

University Administrators Coping Strategies for Managing Tertiary Education in Nigeria in a Period of Economic Depression

Romina Ifeoma ASIYAI

Department of Educational Management and Foundations
Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria
asiyairomina@yahoo.com

Abstract

This study examined university administrators coping strategies for managing tertiary education in Nigeria in a period of economic depression. The investigation was guided by two research questions and two hypotheses. The study sample was made up of 650 (academic staff and administrative staff) selected from six universities (Federal and State) in Southern Nigeria. Data were collected through structured questionnaire. Analysis of collected data for the research questions were conducted through the use of measures of central tendency. Inferential statistics were employed for testing the hypotheses at 0.05 alpha level. The findings revealed that the strategies employed by university administrators to cope during economic depression include freezing of staff recruitment, cost sharing through tuition and other fees payment, non-construction of new buildings, curtailing supply of consumables amongst others. These strategies have severely affected the universities in several ways. The study made recommendations for policy and practice in view of the findings.

Keywords: university administrators, coping strategies, economic depression, effect, managing, universities.

INTRODUCTION

Universities all over the world and Nigeria in particular, are known as centres for learning, teaching, research, innovation, entrepreneurship and community service. They are committed to the pursuit of excellence through ensuring quality delivery of academic activities. Several variables act as facilitators in ensuring quality delivery of the academic activities in order to maintain standards. These variables for indicating quality include university teachers (lecturers), their qualification and experience, support services by non-academics, internal and external supervision, instructional and sanitary facilities, infrastructural facilities and information and communication technologies. These quality indicators must be adequately provided for good quality learning, teaching, research and other functions of the university to be effectively carried out and thus assurance of quality in universities. Through university education a nation can attain sustainability in social, economic and political growth as well as poverty reduction.

The on-going economic recession in Nigeria which has degenerated to economic depression was first described by the Minister for Finance, Adeosun (2016) when she noted that

Nigerian economy was in “technical recession”, noting that Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has declined by 2.06%. Describing the two negative growths of Nigeria economy she maintained that in the first quarter of 2016, the growth rate of Gross Domestic Product in Nigeria was -0.36% and in the second quarter it was -1.5%. Economic recession has been variously described by many groups or people. The National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER, 2017) see economic recession as a period during which there is significant decline in economic activity in a country, lasting for more than few months, noticeable in real gross domestic product, real income, industrial production and employment. Farayibi (2016:12) opined that during a period of recession there is downturn in the economy, indicated by decline in the performance of macroeconomic activities which defines a country’s economic state at any particular time.

The Central Bank of Nigeria (2012) listed war, climate change, revolution and natural disasters as variables that can cause economic recession in a country. Shido-Ikwu (2017:52) attributed the on-going recession in Nigeria to government policy, legacy factors and political/security factors. The policies being implemented by the government of Nigeria prior to the commencement of the current recession included delayed passage and signing of 2016 appropriation bills which trifled economic activities and removal of amnesty programme for the Niger-Deltans which triggered blowing up of oil pipelines by militants. Nigeria economy being majorly dependent on crude oil began to dwindle due to drop in production amidst the decline in the price of crude oil in global market. Other policies of government that resulted in the current recession have been identified by Iwedi and Igbani (2017:259) as removal of oil subsidy, untimely formation of cabinet and implementation of unfavourable exchange rate.

A country is said to be witnessing economic depression when it experiences drastic drop in GDP such that economic activities is slowed down, there is gross unemployment, under employment, low investment, cost of commodities and services gets increasingly very high, some workers are laid off by firms and hardship becomes the order of the day. During a period of economic depression in a country, vices thrive because of extreme poverty of the citizens of the country who must do something for survival. Onuchukwu (2016) calculated the misery index of Nigerian masses which describes the extent of suffering being experienced, indicated by the unemployment and inflation in the country. Accordingly, for 2015-2016 the misery index as at the first quarter of 2016 was 22.53%, gross domestic product was 0.36% and during the first quarter of 2017, it was 31.02%, gross domestic product was 0.8%. It is clear from this index that Nigerian masses are suffering. In addition Suraju and Oyefesobi (2018:67) averred that the economic crisis in Nigeria has seriously affected the pattern of consumption and that many families are finding it difficult to provide basic daily needs to their children.

