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Re-Inventing the Equity Debate: Issues in Balancing Merit with Inclusion in Leadership Selection in Federal Universities in Nigeria

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Abstract

In the conflicting pursuit of equity, the recession of non-indigenes in leadership positions in the nation's federal universities is a major source of campus restiveness. This opinion article, derived from empirical research, therefore aims at bringing to the fore the substance and implications of the faulty inclusion politics and the politicised merit criteria deployed towards achieving equity in leadership selection in Nigeria's federal universities. University of Ibadan and University of Jos were purposively selected for the study being the institutions with the most recent vice-chancellors' selection episodes riddled with identity-based conflicts in 2020/2021. In the two universities, key informant and in-depth interviews were conducted with prominent members of the respective institutions' governing councils, staff unions, staff ethnic associations, and vice-chancellor candidates that were not appointed, all purposively selected being notable actors in the vice-chancellors' appointments politics. With between 70% and 79% predominance of ethno-territorial indigenes in the institutions' workforce, the original inclusion intent of Nigeria's federal character principle was grossly handicapped in the leadership appointment politics. The merit assessment instruments deployed in vice-chancellors' selection processes had subjective items prone to biased scoring. These unfashionably culminated in the persistent return of indigene vice-chancellors in the two institutions for forty years.

Keywords

equity – federal universities – identity – inclusion – merit

1 Introduction

Given the persistence of different types of upheavals in the six geo-political zones of Nigeria, there are fears that the nation-state is fast sinking into the abyss of state failure. Pieces of evidence that Nigeria has become an intractable theatre of social convulsion and terrorists' activities in the six geo-political zones are compelling. The Boko Haram insurgency in the North-east, the ravaging banditry in the North-west, the farmers' / herdsmen's fatal clashes in the North-central, the agitation for resource control in the South-south, the Biafra separatist movement in the South-east and the consistently-loud agitation for federal re-structuring in the South-west are all traceable to the absence of effective statehood occasioned by hard pieces of evidence of identity lopsidedness and inequity in access public spaces and state resources. These are compounded by economic stagnation, corruption, mass unemployment, food insecurity, poverty, disease, criminalities, and low life expectancy. The efforts of the government at addressing the various crises have so far not yielded any promising results, making 'development' a recurring theme in the discourse of Nigeria's predicaments.

Different shades of scholarly thoughts have over time held colonialism and or colonial heritage responsible for Nigeria's crisis of development. I deviate from those lines of thought for one reason. Nigeria attained political independence in 1960, and has, for over sixty years, been free to chart a clear path out of whatever negative elements of colonial heritage holding her down. India is Nigeria's contemporary as a post-colonial state. That nation-state has however made giant developmental strides that fit it being described as a developed state. My point is that sixty years after political independence, it is intellectually unacceptable to continue to blame colonialism and or colonial heritage for Nigeria's woes. Instead, I hold the inadequacies of Nigeria's universities responsible for the crisis of development in the nation-state.

When University College Ibadan took off in 1948, heralding the establishment of many more universities in subsequent years, there were high expectations that Nigerian universities were going to function as agents of rapid innovation and development (Kayode, 2000: 3). Eventually, universities in Nigeria hit a record high of 173 as of 2021, comprising 46 federal universities (including three degree-awarding military and police academies/universities), 48 state universities, and 79 private universities. However, the prevailing socio-economic situations in Nigeria to date visibly display a shattering of the high expectations about the university institutions (Kayode, 2000: 3). Arowosegbe (2016a) has underlined the centrality of endogenous knowledge as the material precondition for autonomous development for Africa, thus

invariably calling out universities in Africa as being responsible for the crisis of development in the continent. I agree with his thoughts, but I approach the issue from a different perspective, drawing data from some anomalies in the leadership selection politics in Nigerian universities. My premise is that faulty leadership selection politics in universities in Nigeria has a direct relationship with the mismanagement of the institutions, and this has resulted in the failure of the universities to provide the required intellectual and scientific mentoring for Nigeria's journey toward rapid innovation and development.

There are a lot of challenges spinning off from the mismanagement of university institutions in Nigeria. These include the strain on the public purse (Adegbite, 2007), the undermining of investments in capital expenditure by corruption (Benjamin, 2014), the reduction in the intellectual quality of university graduates (Fajonyomi, 2008), and the lack of skills of many graduates of Nigerian universities making many of them unemployable (Committee of Vice-chancellors of Nigerian universities, 2012), thus offering them as ready tools for criminalities and insurrection in the six geo-political zones of Nigeria. All these are traceable to weak institutional governance structures and processes, the roots of which include the excessive politicisation of the appointment of the leadership of Nigerian universities.

In this article, derived from empirical research, I single out and bring to the fore the subverting of the original inclusion intent of Nigeria's federal constitution and the undermining of the merit prerogative of the university system on the issue of leadership selection, in which university principal officers' appointment has been reduced to catchment area politics ruled by patronage and clientelist practices by statesmen, politicians, and university academics. I argue for their reversal.

