

# **LEADERSHIP AND STUDENT UNIONISM, CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS IN THE NIGERIAN TERTIARY EDUCATION SYSTEM (COLLEGES OF EDUCATION, POLYTECHNICS AND UNIVERSITIES)**

*Zuokemefa Enebraye Peter*

Department Of Computer Science, Isaac Jasper Boro College Of Education  
(Ijbcoe), Sagbama, Bayelsa State

*Sese Tuperekiye Ebimobwei*

Bayelsa State College Of Arts And Science, Elebele, Yenagoa, Bayelsa State

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## **Abstract**

Student Union leadership is formed to promote and defend the welfare needs of the Students' Community in Nigerian Tertiary Education System. Union leaders engage Government through dialogue on certain policies and the authorities of institutions to provide certain minimum services that will promote a sustained environment for academic interactions. This includes teaching, learning, social and research activities. Student Union Government (SUG) serves as the voice of the Students in all Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria. The Authorities through the Students' Union Government is able to instill discipline and know the feelings and request of the Students. This view is corroborated by Longing (2003) and Ekekwe (2006). Most often, the refusal of Government and Management of institutions to address the legitimate needs of Students' Union leaders leads to conflicts which manifest in demonstrations and unrest with severe consequences. This article examines an ideal student's unionism, its responsibilities, causes of protest and challenges in Union leadership and provides suggested solutions to mitigate unrest by administrators of tertiary institutions and government.

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**Keywords:** Student Unionism, Society, Youth, Student Union, Unrest, Education, Tertiary

## **INTRODUCTION**

A strong relationship exists between Education, student and society. Students are the raw materials fabricated by various educational institutions

through an organized systematic training process to acquire essential skills, knowledge and competences to produce goods and services for the development of any community, state and country. This view was buttressed by Musa (2007), who said education is the bedrock of any human endeavor in achieving the developmental process of any society. Education trains to develop the mental and physical well – being of students and create consciousness for the rapid development of society through the deployment of efficient and reliable processes for the creation of goods and services.

Arcus standard dictionary defined a student as a learner who is enrolled in an educational institution. A student is a person who is undergoing a course of study in a particular recognized place of training. Hence, a Student Union is an association of students in a particular place of education with stipulated rules and regulations to guide the *Modus Operandi* of the association, primarily to project and defend their common interest in line with the society, Isah (1991).

Student Unionism is the system of practice or principle and theory of labour Union in an educational setting to pursue students' interest. A Student Union Leader is a person appointed in a Care-Taker Committee or who emerges through an election to rule or guide and inspire the student body or student community in a representative capacity. Usually, a student Union leader holds a position in the Executive Council for a stipulated period of time defined by the Union's constitution.

Generally, majority of our students in Tertiary Institutions are Young Men and Women, best described as Youths, and they constitutes the most vibrant and resourceful group in society, Isah (1991). They are valuable assets indispensable and invaluable to the growth and development of the society. Youths are fragile, vernal, vulnerable and sensitive to stimulus and can be easily influenced positively or negatively. Students need to form associations and come together as a Union to discover their personal competences, attributes, worth, resilience, assert their opinions on issues, take independent positions, ask questions about issues and express their passion in a well-organized environment. This view is supported by Alada (2011), who stated that it is the Students' Unions that assist Students to develop their organizational abilities and strength of character that prepare them for higher responsibility in the near future. A good Student Union leadership provides the leverage for the student community to strive into the socio-economic and political spheres of the institution and the larger society.

## **RESPONSIBILITIES OF AN IDEAL STUDENTS' UNION LEADERSHIP**

The activities of student Unions include amongst the following, David (2013);

1. Students Welfare

This involves monitoring prices of goods in the campus, improving public transportation around the school, raising scholarship funds by seeking assistance, improving services in sick bays and clinics, expressing solidarity in support of union members during incidences such as death.

2. Social Activities

Enrich social life on campus by organizing parties, discounted trips on excursions, fun trips to beaches, zoos and museums, selling discounted tickets to concerts, shows, plays and cultural events and rag days.

