

University Autonomy as a Forecast of Graduate Employability in Public Universities of North Central Nigeria

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Abstract

Graduate employability is a burning policy issue in Nigeria, as graduates from institutions of higher learning often face significant challenges in seeking gainful employment. Although labour-market dynamics are undoubtedly likely to influence graduates' outcomes, the governance system adopted in universities (especially the degree of autonomy) is crucial in determining whether the institution can redesign, allocate resources appropriately, improve the quality of staffing, and implement strategies likely to promote employability. The current study aimed to determine the predictive ability of different aspects of university autonomy regarding graduate employability in public universities in North Central Nigeria. A correlational survey design was used, with 394 modern graduates participating in the study via a structured questionnaire with high reliability (Cronbach's alpha =.91). Descriptive statistics outlined the variation in the variables. In contrast, the analysis of simple and multiple regression tested the study's hypothesis at the traditional .05 level of significance. The results showed favourable ratings for academic autonomy (M = 3.423), financial autonomy (M = 3.352), administrative autonomy (M = 3.401), and staffing autonomy (M = 3.394). Employability of graduates was also rated to be high (M = 3.363). The regression analysis showed that all dimensions of autonomy were significant predictors of graduate employability, with staffing autonomy as the most powerful predictor ($R^2 = .413$, $p = .005$). All the dimensions of autonomy explained 50.9% of the outcome cloud of graduate employability ($R^2 = .509$, $p < .005$). The research concludes that university autonomy is a strategy of strategic governance to improve employability outcomes and advises strengthening staffing autonomy, financial autonomy, and programme responsiveness in Nigerian public universities.

Keywords: Administrative autonomy, academic autonomy, financial autonomy, graduate employability, Nigeria, staffing autonomy, public universities, University autonomy

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Introduction

Graduate employability has taken centre stage as a measure of the effectiveness of higher education institutions at the international level. Governments, employers, and society at large are putting more pressure on universities to equip graduates with competencies pertinent to the workplace, professional identities, and flexibility to be productive for economic growth. Employability is more than just securing employment, as it encompasses transferable skills, the creation of professional identity, adaptation, and the ongoing evolution of a career throughout a lifetime (Abelha et al., 2020).

Graduate unemployment and underemployment are twin problems in Nigeria's socio-economic landscape. Despite the large numbers of graduates produced by public universities each year, the labour market remains in a stalemate due to skills mismatches, inadequate job preparation, and a shortage of applied skills. Employers have often complained about the graduates' communicative skills, analytical abilities, and the applicability of academic knowledge to work-related issues. These details indicate that the wider employability implications are not influenced solely by external labour-market circumstances but also by institutional frameworks that shape competence and preparedness.

The autonomy of the university in decision-making at the academic, staffing, financial, and organisational levels within the accountability parameter has long been theorised as an important institutional determinant of employability. Autonomy will give universities the freedom to make curricular changes, hire qualified staff, invest wisely, and engage other stakeholders, such as employers and professional associations. On the other hand, restrictive autonomy, typified by bureaucratic consultation and centralisation, may undermine sensitivity to the needs of the labour market and eliminate reformist capacity.

Nigeria has complex governance frameworks for public universities. The level of independence granted in the areas of academics, finances, administration, and staffing varies significantly. Although such institutions are obliged to play a significant role in national development through human capital formation, incidents of graduate unemployment persist. North Central Nigeria, where a few of these universities are located, to develop the regional workforce, provides a good environment to investigate the interface between the autonomy and employability of the institutions. By critiquing the autonomy dimension's roles in graduate employability, researchers and policymakers will be able to gather evidence in time to implement governance changes aimed at improving alum performance in this decisive area.

Empirical studies show that autonomy changes have a positive impact on institutional mission performance, such as quality of teaching and graduate transitory (Painsi et al., 2024). However, despite international literature on the explanations of connections between autonomy and institutional efficacy, there is still a lack of empirical studies specifically on university autonomy as a predictor of graduate employability in Africa, and more specifically in Nigeria. Current scholarship on Nigeria generally focuses on administrative performance or governmentality efficiency rather than on outcomes related to employability, which highlights an important empirical and contextual gap.

In line with this, this study questions the predictive power of the dimensions of university autonomy, including academic, financial, administrative, and staffing, on graduate employability among the North-Central's Public Universities. The results of the research are expected to add to

the existing body of higher-education governance scholarship and provide evidence for policy interventions that can be applied to strengthen employability among Nigerian state institutions.