Unequivocally, federal universities in Nigeria are perceived as merit-driven institutions and pace-setters not only for other tertiary education and research establishments but also for other public sector agencies and the regular civil service in the nation-state. However, in the conflicting struggle for equity across the different geo-ethnic territories of the nation-state, coupled with the effort of the Nigerian state to cope with the federalists' demands of a multiethnic society, the merit prerogative of the universities on the issue of leadership selection have been invaded and largely ruled by subjective factors (Alubo, 2009; Arowosegbe, 2016b; Egbokhare, 2017). That aberration has gradually become accepted as normality, with the university elite and the other constituents of the internal and external environments of the institutions being gradually socialised into living with the anomaly.

In 2021, new vice-chancellors were appointed in two frontline federal universities in Nigeria: University of Ibadan and University of Jos. As usual, the

respective selection episodes for the appointments were widely reported to have been interrupted by agitations for the appointment of indigenes of the geo-ethnic territories of the respective institutions as vice-chancellors, to the point of campus restiveness, despite the merit prerogatives of the academy. Generally, the same phenomenon reigns across federal universities in Nigeria. Since the 1980s, the contestations for that exalted position have followed a recurring path that continued to see indigenes being appointed as vice-chancellors of federal universities. But in merit-driven institutions, how can one explain that it is only the indigene category of applicants for vice-chancellor positions in the respective geo-ethnic territories of federal universities in Nigeria that largely have the merit required for the appointment in such universities for forty years? Are qualified non-indigenes not citizens of the nation-state? This ostensible indigenisation of merit calls for the re-inventing of the equity debate.

This call is urgent for two reasons. First, generally, there seems to be a gradual reduction of the vigour of public concern and scholarly attention on the substance and implications of the faulty inclusion politics and the politicised merit criteria deployed for selecting and managing human and material resources for public service delivery in Nigeria. A further slide in this respect places the nation-state at the risk of intractably becoming a failed state, with implications for the stability of other nation-states of the African continent. Second, the university, by its very nature, is supposed to be a redeemer of the state and society, rather than being their reflection. The ivory tower owes the state and society a duty to stand itself out as a place of creativity, innovation, solutions, and excellence in human virtue development. If the intellectual academy submits itself to the ills of society and permanently becomes consumed by mediocrity, then both the state and society are doomed. Following Aiyede (2021), if gold rusts, what will iron do?

The re-inventing of the equity debate should serve two purposes. First, it should revive the slumbering discourse of the dynamics of balancing inclusion with merit and provide a renewed platform for institutional re-assessment and re-invention. Second, it should rescue the debate from its fixation on the superiority contest between inclusion and merit, a discourse quite overspent, and then redirect the focus of the debate towards bringing to the fore the substance and implications of the faulty inclusion politics and the politicised merit criteria deployed for principal officers' appointment in federal universities in Nigeria. This will enable the Nigerian state to wake up to arrest a continuing slide into mediocrity in societal governance.

This paper is organised into five sections. This introductory part is the first section. After it, there are four other sections, namely: materials and methods,

the crux of the equity debate, issues in balancing inclusion with merit in leadership selection in Nigeria's federal universities, and conclusion.

2 Materials and Methods

Inspired by objective displeasure with the precarious status quo in Nigeria, with a genuine desire for things to get better, I deploy the weaponry of critique in this opinion article, derived from empirical research, to stir up a social discourse. The aim is to bring to the fore the faulty inclusion politics and the politicised merit criteria deployed in the leadership appointment politics in Nigeria's federal universities vis-a-vis the ideals of merit and inclusion. The intent is to motivate a conscientious political re-awakening that may rescue Nigeria from the precipice of state failure. For this paper, the Weberian bureaucratic model and the theory of representative bureaucracy provided the framework, while the exploratory design was used. As of 2021, there were 173 universities in Nigeria, comprising 46 federal universities (including three degree-awarding military and police academies), 48 state universities, and 79 private universities. In clear terms, the population of the study is 46 federal universities. From that population, University of Ibadan and University of Jos were purposively selected for the study being the institutions with the most recent vice-chancellors' selection episodes in 2020/2021 riddled with identity-based conflicts. State and private universities were not sampled because they present different ownership profiles that impinge on the politics of the appointment of their vice-chancellors.

Data were drawn from primary and secondary sources. Primary data were generated from Interviews conducted with some prominent actors in vice-chancellors' selection politics in the two universities. In each of the two universities, Key Informant Interviews (KII) were conducted with seven members of the Governing Council, namely: Vice-chancellor (VC), Deputy-Vice-chancellor (DVC), Registrar, Senate Representative, Congregation Representative, a member of the Joint Council and Senate Selection Board (JC&SSB) and a member of the Search Team; and one Federal Character Commission-Observer. Also, in each of the universities, In-depth Interviews (IDI) were conducted with the leadership of three staff unions, namely: the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), Non-Academic Staff Union of Universities (NASU), Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities (SSANU); two staff ethnic associations (one indigene and one non-ethnic); and two VC candidates that were not appointed (one indigene and one non-ethnic), all purposively selected having been adjudged as notable actors in the recent processes of the appointment

of vice-chancellors in the respective universities, up till 2020/2021. Secondary data were drawn from University Acts, selection guidelines, and registry records. Data were thematically analysed, and the analysis that are relevant to the objectives of this paper are streamed into the flow of the discussion in opinion paper style.