3. Community Service

Contribute to community and society at large by coordinating volunteer activities such as blood donation, promoting environmental awareness campaigns, presenting gift items to charity homes and the needy, clearing of drainages, career choice training to primary and secondary schools in host communities.

4. Sports Development

Organize competitions in sports across faculties/schools, departments, programmes (degree, masters, ND etc) to engage students and discover talents to form school teams. Sporting activities such as football, volleyball, handball, swimming and athletics are competed for in NUGA and other tertiary sports competitions.

5. Infrastructural Development

Embark on building of students' cafeterias, viewing centers to watch matches, listen to news, union secretariat, construction of road signs, Students Park and gardens, information centers, notice boards etc.

6. Para-Military Training

Student Unions encourage enrolment into para-military outfits for physical fitness training and for provision of security especially during elections and events. Example is MAN O' WAR. Anti – cultism enforcement.

7. Information Dissemination/ Orientation

Student Unions create awareness to fresh and returning students via seminars, workshops, notice boards, campus magazines, banners and broadcast news from information centers. They also conduct orientations on ethical conduct and general aspects of the institution.

8. Engage in Economic Activities

Raise funds through dues, establish commercial outfits, collect rents from stores, engage in transportation business, print T-shirts for sale etc

9. Giving of Awards

Student Unions give certificate of service to hardworking members and also confer awards of excellence to deserving lecturers, staff, student

leaders and people in government and politicians that have distinguish themselves in works of life.

Also, a responsible Student Union leadership must;

1. Represent the interest of all its members at all levels.
2. Be accountable to its members
3. Anticipate and respond to students' needs and demands to ensure continuous improvements.
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.

### **THE BIRTH OF STUDENT UNIONISM IN NIGERIA**

The wind of Student Unionism began to blow in West Africa in 1925 with the formation of West African Students Union (WASU) by Ladipo Sholanke who was schooling in London. Its formation united all associations at that time promoting friendship and brotherliness among West African students. It was around the World War and most African countries were under colonial imperialism. WASU campaigned against colonial exploitation, political repression, racism, and social inequalities in West African colonies through the instruments of books, newspaper articles, magazines and public enlightenments programs etc which gradually led to the political independence of most West African States (Babatope 1974 and Ezera 1990). The University of Ibadan was the first to begin Unionism in Nigeria when it was established in 1948 and its pioneer president was Kunle Adepoju. Its formation in U.I gave rise to Students Unions in other institutions in Nigeria resulting in the formation of a unified Union called (NUNS), National Union of Nigerian Students in 1956 with late Ambassador Emmanuel Obe as its first national president.

Students Unionism in the early days in Nigeria was feared and respected by government, students and various management (authorities) across the country's tertiary institutions. These pressure groups were ideology based with a high sense of intellectual debates and resisted oppressive tendencies and policies of government and administrators of institutions of higher learning. They make bold to express their views to authorities when they erred and generally enjoyed the patriotic support of the student community.

### **INCIDENCES OF STUDENTS' UNREST IN UNIVERSITIES AND OTHER TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS IN NIGERIA.**

Over the years, Nigerian Universities and other Tertiary institutions have experienced several students' demonstrations and unrest. Some of them

have resulted in violence leading to destruction of public properties, arrest, large scale injuries, maiming's, expulsions, proscription of Union activities, prosecution and imprisonment, rustication and loss of life. Little or no attention is giving to the issues causing these disputes (Aluede 1995, Aluede 2001), (Ojo 1995, Uzoka 1993). Students often come back after a protest to live in the same conditions that spark off the protest without addressing their demands. Government and Management of Institutions respond to students' request with brute force, leaving behind bitter experiences and disasters that would have been avoided. Why don't we learn from our past mistakes?

1. In 1960, students of the University of Lagos clashed among themselves over the removal of a Vice Chancellor.

2. In June 12<sup>th</sup>, 1993, the annulment of the presidential elections that declared M.K.O Abiola sparked off wide protest among students from different Universities.