The main research question addressed in this research is to analyse the extent to which the dimensions of university autonomy contribute to graduate employability in North Central's Central Public Universities in Nigeria. Specific objectives were to:

1. establish the extent of academic freedom in the public universities in North Central Nigeria.
2. ascertain the extent of financial independence in public universities in North Central Nigeria
3. establish the extent of administrative autonomy present in the North Central Nigeria state-owned universities
4. establish the extent of staffing freedom in public universities in North Central Nigeria.
5. establish the extent of graduate employability of public university graduates in North Central Nigeria.
6. establish the extent to which university autonomy dimensions jointly predict graduate employability in public universities in North Central Nigeria.

In this regard, the following research questions sprang from the previous objectives

1. How autonomous are the public universities of North Central Nigeria?
2. How financially autonomous are the public universities in North Central Nigeria?
3. To what extent is administrative freedom in public universities in North Central, Nigeria?
4. How autonomous is staffing in public universities in North Central Nigeria?
5. How employable are the graduates of public universities in North Central Nigeria?

The following null hypotheses were formulated to guide the study.

1. Academic autonomy has no significant influence on graduate employability.
2. Financial autonomy has a significant impact on graduate employability.
3. Administrative autonomy has no significant relationship with graduate employability in North-Central Nigeria.
4. Staffing autonomy has no significant effect on graduate employability in North-Central Nigeria.
5. University autonomy dimensions do not jointly predict graduate employability in North-Central Nigeria.

Literature Review

University Autonomy Conceptualisation

Generally, university autonomy refers to the ability of institutions of higher learning to make fundamental strategic and operational decisions on their own, while remaining accountable to societal standards, regulatory controls, and quality assurance processes. The complex conceptualisation of autonomy in contemporary comparative scholarship in the higher education field takes the form of a multidimensional, system-specific construct shaped by national governance structures, funding systems, and institutional decision-making processes. An established examination paradigm identifies four strongly correlated areas of autonomy: academic, financial, staffing, and organisational. It suggests that autonomy might be placed on a continuum rather than treated as a given institutional state of affairs (Pruvot et al., 2023). In the European policy discourse and comparative governance studies, university autonomy is

increasingly associated with institutional responsiveness and strategic capacity, particularly the ability of universities to respond to societal demands, such as graduate employability. Graduate employability is also believed to be a multidimensional construct. It not only refers to graduates' ability to find jobs but also to their competence in the work environment, job continuity, and adjustment to changing labour-market environments. The notion of employability encompasses disciplinary knowledge, transferable skills, individual qualities, work attitudes, and career-management competencies (Abelha et al., 2020). This view is that employability is the result of organised processes of competence development where universities and colleges play a key and active role, rather than a passive by-product of academic learning.

The Higher Education Governance: Contextualisation

The governance environment of higher education systems significantly shapes the nature of the relationship between university autonomy and graduate employability. The scope of the discretion that universities can exercise in curriculum, staffing, finance, and organisational design is defined by national steering mechanisms, funding systems, and accountability systems. In a system typified by efficient state regulation and limited institutional discretion, employability interventions are often compliance-based, disjointed, and short-term; systems that provide greater institutional autonomy allow the alignment of teaching and learning processes, labour-market demands, and wider social expectations (Pruvot et al., 2023). In this governance setting, graduate employability has become a key performance indicator in the policy debates over higher education. Higher education institutions are increasingly required to demonstrate intended outcomes through labour-market focus, work-integrated learning, and employer support. These expectations of policy enhance the value of autonomy as a facilitating form of governance by allowing universities to develop coherent, institutional-wide strategies to ensure employability rather than relying on isolated or peripheral interventions.

Autonomy Dimensions and Graduate Employability

Academic autonomy is the institutional discretion over curriculum design and revision, programme approval and withdrawal, assessment practice, and the regulation of academic standards. This dimension especially matters in the context of employability, where employability skills and professional competencies are largely developed through the curriculum, learning outcomes, pedagogy, and assessment structure. The latest empirical research shows that academic autonomy improves the strategic capacity and institutional performance of universities by promoting responsiveness of the curriculum, innovation, and responsiveness to changes in the labour market (Al Gharsi et al., 2024). Systematic reviews of employability models also show that problem-based learning, entrepreneurship education, and authentic assessment, as structured teaching interventions, are the focus of employability enhancements (Eimer & Bohndick, 2023). This type of intervention requires academic freedom of decision-making to incorporate employability skills in disciplinary curricula. In line with this position, authentic assessment research shows strong correlations between real-world-aligned assessment activities and the acquisition of problem-solving, communication, and collaboration skills that are highly desired by employers (Vlachopoulos & Makri, 2024).

