

## INSTITUTIONAL FREEDOM AND AUTONOMY: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNIVERSITY LEADERSHIP

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**ABSTRACT:** This study critically examines the theme of "Institutional freedom and autonomy: implications for university leadership.". To navigate this inquiry, two specific research questions were formulated. The investigation adopted a survey research design, targeting a specific population comprising eight (8) deans drawn from eight distinct faculties within the University of Abuja. Utilizing a purposive sampling technique, the study engaged these eight deans as the sample size. To ensure the instrument's validity, the questionnaire was subjected to review by two senior lecturers from the Department of Educational Management at the University of Abuja. Furthermore, reliability was established by administering the instrument to two external respondents, yielding a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.71, indicating acceptable internal consistency. The empirical results indicated that the university leadership has not successfully achieved either institutional freedom or autonomy. Consequently, the researchers recommend that university leadership must secure robust, independent financial sources to establish true autonomy. Furthermore, to safeguard academic freedom, it is

imperative that leaders uphold strict accountability across all operational facets of the university.

**Keywords:** *Higher Education Governance, Academic Liberty, Institutional Autonomy, Administrative Leadership, University Management.*

## INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions serve as the bedrock for the cultivation of novel concepts, the preservation of intellectual heritage, and the dissemination of expertise through rigorous teaching and research. For these institutions to fulfill their mandate effectively, it is essential that they possess the liberty to self-govern, adhering to universally recognized norms and principles of academia. It is imperative that the various statutory bodies within the university—including the Governing Council, the Senate, faculties, and departments—be permitted to execute their distinct functions autonomously, free from external encroachments.

As articulated by Wagner, Mishra, and Oster (2024), the university is envisioned as a community of scholars who uphold the supremacy of the intellect, insisting that all assertions be subjected to rigorous critical analysis. Consequently, the university environment must be a sanctuary where traditional dogmas face severe scrutiny, allowing knowledge to expand through dissent and practical inquiry rather than through convenient compromise or mere experience. In this manner, the university not only transmits knowledge but also disciplines the human mind to advance scholarship through dedicated research.

To operate at optimal efficiency, universities require the latitude to govern themselves in alignment with their enabling laws and acts. For instance, the Universities Miscellaneous Act of 1993 explicitly grants the Senate of each Nigerian university the authority to regulate teaching and research in accordance with the institution's statutes. Therefore, academic freedom and institutional autonomy are not merely administrative privileges but fundamental rights of the university system.

Scholars have offered various perspectives on these concepts. Akpan and Amadi (2017) describe academic freedom as the liberty of the individual to pursue research, teaching, and learning without inhibition. Similarly, the European University

Association (EUA) (2023) defines institutional freedom as the higher education institution's independence from state control regarding governance, curriculum design, staffing, and financial management. Ramlo (2025) expands on this by characterizing academic freedom as a personal privilege that empowers academic staff to evolve into independent thinkers, inventors, and researchers within the academic framework. This freedom must be devoid of fear, intimidation, or coercion from administrative or governmental forces.

The essence of academic freedom lies in the capacity to express novel ideas and views that drive societal advancement. As Ntshoe and Faller (2025) argue, this is only possible if society permits the decisions regarding knowledge production and dissemination to remain the exclusive preserve of academics. Conversely, university autonomy is an institutional privilege that allows for independent teaching, learning, and research without outside interference. Through autonomy, universities are entrusted with maintaining high educational standards and ensuring institutional sustainability. Saidi (2025) asserts that universities can only fulfill their statutory roles if they operate independently. Furthermore, Berdah et al. (2019) warn that without autonomy, universities risk subjugation by political and economic hegemonies.

Institutionalizing autonomy is cardinal for realizing educational objectives, as it serves as the operational principle for any higher education system. It acts as a mechanism to ensure operational stability and goal actualization. Vasa, O'Hara, and Brown (2025) define institutional autonomy as the relative freedom of an institution to manage its own affairs, free from interference by the state, donors, or other stakeholders. Varghese (2016) distinguishes between two dimensions of this concept: Substantive Autonomy, which is the power to determine goals and programs, and Procedural Autonomy, which refers to the power to determine the means by which these goals are pursued.

