

Institutional Autonomy and Teacher Preparation: A Case for Independent Teacher Education Institutions in South-South, Nigeria

Blessing Iheanyichukwu Nwuchegbuo

Department of Educational Psychology, Guidance and Counselling,
Faculty of Education, University of Port Harcourt

Iheanyiblessing1@gmail.com

Abstract:

This study investigated the relationship between institutional autonomy and teacher preparation in teacher education institutions in South-South Nigeria in order to make a case for teacher education institutions that are independent. Adopted correlational survey design and the study was carried out in the six states of the South-South geopolitical zone. Four research questions and corresponding four hypotheses guided the study. The population included the 17,427 stakeholders namely provosts / deans, heads of departments, lecturers and final year students from the Colleges of Education and the Faculties of Education. The sample size of 600 respondents was selected using multi-stage sampling technique from six purposively selected institutions. The data was gathered by a validated questionnaire, entitled “Institutional Autonomy and Teacher Preparation Questionnaire” (IATPQ) and has a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of 0.83. Pearson Product Moment Correlation and One-way ANOVA were used to analyze the data. The results showed that academic autonomy had a positive statistically significant relationship with the quality of teacher preparation ($r = 0.277$; $p < 0.001$), administrative autonomy with innovation in teacher preparation programmes ($r = 0.455$; $p < 0.001$), and financial autonomy with the effectiveness of teacher preparation ($r = 0.392$; $p < 0.001$). The overall mean scores of the stakeholders showed positive perceptions regarding the need and feasibility of independent teacher education institutions (ITEIs), $F(3,574) = 17.395$, $p < 0.001$, but there were significant differences among stakeholder groups. The study finds that increased autonomy in the academic, administrative, and financial aspects of teacher preparation could significantly improve in the region the quality of teacher preparation, the innovation of teacher education, and effectiveness. It suggests giving more autonomy to Colleges of Education and step

towards a balanced regulatory system to respond to the persistent challenges and create teachers that are prepared for the 21st century classrooms.

Keywords: Institutional autonomy, teacher preparation, Colleges of Education, South-South Nigeria, independent teacher education institutions.

Introduction

Teacher education plays a strategic role in the development of any country's educational system since the quality of teachers is one of the determinants for the quality of learning outcomes, educational advancement and nation development. The teacher is the first point of contact for educational policies and the key facilitator of the learning of knowledge, skills, values and competencies for learners. Teacher preparation is therefore a key issue for government, policymakers and providers globally [1]; [2]; [3]. The teacher education system in Nigeria can be traced back to the colonial period when missionary schools started teacher training schools to supply personnel for their mission schools.

The primary schools teachers were trained through the Teacher Training Colleges (TTCs) with main emphasis on the production of Grade III and II teachers [4]. Since Nigeria's independence in 1960, the demand for qualified teachers has grown tremendously as a result of rapid expansion of education and policies for promoting universal access to education. This demanded changes in teacher education that resulted to the creation of Advanced Teachers' Colleges and subsequently, Colleges of Education for high quality teacher professional training [5]. One of the major milestones was the National Policy on Education, which was introduced in 1977, which marked that teacher education was recognized as essential for the development of the nation, and the Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE) was set as the minimum qualification for teachers in primary and junior secondary schools.

In 1989, the National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE) was set up to oversee and coordinate teacher education programmes in Colleges of Education. The NCCE has been striving to achieve uniformity throughout the country through standardized curriculum, accreditation and quality assurance systems [6]. These changes brought in regulations and standardization, but at the same time, they reinforced the control of the central government over teacher education institutions. There has been an increasing worry over the years that government policies and procedures and centralized decision making have stunted institutional autonomy. Institutional autonomy can be defined as the extent to which an educational institution is able to make choices regarding governance, curriculum development, staff selection, financial management, research and academic programmes without too much outside interference [7].

