

Gains and Pains in Students Unionism in Tertiary Institutions of Learning in Nigeria: Way Forward

¹Alabi Festus Oluwole & ²Ige, Akindele M.

¹Department of Educational Management, Faculty of Education,
Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-akoko, Ondo State Nigeria

²Ministry of Education, Akure Ondo State

Article DOI: 10.48028/iiprds/ijiretss.v8.i1.03

Abstract

The issue of student unionism has been an albatross in the educational system globally, particularly in tertiary institutions of learning where it is prevalent over the years. This paper examines the concept of unionism and student unionism, its background, objectives, the gains recorded through it, such as the improved mutual relationship between students and management of institutions, among others; and pains associated with it, such as the death of and maiming of students, destruction of properties, incessant closure of tertiary institutions, disunity between institutions management and students, loss of the image of tertiary education, brain drain in campuses. It looks further on how the gains accruable through it can be maximized and the pains reduced to the minimum, if not eradicated, to rekindle the lost glory of tertiary education globally in this decade and beyond.

Keywords: *Pain, Gain, Student, Unionism, Student unionism, Institution, Tertiary institution, Education.*

Corresponding Author: Alabi Festus Oluwole

Background to the Study

Education plays a significant role in the development of individuals and a nation. Over the years, the demand for higher education, being an aspect of higher education in Nigeria reveals an increasing trend (Federal Ministry of Education, 2007; Joint Admission and Matriculation Board, 2009; National Universities Commission, 2009). Many factors can however account for this increasing demand for higher education in Nigeria. Even though primary and secondary education can enable an individual to achieve literacy, numeracy, and communicative skills (National Policy on Education, 2004, 4), an individual needs higher education to develop these skills properly and thus be able to live comfortably in the society. Higher education in this regard is an advanced education, which is meant to complement the education already acquired at the lower education levels.

Higher education can also improve the chances of an unemployed in the labor market towards securing a job. An individual with higher education is most likely to be employed faster than the one with lower qualifications. Nowadays, employers of labor prefer job seekers with advanced qualifications for obvious reasons. The amount to be spent on the training of low quality staff will be heavy while the loss in outputs that may result from the use of such staff would be enormous. In terms of salary and allowances, higher education graduate earns more than a graduate with lower qualifications. Even though education generally can enable individuals to contribute to the development of his/her community/society, higher education can further enable the individual to develop better leadership skills/qualities and thus be able to contribute more. All things being equal, an individual with higher education is most likely to possess better leadership skills/qualities, contribute better ideas towards the development of his/her community, govern effectively and efficiently if occupying a position of authority.

Unionism and Student Unionism Concepts

According to Advanced Learners Dictionary (New Edition), unionism is the act of joining together or being joined together, especially in a political context. Collins English Dictionary views it as any set of political principles based on the idea that two or more political or national units should be joined or remains together. Merriam-Webster (2018) further considers it as the principle or policy of forming or adhering to a union.

According to Isah (1991), cited in Oke (2013), a student union is an association of students in a particular place of education with stipulated rules/regulations to guide the operations of the association, purposely and primarily to protect and defend not only their interests but also the entire society. Zuokemefa and Sese (2015) see it as the system of practice or principle and theory of labor union in an educational setting to pursue students' interest. In the light of these definitions, student unionism can be further described as a body of students, formed in tertiary institutions that seek to address the basic needs and yearnings of students as well as serve as a mouth-piece of students. Such needs of students may be conducive hostels, convenient lecture venues, security on campus, provision of potable water, better transport system, power supply to lecture halls and the hostels, etc.

Purpose of Students Unionism

Universally, the purpose of the students' union is to represent students both within the institution and externally, including on local and national issues. Students' unions are also responsible for providing varieties of services to students. According to Oke (2013), a responsible student union is expected to:

1. Represent the interests of all its members at local, regional, national, and international levels
2. Be accountable to its membership
3. Anticipate and respond to student needs and demands to ensure continuous improvement
4. Operate efficient, high-quality services and activities
5. Promote constructive relations between students and the wider community
6. Act professionally and responsibly to all external bodies

According to the National Policy of Education (2004), the specific purposes of tertiary education are the:

1. Acquisition, development, and inculcation of proper value orientation for the survival of individual and society;
2. development of intellectual capacities of individuals to understand and appreciate their environments;
3. acquisition of both physical and intellectual skills which will enable individuals to develop into useful members of the community;
- 4 acquisition of an objective view of the local and external environments.