3. In 1971, in the University of Ibadan, students demanded the removal of an official in the University. During the demonstration, tear gas and live ammunitions was used by the police and a student Adekunle Adepoju was shot and killed.

4. In 1978, 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 rifles, canisters, the presence of police intensified the demonstration and several students were shot and killed. The news filtered to other Universities and the public and it became a nation - wide protest.

5. In 1998, Students of Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoama, violently protested due to cult activities and it resulted in the death of many students.

6 In 2003, the increase in the price of petroleum products sparked up violent protest in most universities and other tertiary institutions across the country.

## **CAUSES OF STUDENTS' UNREST**

Students, government and authorities of our Tertiary Institutions all share various degrees of blames in brewing and giving rise to unrest in our institutions of learning in Nigeria. According to Jega (2003), that the Nigerian Education sector in general has been experiencing a devastating crisis since the late 1970, he stated that the crisis has been characterized by a combination of chronic underfunding, rapidly increasing students' enrolment, inadequacy of facilities, deterioration of physical infrastructures and suppression in managing the institutions, demoralization of staff and students, incessant students riots and periodic staff strikes. These include;

1. The non-participation of Student Union leaderships in decision making processes by Government and authorities of Tertiary institutions. Students should be included in institutions committees such as sports, welfare, matriculation, discipline, environment, bursary, and accommodation committees. This gives students' a sense of belonging and makes them participate in decision making process as opined by (Ajayi and Ayodele 2003).

2. Deliberate refusal by Government and Management to grant audience to Union leaders on their request for improved welfare needs.

3. Basic welfare problems brought about by the absence of amenities such as limited hostel accommodation, poor water supply, shortage of power supply, poor sanitary conditions, recreational facilities etc

4. Academic stress precipitates students' unrest in Nigerian Tertiary institutions. Mounting academic pressures and stress from overcrowded lecture halls, hostels and common rooms etc. This view is supported by Aluede (1996), Denga (1982) and Samson (1967).

5. High handedness by Lecturers and imposition of arbitrary levies and the hostile behaviour of host communities to students' community.

## **GENERAL CONDITIONS THAT TRIGGERED PROTEST FROM STUDENTS' UNIONS**

The conditions range from simple to serious issues. Students can be grouped into radical and docile students' especially final year students. Students demonstrate over fees for food, religious sentiments, water, light in the hostel, the introduction of the NYSC scheme and JAMB, unfriendly disposition and victimization by host community, poor hygienic conditions of conveniences, frequent harassments, sudden hike in school fees, cancellation of programme on graduation, transport hikes on campus, perpetuation in office by SUG, removal of vice chancellor, lack of medical services in sick bay, adjustment of academic calendar without students' inclusion, unconfirmed rumours, insecurity by cultist, foreign and internal policies of government and intra associations conflicts, etc.

## **EFFECTS OF STUDENTS' PROTEST ON THE NIGERIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM**

No matter how germane the reasons for protest are parents, authorities, government and the students' themselves suffer dire consequences. These include;

1. Malicious destruction and vandalism of infrastructures thereby preventing effective teaching and learning.

2. Parents and sponsors of wards, students incur extra cost keeping their children indefinitely in school. Sometimes, students are levied to pay for the damages done on properties.

3. Irregular academic calendar arising from the students' demonstration. Academic programmes are elongated to cater for the period the institutions were shut down.

4. Graduation of half - baked students due to unstable academic calendar resulting from consistent disruptions through riots, demonstrations, students unrest and strike actions by staff.

5. Huge financial loss to government and the institutions' authorities.

6. It encourages un-seriousness in students and brews examination malpractice due to academic stress. Students record poor performances in their results due to accelerated academic activities.

7. It promotes cultism and other vices due to the vacuum created by the closure of the institution. Some students may take up trades that could be inimical to societal norms.

