The Role of Committees in the Decision-Making Process in Nigerian Universities

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Abstract

Universities are complex organizations because of their myriad activities. This has led to the institutional arrangement of committees to facilitate the decision-making process. This paper therefore examined the role committees play in the decision-making process in Nigerian universities. It also ascertained the extent to which decisions made maintain a democratic process for the representation of views. This was done with a view to assess the extent to which the Committee System affects the effective and efficient management of Nigerian universities. Data for the study were solicited from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data was derived from the administration of questionnaires on 474 randomly selected members of committees from six Federal universities located in the six geo-political zones of Nigeria. This was done to ensure that one university from each zone had the chance of being represented in the sample. The study revealed that committees are vital institutional arrangements that facilitate and improve internal decision-making in Nigerian universities. They serve as an avenue for expressing, communicating and recommending policies and curriculum changes to the Faculty, Dean, Provost, Vice- Chancellor and other Heads of Units of the universities. Results of the study further revealed that the use of committees enhance university governance and management because the decisions made guide the judgment of university administrators. The study however found that although the decisions made by the various committees are derived from a democratic process, the committees' recommendations do not sometimes influence the final decisions made by the University Council and Senate, particularly if they are in conflict with those of the university administration. The study concluded that committees are vital tools for university administration, although the decisions made by them are sometimes not implemented because of the overbearing structure of university management.

Keywords: committees, decision-making, universities, Nigeria

1. Introduction

Universities are the progenitors of social change through the generation and dissemination of knowledge and new ideas. They are committed to sustainable human development and promote capacity building through the training they provide (Fielden and Lockwood, 1973). In Nigeria, Universities equip individuals with the knowledge and skills required for positions of responsibility in various professions and are therefore the major vehicles for economic and social development (Alubo, 1999). In addition, Universities in Nigeria are veritable tools for the realization of national development, the development of cultured citizens and the promotion of basic research (Ogbogu, 2011).

Universities are complex organizations because of their myriad activities and multiple objectives (Gumport and Pusser, 1997). The Nigerian University system has grown astronomically in size and has undergone deep transformation since its inception over 60years ago. Universities in Nigeria have through the years developed mechanisms of decision-making in order to move ahead and effectively overcome the challenges of the current period that is characterized by rapid changes. The use of committees has therefore been adopted to democratize and facilitate the decision-making process (Ede 2000). The committee system is a means of sharing governance with the University governance bodies as well as an avenue for ensuring the full participation of staff in the decision-making process (Shapiro, 1987). The committee system is intended in Nigerian Universities to enhance

managerial accountability and to maintain the democratic procedures for representation of views set out in the Universities' Charter and Statutes. The use of committees therefore provides a more solid basis for administrative decisions because it allows the University to benefit from the expertise and experience of faculty and other staff members (Bowen and Shapiro, 1998).

Although it is generally assumed that committees assist the University management in arriving at meaningful decisions that facilitate change and enhance the performance of the system, there are indications that the committee system may not be the preferred method of taking decisions and getting things done. This is because Nigerian Universities function in an intensely political environment, such that decisions reached in committees that might threaten these constituencies are frequently resisted and not implemented. This attitude sometimes promotes lobbying within the university system, particularly in respect of disciplinary and promotion matters (Ede, 2000). It is against this backdrop that this study seeks to investigate the role committees play in the universities' decision making process. It also tried to determine the extent to which the committee system is efficient and effective in facilitating and implementing decisions made, as well as the extent to which the decisions made maintain a democratic process for the representation of views.

2. Literature Review

Universities have been portrayed by Clark (1984) as complex organizations with clusters of sub-units. He affirmed that they are loosely joined federations of organizations with multiplicity of goals. Corwin (1974) posited that the expansion and increased complexity of Universities led to the introduction of committees in the decision-making process in British Universities. He affirmed that the demand for and supply of institutional arrangements for decision-making in Universities are as old as the Universities themselves. In Nigeria, the use of committees was entrenched in the Laws and Statutes that established the University System and they are vital instruments in the decision-making process (Erero, 1991).

