

Senate or Rubber Stamp? Repositioning Academic Boards as Genuine Governance Actors in Nigerian Universities

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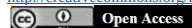
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ABSTRACT

The university senate is constitutionally recognised as the highest academic authority in Nigerian universities. Yet, in practice, it has been progressively weakened, sidelined, and reduced to a body that merely approves decisions already made elsewhere. This position paper argues that the Nigerian university senate has become, in many institutions, a rubber stamp body rather than a genuine governance actor. Drawing on Shared Governance Theory, the paper contends that the erosion of senate authority represents a fundamental governance failure with serious consequences for academic quality, institutional accountability, and the credibility of Nigerian higher education. The paper identifies the problem as rooted in the over concentration of power in the hands of vice chancellors and governing councils, the appointment of loyal rather than competent senate members, weak legislative enforcement of university statutes, and a culture of silence and compliance among academics. The paper concludes that repositioning the senate as a genuine governance actor requires deliberate legal reforms, cultural reorientation, and the strengthening of academic independence. Concrete suggestions are offered for policymakers, university administrators, and other stakeholders in Nigerian higher education.

Introduction

In every well governed university, the senate or academic board holds a position of central importance. It is the body through which the academic community exercises collective authority over the core business of the university, which is teaching, learning, and research. When the senate functions as it should, it serves as the conscience of the institution, asking difficult questions, resisting inappropriate pressures, and ensuring that decisions about academic matters are made by those who are best qualified to make them. When it does not function well, the entire governance architecture of the university is weakened, and the institution becomes vulnerable to abuse of power, poor decision making, and institutional decline.

In Nigerian universities, the senate is established by law. The Universities (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act and the individual statutes of each university grant the senate wide powers over academic policy, curriculum, examinations, the award of degrees, and the setting of standards. On paper, the senate is a powerful and independent body. In practice, however, the reality is often very different. Across many Nigerian universities, the senate has become a body that meets to ratify decisions already made by the vice chancellor or the governing council, rubber stamps policies that were never subjected to genuine deliberation, and produces minutes that reflect consensus where none actually existed (Babalola, Jaiyeoba, & Okediran, 2017).

This paper takes the position that the current state of senate governance in Nigerian universities is a crisis that has received far less attention than it deserves. While much has been written about funding shortfalls, industrial strikes, and infrastructure deficits in Nigerian higher education, the governance dimension of institutional underperformance has been comparatively neglected. Yet, governance failure lies at the root of many other problems. When the senate cannot function as a genuine governance actor, decisions about academic standards are made without proper deliberation, staff promotion processes

become subject to personal influence, examination results can be manipulated without challenge, and the overall culture of academic integrity is weakened (Nwosu & Eme, 2020).

The argument of this paper is not that the senate is entirely without function in Nigerian universities. Senate meetings are held, agendas are circulated, and minutes are recorded. The problem is that the substance of governance, meaning the genuine exercise of academic authority, has been hollowed out. The senate exists in form but not in fact. Repositioning it as a genuine governance actor requires confronting the structural, legal, and cultural factors that have produced this hollowing out and replacing them with arrangements that restore meaning and power to the collective academic voice.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, it reviews the theoretical framework guiding the analysis. Second, it undertakes a conceptual examination of the key ideas informing the discussion. Third, it draws conclusions from the analysis. Fourth, it offers practical suggestions for reform. The paper is written as a position paper intended to stimulate debate, inform policy, and contribute to the literature on higher education governance in Nigeria and Africa more broadly.

Despite the clear legal mandate given to university senates in Nigeria, there is growing evidence that senate authority has been progressively eroded in most Nigerian federal and state universities. The senate, which is meant to be the supreme academic authority of the university, has in many cases become a ceremonial body whose decisions carry little real weight (Ekundayo & Ajayi, 2017). Key academic decisions are frequently made by vice chancellors acting alone or in consultation with a small group of loyalists, and the senate is then presented with these decisions as matters of information rather than matters for deliberation. This pattern has made it very difficult for the senate to play its proper role as a check on executive power and as the guardian of academic standards.

