

# Undergraduate Students' Infractions and the Administration of Social Justice in Nigerian Universities

V. O. Igbineweka<sup>1</sup>, W. A. Iguodala<sup>2</sup> & Blessing Osuigwe Anukaenyi<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Educational Management, University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria

<sup>2</sup> Academic Planning Division, University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria

<sup>3</sup> Godfrey Okoye University, Thinkers Coner, Enugu, Nigeria

Correspondence: V. O. Igbineweka, Department of Educational Management, University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria. E-mail: voeweka@yahoo.com

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## Abstract

Nigeria, situated in the West African sub-region of the African continent has an estimated population of over 170 million people with 146 universities. The demand for these universities in the recent past has been unprecedented with an average of 1.5 million applicants for placement annually, the highest anywhere in the world. Regrettably, public funding of the university is grossly inadequate with public expenditure per students as low as N168,000.00 or \$1000 (given an exchange rate of N282 to \$1). The consequences of the seeming inadequate funding manifest in overcrowded classrooms, inadequate facilities and unfriendly school climate with the attendant restiveness characterizing the behavior of students in the universities. It is the concern expressed by stakeholders about fairness in the administration of social justice that provides the motivation for studies. Three research questions were raised to guide the study perceived to be significant to university administrators, students' union governments, security agencies and the society at large. The survey research design was chosen to observe and describe the situation of students' disciplinary problems and the ability of university authorities to fairly administer justice to sanctioning infractions. A questionnaire titled: Students' Infractions and Administration of Social Justice Questionnaire (SISAQUE) was designed and administered on 454 students and 146 members of Students' Disciplinary Committees (SDCs) in the sampled schools bringing the total sample size for the study to 600. Data collected were analyzed with percentages, means and standard deviation. The result of data analysis showed that stealing, fighting, involvement in examination mal-practices, battery, intimidation, bullying, cyber crimes and involvement in cultism were the commonly reported infractions in the universities. It was also found among others that students have concerns about fairness in the administration of social justice in the universities. Based on the findings, it was recommended that other tertiary institutions such as polytechnics and colleges be fully developed to attract students with the belief that the unprecedented demand for university education in Nigeria will reduce drastically. It was also recommended that the culture of the rule of law be institutionalized in the process of administering social justice in the universities.

**Keywords:** infractions, social justice, students, universities, administration

## 1. Introduction

The Nigerian higher education system comprises universities, polytechnics and colleges offering several academic programmes in the arts, humanities and sciences. It is the largest and most complex higher education system on the African continent (Okebukola, 2005). There are 146 universities in Nigeria out of which 78 are owed, controlled and managed by the government while others are owed by private individuals and organizations. The other tertiary institutions like the polytechnics and colleges owed by the public and private investors are estimated to be over 183 to serve the educational needs of a population estimated to be over 170 million (Nwadiani, 1999). The demand for placement in these universities every year on the average is estimated to be over 1.6 million applicants (JAMB, 2016). Studies carried out by Osagie (2001); Okebukola (2001); Nwagwu (2003); Okebukola (2005); Oyeneye (2006); Awe (2010); Igbineweka and Anukaenyi (2016) show that the available universities are not able to adequately accommodate the proportion of applicants admitted into the universities. The average total students' enrolment in these universities according to the National Universities Commission (NUC, 2016) is estimated to be 560,000. The total student enrolment at all levels therefore in the

universities is estimated to be over 2,520,000 per school year. This means that 17,260 undergraduates on the average are accommodated and enrolled in each of the universities characterized by scarcity of all school inputs except students.

A common sight in these universities is overcrowding. Lecture spaces, bed spaces in the halls of residence as observed by Ukeje and Ehiamezor (1998) are always crowded because they are not enough to adequately cater for the increasing students' enrolment. The figures in Figures 1, 2 and 3 dramatize the problem of overcrowding in the universities.



Figure 1. This is a typical lecture hall in Nigerian universities where 4 or 5 persons scramble for sitting spaces meant for 2



Figure 2. This lecturer is overwhelmed with the size of the class and appears to look tired



Figure 3. This is common sight in the halls of residence. 6 female students are seen scrambling to sleep in a room meant for 2 persons. It is worse in the male hostels

The avalanche of literature on students' involvement in vices such as fighting, cultism, exam malpractices put the consequences of the problem of overcrowding in the universities in perspective.