8. There could be legal issues arising from parents whose children are victims of violent protest especially when it involves death. The police authorities, management and government can be sued by aggrieved parents. The authorities may also prosecute union leaders and other category of students after carrying out investigations. Suspension, expulsion, levying and rustication may arise at the end of investigations based on recommendations.

## **CHALLENGES IN THE LEADERSHIP OF STUDENT UNIONS**

It is the contention of this paper that Student Unionism today is a far cry from what was practiced in tertiary institutions two or three decades ago. This can be attributed to the socio-economic and political systems in the larger society that has crept into the fabrics of our education system. The following bedevil an effective Student Union leadership and Unionism;

1. Candidates aspiring for elective offices into Student Unions do not have a well-articulated manifesto for implementation.

2. Most candidates do not understand the workings of the Union before presenting themselves for service.

3. Some candidates are sponsored by certain interest group within and outside the institutions. Imposition, selection and coronation of favoured candidates.

4. Some candidature are driven by personal and economic gains and not service.

5. Management and Government interference in sponsoring some candidates through the instruments of the institution. Elections are often rigged.

6. Some good candidates are marginalized along ethnic, religious and tribal considerations. Example was the case of Isaac Jasper Adaka Boro in the University of Nigeria, Nsukka when he contested for the SUG president. He is the veteran protagonist and freedom fighter whom IJBCOE is christened and immortalized after.

7. Some credible candidates are wrongfully and deliberately dropped during screening by ELECO.

8. The influence of financial inducement against a free, fair and credible election.

Other salient factors include;

9. Constitutional breaches and refusal to call for congresses and subsequent impeachment.

10. Gross loss of confidence on the Union leadership

11. Failure to extensively deliberate and consider alternatives before declaring a protest action.

12. Financial misappropriation and gross embezzlement.

13. Elongation of Tenure without congress approval and disposition to Management

14. Expulsion, suspension and rustication of student Union leaders and the disbandment of Union activities on campus.

15. Poor financial base to prosecute articulated programmes of the executive.

16. Rift arising from welfare issues and refusal of audience by government and management of institutions.

### **SOLUTIONS TO EFFECTIVE STUDENT UNION GOVERNMENT (SUG) AND INSTITUTIONAL ADMINISTRATION IN THE NIGERIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM.**

1. There must be a responsible society that breeds a responsible education system that gives rise to responsible leadership where people respect and tolerate one another's ideas and opinion.

2. There should be a speedy resolution of issues affecting the Student Unions on campus by management and government. Unions should not be viewed as adversaries but partners towards organizational success, David (2013).

3. Student Union leaders should be represented in committees of the institution for democratization of decision process by stakeholders. In taking major decisions, students have the right to be heard, Olayiwola (1999). Students' participation in institutional governance.



4. 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. 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, provision of services and protecting the well-being of students.
8. Union Executives must be exemplary in their actions, conduct free, fair and credible elections to usher in a new EXCO when their tenure is due. They must be accessible, transparent and be objective.
9. Student Union leaders must encourage student to student interaction by calling congresses, forming committees to assign duties, investigate reports and exhaustively discuss issues before presentation to authorities.
10. Student Union leadership should educate congress members to be careful in handling College properties and equipment to avoid penalties or discipline.
11. There should be joint interactive meetings between students' union leaders, management and security personnel for confidence building to avoid escalation of demonstrations and the use of brute force should it arise.
12. Union leaders must embrace dialogue and negotiation in addressing issues with Management and deploy time-lines to stimulate response. The use of "GBEGE" "SAGBE" ALUTA slogans to declare violent protest should be the last resort.
13. Student Union leaders must be astute, fearless and courageous in demanding for the rights of 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 other similar institutional Unions' for purposes of cross fertilization of ideas and solidarity.

## **CONCLUSION**

Management should encourage Students' 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 students' leaders to assist them develop the skills needed to perform their responsibilities.

Also, Student Union leaders should emerge only through a free, fair and credible elections void of socio – economic and political interferences.

Management should create the enabling environment for learning and peaceful co-existence. Students should note that Management can provide for their welfare and comfort based on available resources.

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.

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