Some countries of the world have witnessed economic recession. In the United States of America, four decades of recession has been reported (Wright, Gianna and Vasquez-Colina 2013:157). They found that economic recession in United States of America had no significant impact on enrollment into higher education as it continued to increase by 155% during recession. In China, Meek and Leahy (2012) explained that the government of Hong Kong, remained committed to funding higher education through the university grant system, increased research support and expanding infrastructures and recruitment of increased number of academics during financial crisis in the country. Thus, the financial crisis in Hong Kong never impacted on higher education significantly. In Malaysia, Sirat, Bakar and Hwa cited in Meek and Leahy (2012) noted that the Malaysian government responded during global financial crisis in the country by allocating more fund to higher education and reduced the allocation of fund when the economy recovered. In the Phillipines, though government allocation to higher education reduced,

institutions were able to stabilize the shortfalls through incomes generated from other programmes offered. Wilson (2013) expressed that economic recession impacted to some extent on universities in Spain, Greece, Portugal and Croatia leading to cuts in benefits of staff, research, facilities and infrastructure provision. In South Africa Maree (2013:391) expressed that as a result of economic wave inequality, unemployment and poverty increased in the country in 2013. As a result of financial difficulties faced by tertiary institutions due to economic downturn, delivery of quality education to produce highly skilled manpower has become extremely difficult. Studies have x-rayed the challenges faced by higher education in Africa due largely to financial crisis (Tefferra, 2016; Wangenge-Ouma & Cloete, 2008; De Villier & Steyn, 2007:138; Oketch, 2003:88). In Nigerian universities the economic crisis is biting hard on academic activities since the economic depression started and many laboratories and workshops are empty lacking equipment and other consumables for practical experiment. The on-going strike embarked upon by Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) since October 2018 is to press forth the demand of the union for proper funding of Nigerian universities by the government.

Managing tertiary education in a period of economic depression involves institutional administrator's capability of planning, coordinating, organizing and utilizing the available human and material resources in the institution, by minimizing wastage and ensuring that academic activities are conducted smoothly. It involves institutional administrators establishing and implementing policies that would facilitate the smooth and effective conduct of academic activities by putting things under control. Tightening up strategies could be adopted by institution administrators during economic depression to help make things work as usual. This study is an examination of the coping strategies employed by university administrators during economic depression and how the depression has affected universities in Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

The economic recession which has degenerated to economic depression in Nigeria is biting too hard on every sector of Nigerian economy. The tertiary education system is severely hit by the financial crisis. The author is not quite sure how university administrators in the country are coping with managing the institutions effectively amidst the drastic drop in allocation of fund to the system. Casual observation by the researcher through visit to some cities in Delta and Edo States noticed that many parents have withdrawn their children from private secondary schools to public schools due to economic depression in the country. Even some parents who have their children studying in universities abroad have been finding it extremely difficult to pay school fees as a result of the continued increase in the price of Dollar in relation to the Nigerian currency. This study attempted to explore the coping strategies used by university administrators for managing university education and how the economic depression in Nigeria has affected the universities.

Purpose on the Study

The study is guided by two purposes such as: to examine the perceptions of staff regarding the coping strategies adopted by university administrators in Nigeria for management of the universities in a period of economic depression. Secondly, the study examined the perspectives of staff of federal and state universities on how the economic depression has affected universities in Nigeria.

Specific Objectives

The specific objectives of the study are:

- To examine the perceptions of staff of federal and state universities in Nigeria regarding the coping strategies adopted by administrators for the management of the universities in a period of economic depression.
- To examine perceptions of staff of federal and state universities concerning how the economic depression in Nigeria has affected the universities.