Cultism is one of such problems. Cultism is defined as a ritual practice by a group of vindictive people whose membership, admission and *modus operandi* are enveloped in secrecy with the overriding objective of protecting and defending its members against acts of oppression or victimization (Ekundayo & Osalusi, 2010). Cultism in Nigeria dates back to the pre-colonial days when a group of people with the main aim of seeking protection from spiritual attacks came together. Today, there is proliferation of secret cults in many parts of the country. The Ogboni secret cult is notable among the Yorubas; Ekpe secret cult among the Efiks; Ekine cult in the Delta region and Owegbe cult among the Edos (Adelola, 1997). Almost everywhere in the world, cults exist for the manipulation of social, economic and political powers. These cults differ in what is kept secret and what is made public. In some, membership is secret, but the rituals they perform are not, while in some others, membership is made public but rituals are secret.

Cultism has also encroached into the school system. This is not surprising because the school is the mirror of the society. Today, cult groups in schools, particularly in the universities carry out violence, maim, kill and carry out many anti-social activities on campuses. Nigerian educational institutions were not associated with secret cults until 1952 when Wole Soyinka (now professor) and six others (Olumuyiwa Awe, Ralph Opara, Tunji Tubi, Daign Imokhuede, Pius Olegbe and Olu Agunloye) formed the Seadogs confraternity (a.k.a. Pyrates). The ideas behind the formation of the confraternity were both patriotic and altruistic as it was not imagined as a secret cult. The main objective of the seadogs according to Orintusin (1990) was to subtly fight against the imposition of foreign culture including the problems of tribalism and elitism. About 45 secret cults have been identified in Nigerian tertiary institutions, the notable ones being; *Black axe, Eiye Confraternity, Vikings, Amazons, Buccaner Mafia, and Dragons*. The female students are not left out as they have their own groups among which are; *Temple of Eden, Frigates, Barracudas, Daughters of Jezebel* among others (Adewale, 2005).

University students' involvement in cult violence became manifest only some two decades ago. The existence of these groups on campuses has made life unsafe and meaningless to both staff and students. Their activities include: harassing any non members who compete with them for limited spaces in the universities or *takeover* a member's girl friend or "sugar daddy" (in case of female cultism); harassing female students that refuse their advances; and generally harass lecturers and university administrators.

According to Atteh (1996), one of the earliest reported secret cult violence occurred at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka in 1985 when a non-cult student incurred the wrath of another student. A student of University of Port-Harcourt was beheaded during a feud between cult members. At Delta State University in Abraka, the activities of secret cult groups resulted in the death of a Principal Assistant Registrar and his wife; on 5<sup>th</sup> of August, 2002, a 300 level economics student was shot dead in Ado-Ekiti area of Nigeria (Adewale, 2005). On the 8<sup>th</sup> of June 2006, some cult members invaded University of Ado-Ekiti at 12 noon where they burnt the cadet's office, killed three students and wounded many students and staff of the university Nwagwu (1994). The authors also reported that on June 28, 2006, a lecturer was abducted and killed during a clash between different cult groups at the Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Ogun State.

Cultists have attacked and killed many students in higher institutions in Nigeria, with the most gruesome recorded at the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife where about ten students died in one day Nwagwu (2003). Other reports according to Ogidefa (2008) show that, 5 students of Obafemi Awolowo University were killed on July 10<sup>th</sup>, 1999, including the 3 students from Kwara State Polytechnic killed on October 2003. Tony Ileogbuna, acting Head of Geology department at the Enugu State University of Science and Technology was murdered; Yomi Edeki of University of Benin was killed on February 4<sup>th</sup>, 2004 while in March 9, 2004 Vincent Uloho of University of Benin, Benin City was also murdered in cold blood. Again, July 2004, Wale Adeyori and Banji of the Federal Polytechnic Ilaro were killed; Ashifat Olatunji Saheed, a student of the Polytechnic Ibadan was slaughtered in March, 2005; Gbenga Joseph, a Policeman attached to anti-cult squad of Kwara State Police command was killed by suspected cultist in June 2005. Cultists also slaughtered Bolaji Toniwa, a student of Lagos State University in September 2005 (Ogidefa, 2008).

The other vice ravaging the university system is examination malpractice. Intense competition for limited access to the few universities has led to widespread cheating in examinations for the purpose of obtaining higher scores to improve the chances of securing good grades to compete for limited jobs in the country's moribund economy. Cheating takes place according to Obayan (1999) in all areas for which examinations are required. Although legislation exists to discourage this vice, it is however lamentable that enforcement has not been effective in addressing the problem (Oni, 1999).

To prevent the breakdown of law and order in the university campuses therefore, rules and regulations are made to regulate students' conduct. National Universities Commission (NUC), the agency that oversees the



management of universities in Nigeria demands that these rules and regulations be given to students to peruse in every university. As a matter of policy therefore, these rules and regulations documented in the students' information handbook are given to every student to internalize upon admission into the university. As a follow-up, every university is made to inaugurate Students' Disciplinary Committee (SDC), to administer justice in matters of infractions involving students in the universities.