3 The Crux of the Equity Debate

Questions of merit, inclusion, diversity, equity, citizenship, state capacity, and state survival constitute prominent subjects of debates on issues concerning the structures, operations, management, and performances of the public services of nation-states. Krislov argues that “the issues of equality, merit, and reward are at the heart of ideological conflicts” (Krislov, 2004: 352). These issues are most prominently visible in discourses of racial, ethnic, gender, and class discrimination. Those subjects have given birth to debates about the ideals of equal opportunity, anchored on strict merit, in the sense of non-discrimination on the one hand; and the notion of equality of opportunity, anchored on the quest for inclusion, in the sense of identity-group representation, on the other hand. These ideological conflicts are sometimes expressed by way of positive and or negative discriminations, as state-guided or street-guided compensatory and or redistributive justice, respectively (Jencks, 1972). Ironically, merit and inclusion, though conflicting in the application, are notions in pursuit of equity in society.

Merit, as a universal concept, is objectively verified competence attained through training and credentialing, tied to expertise rather than to privileges of social category, and based on competitive achievement rather than social and or primordial ascriptions (Sommerlad, 2015). The standard merit principle involves a proper assessment that takes into account the extent to which a person has the skills, knowledge, and abilities relevant to the work-related requirements and outcomes (McCrudden, 1998). As variously implied, within the standard merit context, the existence of unbiased umpires, established rules, defined procedures, measurable competitive criteria, objective parameters, open competition, and non-discrimination are the basic elements that drive and define the standard merit process (Fiss, 1976; Westen, 1982; McCrudden, 1998; Sommerlad, 2015). In essence, equality of individuals before the rules of the contest, irrespective of racial, national, ethnic, gender, or other group affiliation, is the hallmark of the standard merit principle. These also imply that for every merit-intended process, the rudiments of the merit criteria have to be set, defined, and established ahead of the competition.

Inclusion, on the other hand, is the practice of providing everyone with equal access to opportunities and resources. In the workplace, it refers to the removal of obstacles to the full participation and contribution of employees (Roberson, 2006). As an equity tool, inclusion helps give traditionally marginalised groups a means for them to feel equal, accepted, and respected, and contribute fully to the success of the organisation. This implies “equality, justice and full participation at both group and individual levels, so that members of different groups not only have equal access to opportunities, decision-making and positions of power in public spaces, but they are actively sought out because of their differences” (Holvino et al., 2004: 245–276).

Generally, under the guise of achieving inclusion in the contradictory pursuit of equity and the struggle for collective rights in nation-states across the globe, some notable identity mobilization tools, such as indigeneship, ethnicity, race, gender, religion, class, etc., have variously continued to challenge the strict application of the standard merit principle, thereby sometimes breaching societal peace, compromising state stability and truncating world order (Gils and Rocamora, 1992; Connor, 1994; Brubaker, 1998). From some established country studies, inclusion by positive discrimination enhances nation-building and national development. However, inclusion by negative discrimination undermines national cohesion, organisational efficiency, and state capacity.

For instance, in Central and Eastern Europe, ethnicity debars minorities from accessing quality and effective public services and exposes them to various forms of exclusion and widespread discrimination in access to state resources (Kovacs, 2002). In Western Europe and the Americas, race, and class play significant roles in shaping both individual political choice and overall political representation in urban politics, thus having widespread consequences for representation at all levels of the public services (Giulietti et al., 2015). In Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, indigeneship, ethnicity, and religion play key mobilisation functions in the elite struggle for access to public spaces and state resources, breeding incessant conflicts, fatal social violence, and civil wars across the continents (Castles, 1993; Hajnal and Trounstone, 2016; Olayode, 2016).

In Nigeria, like the rest of Africa, indigeneship, ethnicity, and religion are the regular identity mobilisation tools in the contests for access to public spaces and state resources. The three phenomena are noted as the prominent features of the nation's politics with negative implications for national values and state capacity (Alubo, 2004; Isumonah, 2006; Suberu and Diamond, 2004). Many studies that are focused on the interference of indigeneship and ethnicity with public bureaucracy on issues concerning staff and leadership placement in

different sectors of Nigeria's regular public service largely carry 'ethnic lopsidedness' (Ojo, 2005), 'ethnic discrimination' (Okorie, 2013; Okolo, 2014), 'merit sabotage' (Adeosun, 2011), and 'performance capacity subversion' (Gberevbie, 2010) conclusions.

Now, focusing on the university institution which is the concern of this paper, contemporary literature acknowledges the interference of indigeneship and ethnicity with the governance, management, operations, and social relations in universities in Nigeria. Van den Berghe (1973) pointed out that ethnicity featured eminently in on-campus intra-communal conflicts and cooperation amongst the highly stratified and status-conscious members of University of Ibadan community. Yoloye (1989) observed that inter-ethnic acrimonies, presented as the quest for equity were responsible for the federal spread of university institutions, culminating in the intrusion of ethnic politics into Nigeria's universities despite the explicit concern for the merit prerogative of the university system. Akpakwu and Okwo (2014) affirmed that indigeneship, ethnic considerations, and religious affiliation, among others, considerably influenced the appointment of members of governing councils and principal officers in federal and state universities in the North-central states of Nigeria.

All of these suggest the subversion of the merit prerogative in the leadership selection processes in the universities. As revealing as those observations may seem, they however fail to explain the dynamics of the interactions of inclusion and merit. The literature particularly did not explain how the identity-group dichotomy occasioned by inclusion politics interacted with and impacted the merit principle for the selection and appointment of the leadership of federal universities in Nigeria.