The consequences of this governance failure are serious and wide ranging. Without a functioning senate, there is no effective mechanism for collective academic oversight of curriculum quality, research standards, or examination integrity. Staff promotion decisions, which the senate is meant to oversee, become subject to favouritism and political influence. The university loses its capacity for genuine self regulation, making it dependent on external bodies such as the National Universities Commission (NUC) for oversight that should be generated from within (Abiodun-Oyebanji, 2021). Until the senate is repositioned as a genuine governance actor, Nigerian universities will continue to be governed in ways that fall far short of global standards. This paper identifies this repositioning as an urgent institutional and policy priority.

Theoretical Review

This paper is grounded in Shared Governance Theory.

Shared Governance Theory

Shared Governance Theory was originally propounded by Corson in (1960). The theory states that governance in a university must be shared between the administration, which handles operational and financial matters, and the academic community, which handles matters of academic substance. The senate or academic board is the institutional mechanism through which this sharing of governance is given practical expression.

The AAUP's 1966 Statement, which remains globally influential, argues that effective university governance requires joint planning and effort involving governing boards, administrations, faculties, students, and other relevant groups. It specifically assigns to the faculty, acting through the senate, primary responsibility for matters of curriculum, instruction, research, and the conferment of degrees (AAUP, 2015). When these responsibilities are removed from the faculty and concentrated in the hands of the administration or governing council, shared governance breaks down, and the university loses the distinctive academic character that makes it intellectually credible and educationally effective.

More recent scholarship has extended the theory in ways that are particularly relevant to the African higher education context. Olufemi and Okunade (2018) argue that shared governance in Nigerian universities is undermined by the colonial legacy of centralised administrative authority, which placed enormous power in the hands of vice chancellors and governing councils while treating academic staff as subordinate employees rather than as professional partners in governance. Akinwale and Olaopa (2020) similarly argue that the formal structures of shared governance in Nigerian universities, including the senate, were imported from British models but were never accompanied by the cultural and legal

conditions that made those models work in their original settings. As a result, the structures exist on paper without being supported by the values and practices that give them genuine meaning and function.

Relevance of Shared Governance Theory to the Study

Shared Governance Theory is directly relevant to this study because it provides both a normative standard and an analytical framework for assessing the state of senate governance in Nigerian universities. Normatively, the theory tells us what the senate ought to be doing: exercising genuine, collective academic authority over the core functions of the institution. Analytically, it helps us understand why the senate has failed to do this: because the conditions for shared governance, including academic freedom, secure tenure, transparent decision making, and respect for collective deliberation, have not been adequately established or protected in Nigerian universities.

The theory also points toward solutions. If the problem is the absence of the conditions for shared governance, then the solution lies in creating those conditions. This means strengthening legal protections for academic independence, reforming the appointment processes for senate membership, establishing clear boundaries between executive authority and academic authority, and building a culture within universities that values collective deliberation as a fundamental feature of good governance. Shared Governance Theory thus provides not only a diagnosis of the problem but a roadmap for reform, and it is this dual utility that makes it the most appropriate theoretical framework for this paper.

Conceptual Review

University Governance

University governance refers to the structures, processes, and relationships through which a university is directed, controlled, and made accountable. It encompasses both the formal legal structures established by statute, such as the governing council, the senate, and the vice chancellor, and the informal cultural practices through which authority is actually exercised within the institution (Ogunyemi & Oluwole, 2019). Good university governance is characterised by clarity of roles, transparency of processes, accountability for decisions, respect for the distinct authority of different governance bodies, and a commitment to the mission of the institution.

In Nigeria, the legal framework for university governance is provided by the Universities (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act of 1993 as amended, as well as the individual statutes of each university. This framework establishes a tripartite governance structure consisting of the governing council, the senate, and the vice chancellor. The governing council is responsible for the general control and superintendence of the university and its finances. The senate is responsible for academic matters. The vice chancellor serves as the chief executive and academic officer, linking the two bodies (Ekundayo & Ajayi, 2017). In theory, this structure provides a clear division of authority that protects academic matters from political or administrative interference. In practice, the boundaries between these bodies are frequently violated, most often by the expansion of vice-chancellor and council authority into areas that properly belong to the senate.

The Senate as Academic Authority

The senate is the body through which the academic community of a university governs itself in relation to all matters of academic substance. Its membership typically includes the vice chancellor as chair, all professors, deans of faculties, directors of institutes, student representatives, and other senior academic officers. Its functions include approving curricula, setting examination policies, recommending the award of degrees, overseeing academic standards, approving staff appointments and promotions, and advising the governing council on academic matters (Babalola

Jaiyeoba, & Okediran, 2017).