Social justice is the fair and just relation between the individual and society. This is measured by the equitable distribution of wealth opportunities. In Western as well as in older Asian cultures, the concept of social justice means the process of ensuring that individuals fulfill their societal roles and enjoy their rights (Chianu, 2001). Social justice guarantees the protection of rights and duties in the society thereby motivating people to be patriotic. Legal scholars popularized social justice particularly from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when it was embedded in international laws and institutions. For example, the preamble to the establishment of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) states that "universal and lasting peace can be established only if it is based upon social justice". The necessity of social justice therefore in managing students' disciplinary behaviors in the universities cannot be over emphasized. Personal observation and interaction with some university students however show that administration of justice in cases of infractions involving students is poor. Several students have concerns about fairness in the administration of justice in cases involving students. The concern of this paper therefore is to identify the infractions committed by students in the universities and appraise the extent to which social justice is imbibed in resolving cases of infractions involving students. In this regard, the following research questions were raised to guide the study perceived to be significant to university administrators, law enforcement agencies, the students' union governments and the society at large.

- 1) What are the infractions commonly reported among students in Nigerian universities?
- 2) Which of the infractions is (are) perceived to be significant?
- 3) Is there fairness in the administration of social justice in managing reported infractions among students?

## **2. Method of Study**

The descriptive survey was employed to provide the design on which the study anchored to observe and describe the management of students' disciplinary problems in Nigerian universities. All the undergraduate students whose cases were before the SDCs including Secretaries to the SDCs in all the 146 universities in Nigeria constituted the population of study. The multi-stage sampling technique employed to select the study sample took place in 3 stages. The first stage involved the grouping of all the 146 universities in Nigeria under the 6 geopolitical zones that make up the country. In the second stage, 10 percent of the universities in each of the geopolitical zones were randomly selected for the study while the third and final stage chose all the 454 undergraduate students whose cases of infractions have already been decided by the SDCs. In all, 600 respondents constituted the study sample. A questionnaire titled: Students' Infractions and Administration of Social Justice Questionnaire (SISAQUE) was designed, validated, pilot tested and administered on 600 respondents comprising 454 undergraduate students and 146 university staff members that served as members/secretaries in the SDCs. The sample was carefully chosen to ensure that all the population characteristics were accommodated. Data collected to answer the research questions were analyzed with percentages, means, and standard deviation. The theoretical mean on a 4-Point Likert scale was determined to be 2.50 upon which significant reported infractions were identified.

## **3. Results and Discussions**

### *3.1 Research Question 1: What Are the Infractions Commonly Reported among Students in Nigerian Universities?*

To answer research question 1, universities students' disciplinary committee secretaries, the custodians of reported cases of infractions involving students were asked to identify the commonly reported infractions. Their responses were analysed using percentages and means and results shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Percentage analysis of commonly reported infractions among students in Nigerian Universities

S/N	Infractions	Responses		
		Yes	No	% Yes
1.	Stealing	138	08	88
2.	Fighting	117	29	80
3.	Rape	42	104	29
4.	Involvement in Exam malpractices	140	06	96
5.	Battery	67	79	53
6.	Involvement in cultism	146	00	100
7.	Slander	70	76	48
8.	Threat/Intimidation	109	37	75
9.	Bulling	96	50	66
10	Cyber crime (Social Media)	137	09	94
<b>Mean Score</b>		<b>106</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>73</b>

Source: Researchers' Fieldwork.

According to the data in Table 1, SDC secretaries responded that 73 percent of the total documented (or incidented) cases were commonly reported. The infractions commonly reported are stealing, fighting, involvement in examination malpractice, involvement in cultism, cyber crime, threat, and bullying, while the remaining 3 are seldomly reported.

### 3.2 Research Question 2: Which of the Infractions Is (Are) Significant?

The SDC secretaries were asked to rate the extent to which the reported cases affect the management of students behaviour on a 4-point Likert scale. The responses were analysed using standard deviation and the results presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Mean analysis of commonly reported infractions involving students in Nigerian Universities

Infractions	Responses		
	X	Mean	S.D
Stealing	212	1.99	0.039
Fighting	286	2.70	0.142
Involvement in Exam malpractices	307	2.90	0.108
Threat/Intimidation	275	2.59	0.114
Bullying	118	1.12	0.002
Cyber Crime	119	1.12	0.011
Involvement in Cultism	319	3.01	0.162

Source: Researchers' Fieldwork.