The importance of appropriate decision-making process in the governance of institutions has been stressed in the literature of Higher education leadership and management. Nwachukwu (1998), for instance posited that the Nigerian University system utilizes committees in the decision making process under the collegial arrangement with the University Governing Council and Senate at the summit. The Council is in the management of finance, property and personnel, while the Senate is theoretically supreme with respect to academic matters. It is from these two bodies that all other committees derive their raison d'être. Each public university in Nigeria has not less than forty (40) standing committees with which they make decisions that facilitate the proper management and growth of the university system (Ogunruku, 2012).

The committees in their totality are responsible for the internal decision-making process subject to the ratification of either Senate or Council as appropriate. Erero (1991) submitted that the collegiality in internal decision-making process in Nigerian Universities is anchored on the committee system. Immerwahr (1998) posited that Universities are complex and they face the challenge of change as they struggle to adapt and serve a changing world in which they find themselves. Mac Taggart (1997) therefore posited that it is difficult for an institution as large, complex and tradition – bound as the modern University to transform itself to change to be able to serve a changing world without developing varieties of mechanisms to be able to do so. Adegbite (2004) added that the changing nature of the society the University serves as well as its complex nature requires the importance of experienced, responsible and enlightened university leadership, governance and management. In view of this, a lot of universities across the globe embrace the concept of shared governance which encourages the use of committees in taking decisions (Duderstadt, 2000). Thus, Ajayi (1999) and Ogunruku (2012) affirmed that committee system remains the only viable and acceptable system for the administration of Universities. Since Universities need to develop a more strategic context for decision making in a period of rapid change the use of committees are viable instruments for meeting the demands of such changes. Nigerian Universities have over the years developed the committee system as a unique strategy for responding to the challenges evolving from radical transformations (Ede, 2000). According to him the use of committees are specifically important and justifiable in Nigerian Universities because the instrument by which the Universities were established prescribed specific committees as part of the governmental structure.

Committees are important in the University system because they democratize the decision making process and assist management in arriving at useful and meaningful decisions (Nwachukwu, 1988). Nigerian Universities believe in the spirit of shared governance and therefore engage the services of committees to debate institutional-wide issues, (Ajayi, 1999). Members of the committees are either elected or sometimes appointed by the Faculty or Departments to provide advisory service to the University. Most key decisions are however made by the University Senate and Governing Council (Alubo, 1999). Baldridge (1971) emphasized the fact that

coordination is achieved in committees through consensus among groups and individuals. In this system, a plethora of individuals and groups make their own decisions about courses, research, consulting and other administrative issues.

Fielden and Lockwood (1973) however expressed concern over the explosion of committees in British Universities. Adamolekun (1989) in the same vein admitted that Universities in Nigeria seem to make far more use of committees. He therefore questioned the expansion of committee work which results in the deprivation of some legitimate executive responsibilities. In spite of the relevance of committees in University administration, decision-making and leadership, it is sometimes hampered and challenged by lack of adequate funds to facilitate their activities. Bureaucratic policies, procedures and practices along with the anarchy of committee impact on the smooth functioning of the committees. Members of the committees sometimes feel constrained by the administration, bureaucracy and colleagues. In view of this Tierney (1999) confirmed that bureaucracy sometimes erodes the implementation of committee decisions. Ede (2000) posited that Public Universities are mostly affected because they function in an intensely political environment such that decisions made by committees that might threaten these constituencies are frequently resisted. Sifuna (1991) thus opined that the use of committees may not necessarily be the best method of effectively taking decisions and managing the University system, if decisions made by them are sometimes not implemented due to vested interest.

For Nigerian universities to thrive in the twenty-first century, it will require new patterns of committee system capable of responding to the changing needs and emerging challenges of the society. Adegbite (2004) thus suggested that this can be achieved if University committees work towards providing strategic, supportive and critical stewardship for their institutions and by remaining true participants in the decision-making process rather than simply being watchdogs of administration or defenders of the status quo.