Ultimately, autonomy represents the necessary degree of independence from external control regarding internal organization, governance, resource distribution, recruitment, and the conditions of study. However, distinct differences exist. Latin-Amovcay (2024) posits that while closely related, academic freedom pertains to the

rights of the individual scholar, whereas autonomy refers to the rights of the institution. Academic freedom implies the right of staff to participate in university matters, while autonomy concerns the institution's broader academic affairs. Paradoxically, an autonomous university could restrict the academic freedom of its lecturers; thus, autonomy does not automatically guarantee academic freedom. This raises a critical question: Can academic freedom flourish in the absence of institutional autonomy?.

Hao (2025) defines institutional autonomy as the ability to make independent decisions regarding mission and resource acquisition. Yet, Devrim (2022) emphasizes that institutional autonomy alone is insufficient to guarantee individual academic freedom.

### **Implications of Institutional Autonomy for University Leadership**

The implications of autonomy for leadership are profound. Oyebamiji, Opeyemi, and Fadikpe-Aroki (2019) note that under an autonomous system, academic leaders possess the freedom to select staff and students, determine retention conditions, set curriculum content, and allocate funds. Al Gharsi, Belhaj, and Nimala (2024) suggest that leaders should leverage autonomy to build capacity, monitor performance, and improve research outcomes. Autonomy grants leaders the authority to hire and fire, and to define conditions of service.

For leaders to be truly autonomous, they must fully comprehend their rights, duties, and challenges. They are expected to demonstrate commitment, efficiency, responsibility, transparency, and probity. According to Wingrove (2024) and Akpan and Amadi (2017), university autonomy entails several rights for the institution, including:

- Legal ownership of assets (land, buildings, plants).
- Freedom to set and pursue strategic plans independently.
- The right to budget for university operations.
- Freedom to design suitable academic programs.
- The right to recruit and dismiss staff.

- The freedom to set tuition and fees.
- The authority to develop salary structures.
- The right to determine student enrollment and admission policies.
- The right to run an independent academic calendar.
- The power to select administrative heads.
- The right to determine intake capacity and teacher workload.
- Full financial autonomy, including income generation and internal auditing.
- Administrative autonomy free from political bureaucracy.

Pruvot, Estermann, and Popkhardeze (2023) reiterate that autonomy is the ability to independently decide on the mission and access the means to fulfill it. This implies that leaders must be accountable for their decisions. Usman (2016) avers that accountability is inevitable if a university is to enjoy core privileges like academic freedom and self-governance. Ntshoe and Faller (2021) define accountability as the obligation to demonstrate that resources are utilized according to agreed rules and to report accurately on performance. Academic leaders must strike a balance between autonomy and accountability, requiring transparency in governance.

However, challenges persist. Funding is a primary obstacle. When the government finances the university, it inevitably exercises control, posing a danger to autonomy. Government officials may make decisions that adversely affect the institution. Fanea-Ivanovia and Babe (2022) suggest that universities must engage in entrepreneurship to achieve self-sustainability.

In Nigeria, the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB) regulates admissions, effectively transferring control from the universities to the government. Oyebamiji et al. (2019) note that JAMB sets admission standards, often resulting in high-scoring candidates being denied placement. Critics argue that JAMB should be scrapped, returning these duties to universities as was the case before 1974.

Curriculum control is another challenge. The National Universities Commission (NUC) dictates the curriculum and accredits courses. Consequently, the University

Senate lacks absolute power over instruction, as it must adhere to the government's Minimum Academic Standards (MAS). The NUC enforces this through periodic visits. Huffman (2023) observes that this scrutiny limits absolute freedom. Furthermore, the politicization of admissions—where "Federal Character" or quota systems prioritize location over merit—constrains leaders from admitting the best candidates. This systemic favoritism erodes the university's freedom to determine merit.