Relevance of the Study

Generally, universities are charged with the production of high level quality manpower for nation's economy. A nation having sound university education system of high standard could be able to boost the skilled manpower for economic, social, political, industrial and technological development. Therefore, a study that has its focus on university education could be beneficial to tertiary education stakeholders in several ways. Students who are the fulcrum of education would gain from this study if the recommended suggestions are implemented for improved learning. Academic and non-academic staff whose welfare has been impaired by the biting economic depression in the country would also benefit. University administrators and management team could find the findings and suggested recommendations as policy guide for improved management of affairs of Nigerian universities.

Research Questions

Two questions were posited and answered in this study as follows:

- What coping strategies have been employed by University administrators in the management of the institution during economic depression in Nigeria?
- How does staff of Federal and State Universities perceive the extent to which economic depression in Nigeria has affected the universities in the country?

Hypothesis

Two hypotheses were formulated and tested as follows:

- Staff of State and Federal Universities in Nigeria will not differ significantly in their perception of the coping strategies that have been employed by University administrators in a period of economic depression.
- Staff of State and Federal Universities in Nigeria will not differ significantly in their perception on the extent to which economic depression has affected universities in the country.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This descriptive survey research of ex-post facto design drew its population from public universities in southern Nigeria. The sample of the study comprised 640 made up of 200

administrative staff and 440 academic staff of six universities (three Federal and three States) in Nigeria. The administrative staffs were persons from the rank of Senior Assistant Registrar to Deputy Registrar. The academic staffs were taken from the rank of Lecturer 1 to Professor. Simple random sampling technique was employed in selecting the subjects. Six universities were selected from two geopolitical zones in southern Nigeria. The universities are Ambrose Ali University, Ekpoma, University of Benin, Benin-city, Enugu State University of Science and Technology, Enugu, Ekiti State University, Ado Ekiti, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Akwa and University of Lagos, Akoka Lagos. Three of the Universities were federal and three were state. The questionnaire was the instrument for collection of data from the respondents. The first part of the questionnaire contained demographic information of the respondents bothering on type of university, status and rank of staff. The second part of the questionnaire contained the main items structured on a four points scoring scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The scoring scale was weighted from 4 to 1 point. The instrument was sub divided into two sections. The first subdivision section contained twelve items focusing on coping strategies employed by university administrators in a period of economic depression in Nigeria. It was titled "State and Federal University Staff Perception on Coping Strategies for Managing Universities in a Depressed Economy Questionnaire", (SFUSPCSMUDEQ). The second subdivision contained six items focusing on the extent economic depression in Nigeria has affected universities in southern Nigeria. It was titled "State and Federal University Staff Perception of the Extent to which Economic Depression Affected Southern Nigerian Universities Questionnaire" (SFUSPEEDASNUQ).

The face and content validity of the instrument was censured by two experts in educational administration of Delta State University, Abraka. They read through each item of the instrument, and provided comments which were used in effecting correction before the final version was prepared. To establish the reliability of the instrument, thirty copies were administered to academic and administrative staff of two universities not included in the sample twice within an interval of two weeks. The data obtained were statistically analyzed using Pearson Product Moment Formula An index of 0.52 was calculated. This was stepped up using Spearman Brown's Prophecy Formula to yield a reliability index of 0.684. This helped to establish the item stability of the instrument and hence it's suitability for use.

The questionnaire was administered by the researcher and five assistants who are her friends, currently academic staffs of the universities used for this investigation. The instrument was sent to the research assistants as parcel through transport service. They administered it in their universities and returned it back to the researcher through transport services as parcel. Six hundred and forty (640) copies of the instrument was administered but six hundred and twenty (620) copies were returned correctly attended to and used for analysis. Data collected from administered questionnaire were analyzed through the application of version 22 of the Statistical Package of the Social Sciences in the forms of frequency counts, mean and standard deviation. Hypothesis testing was through parametric statistics of t-test at 0.05 significant level.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the result of data analysis in answer to research question which focused on identifying the coping strategies adopted by university administrators during economic depression in Nigeria.