3. Methodology

This study adopted the survey research design. Data used for the study were obtained from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were solicited through the administration of questionnaires. The stratified random sampling technique was used in administering questionnaires on 600 senior academic and administrative staff that have served in various University committees. The respondents were derived from six randomly selected federal universities located in the six geo-political zones of Nigeria. This was done to ensure that at least one university from each geo-political zone was represented in the sample. The questionnaire was designed to elicit personal and demographic information from the respondents as well as help determine the role of committees in the decision making process in Nigerian universities. The questionnaire also tried to measure the effectiveness of the committee system in facilitating decisions made, as well as the extent to which the decisions made maintain a democratic process. 474 copies of the questionnaire were retrieved and analyzed, using descriptive statistical technique.

4. Results and Discussion

The samples used for this study cut across senior academic and administrative staff in Nigerian universities. The senior academic staff constituted 47 percent of the total sample, while the senior administrative staff constituted 53 percent of the study sample. Majority of the respondents (63 percent) were males, while the remaining 37 percent were females. This is an indication that males dominate the university labour force and occupy more of the decision- making positions of the universities.

Data on the marital status of the respondents reveal that majority (63.5 percent) were married, 24.3 percent were single, while 12.2 percent were widowed. Furthermore, results on the work experience of the respondents show that 75 percent of them had worked in their various universities for over 10 years. This is an indication that most of the respondents used for the study have sufficient work experience, and have served in various university committees.

Table 1. Respondents' perception of the role committees play in the decision-making process in Nigerian Universities

Roles of committees	Yes (%)	No (%)	Total %
University committees are prompt and efficient in taking decisions	191 (40.3)	283(59.2)	474(100)
Decisions made at committee levels are used in recommending policies and changes to Heads of Units	251 (52.9)	223 (47.1)	474 (100)
Committees improve the decision making process in Universities	313 (66)	161 (34.6)	474 (100)
Effective advisory services are provided by committees	250(52.7)	224(47.3)	474 (100)
Committee decisions help to promote better coordination of activities within the university	394 (83.2)	80 (16.8)	474 (100)
Decision made by committees facilitate the proper management and growth of the university system	245 (51.7)	303 (63.9)	474(100)
Committees are useful for disseminating and acquiring vital information within the university	171 (36.1)	303 (63.9)	474 (100)

Table 1 above provides information on the roles of committees in the decision-making process in Nigerian Universities. Figures on the Table reveal that majority (83.2 percent) of the respondents indicated that committee decisions help to promote the better coordination of activities within the University. This supports the findings of Ede's (2000) study in which he posited that the activities within Universities could come to a halt without adequate inputs from committees. The committee system is thus, a vital tool that enhances the performance of universities. This is further corroborated by the figures on the table which shows that 66 percent of the respondents perceived that committees improve the decision making process in Nigerian Universities and that the decisions made by them facilitate the proper management and growth of the system (51.7percent). This result is consistent with Gwary's (1993) findings that emphasized the fact that committees enhance the smooth administration of the University and are useful in expediting the decision making process by aligning it with the University strategic plan.

The respondents that specified that decisions made at committee levels are used in recommending policies and making necessary changes to the various units of the University system were 52.9 percent. Those who indicated that effective advisory services were provided by committees to major organs of the University were 52.7 percent. This is consistent with the views of Duderstadt (2000) who posited that committees are generally advisory on most issues but without true power. This may be due to the fact that although committees may be consulted and set up on important University matters, they rarely have any executive role. Most key decisions are taken by the Universities' Governing Council and Senate.