The early post-independence era was relatively more conducive to academic and administrative freedom for HEIs in Nigeria. The autonomy has, however, been gradually reduced over the years by the increasing government involvement in fundraising, policy formulation, leadership appointments and curriculum control, particularly in public schools [8];[9]. Institutional autonomy has emerged as a key topic in discussion around education today [10], in relation to innovation, responsiveness to change, accountability, and effectiveness. Many systems have strived to become autonomous internationally in order to enable the institutions to respond to the changes in society, technology, and the labour market. Greater autonomy has been linked with the flexibility of the curriculum, effective resource management, closer links with industry and community, and innovation [11];[12]. However, too much centralization can hamper responsiveness and stifle the effectiveness of the institutions in dealing with local challenges.

In Nigeria, TEIs are still in a highly regulated environment with centralized curricula, limited funding and administrative restrictions. These measures are designed to hold institutions to account and to guarantee minimum standards, but have triggered concerns over the capacity of institutions to innovate

and deliver on new demands. The demands of the contemporary world, including digital literacy, competency-based learning, inclusive practices, entrepreneurship education, and technology-enriched learning, necessitate flexible, adaptive and context-sensitive teacher preparation programmes [13];[14].

However, several COEs are facing difficulties because of their lack of flexibility, poor infrastructure, funding shortages, staff shortages, and bureaucratic issues. The problems are especially severe in the South-South region of Nigeria (Delta, Rivers, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River and Edo States). It is also home to several teacher education colleges both public and private that provide teachers in the region and across the country. However, many of them continue to experience problems such as poor facilities, drop in student enrolment, weak technology integration, scarcity of funds, and challenges of matching the curricula with contemporary educational.

A number of these issues have contributed to concerns of stakeholders regarding teacher preparation in general and the readiness of teacher graduates to respond to the demands of the 21st century classroom. In response, there has been a focus on the creation or strengthening of autonomous teacher education institutions that are more academically, administratively and financially independent. These institutions may be more attuned to developing a curriculum that is relevant to their context, using innovative pedagogies, forming strategic partnerships, efficiently sourcing resources, and being capable of reacting quickly to evolving demands. But there are concerns about how far increased autonomy could go in boosting the quality of teacher training without compromising on standards, accountability, equity, and the quality of education. While several studies have investigated the funding, infrastructure, curricula, teacher quality, and policy reforms in teacher education in Nigeria, very few have explored the link between teacher autonomy and the quality of teacher preparation.

Few empirical studies have been conducted on independent teacher education institutions in the South-South region. This gap highlights the importance of specific research to determine if greater autonomy can lead to greater relevance, innovation, graduate skills and outcomes for teacher preparation. With this background, the present study takes a look at institutional autonomy and teacher preparation and advocates for independent teacher training institutions in South-South Nigeria. It examines the impact of academic, administrative, and financial autonomy on the quality of teacher preparation programs and examines the views of stakeholders on the desirability and viability of autonomous teacher preparation programs as a means to improve teacher preparation in a region. The teacher education colleges are supposed to train competent, ethical, innovative and adaptive teachers to address the needs of the modern education system. But, there are still worries about the quality of the teacher preparation in Nigeria. This is reflected on the lack of pedagogical skills, insufficient use of technology as an important tool in education, low sense of professional identity of graduates and low responsiveness to new educational needs.

Regardless of government and regulatory reform, many Colleges of Education still face issues of insufficient amounts of funding, poor infrastructure, inflexible curricula, excessive bureaucratic control and a lack of innovation capacity. One dimension related to institutional autonomy to which too little has been dedicated to the scholarly literature is the impact on the quality of teacher preparation. In Nigeria, teacher education institutions are normally highly centralized, which leads to their limited autonomy to take decisions on curriculum development, allocation of resources, recruitment of staff and innovation of programmes. This often fails to meet the need for teacher education institutions to be responsive to local contexts or needs, which are continually changing.