Table 1: Mean rating of staff of federal and state universities on coping strategies employed by university administrators during a period of economic depression in Nigeria

S/N	Items on Coping Strategies Adopted by University Administrators in a period of Economic Depression	State Uni		Federal Uni	
		Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.
1	My university has resorted to cost sharing via tuition and other fees as a way of coping during economic depression	2.66	0.56	2.90	0.62
2	Diversifying sources of fund generation has helped universities cope during economic depression	2.80	0.77	2.96	0.54
3	Resorting to cost recovery through student loan scheme have been used by university management to cope during economic depression	2.00	0.89	1.88	1.11
4	Soliciting for donations from multi-nationals, firms, wealthy people and industries can be a source of funding universities during economic depression	2.30	1.25	1.90	0.99
5	My university management has resorted to freezing recruitment of staff as a coping mechanism during economic depression	3.20	0.44	3.00	0.80
6	My university has adopted compulsory retirement of invalid sick and aged staff as a coping strategy for due economic depression	2.90	0.80	2.56	0.82
7	Reducing supply of consumables have been used by university management a coping strategy during economic depression	2.75	1.00	3.00	0.92
8	Cutting down non-essential travels by staff have been used by university management as a useful strategy for coping during economic depression	2.70	0.38	2.90	0.72
9	As a coping strategy during economic depression, university administrators have reduced sponsorship of staff to national and international conferences for their professional development	3.30	0.42	3.20	0.55
10	Putting a stall on capital projects and construction of buildings can act as a coping mechanism for universities during economic depression.	2.80	0.66	2.76	0.59
11	Universities have curtailed the number of academic staff accepted for sabbatical leave as a coping strategy during economic depression	3.10	0.46	2.60	0.88
12	My university now pay staff salaries in fraction in order to cope with economic depression	2.80	0.64	2.78	0.53
13	My university management has adopted delayed promotion of staff as a coping strategy during economic depression	3.40	0.56	3.10	0.74
14	My university management have adopted the option of delayed implementation of promotion of staff due to financial crisis as a result of economic depression	3.25	0.39	2.80	1.00

The mean score for each of these items except items 3 and 4 is greater than 2.50, the cut-off point. The items having mean score above the criterion mean of 2.50 are accepted as the coping strategies adopted by Southern Nigeria university administrators in a period of economic depression in the country. For state and federal Nigerian universities, items 1, 2, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13 and 14 represent the coping strategies adopted by university administrators for coping in a period of economic depression in southern Nigeria.

Table 2 present the result of data analysis in answer to research question two which is concerned with finding out the extent economic depression in Nigeria has affected universities in the country.

Table 2: Mean rating of State and Federal University staff on extent economic depression in Nigeria has affected academic activities in universities

S/N	Items on how economic depression has affected Nigerian Universities	State Uni		Federal Uni	
		Mean	Std Dev	Mean	Std Dev
15	Non recruitment of academic staff has had serious impact on teaching and learning in Nigerian universities	3.30	0.90	2.94	0.78
16	Non replacement of retired and dead staff has led to overload of work for available academic staff	3.15	0.88	2.76	0.55
17	Reducing provision of materials and resources for teaching and learning can de-motivate staff in the pursuit of academic excellence	3.50	0.64	2.80	1.02
18	Non maintenance of facilities such as staff furniture, sanitary facilities due to economic depression can lower their motivation and commitment to duty	2.90	1.00	2.78	0.88
19	Inadequate provision of consumables during economic depression can engender frustration of staff when performing their duties	2.85	0.92	2.69	0.72
20	Delayed payment of staff salary during economic depression has triggered off union disputes thus leading to strike action which disrupted academic activities	2.84	0.59	3.00	0.85
21	Attainment of good quality in academic activities in the universities has been short chained due to serious cuts in provisions of resources for teaching and learning in a period of economic depression	3.20	0.60	3.06	0.49
22	Conduct of practical works have been reduced due to non-provision of resources due to financial crisis	3.25	1.06	2.86	0.99
23	Inadequate supply of materials to academic departments and units have impeded the effective running of day to day activities of each department/units	3.00	0.49	2.90	0.65
24	Curtailing of staff professional development due to paucity of fund during economic depression has severely impacted of the quality of teaching, learning and research in Nigerian universities	3.40	0.70	3.10	0.69
25	Non implementation of promotion of staff due to financial strangulation of universities during economic depression have had a de-motivating effect on them	3.60	0.72	3.46	0.55
26	Productivity of staff has dampened as a result of serious financial difficulties due to recession of Nigerian economy	3.48	0.36	3.26	0.77
27	Non provision of impress to heads of department due to economic recession has made it difficult to run the affairs of the departments effectively	3.52	0.86	3.10	0.94
28	Inability of academic departments of some Nigerian university to meet up with accreditation requirements due financial difficulties as a result of going economic depression has resulted in denial of accreditation of some courses	3.50	0.44	3.30	0.63