In Nigeria, the debate between merit and inclusion in contemporary literature on the challenges of equity and citizenship has been a response to the politics of identity-group dichotomy, particularly indigeneship and ethnicity, in the country's public spaces within the purview of the application of the federal character principle. To appreciate the equity debate, one fact needs to be underscored. Although, substantial literature exists on issues connected with indigeneship and ethnicity outside of the studies on Nigeria's federal character principle, however, inadvertently, the literature on the issues of the conflict between inclusion and merit in Nigeria's public service is largely dominated by the discourse of that affirmative action policy. In the wisdom of the ruling elite, the federal character principle, Nigeria's brand of affirmative action policy, is an inclusion strategy devised by statecraft to enhance the equity required in the public service for the persistence of the polity. Critics have however argued that rather than enhancing equity, the affirmative action has undermined it

and widened the dividing lines between Nigerians (Osaghae, 1995; Ayoade, 1998; Alubo, 2009; Kendhammer, 2014).

Intrinsically, the equity debate underscores an explicit concern for state capacity from two interrelated perspectives. First, there is the concern for state capacity from the perspective of the ability of the state to act authoritatively to transform the structural basis of the economy to achieve economic growth, reduce poverty, and correct socio-economic inequity. Second, there is the concern for state capacity from the perspective of the ability of the state to deliver on nation-building, political integration, and national citizenship development by fostering a sense of belonging, allegiance to the nation-state, and national identity (Olugbemi, 1987; Kendhammer, 2014). In other words, state capacity in these two perspectives implies the ability of the state to foster inclusive development, including enhancing the human capabilities of all citizens and achieving employment equity, distributive justice, and representative bureaucracy without sacrificing merit or bureaucratic efficiency so as not to produce a failed state. Despite its concern for state capacity, the equity debate has remained unresolved and inconclusively recessed due to several fundamental deadlocks.

First, there is the problem of six different prominent notions of equity. At issue here are three major conflicting equity propositions: equality of citizens (merit) (Ayoade, 1998); equality of ethnic groups (inclusion) (Agbodike, 1998); and balancing the equality of ethnic groups with equality of citizens (inclusion/merit balancing) (Ojo, 2005; Mustapha, 2007). Three other splinter equity demands include Muslims / Christians placement parity (Higazi and Lar, 2015); gender representation (Obiyan and Akindele, 2002); and the need to consider the sensitivity and clout of particular offices to avoid situations in which some particular important offices are dominated by some ethnic/religious / gender groups, while other ethnic/religious / gender groups are consigned to inferior portfolios (Ugo and Ukpere, 2011). Each of these six equity notions has reasonable justifications.

Second, there is the problem of enforcement and judicial adjudication of inclusion and merit given the conflict created by different constitutional provisions for both. This is predicated on the contradictions between the Section 14 provisions for the federal character principle, and the Section 15 provisions for national integration, both in the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Explicitly, the section 14 provisions, forbidding discrimination on any grounds, translates to tacit support for merit; while the section 15 provisions, stipulating the need for ethnic balancing in public agencies, translate to tacit support for inclusion. These put the court in a difficult, if not impossible,

position to adjudicate in any legal conflict to give justice to contenders whose rights are perceived violated under any of the two contentions (Yakubu, 2003).

Third, there is the problem of the consequences of the subversion of the standard merit principle in public service. The federal character policy is seen by employees as an unsavoury strategy for rectifying the effects of past or present unfair discrimination by sacrificing merit in favour of inclusion thus aggravating corruption and loss of morale amongst government employees (Briggs, 2007: 149), and hindering the capacity of government for service delivery as good quality hands were frustrated in and out of the system (Gberevbie, 2010).

Fourth, there is the problem of the constriction of citizenship development by the practice of relying on indigeneship confirmation as an instrument for regulating access to public spaces. At issue here is that going by the emphasis on indigeneship certifications, the application and operation of the inclusion rationale of the federal character policy tended to create a dangerous dichotomy between Nigerian citizenship and “nativity of a state” (Alubo, 2009: 5) similar to the situation in the colonial period when Nigerians living outside their states of origin were regarded as native foreigners who could not enjoy full citizenship rights in those states to which they migrated within Nigeria, thus frustrating nation-building and national citizenship development as primordial nativity becomes more valuable than nation-state citizenship (Bello, 2012).

We can put the equity debate on some theoretical framework. The Weberian bureaucratic model and the theory of representative bureaucracy can be referenced to take their different queues behind merit and inclusion, respectively, and thus be hypothetically enlisted to join the different sides of the debate. On the side of merit, the Weberian bureaucratic model proposes the ideals of organizational rules, structure, specialization, predictability, objectivity, rationality, and partial democracy that should interact to produce efficiency and effectiveness in corporate bodies, especially government organizations. In Max Weber’s conception of the ideal bureaucracy, the advantages of precision, speed, clarity, knowledge of rules, continuity, discretion, unity, strict subordination, reduction of friction, reduction of materials, and reduction of personal costs anchored on merit, quality and excellence in human capacities are raised to the optimum point in the strictly bureaucratic administration (Thompson, 1961).

