Gendered Students' Activism and Rebound of Democratic Values in Nigeria: Advocacy for a Paradigm Shift
by

[1]Abdullahi Abiodun, OYEKANMI (Ph.D.)
oyekanmiaa@tasued.edu.ng
+2347062191517

[2]Sunday Toyin, OMOJOWO
Omojowost@taused.edu.ng
Department of Political Science,
Tai Solarin University of Education, Ogun State, Nigeria

[3]Ibrahim Adedayo, OYEWOLE
Oyewoleibrahim2@gmail.com
Sikiru Adetona College of Education, Omu- Ajose , Ijebu, Ogun State
&

[4]Samuel Anuoluwapo, SALAKO
salakosa@tasued.edu.ng
Department of Political Science,
Tai Solarin University of Education, Ogun State, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

Globally, students have continued to play critical roles in nation-building as advocates of good governance and development. The trajectory of Nigeria's democracy and good governance hold much to students' activism. The radical ideology of the students' leaders support for decolonisation and opposition to military interregnums became signposts of Nigeria's democratic evolution. In recent time, the gains of democracy such as equal political participation, credible elections and good governance are on the decline as a result of gender disparity in students' activism. Students' activism, a supposed conscience of the nation is now dominated by the male students, thereby marginalising female voices that are critical to inclusive democratic participation. Arguably, there is paucity of studies on the role of female students' activists and how such has impacted the growth of democracy in the Fourth Republic. The study is a qualitative approach with data sourced from relevant secondary materials via journals, textbooks, and case studies report, with the use of feminist theory. The study identified cultural stereotypes, absence of institutional quota for female representatives in campus activism and violence- laden nature of African politics responsible for the declining of students' activism and which has become a significant barrier to the growth of Nigeria's democratic institutions. The study recommends for strategies to counteract gender exclusion in students' activism; integration of female students into campus activism; emphasising policy –based reforms such as institutionalising gender quotas within students' unions structures to promote equal representation; collaboration of students wing with the leadership of ASUU and prosecution of violence entrepreneurs in African politics in order to ensure renaissance of democratic values in Nigeria.

Keywords: Democracy, decolonization, gendered activism, governance, politics

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of democracy in the global political landscape was received with euphoria and excitements due to its popularised values. Through democratic ethos, citizens were persuaded with the values of social justice, equitable distribution of political power and bottom- up approach to governance. As such, democracy spread like wildfire as a "re-modification of political power, acquisition and usages in accordance to majority preferences". Given the Lincoln classic that democracy epitomises the government of the people by themselves, enjoying the real value of governance, a de-construction of global political configuration was created, democracy becoming popular in the Western Europe and a bastion of hope to challenging authoritarian regimes and political lords in Africa. The political affair of African States from the 90's replete of vigorous advocacy against military interregnums and political sit-tightism. The struggle of most African countries like Nigeria, Ghana, Gambia, South Africa, Sierra-Leone and others for the enthronement of democracy have been well curated with flash-points events that characterized the second phase of African political institutionalisation.

However, as noted, the efforts that birthed democracy in Nigeria was an amalgamation of varying interests, groups and stakeholders through various intensive approaches and collaboration which includes civil societies, indigenous cultural-ethnic groups and the students. The African students were firebrands, intellectual savvy and very probing by nature. Their organisational ability, poise for interrogating public policy and tireless confrontation of post-colonial relics gave them prominent roles in African democratisation (Oyekanmi, 2014).

The formation of West African Students Union in 1925 became a parameter of students' decolonisation struggle and the epicenter of students' activism across African countries. Thus, as noted by Oyekanmi etal (2022) students' groupings were organised in higher institutions, imbued with leftist ideology to protect students' interest, advocate for welfare and good governance. This led to many students' *'massification'* against unpopular governance, military interventionists and public policy. Students' activism became legitimately recognised as important actor in African political order in the early post-independence. The *massification* of students struggle was not limited to decolonization; it became an anchor of democratic movements in Africa. As cited by Oyekanmi and Adebajo (2023) African students in Nigeria mounted rostrums of supports for the enthronement of democracy. There were collaborations of students' activists led by the National Association of Nigerian Students with other civil societies, exalting pressure on the military junta

for the return to civil rule. Adeboye and Eesuola (2015) corroborate the active role of the students' movement in African politics that students' activism became the flagship of African democratic trajectory with indelible impacts, leading to African countries embracing democracy, regular election; political rights of the minority and legitimate path of the majority to occupy political power and thus, military rule gradually became an aberration.