Historical Development of Students' Unionism

In Nigeria, students' unionism developed out of selfless and struggle for collective interest. The development of unionism among students can however be categorized into the pre-independence and post-independence phases. It dated back to the year 1925 when the West African Students' Union (WASU) was formed by Ladipo Sholanke, which metamorphosed into the National Union of Nigeria Students (NUNS) and pioneered by some Nigerian students schooling in London.

The first era was mainly a tussle with colonialism. The pioneers of student struggle (ALUTA) at its inception were highly militants, resourceful, and committed to the struggle. The era was characterized by militants, selflessness, diplomacy, and violent but objective action. Subsequently, the era led to the emergence of national leaders; the majority of whom were radical and were also ideological in thought perception and action. At the nascent stage of students' unionism, the period was enhanced and fostered by robust debates, diplomatic maneuvering, passive or total resistance to oppressive tendencies of the institution authority as well as unpalatable government policies. Indeed those that were highly articulate intellectually inclined and very dogged in the field of struggle.

The union then enjoyed support from radical intellectuals and academia. The union leaders were purely idealist and free brands. Under the leadership of Segun Okeowo, NUNS became directly involved in National politics for proper funding of education for Nigerian students.

They suffered manners of maltreatment but they remain adamant insisting they are fighting against the forces of feudalisms, parochialism, and tyranny in our political system. NUNS suffered all forms of brutality under the administration of a man that sees nothing good in Nigerian students and who has Zero tolerance for student unionism, General Olusegun Obasanjo.

Thereafter, the deployment of police to campuses at slightest provocations by the student and the use of firearms is considered the major causes of death culture of activism (through demonstration/protests, for example, Operation Gowon must Go of 1974, UNIBEN 1978, etc.) against the junta, led to the ban of National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS) and the subsequent formation of the present National Associate of Nigerian Students (NANS) in Yaba College of Technology in 1980.

He seems to forget that it was this same defender of democracy that destroyed NUNS and under whose administration some NUNS fighters were rusticated from their various universities. He was supporting a man who was brought out of the valley of the shadow of death and entrusted with the destiny of our great country but instead re-writing the history of our nation, used the opportunity to haunt his opponents. He was only under the influence of petty donations made by the president and his aides. The union leaders of today use the position to acquire wealth and gain access to the corridor of power. NANS has been indeed been turned into a sycophantic cabal! Looking back, the NUNS/NANS of old were effective and progressive in line with the nature and place of the universities at the time as a strategic resource or the production of ideas and manpower for societal growth. Students were at the center of this as agents of change and leaders of tomorrow with a strong stake in the future of the community. But today, students are the center of cultism, fraud, and prostitution.

In Nigeria, student unionism began in 1925 with the emergency of the West African Student Union (WASU) and was partly pioneered by some Nigerian students in London. They fought the colonial masters for the rights of Africans. National Union of Nigeria Students (NUNS) inherited the same idealism from WASU and the student union matched on as a platform of change and of informed activism. The union then enjoyed support from radical intellectuals and academia. The union leaders were purely idealists and firebrands. Under the leadership of Segun Okeowo, NUNS became directly involved in national politics for proper funding of education for Nigeria students. They suffered all manners of maltreatment yet remain adamant insisting they are fighting against the forces of feudalism, parochialism, and tyranny in our political system.

NUNS suffered all forms of brutality under the administration of a man that sees nothing good in Nigerian students and who has zero-tolerance for student unionism, General Olusegun Obasanjo. He even placed a ban on NUNS but kudos to the administration of Alhaji Shehu Shegari's that lifted the ban leading to the birth of the National Association of Nigeria Student in 1980.

Gains in Student Unionism in Nigeria

Despite the pains experienced in students unionism in Nigeria over the years, a lot of gain had been recorded, such as:

Improved Funding of Tertiary Education: It is a fact that education is still grossly underfunded in Nigeria, as the allocation to it, relative to the total fund available and even when compared to the 26% minimum standard of proper education funding by UNESCO, is still very low. This has been a major bone of contention between students and tertiary institution administrators over the years. Many of the agitations and struggle of students over the years which although had culminated into students unrest, had been centered on the need for government to increase the allocation to education which if achieved can guarantee increased procurement of infrastructural facilities and rehabilitation of the decaying ones in the institutions, and eventually improved standard of teaching and learning in the campuses. It thus implies that continued agitations of students through unionism could go a long way in improving the funding of education, particularly tertiary education in Nigeria.