On the side of inclusion, the theory of representative bureaucracy suggests that organisations perform better if their leadership and workforce reflect the characteristics of their constituent populations (Andrews et al., 2005). The theory postulates that the active representation of group interests in public institutions occurs because individual bureaucrats mostly reflect the views of those who share their demographic backgrounds (Groeneveld and Walle, 2010). In

bureaucratic representation, it is expected that public administrators and government officials in a bureaucracy represent and conduct duties that are of concern to the interests of the individuals and groups that they represent and serve (Beverlin, 2012). With the notion that broad social groups should have spokespersons and officeholders in administrative as well as political positions, Krislov (2012) describes the theory of representative bureaucracy as a form of representation that captures most or all aspects of a society's population in the governing body of the state.

From the above theoretical framework, two issues that are of consequence for this re-invented equity debate needs to be underscored. First, this paper is concerned with the ideal merit principle that normatively and practically gravitates on objective parameters. The Weberian bureaucratic model proposes the ideal, and as confirmed by Max Weber himself, the model is a conceptual one for efficiency-driven public bureaucracies (Thompson, 1961). Although, the Weberian bureaucratic model, as a total construct in one piece, can be perceived as a utopia, however, many of its critical elements, such as strict adherence to rules, objectivity, impartiality, and rationality that joins together to anchor the merit process are not confined to the normative realms. They are widely acknowledged as the exclusive anchors for technical efficiency and operational effectiveness in some very large public service establishments, security agencies, and military organizations in Europe and the Americas (Clark and Pfaff, 2020).

Second, the theory of representative bureaucracy does not actually propose or suggest the constriction of merit in public bureaucracy. It only takes the position that a public workforce that is representative of the people in terms of indigeneship, ethnicity, race and gender, and corporate interests will help ensure that the interests of all the groups are actively considered in bureaucratic decision-making processes (Bradbury and Kellough, 2014), and hence return the benefits of that representation to the society as a whole. In essence, public bureaucracy can be representative of the different segments of society and still be merit-driven.

4 Issues in Balancing Inclusion with Merit in Leadership Selection in Nigeria's Federal Universities

As a result of Nigeria's seeming adoption of the equity option of balancing merit with inclusion in federal universities, controversies about leadership selection politics in the institutions have largely been ignited by two issues. First, bordering on inclusion, there is the issue of the extent of the involvement

of non-indigenes in the leadership strata of the institutions over time. Second, bordering on the merit process, there is the issue of the objectivity and fairness of the selection processes to all those concerned. At close observation, there seems to be a connection between the political mismanagement of inclusion and the politicisation of the merit to suit the elite pretence of pursuing equity.

The foundation of the faulty inclusion politics in the ivory towers is largely laid on the indigene / non-indigene imbalance in the identity-group distribution in university staff composition. The presence of ethno-territorial non-indigenes in the staff compositions of University of Ibadan (UI) and University of Jos (Unijos) was generally very low, ranging between 21% and 30%, in the period between 2003 and 2021. Logically, therefore, the presence of that category of non-indigene candidates' in the vice-chancellors' appointment politics in the institutions was also very low, ranging between 7% and 25% during that period (UI Registry records, 2021; Unijos Registry records, 2021). The identity politics, underscored by Nigeria's federal character principle and the catchment area policy, coupled with the inter-ethnic hostilities that pervade Nigeria's political landscape compels the preference of many Nigerians to seek employment only in their ethnic territories which they considered as comfort zones and safe havens in the eventualities of social crisis. This gives the impression that non-indigenes are not nationals of the constituencies of their abode and as such cannot engage in direct political participation in those places (IDI, Aug.–Sept. 2021).

For quite some time, the gradual replacement of non-indigenes by indigenes, and their systematic exclusion from the leadership strata of the regionally-domiciled federal institutions are too obvious to be disregarded. First, there had been a gradual recession of non-indigenes of the geo-political zones of locations of federal universities in principal officer placements from the 1980s, in both substantive and acting capacities. For instance, in UI and Unijos, on average, ethno-territorial non-indigenes constituted 51% of the appointed principal officers between 1960 and 1980. In the period between 1980 and 2000, the statistics of that category of non-indigenes in the principal officer strata went down to an average of 28%. By the period between 2000 and 2015, the statistics had gone down to a paltry average of 9% (UI Registry Records, 2017; Unijos Registry Records, 2017).

Second, since the early 1980s, the primordial identities of succeeding vice-chancellors of the two federal universities have largely, almost in quick succession, carried affinity with the geo-ethnic locations of the institutions. In the politics of vice-chancellors' appointment in the focussed universities, three variants of indigeneship mobilisations were visible, namely: 'ethno-territorial', 'sub-ethnic' and 'state-of-origin' indigeneship mobilisations. University of Jos,

in Plateau State, in the North-central geo-political zone, had ten (10) substantive vice-chancellors between 1980 and 2021. In quick succession, eight (8) of them were indigenes of Plateau State, given that state-of-origin indigeneship mobilisation mostly prevailed against ethno-territorial and sub-ethnic indigeneship mobilisations as the hegemonic platform for leadership ascension in that institution up till early 2021. However, around the first quarter of 2021, power dramatically changed hands due to some re-engineering of social discourse and power relations in the institution which produced an ethno-territorial indigene (i.e., indigene of the Northern region of Nigeria), from Kebbi State, as VC by the close of that year. In any case, it is still indigenes, whatever the variant of indigeneship mobilisation, which continues to gain the appointment in that institution. Non-ethnic candidates, specifically those from the Southern region of Nigeria appear to be experiencing political exclusion in the game (IDI, Aug.–Sept. 2021).