According to the data in the Table 2, the cases of fighting (0.142), involvement in examination malpractices (0.108), threat/intimidation (0.114) and involvement in cultism (0.162) are the reported cases that significantly affect the management of students' disciplinary behaviors in Nigerian universities. The other cases of stealing, (0.039), bullying (0.002) and cyber crime (0.011) though reported do not significantly affect the management of students' disciplinary problems.

### 3.3 Research Question 3: Is There Fairness in the Administration of Social Justice in Managing Reported Infractions in the Universities?

To answer research question 3, a total of 600 university students who appeared before the SDCs either as complainants or as accused between 2012 and March 2016 were identified and traced to their departments and residences. They appraised the fairness of the university authorities in administering justice in reported cases on a 4 point Likert scale. The responses were analysed with the mean statistics and result presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Mean analysis of students perception of universities authorities administration of social justice

Category	N	X	Mean	S.D	Remark
Complainants	112	326	2.91	0.011	Fair
Accused	488	819	1.68	0.036	Unfair
Total	600	1145	1.91	0.0235	Unfair

Source: Researchers' Fieldwork.

According to the data in Table 3, students that reported cases of infractions with a mean score of 2.91 believe that there is fairness in the administration of social justice in managing students' disciplinary problems in Nigerian universities while the accused with a mean score of 1.68 believe otherwise.

#### 4. Discussion

Overcrowding and shortage of learning facilities characterize university campuses in Nigeria. Students therefore scramble for spaces in classrooms, libraries, laboratories, studios and workshops including the halls of residences all the time for learning and recreational activities. It is the process of scrambling that rights are violated resulting in different cases of infractions. The infractions commonly reported in this study are not different from the ones reported by Osalusi (2010) and Adewale (2005) in previous studies.

The commonly reported cases of fighting, examination malpractices, involvement in cultism and threat/intimidation and supported by the findings of Ajayi, Ekundayo and Osalusi (2010) are significant. The emphasis placed on certificate, paper qualifications in Nigeria for employment and the propensity to acquire university degree for social status may explain the unprecedented involvement in examination malpractices. The worrisome widening gap between the rich and the poor in Nigeria may be the bane of hatred that exacerbates the provocation to fight, intimidate and involve in violent activities.

The practice of cult activities is a problem that has its root in the society and has infiltrated the entire higher education system. The conditions in higher education institutions, such as overcrowding, deteriorated facilities, admissions malpractices and inadequately challenging academic programmes have been blamed for encouraging the emergence of secrets cults in the system. Cult activities have had an extremely negative impact on learning and discipline in the institutions. Cult activities have been made illegal but the practices continue due to the concerns stakeholders have about the administration of justice.

Safety on campuses and creation of a learning environment is essential for effective education and for the elimination or lessening of the anger and alienation that contribute to the attractiveness of cult activities. The challenges in this area are staggering due to the fact that they are rooted in the society and the political system. Cults operate underground with members not using their real names. Government legislation seems to be ineffective in stamping the practice out of higher education. This issue needs sustained attention by both government and individual institutions because it impacts negatively on the quality of education offered.

Religion and ethnicity may also explain the distrust, hatred and anger that many university students willfully violate the rights of others, religion and ethnic intolerance observed amongst Nigerians have been the bane of militancy, insurgency, restiveness and the other gangrenous activities currently threatening co-existence in the country. The university, being a microcosm of the society therefore is not spared. It is not surprising therefore that students in the university fight or intimidate one another to assert some sort of influence. The seeming absence of the rule of law in Nigeria even encourages infractions to be committed with impunity.

## 5. Conclusion

Over subscription for the limited spaces in Nigerian universities is the bane of overcrowding in the university system. It is this overcrowding in virtually all departments in the university that supports the strong to violate the rights of the weak. The university management recognizing the fact that development will lag behind in the absence of peace, inaugurates students disciplinary committees to manage reported disciplinary problems among students. It is imperative therefore that the university authorities should be seen to be consistent and fair in adjudicating in reported cases of infractions among students in order to enjoy their trust and confidence.

## 6. Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions, the study concluded that:

- 1) The supply of university education should be based on need and available facilities for teaching/learning activities. It is believed that when this is done, the problem of overcrowding will be exterminated and quality assured.
- 2) Reported infractions particularly fighting, intimidation, involvement in examinations malpractices and cultism that are significant should be severely sanctioned to deter perpetrators. Suspension, expulsion and payment of damages are sanctions that could be effectively used to manage disciplinary problems amongst students.
- 3) University staff members with proven integrity should be identified and appointed to serve on *ad-hoc* basis in the students' disciplinary committees. When this is done, far reaching decisions can be taken dispassionately and students' confidence and trust in the system safe guided.

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