Improved Participation of Students in Decision Making in Institutions: One of the complaints of students over the years has been the inability of institutions administrators to carry them along in the management of institutions, particularly in the process of taking decisions on vital areas that will affect them on the campuses. In most cases, institution administrators are fond of taking decisions without the involvement of the students union government, which had even been causing conflicts and unrest on campuses. Student unionism has improved the level of participation of students in the management of institutions, which is capable of promoting democracy and a peaceful atmosphere, as well as cordial relationships in the campuses.

Effective Management of Institutions: It is not a gainsaying that a lot of achievement had been recorded in the management of institutions, through students agitations on campuses. Institutions administrators have been able to address the loopholes or shortcomings noticed in the management of institutions. There is thus the possibility that through continued unionism among the students, institutions will be effectively and efficiently managed.

Improved State of Infrastructural Facilities in Institutions: One of the main bases of agitations e students on the campuses over the years is the need for institutions administrators to provide basic amenities and utilities in the campuses, such as water, electricity, conducive lecture rooms, among others., it is a fact that significant achievement ad been recorded I this area over the years which had one a lo way in improving the infrastructural facilities base of the institutions, the state of teaching and learning. With continued student unionism in Nigeria, it is hoped that there will continue to be more agitations in this direction n which will pay off in the provision of more facilities ad infrastructures, improved teaching of students, and academic performance of the students. in the campuses, and ultimately, improved standard of tertiary education.

Improved Quality of Tertiary Education: One issue that has become noticeable in tertiary institutions in Nigeria over the years, is the quality of tertiary education which has become worrisome and concern to the stakeholders. With continued student unionism, it is hoped that there will be more agitations for an improved commitment of staff, particularly, the academic staff and provision of facilities which will lead to the provision of better quality education for the students.

Accountability in the Management of Resources of Institutions: Government has been injecting many funds into education, it is thus necessary for these resources to be accounted for. Over the years much of the agitations of the student union government in tertiary institutions have been centered on the need for accountability by the management of institutions. It is therefore hoped that as much as student unionism is encouraged in the campuses, there is bound to be improved accountability for the resources of government in the institutions.

The Pains

It is not doubtful that the issue of student unionism is aged in Nigeria. It has been a story of mixed feelings. The struggle has not been easy, i.e. rough. The history of student unionism in Nigeria has been laden with pains, which can be buttressed by:

Death of and maiming of students, as well as the destruction of valuable properties: The issue of unionism has always been greeted by violent demonstrations by students, either within or outside the campuses. Many students had died as a result of the struggle by students. It is worthy of note that during demonstrations, law enforcement agents are often drafted into campuses to maintain and forestall the breakdown of law and order. In the process, the law enforcement agents do apply force, through the use of guns and other life ammunitions which had often been resulting in the death of students. The report indicates that there was police brutality of students that participated in the University of Ibadan riot of 1st February 1971, which eventually led to the death of Adekunle Adepeju. Other causes of death are as indicated in Table 2 below:

1. In 1978, the National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS) demonstrated over the increase of feeding fees from 50K to 1:50K with placards, the police were drafted with automatic riffles, canister, the presence of police intensified the demonstration and several students were shot and killed. The new filtered to other universities and the public and it became a nationwide protest.
2. In 1998, students of Ambrose Alli Universities, Ekpoma, Violently protested due to cult activities and it resulted in the death of many students.
3. In 2003, the increase in the price of petroleum products sparked up violent protests in most universities and other tertiary institutions across the country.

Not only had death been recorded among students, in some cases, the law enforcement agents rather than working to achieve the mission, do rape innocent female students on campuses. Also, valuable properties of institutions or individuals in the society, are often destroyed by an angry mob, in an attempt to show the level of their annoyance. Quite disturbing is the fact that hoodlums within the society do join the angry mob to unleash terror on individuals and set

government vehicles ablaze. It is also unfortunate that after the reopening of institutions, these properties are valued and students are levied individually to replace them. This has been a yoke for those among the students who are from poor homes. In most cases, students found to be involved, are suspended or expelled. This category of premature graduates or dropouts is making society to be turgid of criminals because eventually, they will result in nefarious activities for them to survive in society. This has also continued to be a waste of resources of government and even parents on the education of such students.

Over the years, Nigerian Universities and other tertiary institutions have experienced several students' demonstrations and unrest. Some of them have resulted in the violence leading to the destruction of public properties, arrest, large-scale injuries, maimings, explosions, proscription of union activities, prosecution and imprisonment, rustication, and loss of life.