Financial Independence and Employability of Graduates

Financial independence involves universities' control over budgeting, fund allocation, retention of internally collected funds, and strategic decision-making on investment matters. Financial

independence plays a central role in the growth of employability, as programmes in employability require continuous and predictable investment in digital infrastructure, laboratories, practice-based learning mechanisms, career-advising systems, start-up centres, and work-based learning coordination. Without financial flexibility, employability initiatives are often project-based and can hardly be institutionalised. The international experience supports work-based learning as one of the main mechanisms for acquiring employment, which requires substantial institutional provision and coordination. A scoping review of inclusive design in work-integrated learning highlights that fostering equal access to experiences that promote equitable access to the employment landscape requires both planned institutional investment and design solutions (Hansen et al., 2024). These assertions confirm that financial independence is essential to enabling universities to embed employability programs in their core operations rather than viewing them as peripheral activities.

Graduate Employability and Staffing Autonomy

Staffing autonomy: Relates to the autonomy that universities have regarding the recruitment, promotion, assessment, growth, and maintenance of the academic and professional staff. This aspect is closely related to graduate employability because the quality of staff, pedagogical competence, industry involvement, and professional dedication influence students' learning experience and competence acquisition. The existing empirical research in India shows that a positive influence on organisational performance, via enhanced strategy implementation and teaching quality, is achieved through staffing autonomy (Al Gharsi et al., 2024). Equally, Kumar et al. (2024) revealed that staffing autonomy plays a significant role in improving innovation and teaching performance, both of which have a strong relationship with employability-competence development. The Vietnamese experience also supports the idea that staff autonomy promotes the development of academic workers and, consequently, enhances the quality of teaching and the preparation of graduates (Le et al., 2022). Together, these studies make staffing autonomy a prerequisite of an employability-oriented teaching and learning.

Graduate Employability and Administrative Autonomy

Administrative autonomy concerns universities' autonomy to design internal governance arrangements, create and re-create organisational units, and coordinate institutional processes. The dimension affects employability, as the operationalised concept of employability is organised around organisational arrangements (career service, internship coordination unit, employer-engagement unit, entrepreneurship centre, alum network, graduate-tracking system, etc.). The evidence from the European University Association Autonomy Scorecard indicates that organisational autonomy promotes institutional efficiency and strategic responsiveness, enabling governance changes that can lead to programme relevance and graduate outcomes (Estermann et al., 2023). Also, a recent systematic review of employability found that its efficacy lies in how universities align curriculum, co-curricular provision, and external partnerships across governance levels (Barachino et al., 2025). Such results provide strong grounds for assuming that organisational autonomy should be modelled as a predictor of graduate employability outcomes.

Synthesis and Comparison of the Empirical Evidence

In the literature surveys, there is a common trend: academic, financial, staffing, and organisational autonomy are strengthening dimensions that interactively contribute to shaping universities' potential to bring about employability-promoting change. Research on academic autonomy places special emphasis on curriculum responsiveness and competence integration; financial autonomy research emphasizes sustained investment in employability infrastructure; staffing autonomy research emphasizes teaching quality and staff development; and organisational autonomy research emphasizes the effectiveness of governance and the capacity to coordinate. There is also empirical data that autonomy does not directly produce employability outcomes; however, it operates through institutional processes of curriculum innovation, teaching quality improvement, the provision of work-based learning, and engagement with employers. Paisi et al. (2024) provide robust evidence of a correlation between institutional autonomy and universities' success in achieving their missions, including graduate-related performance. This synthesis allows for a systemic approach to autonomy, treating it as an enabling condition of governance rather than an end.

Relation to Theory and Determination of the Gap in the Research

The literature reviewed fits well with the Human Capital Theory and the Resource-Based View of the organisation. According to Human Capital Theory, graduate employability refers to the product of investment in education that improves individuals' productive potential and economic worth (Becker, 1964; Schultz, 1961). The Resource-based View is an extension of this view, pointing to internal facilitators and competencies of universities, such as the expertise of the staff, the curriculum system, the processes of governance, financial resources, and external relationships, as sources of sustainable performance advantage, which is created when managed with the help of strategy (Barney, 1991). Given the growing body of empirical evidence indicating a relationship between university autonomy and institutional performance, there remains a distinct void in comprehensive, integrated empirical models examining how various dimensions of autonomy collaborate in affecting graduate employability. The available literature largely separates the analysis of autonomy and employability into two areas. The current study closes this gap and contributes to the existing body of knowledge on governance and employability research in higher education by modelling academic, financial, staffing, and organisational autonomy as joint predictors of graduate employability.