With the foregoing, good governance through democratic values is expected to pervade all facets of Nigeria. It is an apparent yardstick of measuring national political maturity through periodic, transparent elections, efficacy of democratic institutions and masses oriented policy drives to enable Nigeria measure up with best practices in global political and economic waves. However, in recent time, there has been resurgence of military coups in Africa, with electoral crisis and majoritarian rascality on the rise. In Nigeria, there have been subtle calls for the return of military rule by some section of the country on account of economic hardship and perceived ethnocentric distribution of the common patrimony. The Nigerian Defence Headquarters through General Tukur Gusau, the Director of defence information had to issue terse warning statement, reaffirming the loyalty and commitment of the military to protect the sanctity of Nigeria's democracy. The Force reiterated that any call for military intervention of subtle actions would be treated as treason (*Vanguard*, 2024).

In the analysis of Nigeria's democratic trajectory before 1999 and beyond, the Nigerian students served as key actors through their engagement strategy and radical confrontation with the military hegemons and interrogation of public policy within the realm of public interests. In recent years, it has become worrisome that students' activism which played key roles in the enthronement of democracy in Nigeria is now on a reputed decline. As argued by Arogundade (1990) and supported by Eesuola (2014) the Nigerian students now demonstrate opposite character and values on which the leftist-ideology of the students' body were embellished with. The students through her national, zonal and local leadership on campuses have become praise-singers of the political class and enabler of corruption, social vices and apathetic to public policy and governance metrics. A key albatross of these downward qualities is the domination of students' activism by males across Nigeria's higher institutions of learning. Daily on various campuses and in other pyramids of students' leadership, positions of students' representatives are now likened to a "cult-hall" exclusively preserved for males' folks. The leadership of Nigerian students from campuses, states, zonal and National Association of Nigerian Students has females

disproportionately represented. Although, the paradigm shifts from traditional stereotypes against the education of female child to that of equal educational opportunities for all gender has increased the female enrolment rates in higher institution of learning in Africa and Nigeria in specific. In the submission of Ekeh (2024) the population of female students accounted for 60% enrolment in 75% of higher institutions in Nigeria between 2016 and 2023. Regrettably, this population surge has not been compensated for in the leadership configuration of students' movements in Nigeria. Thus, it is believed that the male gendered dominance in students' activism has failed to sustain the popular advocacy for good governance and democratic values due to disproportionate gendered activism, hence the decline in the value of Nigeria's democracy and good governance. Today in Nigeria, male dominated leadership of Nigerian students is recruited as ballot snatcher and key electoral malfeasants. More worrisome that students' elections and convention have become the opaque of violence and zero-sum behavior contrary to expected democratic values. Although, there are extant studies on the role of students activists towards good governance and nations building efforts, these studies have neglected the role of gender equality in students representations, how it can help to shape good governance advocacy and investigate the bridging of disparity gaps among male and female students to address challenges in students structure that can revive democratic values n Nigeria's political spectrums. Hence, this paper is undertaken to review the role of students' activism towards decolonisation and democratisation in Nigeria, evaluate the impact of gendered students' activism on the sustainability of Nigeria's democracy and continued advocacy for good governance.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Students' Activism

Generally, activisms involve vigorous campaigning tools to engender political or social change. Activism is directed to promote, mobilise, direct, or intervene in social, political, economic, or environmental reform with the goal to stimulate progress and development in the society. The end product of activism is the achievement of a greater goal. There are two variants of activism in form of support and opposition to a particular cause. Activism has also been described, as an organised intentional action that is consistently directed to achieve a private or public goal. A person who engages in activism can be called an *activist*. The word *activism* implies actions are taken consistently. Activism is a collection of activities by groups or individuals that are directed

towards the actualisation of set objectives. As a curated action, it can be formal, informal, planned or spontaneous (Oyekanmi, 2024; Macbeth, 2020 & Eesuola, 2014).

Oyekanmi (2014) asserted that students' activism in Africa does not revolves around the removal of colonial vestiges. It involves continued opposition and development driven advocacy to safeguarding students' welfare from the post-colonial university administrators and unpopular government policies. Students' activism is an integral part of civil society, which encompasses activities pertaining to seeking solutions to myriad issues affecting the individual students, lecturers and immediate community, through their campus unions established at various institutions of higher learning and replicated at the state, zonal and federal levels.

Students' activism is commonly associated with left-wing politics and socio-political engagements, although right-wing student movement is also common. Elected students' leaders have the legitimacy to act as interface between authorities in higher institutions and the students, including the right to interrogate public policy to the advantage of their members (Peter & Ebimobowei, 2015).