University of Ibadan, in Oyo State, in the South-west geo-political zone, had ten (10) substantive vice-chancellors between 1980 and 2021. All of them were Yoruba indigenes given that ethno-territorial indigeneship mobilisation was the dominant hegemonic platform that regularly incapacitated state-of-origin and sub-ethnic indigeneship mobilisations for leadership ascension in that institution. However, in the 2021 UI VC selection episode, there was similarly a re-engineering of social discourse and power relations which for the first time in the history of that institution resulted in the appointment of an Ibadan / Oyo State indigene as VC by the close of that year. This, for the first time, gives presence to sub-ethnic / state-of-origin indigeneship variants in the VC strata of leadership in the institution. Even then, the fact that the new VC's indigeneship is part of Yoruba ethnic territory still gives the impression that ethno-territorial indigeneship mobilisation is still the dominant hegemonic platform there (IDI, Aug.–Sept. 2021). In essence, in both universities, nothing has changed in favour of non-ethnics (i.e., non-Yoruba ethnics).

Third, as of 2015, on the scale of the north/south regional indigeneship, thirty-six (36), that is 78%, of Nigeria's forty-six (46) federal universities had vice-chancellors that were indigenes of the ethnic regions of the location of the universities. The 22% non-indigene vice-chancellors were those directly appointed by the federal government at take-off for ten (10) of the nineteen (19) newer federal universities established by the Goodluck Jonathan regime between 2011 and 2015, while the newer universities' governing councils were then in the process of being constituted (*Unilorin Bulletin*, October 5, 2015). In essence, those few non-indigene vice-chancellors were imposed by presidential executive order / military fiat rather than appointed through the governing council-moderated campus politics.

Generally, the inequitable indigene/non-indigene identity-group distributions in the staff and leadership compositions of the federal universities facilitated the ethnic appropriation of the federal institutions rather than compelling the bringing together of the different ethnic groups into a fused national context in each of the institutions. Intrinsicly, the original intent of Nigeria's inclusion strategy as embodied in the federal character principle enshrined in the federal Constitution is that:

The composition of the government of the federation or any of its agencies and the conduct of its affairs shall be carried out in such a manner to reflect the federal character of Nigeria and the need to promote national unity and also command national loyalty, thereby ensuring that there shall be no predominance of persons from a few states or from a few ethnic or other sectional groups in that government or any of its agencies.

Section 14, sub-section 3, 1999 Constitution, Federal Republic of Nigeria

However, as being applied to federal universities, the management of that mandate has been corrupted by the idiosyncrasies of state actors assembled to run the statutory prerogative of the Federal Character Commission (FCC) in superintending over the administration of the federal character principle. By their political strategy of taking the forty-six federal universities in Nigeria as 'one agency', and abetting the ethnic pre-dominance of each university by the indigenes of the respective geo-ethnic territories of the institutions through catchment area policy, state actors assume that the federal character principle has been conclusively implemented in that sub-sector of the public service. Hence, we have a situation in which federal universities are politically appropriated by the indigenes of the geo-ethnic territory of the respective institutions despite their statutory ownership and full funding by the federal government. Instead of bringing together and fusing Nigerians of different ethnic backgrounds, the situation is making non-indigenes, in their diverse variants, to be treated as strangers in their own country thus truncating national integration, subverting national citizenship notions, and hindering many peoples' resourcefulness and expected contribution to the socio-economic development of the nation-state (IDI, June.–July. 2017).

Some issues throw light on the subversion of merit in the appointment of vice-chancellors in the two referenced federal universities. First, the unbalanced indigene / non-indigene staff identity distributions in the universities had implications on the composition of the vice-chancellors' selection organs. For instance, Indigene compositions of the university staff in the two federal universities between 2003 and 2021 by states of origin ranged between 28.6%

and 55.7%; and by the geo-political zone of origin, it ranged between 70% and 79%, excessively overshadowing those of non-indigenes. The indigene compositions of the Joint Council & Senate Selection Board (JC&SSB) by states of origin ranged between 20% and 60%; and by the geo-political zone of origin, it ranged between 80% and 100%. The identity distributions in the Search Team and the Governing Council were also relatively, similarly inclined. Thus, the indigene/non-indigene identity distributions of university staff found some relative expression in the identity distributions of the members of the vice-chancellors' selection organs; hence cleverly, indigeneship interests were fused with the corporatist interest representation in the selection organs (KII, Aug.–Sept., 2021).

Second, logically flowing from the above, the vice-chancellor candidates' political strategies deployed towards gaining the appointment included: influencing the composition of the vice-chancellors' selection organs and identity mobilisation for communal acceptance. As already noted, identity representation revealed three variants of indigeneship mobilisation in the politics: ethno-territorial indigeneship, sub-ethnic indigeneship, and state-of-origin indigeneship mobilisations. As stated earlier, ethno-territorial indigeneship mobilisation was the hegemonic platform for the appointment of vice-chancellors in UI (Yoruba indigeneship) while state-of-origin indigeneship mobilisation (Plateau State indigeneship) mostly prevailed as the hegemonic platform in Unijos (KII, June–July 2017).