Methodology

A correlational survey research design was used to examine the predictive relationship between university autonomy dimensions and graduate employability in public universities in North Central Nigeria. The design is considered adequate, as it allows highlighting major predictive associations among variables without controlling for the study environment. The study population was 25354. A sample size of 394 was determined using a proportionate stratified random sampling technique, ensuring representation of the study area. The population was first stratified by relevant characteristics, such as universities and faculties, to ensure adequate representation of key subgroups. Thereafter, respondents were randomly selected within each stratum in proportion to their population size. This approach ensured that each member of the population had a known, zero-probability of selection, thereby enhancing the statistical representativeness of the sample and supporting the generalisation of the findings to a broader population. The Institutional University Autonomy and Graduate Employability Questionnaire (IUAAGEQ) was used as the data collection instrument. The measure was four university

autonomy dimensions, including academic, financial, administrative, and staffing autonomy dimensions, and graduate employability. The responses were scored on a 4-point Likert scale between low and high agreement. The questionnaire was also tested on the expert's view to validate the relevance of the content and the sufficiency of coverage of the study variables. The level of reliability was determined using Cronbach's alpha, which yielded a general coefficient of 0.91, a value so high due to the study's high internal consistency, and it is possible to state that it suits the study. The questionnaire sample was administered to selected graduates in the North Central Region at public universities. Respondents were contacted voluntarily, and their privacy was guaranteed. The completed instruments were selected and examined for completeness prior to analysis.

Findings

Research Question 1: How autonomous are the public universities of North Central Nigeria?

The results reveal that academic autonomy is high, with a construct mean of 3.423. This finding indicates that universities have significant powers over some of the most important academic functions, such as curriculum development and revision, launching academic programmes, determining course content, evaluation procedures, and the passing of graduation requirements. This observation implies that academic freedom in the region among the universally accessible institutions of higher learning is of appreciable magnitude and, as such, they can make key decisions unrelated to the fundamental aspects of their academic institutions without undue interference from external forces. This kind of autonomy improves institutions' adaptation of curricula to their changing labour-market needs, as well as the integration of learning outcomes that facilitate employability in academic undergraduate programmes.

Research question 2: How financially autonomous are the public universities in North Central Nigeria?

Findings indicate that financial autonomy is high, with a mean of 3.352. Respondents were confirmed to have significant leeway in setting budgets, allocating funds, retaining internally generated revenue, and deciding what to spend on at the university. This observation means that the financial independence of the public universities in the region is relative, and it is essential to maintain employability-related activities, such as career development centres, skills laboratories, digital learning infrastructure, entrepreneurship programs, and internship coordination systems. Financial autonomy thus provides a facilitating environment for institutional investment in graduate employability improvement.

Research Question 3: To what extent is administrative freedom in public universities in North Central, Nigeria?

The results show that administrative autonomy is high, with a construct mean of 3.401. The respondents concurred that universities have the autonomy to formulate governance structures, policies, committees, and academic and student support units. This finding indicates a high level of organisational and managerial autonomy in the public universities of North Central Nigeria. This autonomy improves the institution's effectiveness, lessens bureaucratic slowness, and increases the ability to implement employability-based reforms in a timely and well-coordinated manner.

Research Question 4: How autonomous is staffing in public universities in North Central Nigeria?

The findings demonstrate a high level of staffing autonomy, with a mean of 3.394 on the construct. The respondents felt that the Universities have a great deal of freedom in terms of recruitment, promotion, staff development, discipline, and welfare policies. This observation implies that institutions of higher learning have some leeway in managing their human capital in line with institutional interests. Of utmost importance is staffing autonomy, as the quality of

academic staff, their motivation, and their professional competence are the direct factors determining the effectiveness of teaching and the acquisition of employability skills by graduates.

Research Question 5: How employable are the graduates of the public universities in North Central Nigeria?

The graduate employability rating was high, with a mean of 3.363. The graduates cited high ratings in self-perception of employability characteristics, including communication skills, collaboration, digital competence, confidence, adaptability, and problem-solving skills. Such a finding means that graduates consider themselves fairly equipped to enter the labour market. It also indicates that institutional systems might be playing a positive role in the development of employability. However, the same self-based evaluations should be taken with care when the employer assessment is absent.

