipitate students' activism in the near future.

### CONCLUSION

It is imperative to recognize those issues that are likely to generate campus unrest, especially in the subsequent decades of the millennium: student campus life issues; poor funding of Nigerian universities by the government; and withdrawal of subsidy from petroleum products. In appreciation of the potential issues that would generate student protests in the near future, student services professional would be challenged to evolve strategies that would help to bring the incidents of student unrest in Nigerian universities to the barest minimum.

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