Ideally, lecturers should act without inhibition, enjoying the liberty to investigate and discuss facts concerning humanity and the physical world. This empowers them to become creators of knowledge, free from government intimidation. Through these principles, academia can advance society. The National Association of College and University Attorneys (NACUA) (2021) supports preserving these rights. True academic autonomy is attained when the university operates its statutory roles of teaching and research without subjugation to political or economic hegemonies. Lackner (2024) affirms that freedom from outside interference is essential for stabilizing quality goals. Pelike, Kinzelbach, and Glaisel (2023) maintain that institutional freedom should be protected by the rule of law, fostering democratic pluralism.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The concepts of institutional liberty and autonomy are designed to provide the academic workforce with the necessary leverage to operate without external encroachments. Theoretically, autonomy allows academia to pursue research, teaching, and learning without inhibition. It obligates the individual lecturer to study and contribute to institutional advancement, empowering staff to become independent thinkers and creators.

On an institutional level, autonomy positions the university to ensure high educational standards and sustainability, free from political and economic domination. Leadership, in turn, should be able to guide teams to conduct independent research, bringing stability and goal actualization. Implied rights include budgeting, program design, strategic planning, salary structuring, and student enrollment.

However, the critical problem remains: do university leaders actually execute the necessary parameters to attain this freedom and autonomy?. The researchers were motivated to investigate this gap and determine if university leaders have truly attained institutional freedom and autonomy.

### **Research Purpose**

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the extent to which university leaders have embarked upon and achieved institutional freedom and autonomy. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Determine whether university leaders have attained institutional freedom by executing the necessary freedom parameters within the University of Abuja.
2. Investigate whether university leaders have attained institutional autonomy within the University of Abuja.

### **Research Questions**

Two pivotal research questions guided this study:

1. Have university leaders attained institutional freedom by executing the necessary freedom parameters in the University of Abuja?
2. Have university leaders attained institutional autonomy in the University of Abuja?

### **Methodology**

The researchers employed a survey research design, which facilitated the sampling of representative respondents from the target population. The population for this study consisted of eight (8) deans presiding over eight faculties at the University of Abuja.

Using a purposive sampling technique, the entire population of eight (8) deans was selected as the sample for the study. The research instrument (questionnaire) underwent validation by experts within the Faculty of Education at the University of Abuja. Reliability was established through a pilot study involving two deans who were not part of the main study. Data were retrieved using the test-retest method, and

a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.73 was obtained, indicating high internal consistency.

Mean statistics were utilized to analyze the research questions. The decision rule established that a mean score of 2.50 and above constituted "Agreed," while a score of 2.49 and below constituted "Disagreed". Similarly, sectional mean scores of 2.50 and above were adjudged as "Accepted," while those below were "Rejected".

## Data Analysis

**Research Question One:** *Have the university leaders attained institutional freedom?*

**Table 1:** University Leader Attainment of Institutional Freedom (N=8)

S/N	Items	SA	A	D	SD	$\bar{x}$	Decision
	You have attained institutional freedom by:						
1	Carrying out your activities in the university even though there are external hitches	2	3	2	1	2.75	Agreed
2	Making lecturers to lecture freely and committedly.	3	3	1	1	3.00	Agreed
3	Helping lecturers get grant to carry out individual research	2	1	2	3	2.25	Disagreed
4	Empowering lecturers to become independent thinkers and inventors	1	1	2	4	1.88	Disagreed
5	Not being free from fear of government intimidation	2	2	2	2	2.50	Agreed
6	Giving lecturers personal privileges to lecture freely.	2	3	2	2	2.75	Agreed
7	Helping individual academia to execute the right of sharing his ideas, opinions for, university advancement.	1	2	3	2	2.25	Disagreed
8	Not empowering the academic staff to create worthwhile strategies to carry out innovative venture for academic advancement.	2	3	1	2	2.62	Agreed
9	Allowing academia to ultimately and	3	2	2	1	2.87	Agreed

	absolutely contribute to knowledge in their areas of specialization.						
10	Allowing academia to be absolutely free to act as he will want to in the university.	1	1	2	4	1.87	Disagreed
	<b>Sectional mean</b>					<b>2.48</b>	<b>Rejected</b>

The findings presented in Table 1 reveal that university leaders have not attained institutional freedom. This is evidenced by low scores in key areas: helping lecturers secure research grants ( $\bar{x} = 2.25$ ), empowering lecturers to become independent thinkers ( $\bar{x} = 1.88$ ), facilitating the sharing of ideas for advancement ( $\bar{x} = 2.25$ ), and allowing absolute academic freedom of action ( $\bar{x} = 1.88$ ). With a cumulative sectional mean score of **2.48**, the data confirms that the respondents rejected the notion that university leaders have achieved institutional freedom. Consequently, the finding proves that university leaders in the University of Abuja have not attained institutional freedom.