The strength of the senate as an academic authority depends on several conditions being in place. First, senate members must be genuinely independent, meaning they must be willing and able to speak and vote according to their professional judgement rather than according to what they think the vice chancellor wants to hear. Second, information must flow to senate members in a timely and complete manner, so that they can make informed decisions. Third, the deliberations of the senate must be genuine, meaning that issues must be properly debated and that dissenting views must be heard and recorded. Fourth, decisions of the senate must be binding within their proper domain, meaning that the vice chancellor and governing council must not routinely override or ignore senate decisions on academic matters (Olufemi & Okunade, 2018).

In Nigerian universities, all four of these conditions are frequently absent. Professors who oppose vice-chancellor preferences in senate meetings have reported being victimised through delayed promotions, unfavourable teaching assignments, and exclusion from important committees (Nwosu & Eme, 2020). Information is often withheld from the senate or presented in ways that make it difficult to ask informed questions. Meetings are conducted in ways that discourage genuine debate. And decisions that the senate does make are sometimes simply ignored by the administration when they are inconvenient. The result is a senate that is present in the institutional architecture but absent from actual governance.

The Rubber Stamp Institution

The concept of a rubber stamp institution refers to a governance body that formally exists and goes through the motions of decision making but that lacks the independence, information, and authority to exercise genuine oversight or to resist the preferences of those who hold executive power (Nwosu & Eme, 2020). Rubber stamp institutions are common in political systems where democratic forms are maintained without democratic substance. They are also found in organisational settings where governance structures are created to satisfy external requirements for accountability without genuinely serving that purpose.

In the context of Nigerian university governance, the senate can be described as a rubber stamp institution when it consistently approves proposals without substantive debate, when it never rejects or significantly modifies proposals put to it by the vice chancellor, when its members are selected or rewarded on the basis of loyalty rather than competence, when it has no effective means of compelling the administration to account for its decisions, and when its members feel unsafe expressing disagreement (Abiodun-Oyebanji, 2021). These conditions describe the reality in many Nigerian universities, where senate proceedings are carefully managed to produce the appearance of collective deliberation without its substance.

The transformation of the senate from a genuine governance actor into a rubber stamp institution does not usually happen suddenly. It is typically a gradual process driven by the accumulation of small compromises over time. A vice chancellor who is slightly impatient with detailed academic debate begins to present proposals as settled matters. Professors who initially push back find that this has consequences for their careers. Over time, a culture develops in which senate membership is understood to mean going along with the administration rather than exercising independent judgement. This culture, once established, is very difficult to reverse because it becomes self enforcing: academics who might be willing to speak out observe the consequences for those who have done so and choose silence instead (Akinwale & Olaopa, 2020).

Shared Decision Making in Higher Education

Shared decision making in higher education refers to the practice of involving multiple stakeholders, particularly academic staff, in decisions that affect the core activities of the institution. It is grounded in the recognition that academic decisions require academic expertise and that those who will be most affected by a decision often have the most relevant knowledge for making it well (Birnbaum, 2015). Shared decision making is not the same as collective management by committee. It does not mean that every decision must be made by a vote of all interested parties. It means that decisions within the proper domain of the senate must be genuinely deliberated within that body, and that those outside the senate must not bypass or override it without clear legal justification.

Research consistently shows that universities with higher levels of genuine shared decision making perform better across multiple dimensions. Olabisi and Oduaran (2022) found that Nigerian universities where senate members reported greater influence over academic decisions also reported higher levels of staff satisfaction, lower rates of academic staff turnover, and stronger research output. These findings suggest that shared decision making is not only a governance principle but a practical driver of institutional performance. When academic staff feel that their professional judgement is respected and that they have genuine authority over academic matters, they are more committed, more productive, and more likely to uphold the standards of the institution.

Institutional Accountability in Higher Education

Institutional accountability in higher education refers to the obligation of the university to account for its decisions, its use of resources, and its performance to a range of stakeholders. These stakeholders

include students, staff, government, employers, and the broader public (Ogunyemi & Oluwole, 2019). Accountability operates through multiple channels: legal accountability through compliance with statutory requirements; financial accountability through audits and reporting; academic accountability through quality assurance processes; and internal accountability through governance structures including the senate.