Hypothesis 1: Academic autonomy does not significantly predict graduate employability.

The regression analysis showed that academic autonomy significantly predicted graduate employability ($R = 0.466$, $R^2 = 0.217$, $F = 108.57$, $p < .05$). Academic autonomy accounted for 21.7 percent of the variance in employability outcomes ($\beta = 0.466$, $t = 10.420$). Since the probability value was less than 0.05, the null hypothesis was rejected. This result indicates that greater academic decision-making freedom enhances employability outcomes, likely through curriculum relevance and skills integration.

Hypothesis 2: Financial autonomy has a significant impact on graduate employability.

Graduate employability had a strong association with financial autonomy ($R = 0.562$, $R^2 = 0.315$, $F = 180.73$, $p < 0.05$). Financial autonomy, as an independent variable, explained 31.5 percent of the variance in employability ($b = 0.562$, $t = 13.440$). The null hypothesis was not accepted. This observation confirms that financial flexibility enhances employability, as universities can invest in support systems and learning infrastructure to improve it.

Hypothesis 3: Administrative autonomy has no significant relationship with graduate employability in North-Central Nigeria.

Administrative autonomy was a significant predictor of graduate employability ($R = 0.587$, $R^2 = 0.345$, $F = 206.19$, $p < 0.05$). It discussed a 34.5 percent difference in the employability results ($b = 0.587$, $t = 14.360$). The null hypothesis was not rejected. This finding suggests that organisational independence increases universities' capacity to implement employability strategies effectively.

Hypothesis 4: Staffing autonomy has no significant effect on graduate employability in North-Central Nigeria.

The most critical predictor of graduate employability ($R = 0.643$, $R^2 = 0.413$, $F = 275.90$, $p < 0.05$) was staffing autonomy. Staffing autonomy accounted for 41.3 percent of the employability variance ($b = 0.643$, $t = 16.610$). The null hypothesis was not accepted. The highlighted observation focuses on the primary impact of staffing decisions on the quality of teaching, competency development, and graduates' employability.

Hypothesis 5: University autonomy dimensions do not jointly predict graduate employability in North-Central Nigeria.

The regression model (together) was also statistically significant ($R = 0.713$, $R^2 = 0.509$, $F = 100.61$, $p < 0.05$). All the dimensions of autonomy seemed to be useful predictors in the combination model; staffing autonomy has the strongest standardised coefficient ($b = 0.379$, $p < 0.05$). The null hypothesis was disproved. This finding demonstrates that the combined dimensions of autonomy have a powerful and significant impact on graduate employability levels.

Discussion

The observation that academic autonomy is high among North Central Nigeria public universities indicates that the institutions have significant discretion in designing curricula, developing programmes, shaping assessment practices, and setting graduation requirements. This finding aligns with the comparative higher-education governance literature, which defines

academic autonomy as a focal point for universities' use of intellectual and curricular power (Bennetot Pruvot et al., 2023). The noted level of autonomy indicates that the universities in the region are not overly controlled by external sources when making academic decisions. Better still, the academic independence's predictive power is substantial and consistent with current empirical findings. Al Gharsi et al. (2024) illustrated that academic autonomy enhances institutional strategy-building and performance, especially in responding to curriculum and being innovative. Equally, Eimer and Bohndick (2023) maintained that the quality of enhancing employability relies on the capacity of universities to introduce organized competence development with the curricula, which, by implication, assumes the freedom of academic choice. The current conclusion is that academic autonomy is relevant to enhancing employability by facilitating curriculum relevance, skills integration, and the assimilation of pedagogical practices beyond labour-market expectations.

A high level of financial autonomy means that public universities in the North Central of Nigeria have significant discretion over budgeting, distributing, and retaining internally generated revenues. This result aligns with the governance scholarship, which views financial autonomy as a key enabler of strategic institutional growth and stability (Bennetot Pruvot et al., 2023). The association between financial autonomy and graduate employability is also strong and significant, which is why the researchers offer empirical verification of the employability literature, in which the role of institutional investment is important. Hansen et al. (2024) emphasized that the sustenance of work-integrated learning, as well as an inclusive placement system, is projectable with employability initiatives and relies on institutional resourcing and financial capacity. Similarly, the study by Vlachopoulos and Makri (2024) illustrated that effective assessments and learning through practice require investment in infrastructure and human capacity. The current results indicate that financial independence helps universities maintain employability-enhancing activities, such as career development centres, online learning spaces, skills laboratories, and internship coordination systems. This, in turn, leads to financial autonomy, not only through administrative incentives but also through substantive employment outcomes.