**Research Question Two:** *Have the university leaders attained institutional autonomy?*

**Table 2:** University Leaders Attainment of Institutional Autonomy

S/N	Items	SA	A	D	SD $\bar{x}$	Decision
	Your university has attained institutional autonomy by leaders:					
1	Designing academic programmes considered suitable for the university.	2	3	2	1 2.75	Agreed
2	Recruiting and sacking of academic and non academic staff.	3	3	1	1 3.0	Agreed
3	Setting strategic plan on a choice project and running it independently without government interference.	2	1	2	3 2.25	Disagreed
4	Determining admission policy.	1	1	2	4 1.88	Disagreed

5	Determining fees and other charges for students to pay.	2	2	2	2	2.50	Disagreed
6	Determining lecturers capacities in various faculties.	2	3	2	2	2.75	Agreed
7	Determining students enrolment.	1	2	3	2	2.25	Disagreed
8	Determining and running suitable academic calendar.	2	3	1	2	2.62	Agreed
9	Selecting heads of the department.	3	2	2	1	2.87	Agreed
10	Developing and having salary structure suitable for the university.	1	1	2	4	1.87	Disagreed
	<b>Sectional Mean</b>					<b>2.47</b>	<b>Rejected</b>

The respondents disagreed that leaders attained autonomy in critical strategic areas, as indicated by mean scores for: setting strategic plans independently ( $\bar{x} = 2.25$ ), determining admission policy ( $\bar{x} = 1.88$ ), determining student enrollment ( $\bar{x} = 2.25$ ), and developing salary structures ( $\bar{x} = 1.87$ ). However, respondents agreed that leaders achieved autonomy in designing academic programs ( $\bar{x} = 2.75$ ), recruiting/sacking staff ( $\bar{x} = 3.00$ ), determining fees ( $\bar{x} = 2.50$ ), running the academic calendar ( $\bar{x} = 2.62$ ), and selecting heads of departments ( $\bar{x} = 2.87$ ). Despite these specific areas of agreement, the overall sectional mean score of 2.47 resulted in a rejection of the premise. Thus, the study concludes that university leaders at the University of Abuja have not attained institutional autonomy.

### Discussion of Findings

The consolidated findings from both research questions substantiate that university leadership has achieved neither true academic freedom nor full institutional autonomy. These results align with the observations of Huffman (2023), who argued

that absolute freedom is non-existent in universities because they remain subject to the scrutiny of external "keepers" through accreditation exercises.

Furthermore, Oyebamiji (2019) corroborates this by noting that admission into Nigerian universities is not determined by the institutions themselves. Instead, the government, through JAMB, retains the sole responsibility for setting standards and determining admissions, thereby nullifying autonomy in this regard. This centralized control strips the university of the free hand to decide on candidate selection. Regarding financial autonomy, Mukoro (2017) posits that universities cannot be truly autonomous as long as they rely on government financing. When the government funds and controls universities, officials are empowered to make crucial decisions that may adversely affect the institution. Consequently, Fanea-Ivanovia and Babe (2022) argue that for universities to attain autonomy, leaders must pivot toward entrepreneurial engagements to ensure self-sustainability.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the empirical evidence gathered and analyzed, the researchers conclude that university leaders at the University of Abuja, Nigeria, have not attained the requisite levels of academic freedom or institutional autonomy.

## **Recommendations**

In light of these findings, the following recommendations are advanced:

1. University leaders must proactively develop independent sources of funding for their programs. Establishing a solid financial base is a prerequisite for achieving genuine freedom and autonomy.
2. Leadership must enforce strict accountability in all university dealings. Maintaining high ethical standards and transparency is essential to safeguard and sustain academic freedom.

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