The senate plays a crucial role in internal accountability. When it functions well, it ensures that academic decisions are made transparently, that the basis for those decisions can be questioned and explained, and that those responsible for academic performance can be held to account by their peers. When the senate is reduced to a rubber stamp body, this form of internal accountability disappears, and the institution becomes dependent on external oversight for the accountability that should be generated from within (Akinwale & Olaopa, 2020). The NUC accreditation process, for example, is partly designed to compensate for the weakness of internal governance in Nigerian universities. But external oversight can never fully substitute for the ongoing, detailed, and expert scrutiny that a genuinely functioning senate can provide. The absence of strong senate governance thus creates accountability gaps that no external body can fully fill.

Comparative evidence from other African countries illustrates the potential of strong senate governance for institutional accountability. In South Africa, the Higher Education Act of 1997 strengthened the role of academic governance structures and created statutory protections for their independence. Subsequent research showed that institutions with more robust senate governance demonstrated stronger internal quality assurance processes and more transparent decision making (Luescher & Loader, 2018). In Ghana, the University of Ghana's Governing Body Statute was revised to clarify and strengthen the authority of the academic board over curricular and examination matters, with positive effects on academic integrity (Asante & Osei-Bonsu, 2019). These examples suggest that legal and structural reforms can make a real difference to the effectiveness of senate governance.

Conclusion

This paper has advanced a clear and urgent argument: the university senate in Nigeria has been progressively reduced from its proper status as the supreme academic authority of the university to a body that, in many institutions, functions as little more than a rubber stamp for decisions made elsewhere. This reduction is not accidental. It is the product of deliberate and cumulative choices by administrators who have found it convenient to concentrate authority, by academics who have found it safer to remain silent, and by regulators and policymakers who have not given sufficient attention to the governance conditions that make academic institutions credible.

Drawing on Shared Governance Theory, the paper has argued that this state of affairs represents a fundamental failure of university governance with consequences that reach into every dimension of institutional performance. Without a genuinely functioning senate, there is no effective mechanism of internal academic accountability. Academic standards cannot be properly maintained. Curriculum decisions cannot benefit from the full range of expert input available within the institution. Staff promotions and appointments cannot be protected from personal and political influence. The university loses its capacity to govern itself in accordance with the values and standards that give it meaning as an academic institution.

The paper concludes that repositioning the Nigerian university senate as a genuine governance actor is both necessary and possible. It is necessary because the costs of continued senate weakness are too high to tolerate in a country that urgently needs its universities to perform at a higher level. It is possible because the legal framework, while imperfectly applied, provides the foundation on which genuine senate authority can be rebuilt. What is required is the political will to enforce existing laws, the institutional courage to reform where laws are inadequate, and the cultural commitment to build academic communities in which the collective voice of scholars is genuinely valued and respected.

Suggestions

1. Federal Government of Nigeria, through the National Assembly, should review and strengthen the legal provisions governing the authority of university senates. Amendments to the Universities (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act should clearly define the boundary between senate authority and council or vice chancellor authority, and should provide explicit legal remedies for situations where senate decisions are overridden without proper justification.

2. Nigerian universities should review the processes through which senate members are appointed to committees, chairpersonships, and other positions of influence within the senate. These appointments should be governed by transparent criteria based on academic competence and seniority rather than on personal loyalty to the vice chancellor. Where applicable, elections by peers should replace appointments by the vice chancellor for key senate positions such as faculty deans and heads of departments.

3. The NUC, in collaboration with university governing councils, should establish formal mechanisms through which senate members who are victimised for exercising their governance functions can seek redress. This should include a clear whistleblower protection framework applicable to academic governance contexts. Without such protections, the culture of silence that currently prevails in many senates cannot be broken.

4. Nigerian universities should be required to make the proceedings of their senates more transparent, including by publishing anonymised records of senate decisions, votes, and significant debates on institutional websites.

The NUC should incorporate an assessment of the genuine functioning of the university senate into its accreditation and quality assurance processes. Accreditation visits should include interviews with senate members about the quality of governance deliberations, review of senate minutes for evidence of genuine debate, and assessment of whether senate decisions on academic matters are being respected by university administrators. Poor senate governance should affect accreditation outcomes.

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