Third, the governing council guidelines for VC candidates' merit assessment instruments had subjective items. On those instruments, items that attracted subjective scoring by members of the Joint Council & Senate Selection Board (JC&SSB) ranged between 48% and 50% in the two federal universities. Although, there was no conclusive registry evidence that the selection organs officially adopted indigeneship as one of the variables that determined the appointment of the vice-chancellors, however, the composite elements of the merit criteria which factored candidates' academic, professional and managerial aptitudes, straddling the objective and the subjective items, were overwhelmingly presumed to have been actively pronged to assess three issues, namely: the 'academic/professional excellence', 'managerial acumen' and 'communal acceptability' of candidates. An unpopular candidate could not emerge as vice-chancellor under that selection and election system irrespective of the heights of his academic excellence and managerial aptitudes. The communal acceptability factor was thus the window through which indigeneship prejudice interacted with the merit principle of the appointment (KII, June–July 2017).

The way a majority of key actors in the universities defined the merit concept within the context of the vice-chancellors' selection processes throws further

light on the status of the merit principle in the vice-chancellors' appointment politics. Those key actors' perception in this regard determined and defined the degree to which the opportunities provided by the vice-chancellors' selection organs, procedures, and processes were largely twisted for parochial purposes. Two issues stand out in this respect. As already noted, between 48% and 50% of the assessment items on the instruments deployed in the two referenced universities for the scoring of candidates for the position of vice-chancellor were not measurable and hence relied on the discretion of the umpires for their scoring, thus seemingly deployed to factor the subjective preferences of the umpires and or the university community. The assessment templates adopted in the selection processes were generally seen as a necessary and rational device for achieving a balance between the assessment of candidates' academic/professional excellence and managerial acumen, and the political consideration of the communal acceptability of candidates (KII, June–July 2017).

Furthermore, generally, emphasis was placed on the internal democracy embedded in the corporatist interest representation scheme which provided an 'electoral college' system in the selection and appointment processes. The vice-chancellor's selection and appointment processes, as embedded in the governance structure in the university system, are run based on corporatist interest representation. In a system of corporatist interest representation, the constituent units are organised into a limited number of singular, compulsory, non-competitive, functionally differentiated, and hierarchically ordered categories that are granted a deliberate representational monopoly on the university governance system. While the university governing council has full responsibility for governance, corporate representation in the governing council includes the Visitor (Nigerian president), the government (ministry of education), the whole federation (appointees of the council of ministers), the university senate (academic), congregation (general staff) and convocation (alumni and students). The web-like structure of governance in the university system thus ensures relative participation of the members of the university community and other stakeholders in decision-making (KII and IDI, June–July 2017).

Similarly, while the 5-member Search Team and the 5-member Joint Council and Senate Selection Board performed specified specialist functions in the vice-chancellors' appointment process, the composition of those organs was made through corporate representation. The corporate bodies being represented in the two organs included: the governing council and the university senate. The governing council elected two of its members, differently, into each of the Search Team and the Joint Council & Senate Selection Board. The

university senate also did likewise. The pro-chancellor served as the chairman of the Joint Council & Senate Selection Board while a council member appointed by the council served as the chairman of the Search Team.

Apart from an objective scoring system that should enable the umpires to determine an appreciable baseline for academic/professional excellence and managerial abilities, political manoeuvring was overwhelmingly considered necessary for achieving a balance in such an 'electoral college' system. In addition, merit, within the established guidelines, was generally understood from the perspective of the three-point level playing ground that the selection processes provided for all candidates. These include: (a) the relay-style, multi-level, functionally intertwined processes; (b) the uniform, multi-layer scoring template; and (c) the corporate interests' representation, which provided the 'electoral college' semblance for the system. This was largely considered to be an excellent combination of meritocracy and participatory democracy. That democratic content in the processes is the main trouble of the merit prerogative of the appointment system (KII, June–July 2017).

Furthermore, it was overwhelmingly considered that rather than being a normal promotion exercise in a bureaucratic set-up, the 'selection and election' processes for the appointment of vice-chancellors of federal universities were largely a hybrid of bureaucratic and political competition amongst interested candidates. In this regard, the vice-chancellor job, though bureaucratic, was generally considered political because it offered separate conditions of service for specified terms in office, and did not terminate the beneficiaries' normal public service career in the university at the expiration of the specified terms. In addition to candidates' academic abilities measured by the heights of educational attainments, classes of degrees, number of publications; etc., the antecedents of candidates in previous management positions, their ability to govern an academic community, and their popularity and acceptability in the community were all politically considered as components of the merit criteria (IDI, June–July 2017).

Generally, key actors were of the view that if a candidate was naïve in a way that he was only superficially projecting only his academic excellence and managerial acumen, and could not compete with his colleagues, politically, within the broad understanding of politics, then such a person was myopic and not fit to ascend to governance positions in the university. It was considered that academic excellence was one thing, while the ability to govern an academic community was another critical issue entirely. Yet the most important thing was the ability to play politics to achieve democratic acceptance in the community. These were generally adjudged as constitutive of the merit principle in the spirit of the established guidelines for the appointment of

vice-chancellors in federal universities in Nigeria. This is a disservice to merit (KII, June–July 2017).