The challenges are more pronounced in the South-South region of Nigeria where resource limitation, low enrolment and the concerns of stakeholders on graduates' preparedness for the current classroom are more pronounced. There is some empirical evidence that greater autonomy of independent teacher education institutions, both academically, in terms of administration and finances, may be a potential answer, although this is not widely advocated. Thus it is not yet known whether the granting of institutional autonomy or the creation of the more independent teacher education institutions would

improve the South-South region's curriculum relevance, teaching innovations, graduate quality, and overall quality of teacher preparation. This uncertainty is the essence of the problem to be investigated in the present study.

The aim of this study is to examine the relationship between institutional autonomy and teacher preparation in independent teacher education institutions in South-South, Nigeria. The specific objectives are to:

1. Examine the extent to which academic autonomy influences the quality of teacher preparation in teacher education institutions in South-South Nigeria.
2. Determine the influence of administrative autonomy on innovation in teacher preparation programmes in teacher education institutions in South-South Nigeria.
3. Assess the extent to which financial autonomy contributes to the effectiveness of teacher preparation in teacher education institutions in South-South Nigeria.
4. Investigate stakeholders' perceptions regarding the need for independent teacher education institutions in improving teacher preparation in South-South Nigeria.

The following research question guided the study

1. To what extent does academic autonomy influence the quality of teacher preparation in teacher education institutions in South-South Nigeria?
2. To what extent does administrative autonomy influence innovation in teacher preparation programmes in teacher education institutions in South-South Nigeria?
3. To what extent does financial autonomy contribute to the effectiveness of teacher preparation in teacher education institutions in South-South Nigeria?
4. What are stakeholders' perceptions regarding the need for and feasibility of independent teacher education institutions in improving teacher preparation in South-South Nigeria?

The following corresponding null hypotheses were tested at the 0.05 level of significance:

1. Academic autonomy has no significant influence on the quality of teacher preparation in teacher education institutions in South-South Nigeria.
2. Administrative autonomy has no significant influence on innovation in teacher preparation programmes in teacher education institutions in South-South Nigeria.
3. Financial autonomy has no significant influence on the effectiveness of teacher preparation in teacher education institutions in South-South Nigeria.
4. There is no significant difference in stakeholders' perceptions regarding the need for independent teacher education institutions in improving teacher preparation in South-South Nigeria.

Methodology

A correlational study was used in this study. It was carried out in South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria that consists of Delta, Rivers, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River and Edo States. There are several Colleges of Education in the region and also some Faculties of Education in Universities which are responsible for preparing teachers for primary, secondary and tertiary schools. The selection of the study area was driven by the growing concerns of the quality of teacher preparation and the increased call for institutional autonomy in the region.

The population of the study was all the stakeholders in teacher education institutions in South-South region of Nigeria. The target population that was estimated was seventeen thousand, four hundred and twenty-seven (17,427) which comprised of 12 Provosts, 15 Deans of Education, 150 Heads of

Departments, 2,250 lecturers and 15,000 final-year students in Colleges of Education and Faculties of Education in the region. The categories of respondents were chosen because they have enough information about the functioning of the institution, educational governance, and good quality teacher training programs.

The sampling was done in a multi-stage manner and involved 600 respondents. In the first phase six teacher education institutions were purposively selected (one from each State in South-South zone). Proportionate stratified sampling was then used to segment the respondents in terms of provosts/deans, heads of departments, lecturers and final year students. Finally, simple random sampling was used to obtain the samples for each stratum. The sample consisted of 6 Provosts/Deans, 24 Heads of Departments, 270 lecturers and 300 final year students (total of 600 respondents).