Decision was based on 2.50, the cut-off point

The data in Table 2 indicated that for all the 13 items for both state and federal university staff, the mean score is greater than the cut off mean score of 2.50. There is an overwhelming agreement by staff of state and federal universities in southern Nigeria that the economic

depression in the country have seriously affected academic activities in universities in southern Nigeria.

Table 3 presents the result of data analysis for testing the first hypothesis which stated that staff of State and Federal Universities in Nigeria will not differ significantly in their perception of the coping strategies that have been employed by university administrators in a period of economic depression.

Table 3: t-test analysis based on coping strategies for managing university education in a period of economic depression in Nigeria

Groups	N	Mean	SD	DF	t-Cal	p	Decision
State University	300	2.379	0.383	618	4.570	0.000	NS
Federal University	320	2.257	0.350				

The calculated t-score of 4.570 is not significant at 0.05 level and degree of freedom 618. Therefore the hypothesis which stated that there is no significant difference between State and Federal University staffs in their perception regarding the coping strategies adopted by university administrators in southern Nigeria during economic depression is retained.

Table 4 presents the result of analysis of data for testing the second hypothesis which states that Staff of State and Federal Universities in Nigeria will not differ significantly in their perception on the extent to which economic depression in the country has affected universities in southern Nigeria.

Table 4: t-test of analysis based on extent economic depression in Nigeria has affected university education

Groups	N	Mean	SD	DF	t-cal	p	Decision
State University	300	3.249	0.430	618	2.123	0.000	S
Federal University	320	2.263	0.483				

The calculated t-score of 2.123 is significant at 0.05 alpha level, degree of freedom 618. Hypothesis two is therefore not accepted. Hence, there is a significant difference between the perceptions of staff of State and Federal University on the extent economic depression has affected the university education in Nigeria. The higher mean value for state universities tend to imply that the impact of economic depression in the country is more on state universities than on federal universities in the country.

DISCUSSION

The coping strategies are cost sharing through tuition and other fees payment, freezing of staff recruitment, compulsory retirement of invalid, sick and aged staff, reducing the supply of consumables and sponsorship of staff to conferences for their professional development, putting a stall on capital projects and construction of new buildings and curtailment of the number of staff accepted for sabbatical leave. The hypothesis tested revealed that staff of State and Federal Universities in southern Nigeria did not differ significantly in their perception regarding the coping strategies adopted by university administrators during economic depression in Nigeria.

This implies that similar coping strategies were employed by administrators of universities in Nigeria during a period of economic depression. Freezing of staffing could lead to over working of few available staff. In addition, the capability of staff being able to perform tasks effectively under this condition is impeded. This situation has serious effects as a result of accompanying staff stress, burn out and break down in health. When professional development of staff is curtailed due to financial strangulation of universities by government during economic depression, the staff involved may not be abreast with new knowledge in their disciplines and this could have serious impact on quality assurance in academic activities of universities. Several studies have shown that update of knowledge of academic staff of tertiary education institutions through professional development training positively correlates with their academic productivity (Garet, Porter, Desimonen, Birman & Yoon, 2001:916; Lim-Teo et al., 2007:239; Mayotte, Wei, Lamphier & Doyle 2013:264; Sharma, 2016:350; Author 2016:196). Through professional development of university teachers, their knowledge and skills can be greatly improved and they can change in classroom practice, develop pedagogical content knowledge needed for effective teaching, gain knowledge with which they could be good decision makers, and effective school reformers. The finding of this study has shown that academic staff gets demoralized due to financial difficulties severely impacting on Nigerian universities due to economic depression. Earlier study by Tsang and Liu, (2016:200) indicated that staff demoralization is a negative emotional experience affecting teacher's well-being and quality of teaching.