The table further shows that only 36.1 percent indicated that committees are useful for disseminating and acquiring information within the University. This implies that dissemination of information by committees may be constrained by bureaucratic practices of Universities, along with the anarchy of committees. Finally, data on the table shows that although committees are perceived as vital instruments in the Universities' decision-making process, just 40.3 percent of the respondents affirmed that they are prompt and efficient in taking decisions. This is corroborated by the fact that very few of the respondents (36.1 percent) supported the view that committees are useful for disseminating and acquiring vital information within the University. Generally, results on the table indicate that committees improve the decision-making process in Nigerian Universities. They facilitate the coordination of their activities and also provide advisory services. However, the committees are not prompt in taking decisions nor do they facilitate the dissemination and acquisition of vital information within the Universities. This may be attributed to the bureaucratic structure, practices and bottle-necks associated with the Nigerian University System amongst other variables.

Table 2. Respondents' opinions on the extent to which committees' decisions maintain a democratic process

Opinions	Yes (%)	No (%)	Total %
Committees' recommendations and decisions are democratically made and a true reflection of decisions taken by their members.	284 (59.9)	190 (40.1)	474 (100)
Committees encourage the spirit of team work.	346 (73)	128 (27)	474 (100)
Decisions made by committees influence the overall decisions made by the University management.	200 (42.2)	274 (57.8)	474 (100)
University management ignore the decisions of committees if they do not promote the interest of government and other vested stakeholders.	341 (71.9)	133 (28.1)	474 (100)

Table 2 above shows the percentage distribution of respondents' opinions on the extent to which the committees' decisions are democratically made; represent the views of members and influence Universities' decision outcomes. Data on the table shows that a higher percentage (73 percent) of the respondents affirmed that committees encourage the spirit of team work. This implies that there is collaboration between members of the various committees. The table also shows that 71.9 percent of the respondents indicated that University management ignore the decisions of committees if they do not promote the interest of government and other vested stakeholders. This may be due to the fact that University Governing Councils are political in nature and are connected to political constituencies. Thus implementation of decisions that threaten these constituencies may be resisted even if they would promote positive changes within the University. It is therefore not surprising that a smaller number of the respondents (42.2 percent) agreed that the decisions made by committees influence the overall decisions made by university management. This implies that although committees assist in arriving at useful decisions that can enhance the growth of the system, the power to influence certain key decisions rests in the University Council and Senate.

Data on the table further reveals that a higher percentage (59.9 percent) of the respondents indicated that committees' decisions and recommendations are democratically made and are a true reflection of the views of members. This finding is consistent with Sifuna's (1997) study that posited that most Universities' committees democratize the decision they make and recognize the need for a broadly based decision making process.

Generally, results on the table reveal that committees represent a broad spectrum of the University staff and demonstrate the spirit of team work. Decisions are democratically made and represent the views of members, however the decisions do not influence the overall decisions made by the University management. Although committees are vital tools, their decision sometimes do not influence the overall decisions made by the University. This may be attributed to the overbearing structure of University management as well as the desire to satisfy its stakeholders and their political constituencies.

5. Conclusion

Universities worldwide are facing a period of change due to the changing environment in which they currently operate. Majority of them are attempting to also respond to the challenges presented by a changing world. Increased complexity, pressure and accountability demanded of Universities from government and other stakeholders due to the changes have accentuated the need for a stronger management. This explains why many Universities establish an array of committees to assist management in arriving at useful and meaningful decision that can facilitate change and also enhance the proper management and performance of the University System.

This study found that the use of committees was entrenched in the statutes and Acts that established Nigerian Universities. It was also found that committees in Nigerian Universities provide effective advisory services to the University management and also improve the decision making process within the Universities. Although it was found that the decisions made by committees are used for recommending policies and change, but such recommendations are sometimes not implemented because certain key decisions are only taken by the University Governing Council and Senate. Also certain decisions are not implemented if they do not promote the interest of government and some other stakeholders. The ability of government and University Council to use their powers to promote special interest, influence decisions, delay action and prevent reforms all pose risks to the University system. Consequently, for Universities to respond to the changing needs and emerging challenges occasioned by the society in which they operate, increasing politicization of University committees should be curbed. In view of this, Universities should empower their committees to function within a structure and a process that reflect the best practices of corporate committees, while maintaining shared collegial internal governance of matters.

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