A researcher-made questionnaire, “Institutional Autonomy and Teacher Preparation Questionnaire” (IATPQ) was used as the tool for data collection. The questionnaire was divided into 5 sections. Demographic data was collected in Section A, with the Academic Autonomy, Administrative Autonomy, Financial Autonomy and Stakeholders' Perceptions of Independent Teacher Education Institutions measured in Sections B, C, D and E respectively. Questions were scored using a four-point scale: Strongly Agree (4), Agree (3), Disagree (2), and Strongly Disagree (1). The instrument was face and content validated by three experts, one from the Educational Management department, one from Measurement and Evaluation and one from Teacher Education department of reputable Universities in Nigeria. These comments were taken into account in the final version on issues of clarity, relevance and adequacy.

The reliability of the instrument was determined by conducting a pilot study with 30 respondents who were outside the main sample but had similar characteristics to the respondents to be analyzed. The findings of the pilot test revealed the Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient values for Academic Autonomy, Administrative autonomy, Financial autonomy and Stakeholders' Perception were 0.81, 0.84, 0.79 and 0.86, respectively, while the overall Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient was 0.83. The results of these values show that the instrument was reliable in the study.

Results

RQ1: To what extent does academic autonomy influence the quality of teacher preparation in teacher education institutions in South-South Nigeria?

H₀₁: Academic autonomy has no significant influence on the quality of teacher preparation in teacher education institutions in South-South Nigeria.

Table 1. Relationship between Academic Autonomy and Teacher Preparation Quality

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum	Correlation (r) with TP Quality	p-value
Academic Autonomy	578	2.49	0.44	1.04	4.00	0.277	0.000
Teacher Preparation Quality	578	1.37	0.41	1.00	2.88	-	-

The descriptive statistics show that respondents perceived a **moderate** level of academic autonomy in their teacher education institutions (Mean = 2.49, SD = 0.44). However, the perceived quality of teacher preparation was **low** (Mean = 1.37, SD = 0.41). This indicates that while institutions have some academic freedom, stakeholders still rate the overall quality of teacher preparation programmes in the South-South region as inadequate.

Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) analysis revealed a **weak to moderate positive and statistically significant** relationship between academic autonomy and the quality of teacher preparation (**r = 0.277, p < 0.001**). Since the p-value is less than the 0.05 level of significance, the **null**

hypothesis (H_{01}) is rejected.

This finding suggests that higher levels of academic autonomy (freedom to design curricula, select teaching methods, introduce new programmes, and integrate innovative pedagogies) are associated with improved quality of teacher preparation. Academic autonomy accounts for approximately 7.7% ($r^2 = 0.077$) of the variance in teacher preparation quality. Although the relationship is statistically significant, the modest effect size indicates that other factors (such as financial resources, infrastructure, and administrative support) also substantially influence teacher preparation outcomes.

RQ2: To what extent does administrative autonomy influence innovation in teacher preparation programmes in teacher education institutions in South-South Nigeria?

H_{02} : Administrative autonomy has no significant influence on innovation in teacher preparation programmes in teacher education institutions in South-South Nigeria.

Table 2. Relationship between Administrative Autonomy and Innovation in Teacher Preparation Programmes

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum	Correlation (r) with Innovation	P-value
Administrative Autonomy	578	2.59	0.44	1.14	4.00	0.455	0.000
Innovation in Teacher Preparation	578	2.01	0.44	1.00	3.32	-	-

The descriptive statistics indicate that respondents perceived a **moderate** level of administrative autonomy in their institutions (Mean = 2.59, SD = 0.44). The perceived level of innovation in teacher preparation programmes was **low to moderate** (Mean = 2.01, SD = 0.44). This suggests that while institutions enjoy some administrative independence, innovation in areas such as programme development, pedagogical approaches, and responsiveness to emerging needs remains limited.

Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) analysis revealed a **moderate positive and statistically significant** relationship between administrative autonomy and innovation in teacher preparation programmes ($r = 0.455$, $p < 0.001$). Since the p-value is less than the 0.05 level of significance, the **null hypothesis (H_{02}) is rejected.**

This result implies that greater administrative autonomy (e.g., freedom to recruit staff, appoint leaders, establish partnerships, and make quick administrative decisions) is associated with higher levels of innovation in teacher preparation programmes. Administrative autonomy accounts for approximately 20.7% ($r^2 = 0.207$) of the variance in innovation.