Incessant Closure of Tertiary Institutions: One issue that has become noticeable after the demonstration by students is the fact that institutions are often closed by management indefinitely in most cases, definitely on few occasions, to prevent further breakdown of law and order and give room for restoration of normalcy in the institutions. The incessant closure of institutions has however been disturbing the academic calendar and normal teaching of students on the campuses. In some cases, institutions are closed for up to four months or more, thereby losing the students to society. This has been causing a delay in the completion of the academic calendar on the campuses and a delay in the graduation of students. Unfortunately, a student who supposes to spend four years for a program does end up spending twice or more, which has been serving as a yoke for parents and guardians who have to spend additional money on the education of their children in the institutions. It is also disturbing to note that when students are released to the society indiscriminately, many among them, in an attempt to keep themselves busy, or garner money for their sustenance, do enlist in nefarious activities, such as examination malpractice, armed robbery, prostitution, swindling, kidnapping, just to mention a few. This has continued to disturb the peace of society.

Disunity between Management and Students: The unionism of students has over the years been setting students against the management. In most cases, a battle line is always drawn between the two, where one is not ready to bend for the other until their demands are met. It is not a doubt that students and management of institutions operate as enemies with one trying to prove supremacy over the other.

Loss of Image of Tertiary Education: In the past, tertiary education in Nigeria was well respected at home and at an international level because of the quality of education it provides and the quality of the graduates of tertiary institutions. Unfortunately, the story has changed as things have already fallen apart. Without mincing words, tertiary education has lost the glory in Nigeria. We now have substandard graduates which have been making the employers of labor reject them during the recruitment process. The complaint has been that the products of tertiary institutions cannot match the skills expected from them, as they are myopic and deficient knowledge, skills, traits, and even values. Quite unfortunate is the fact that many students of tertiary institutions in Nigeria who show interest in continuing their education in overseas countries are now been made to write qualifying tests, which has been discouraging and embarrassing, and humiliating.

Rising Cases of Brain Drain: One of the main issues in tertiary institutions in Nigeria, is the level of brain drain, in which case, academic staff leaves institutions, to another institution and even foreign countries. This has been depleting manpower in tertiary institutions. One major cause of this situation as being the incessant student unrest, associated closure of institutions, as well as disruption of the academic calendar.

Fall in the Quality of Graduates of Tertiary Institutions

The Way Forward

Management should create enabling environment for learning and also the University authorities should take the security of the university more seriously. The issue of having old men as security officers should be a thing of the past. The security department should be filled with able-bodied, literate, and well-trained men in the art of security keeping. The security departments should be adequately equipped with the necessary security gadgets to minimize the activities of students with criminal tendencies.

Students should be encouraged to speak up against crime or report shady movements to the security department immediately. Such revelations should be handled with utmost dispatch and confidence to nip crises in the bud. Students should be encouraged to know their rights and the implication of their actions to deter them from giving and receiving bribes. They need a reorientation to make them know that they do not have to give something (bribe) to get their entitlement/rights.

Finally, the universities should overcome cultism by encouraging the formulation of elitist social clubs on campuses from which a large number of students would learn what it means to have positive socialization for leadership as well as how to be a university product.

1. There must be a responsible society that breeds a response education system that gives rise to responsible leadership where people respect and tolerate one another's and ideas and opinions.
2. There should be a speedy resolution of issues affecting the student union on campus by management and the government. Unions should not be viewed as adversaries but partners towards organizational success, David (2013).
3. Students Union leaders should be represented in committees of the institution for a democratization of decision process by state holders in taking major decisions, students have right to be heard, Olayiwola (1999) Student's participation in institutional governance.
4. The introduction of seminars and workshops on leadership training would enhance organizational effectiveness in tertiary institutions.
5. Being the voice of the student community, they should strive to instill discipline among students.
6. The government should increase the funding of tertiary institutions to boost infrastructures on campuses.
7. Student Union leaders should be alive to their constitutional responsibilities which may include organizing social and sporting activities such as football competitions, beauty pageants, ragging days, cultural events, providing services and protecting of services, and protecting the well-being of students.