The second hypothesis tested revealed that there is significant difference between staff of State and Federal Universities in the country in their perceptions regarding the extent economic depression has affected the university education in Nigeria. The finding revealed that attainment of good quality delivery of academic activities including teaching, learning, research, community services, innovation, and entrepreneurship is short chained during economic depression as a result of serious cuts in the provision of resources. Short supply of fund and other materials to universities due to economic depression could have calamitous effects on teaching, learning and research. When there is curtailment in purchase of instructional materials, consumables, library and laboratory facilities and curtailment of practical works for students' academic activities especially teaching and learning would be severely handicapped. This situation triggers students and staff frustration and demoralization. Under the condition of acute shortage of facilities and unemployment of qualified lecturers, it becomes extremely difficult for universities to train students in relevant skills for employability by industries and meet the globally competitive quality standards acceptable at the international scene. This finding is supported by Mapolisa and Tshabalala (2013) that Zimbabwe education system has been negatively affected by economic meltdown as classroom were in a deplorable condition and students lack furniture for sitting and writing during lesson. Similarly, the finding lends credence with Bamigboya, Ede and Adeyemi (2016) that economic crisis had severe impact on education in south-west Nigeria through reduction in number of teachers employed and reduced purchase of books and educational materials, which affected effective delivery of curriculum. Similarly, the finding of this study is supported by Oluwale and Pinga (2017) that economic meltdown in the country have severe effects in Benue State secondary education, resulting to decline purchase of materials and provision of resources for effective teaching and learning.

The policy of non-replacement of retired and dead staff in a period of economic depression has immeasurable effects on the personal health and productivity of few available staff. All these severely impacts on the quality of delivery of academic activities. Earlier study by Author (2006) proved that inadequate facilities, resources, supplies, un-conducive teaching

and learning environment and underfunding of Nigerian universities were variables that induced trade union disputes, leading to strike actions embarked upon by staff unions. Paucity of fund has continued to jeopardize the construction of new building, purchase of needed equipment, payment of staff' salaries and allowances and maintenance of available school plants.

As a result of declining financial allocation to universities in Nigeria the existing facilities and infrastructures are not regularly reactivated. This situation has resulted to lowering of morale of students and staff and making the management of universities difficult. This study showed that the impact of the economic depression seems to be more heavily weighted on State Universities than Federal Universities. The reason that could be advanced for this variation is because Federal universities being owned and funded by the federal government stands at a better ground and financial solvency than state universities which depend solely on State government for funding.

CONCLUSION

From the findings of this study it is obvious that measures adopted by university administrators in Nigeria as coping strategies during economic depression in the country had serious negative impacts on quality delivery of services. The study concludes by re-emphasizing that the on-going economic depression in Nigeria has made university administrators to adopt coping strategies that have severely impacted on universities as a result of serious financial difficulty challenging the effective management of the universities. Staff frustration, de-motivation, and turn-over are at increasing levels. Low morale of staff and negative attitude to work due to financial strangulation of universities by government resulting in fractional payment of salaries, non-payment of staff allowances, non-replacement of retired, dead and dismissed staff, high work load for few available staff amidst obsolete infrastructures requiring renovation which dots the system appears to have truncated the delivery of quality teaching, learning, research and innovation.

Recommendations

The study recommends the following:

- Nigerian government should have a re-think by placing more value on education especially tertiary level by ensuring that adequate fund is allocated and disbursed to universities in spite of the economic depression.
- Government of Nigeria should place more priority on university education as a result of its importance in raising human capital who are responsible for piloting national development.
- Nigerian government should recognize the autonomy of universities by encouraging the re-establishment of programmes to help generate fund internally for effective management of the system.
- Government of Nigeria should consider the introduction of tuition fees as a way of helping universities mitigate the declining funding and improving their self-sustenance financially.
- University administrators should allow Heads of Departments to open an account in the name of their department for collection of departmental dues. Students should pay such

dues directly into the account. The fund realized should be used to effectively run the department.

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