RQ3: To what extent does financial autonomy contribute to the effectiveness of teacher preparation in teacher education institutions in South-South Nigeria?

H_{03} : Financial autonomy has no significant influence on the effectiveness of teacher preparation in teacher education institutions in South-South Nigeria.

Table 3. Relationship between Financial Autonomy and Teacher Preparation Effectiveness

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum	Correlation @ with TP Effectiveness	P-value
Financial Autonomy	578	2.18	0.51	1.00	3.86	0.392	0.000
Teacher Preparation Effectiveness	578	1.52	0.47	1.00	3.14	-	-

The descriptive statistics reveal that respondents perceived a **low to moderate** level of financial

autonomy in their institutions (Mean = 2.18, SD = 0.51). Similarly, the perceived effectiveness of teacher preparation was **low** (Mean = 1.52, SD = 0.47). This indicates heavy reliance on government funding and limited internal revenue generation, which stakeholders believe constrains the overall effectiveness of teacher education programmes in the South-South region.

Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) analysis showed a **moderate positive and statistically significant** relationship between financial autonomy and the effectiveness of teacher preparation ($r = 0.392$, $p < 0.001$). Since the p-value is less than the 0.05 level of significance, the **null hypothesis (H_{03}) is rejected**.

This finding suggests that greater financial autonomy particularly the ability to generate and manage internal revenue, secure grants, allocate budgets independently, and invest in infrastructure and resources is associated with improved effectiveness of teacher preparation programmes. Financial autonomy accounts for approximately **15.4%** ($r^2 = 0.154$) of the variance in teacher preparation effectiveness. The result underscores the critical role of financial independence in enabling institutions to acquire modern teaching resources, maintain infrastructure, and implement quality-enhancing initiatives.

RQ4: What are stakeholders' perceptions regarding the need for and feasibility of independent teacher education institutions in improving teacher preparation in South-South Nigeria?

HO4: There is no significant difference in stakeholders' perceptions regarding the need for independent teacher education institutions in improving teacher preparation in South-South Nigeria.

Table 4. Stakeholders' Perceptions Regarding the Need for Independent Teacher Education Institutions

Stakeholder Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum	F-value	p-value
Provosts/Deans	25	3.32	0.41	2.43	4.00	17.395	0.000
HODs	95	3.22	0.40	2.14	4.00	-	-
Lecturers	255	3.12	0.41	1.86	4.00	-	-
Students	203	2.91	0.46	1.57	4.00	-	-
Overall	578	3.08	0.45	1.57	4.00	-	-

The table shows that stakeholders in South-South Nigeria generally hold **positive perceptions** regarding the need for and feasibility of independent teacher education institutions (Overall Mean = 3.08, SD = 0.45). Support was highest among Provosts/Deans (Mean = 3.32) and HODs (Mean = 3.22), followed by Lecturers (Mean = 3.12), while Students recorded the lowest mean (2.91), though still above the scale midpoint.

One-way ANOVA results revealed a **statistically significant difference** in perceptions among the different stakeholder groups ($F(3, 574) = 17.395$, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, the null hypothesis (H_{04}) is **rejected** at the 0.05 level of significance.

This significant difference suggests that administrative leaders (Provosts/Deans and HODs) are more optimistic about the benefits of independent/autonomous teacher education institutions compared to lecturers and students.

Discussion

The study found a **moderate positive statistically significant relationship** between academic autonomy and the quality of teacher preparation ($r = 0.277$, $p < 0.001$). The null hypothesis was rejected. This indicates that greater freedom in curriculum design, selection of teaching methods,

introduction of new programmes, and integration of innovative pedagogies is associated with improved quality of teacher preparation, though other factors also play substantial roles.