8. Union executives must be exemplary in their actions conducts free, fair, and credible elections to usher in a new EXCO when their tenure is due they must be accessible, transparent, and objective.
9. Student Union leaders must encourage the student to student interaction by calling congress, forming committees to assign duties investigates reports, and exhaustively discuss issues before presentation to authorities.
10. Students' Union leaders should educate Congress members to be careful in handling college properties and equipment to avoid penalties or discipline.
11. There should be joint interaction meetings between student union leaders, management, and securities personnel for confidence building to avoid escalation of demonstration and use of brute force should it arise.
12. Union leaders must embrace dialogue and negotiation on addressing issues with management and deploy timeliness to stimulate a response. The use of “GBEGE” “SAGBE” “ALUTA” slogans to declare violent protest should be the last report.
13. Student's union leaders must be astute, fearless, and courageous in demanding the rights of the students in the most civil manner.
14. Students' union leaders must know the limits of their powers and cooperate with management towards achieving institutional goals without compromising standards and the welfare of students.
15. Student Union leaders must liaise with another institutional union for purposes of cross-fertilization of ideas and solidarity.
16. Management should encourage student participation in institutional governance which leads to organizational effectiveness in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. The inclusion of students in the day-to-day running of educational institutions both Federal, State, and privately owned will address most challenges. To stimulate good student leadership and organizational effectiveness, the government, and management of our education sectors should organize courses, seminars, talk shows, and workshops in leadership training for student leaders to assist them to develop the skills needed to perform their responsibilities.
17. Also, student's union leaders should emerge only through free, fair, and credible elections void of socio-economic and political interferences.
18. Management should create an enabling environment for learning and peaceful co-existence. Students should note that management can provide for their welfare and comfort based on available resources.
19. Every student is responsible for his or her action while undergoing training in any institution of higher learning. Union leaders and students alike should remember that their primary duty in the school is to acquire skills and knowledge. They should avoid any actions that may lead to suspension, expulsion, prosecution, and even imprisonment. They should be guided by the oath of allegiance they took during matriculation which ends only when they have successfully graduated.

References

- Abbas, I. M.(1991). *Responsible students unionism: Paper presented in the matriculation orientation of Kaduna State Polytechnic*, Kaduna: Nigeria
- Abati, R. (2005). Was that NANS...?', *The Guardian Newspaper* 11th December, 2005, p2
- Adebayo, F. A. (2009). Student – authority conflict in Nigerian Universities, *The Social Science* 5(5), 489–493.
- Adesanya, A. P. (1989). A study of students participation in school management. An unpublished M.Ed thesis, O. A.U, Ile-Ife Administration and political development of nations, African Research Review, *An International Multidisciplinary Journal, Ethiopia*, 9 (1), Serial No 36, January, 2015, 146-158
- Behrendt-kigozi, H. (2013). *Violence and ethics in electoral processes in Nigeria*, Report on the round table discussion on violence and ethics in electoral processes in Nigeria on 20th of Feb.2013. published March 4, 2013. Available at <http://www.kas.de/nigeria/en/publicat>. (Accessed 4 June 2013).
- Dickson, S. (2012). How Sylva victimized me – New Bayelsa Governor premium Times. Feb 22, 2012. Available at <http://premiumtimesng.com/politics>. (Accessed 4 June 2013).
- David, O. O. (2013). *Student unionism: A protest instrument for the promotion of FUTA*, Brand being lecture delivered in 2013 at the leadership retreat of newly Elected FUTASU officials at the National Institute for Educational Planning and Administration (NIEPA) Ondo on 9th, May,
- Ezekwem, E. C. (2006). *Student unionism and University administration in Nigeria*, Retrieved from <http://publisher.com/proposal> 1568.
- Federal Republic of Nigeria. (2004). *National Policy on Education (Revised)* Abuja, Nigeria: Federal Government Press.
- Jega, A. (2003). *The role of unions of University governance in Nigeria*, (A paper delivered at the National Association of Pro-Chancellors of Nigeria Universities Seminar held on 13th -14th January.
- Nworah, U. (2008). *Nigerian politicians as gangsters. In: Chicken bones for literary and Artistic African - American Themes*, <http://www.nathanieltturner.com/nigerianpoliticiansasgangsters> Accessed 4 June 2013.

Obasanjo, O. (2012). *Hold politicians accountable for their empty promises*, Daily post. Nigerian online newspaper Nov. 13. Available at <http://dailypost.com.ng/2012/11/13holdpoliticians-accountable> (Accessed 4 June 2013).

Ogbonmwan, S. (2005). *The Nigeria political godfather Edo State as a case study*, Paper presented at the 3rd Annual Edo Global Organization Conference Budapest. Hungary 14 – 16 October 2005. Available at <http://www.dawody.com/ogbonmwan>. (Accessed 4 July 2013).

The Gaurdian Newspaper (2010). *Show of shame at the House of Reps*, Thursday June 24 Editorial Opinion, Available at <http://ogala.blogspot.com/2010/06/show-of-shame-at-house> (Accessed 11 September 2,2013.)

Ige, A. M. (2014). The challenges of being a student of any publictertiary institution in Nigeria of today, *Journal of Studies in Education*. 4, (1),128-141