The research found a high degree of administrative autonomy, which was also significant in predicting graduate employability. This result concurs with the literature, which places organisational autonomy as a driver of institutional efficiency, reform capacity, and responsiveness to external demands. The European University Association Autonomy Scorecard evidence shows that organisational autonomy is a positive influence on universities' capacity to make governance changes in response to labour-market demands in a strategic manner (Estermann et al., 2023). Barachino et al. (2025) proved that the effectiveness of employability by the university is conditioned by the way the university organizes curriculum, co-curricular provision, and stakeholder-level partnerships. The significant influence observed in this research indicates that administrative autonomy enhances the university's ability to create and align structures relevant to employability, such as career services, employer engagement sites, and graduate tracking systems. Thus, the given finding helps prove that employability is not only an academic success but also an organisational success that relies on an internal governance system and management flexibility.

The autonomy of staffing became the most significant individual predictor of graduate employability, as it indicated the largest amount of variance in the dimensions of autonomy. This can be highly justified by the current body of empirical evidence which remains unaffected to state that staff quality, pedagogical competence, and professional development are the key mechanisms by which universities affect employability. Kumar et al. (2024) discovered that staffing autonomy is highly associated with improvement of innovation and teaching performance that subsequently leads to the development of employability-competence. Further evidence in Vietnam proves that the autonomy in staffing enhances the development of academic staff, which in turn enhances the quality of teaching and level of graduate competence

(Le et al., 2022). All these studies formulate staffing autonomy as a precondition of the employability-oriented teaching and learning.

This analysis adds to knowledge in three ways. Policymaking-wise, it develops the university's independence as a strategic policy tool for enhancing graduate employability, showing that university autonomy policy, particularly staffing and financial policy, ought to be incorporated into higher education and labour-market policy. Concerning the practice, as reflected in the study, autonomy is translated into employability outcomes through competent human resource governance, a responsive curriculum, and streamlined institutional arrangements, and staffing autonomy has emerged as the most significant practical driver. In theory, the paper builds on higher-education governance insights and the Human Capital Theory to empirically illustrate the application of the institutional autonomy concept as a facilitative factor in enhancing universities' ability to translate educational processes into labour-market-specific competencies, especially in a developing country setting.

Recommendations

The research recommends enhancing universities' autonomy to improve graduate employability. Emphasis must be placed on staffing autonomy that will allow universities to hire, train, and retain qualified personnel capable of providing employability-oriented teaching and mentoring. Accountability should be broadened to achieve financial autonomy to sustain investment in employability infrastructure, career services, and work-integrated learning. The protection of academic autonomy should aim to make the curriculum responsive and to embrace labour-market-applicable skills. In contrast, the autonomy of administration should be used to enhance employability governance systems and alliances with industry. Universities ought to institutionalise employability practices by being evidence-based, enhancing their collaboration with employers and alumni, and embracing graduate tracer studies and employer feedback systems to ensure that autonomy reforms produce quantifiable labour-market results.

Conclusion

The study concludes that university autonomy is a critical governance mechanism for enhancing graduate employability in public universities in North Central Nigeria. The findings demonstrate that academic, financial, administrative, and staffing autonomy are all significant predictors of employability outcomes, both independently and collectively. Notably, staffing autonomy emerged as the most influential dimension, underscoring the central role of human resource quality, pedagogical competence, and professional development in shaping graduate competencies.

The results further affirm that autonomy does not operate in isolation but functions as an enabling framework through which institutions can implement responsive curricula, invest in employability infrastructure, and establish effective organisational systems. The combined explanatory power of the autonomy dimensions indicates that a holistic approach to institutional governance is essential for achieving meaningful employability outcomes.

Overall, the study establishes that strengthening university autonomy, particularly in staffing and financial domains, is fundamental to improving the alignment between higher education outputs and labour-market demands. It therefore positions autonomy as a strategic policy instrument for advancing institutional effectiveness and addressing graduate unemployment in Nigeria.

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AI Statement

This document has been enhanced through the use of Grammarly which was employed to refine its linguistic style and correct grammar and spelling. While the incorporation of these technologies may introduce some AI-generated linguistic patterns, it is important to note that the core intellectual content, data interpretation, and conclusions presented are entirely the work of the author.

Statement of Absence of Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest related to the research, findings, or recommendations presented in this paper. All conclusions drawn are independent and unbiased.

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