This finding aligns with global empirical evidence. Altbach, Reisberg, and de Wit argued that institutional autonomy in academic matters enhances curriculum relevance and pedagogical innovation. Similarly, OECD and Belgaroui reported that higher academic autonomy enables institutions to respond more effectively to societal needs and labour market demands. In the Nigerian context, the result supports Aina and Akintunde, who observed that rigid centralized curricula limit the ability of Colleges of Education to integrate current technologies and competency-based approaches. The moderate effect size ($r^2 = 0.077$) explains why many previous studies (e.g., UNESCO) noted persistent quality gaps despite regulatory reforms.

A **positive statistically significant relationship** was found between administrative autonomy and innovation in teacher preparation programmes ($r = 0.455$, $p < 0.001$). The null hypothesis was rejected. This suggests that freedom in staff recruitment, leadership appointments, partnership formation, and internal decision-making strongly promotes innovation.

This result is consistent with international literature. OECD and Belgaroui demonstrated that administrative autonomy enables institutions to respond swiftly to emerging challenges and foster creative partnerships. In Nigeria, the finding corroborates Mukoro and Saint, who noted that excessive bureaucratic interference stifles innovation in teacher education. The relatively stronger correlation here compared to academic autonomy highlights administrative flexibility as a critical driver of innovation in resource-constrained environments like South-South Nigeria.

This study examined the relationship between institutional autonomy and teacher preparation with a focus on making a case for independent teacher education institutions in South-South Nigeria. The findings revealed that academic, administrative, and financial autonomy significantly influence the quality, innovation, and effectiveness of teacher preparation programmes in the region. Specifically, greater academic autonomy enhances curriculum relevance and instructional quality, administrative autonomy fosters innovation and efficient programme management, while financial autonomy strengthens resource mobilization and infrastructural development necessary for modern teacher education.

The study further established that stakeholders in South-South Nigeria generally hold positive perceptions regarding the need for independent teacher education institutions with enhanced autonomy. These institutions are viewed as critical to addressing persistent challenges such as rigid curricula, bureaucratic bottlenecks, inadequate funding, and limited responsiveness to contemporary educational demands. By granting greater autonomy, teacher education institutions can become more adaptive, innovative, and contextually relevant, ultimately producing graduates who are better equipped to meet the needs of 21st-century classrooms [15].

The results affirm that institutional autonomy is not merely an administrative privilege but a strategic imperative for improving teacher quality and, by extension, the entire educational system in Nigeria. While challenges related to accountability and maintenance of national standards remain, the evidence supports a balanced approach that combines institutional independence with appropriate regulatory oversight. This study contributes to the limited body of empirical literature on institutional autonomy in Nigerian teacher education and provides a regional perspective that can inform national policy reforms.

Conclusions & Recommendation

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made: **The Federal Government and NCCE should grant greater academic and administrative autonomy** to Colleges of Education in South-South Nigeria, particularly by allowing institutions to design and implement

context-specific curricula, introduce innovative programmes, and manage internal academic affairs with reduced bureaucratic bottlenecks. **State governments in the South-South region should enhance financial autonomy** of teacher education institutions by enabling them to generate and retain internally generated revenue, access diverse funding sources, and manage their budgets independently while maintaining transparency and accountability mechanisms. **Relevant stakeholders, including university management and regulatory bodies, should establish pilot independent teacher education institutions** in the South-South zone. These institutions should be granted substantial autonomy in governance, curriculum, and finance, with built-in quality assurance frameworks to serve as models for nationwide reform. **The National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE) and state ministries of education should develop a comprehensive policy framework** that balances institutional autonomy with national standards. This framework should include capacity-building programmes for institutional leaders, regular monitoring mechanisms, and incentives for institutions that demonstrate improved teacher preparation outcomes through greater autonomy.

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