In essence, the merit principle in operation for the appointment of vice-chancellors in the federal universities was fused with political considerations, considering the identity-group politics locked within the selection processes. Due to the absence of statutorily defined merit criteria, the vice-chancellors' appointment politics operated a selection and election system in which an objective assessment of the academic/professional excellence and managerial acumen of candidates was intertwined with the subjective preferences of the members of the university community. Logically, therefore, it was evident that the appointment system appropriated 'academic/professional excellence', 'managerial acumen', and 'communal acceptability' of candidates as constitutive of the merit criteria in the institutions.

It can be argued that this subjective influence on the framing of the merit criteria was premised on the quest to achieve equity through the instrumentality of ethnic group representation in the sharing and ownership of federal resources. In the workforce of the respective federal institutions, the ethnic group representation notion was largely operated via the numerical strengths of the respective ethnic groups indigenous to the areas where the respective federal institutions are domiciled. This pointed out the ethnic direction of the 'communal acceptability' component of the merit criteria, culminating in the phenomenon of ethno-territorial hegemony, foreshadowing non-indigenes' low presence or systematic exclusion in the leadership strata of the respective universities. These have resulted in many Nigerians becoming apathetic to issues of development in the nation-state (IDI, June–July 2017).

There is a need to recover the original inclusion intent of Nigeria's nation-building agenda expressly embodied in the 1999 Constitution, and also restore the standard merit principle as the most conspicuous trademark of the academy. This is most particularly because there are two contradictions that are central to elite's pretence of pursuing equity. First, there is the tricky situation occasioned by the conventional expectation of the inviolability of the standard merit principle in universities against the need for the appropriation of the politicised merit criteria in the public service as a result of the complication of Nigeria's plurality. The resolution of that tricky situation should not be done to condone mediocrity in the ivory towers.

Second, there is a lock jam between the traditional demands for the rights of individuals and consideration for group rights in the appropriation of fairness, impartiality, and freedom from bias in matters relating to the distribution of state resources and access to public spaces in plural societies. Resolving that lock jam should not be done in a way that would result in the involuntary brain drain of well-qualified individuals that have more to contribute to the

development of the nation-state than a bunch of glorified constituency representatives whose value does not go beyond being the eyes and mouthpieces of the intellectually inactive majority.

Furthermore, if representation is taken as the most viable key for inclusion towards achieving nation-building and national development, then that key should be handled in such a way as to balance the presence of indigenes with those of non-indigenes in all the staff and principal officer cadres of the university. Representation in that wise would surely enhance citizens' participation in the sustenance of the polity. Technically, the discourse of the values and benefits of representation, as it concerns the politics associated with the appointment of vice-chancellors, and by extension, of all principal officers, of federal universities in Nigeria, can be viewed from two perspectives.

First, viewed from the perspective of participatory democracy, as embedded in the corporatist interest representation arrangement in the governance and leadership appointment processes in the institutions, representation ensures that the problems of political cohesion, nation-building, and state capacity enjoy supportive solutions involving both the Nigeria state and the citizens. It can be argued that the elements of participatory democracy via the semblance of the electoral college system embedded into the vice-chancellors' appointment processes in the federal universities, which make the voices of stakeholders and the university community count in the leadership selection processes, place the nation-state at a vantage position to harvest the values of participatory democracy as it concerns the federal universities. Second, viewed from the perspective of representative bureaucracy, representation ensures that the interests of the respective indigenes and non-indigenes, in equal proportion, are considered in bureaucratic decision-making processes, particularly if the active representation objective is actualized. These would promote national cohesion if enlisted as guiding principles.

5 Conclusion

Vice-chancellors' appointment in Nigeria's federal universities is a product of the interactive contexts of institutional autonomy, communal participation, identity politics, and merit principle. Without a doubt, the widely acclaimed variables that determined the appointment of persons to the position were: academic qualifications, managerial experience, academic leadership standing, character and integrity, and interview performance, all factored via a chain of appraisal items that straddled objective and subjective elements. However, as it was contrived, those composite elements of the merit criteria were actively pronged to access the 'academic/professional excellence', 'managerial

acumen', and 'communal acceptability' of candidates. The faulty inclusion politics and the subversion of merit are thus interconnected with the systematic exclusion of non-indigenes in vice-chancellors' appointments in federal universities in Nigeria.

The subjective items on candidates' merit assessment instruments, requiring the discretionary scoring by members of the Joint Council and Senate Selection Board, seemed to have been intentionally schemed as a window to appropriate the 'communal acceptability' element of the politicised merit criteria in favour of the subjective preferences of the members of the university community. Indigeneship thus unequivocally annexed that window to become an additional variable that influenced the appointments' processes. Via that path, indigenes' predomination of the leadership strata of a federal university thus clearly becomes a counter-productive perspective to inclusion as this gradually results in the institution becoming an *ethnic community* rather than a *universal community*. These have resulted in many Nigerians becoming apathetic to issues of development in the nation-state.

To restore the universal and multicultural concepts of the ivory towers, the university institutions should dismantle that faulty inclusion politics and re-invent the leadership selection system to give exclusive consideration to a merit-driven amalgam of equality of opportunities, excellence, and quality. The nation-state shall be the better for it.

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