In a clear term, students' activism can be explained as the aggregated and articulated interests by students' leadership on educational matters, student's welfares and governance performance of the established school and political authorities across levels of government. This was corroborated by Altbach (1989) that students' activism involves the participation of students in group activities that are directed to stimulate new program, values, and government commitment developmental issues on campus and the larger political spectrum. It is a collection of activities by groups or individuals that are directed towards the actualisation of set objectives. As a curated action, it can be formal, informal, planned or spontaneous.

One importance of Students' activism is that fosters students' capacities for engaging in socially responsible collective action both on campus and outside it. It thus means that students' activism extends beyond students' unionism and activities of elected representatives on campuses; it includes the activities of all affiliated students' leadership structures on students' welfare and advocacy for public good in the society. In sum, students' activism is not restricted to campus affairs; it involved consistent engagement with the drivers of political spectrums in the state and federal level.

Gendered Activism

Wendel (2023) emphasised that gendered activism has attracted global attention, with many countries, civil societies and media offering dimensional opinions on its causes and impacts. As a term, gendered activism is rooted in disproportional role and activities of the females and males gender in activism.

However, Oyekanmi (2024) argued that when the right to participate in activism is shaped and influenced by the gender of the participant, it is gendered activism. Gendered activism is equally an expression of dominance and preference for a particular gender's right to actively participate in activism related engagement. These activities can be in private or within public hemisphere. Gendered activism is not a tailored opportunity for a specific gender. It thus sees gendered activism as a hub of engagement whose rights of participation is influenced by the socio-cultural and political legitimacy accorded to a particular section of the gender as an integrated segment of the whole 'gender'.

Within the context of this study, gendered students activism is an oscillating engagements of students' activities whose participatory legitimacy and dynamics is influenced by accorded dominance of male over female or female over their male counterparts in students' activism in students' related interest.

Decolonisation

Decolonisation marks the final step toward self-rule and autonomy from colonial authorities in Nigeria and other African nations. It represents a "regime shift," signifying a transformed connection between the ruling power and the subordinate colony. This process unfolds in three key phases. The first phase includes giving formal constitutional independence by the colonial authority, enabling the new state to gain international recognition and join global organizations. The final stage involves substituting colonial administrators with accountable, representative government institutions, creating a state that is entirely free from economic and cultural reliance on the former colonial rulers. In the second phase, a broader transition occurs, replacing the colonial government structure with one that is locally legitimate. The final stage involves substituting colonial administrators with accountable, representative government institutions, creating a state that is entirely free from economic and cultural reliance on the former colonial rulers (McLean & McMillan, 2003).

According to Abia (2006) decolonisation is a cumulative process undertaken by groups and individuals who are sympathetic to the colonial status of Africa under imperial political

hegemony. It is a structural departure from the colonial masters' legacy of governance and arbitrary control. The operationalisation of decolonization covers moves to protect Africa's extractive and natural resources, cultural infiltration and other forms of subjugation. A critical internal factor driving decolonisation in Africa was the emergence of nationalist movements. These groups, consisting of individuals with shared interests, goals, and ideologies, united to oppose colonial oppression and fight for political independence. The character of these nationalist movements closely correlated with the methods and policies of colonial administration.

The key nationalist groups that resisted foreign rule in Africa included the West African Students' Union (WASU), National Congress of British West Africa (NCBWA), and Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM).Nigeria's independence journey was further bolstered by constitutional reforms across West Africa, the emergence of political parties, and the rise of the press. Groups like the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP), Egbe Omo Oduduwa, Jamiya Mutanem Arewa, Igbo political organizations, National Council of Nigerians and Cameroons (NCNC), Northern People's Congress (NPC), and Action Group (AG), as well as newspapers like *West African Pilot* by Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe and *Lagos Daily News* by Sir Herbert Macaulay, played pivotal roles. Additionally, organized labor unions, conferences, and delegations to London significantly contributed to the eventual independence of Nigeria (Babel & James, 2022).

Governance

Governance is much rooted within the realm of formal activities that are undertaken by elected or appointed government officials to galvanise public policy and people's welfare. Governance refers to the processes, systems, and practices through which organizations, institutions, or established political authorities make decisions, exercise authority, and ensure accountability to achieve objectives. For Bevir (2012) governance describes the rules, norms, and actions that structure how power and responsibilities are distributed.

Governance can be categorised as corporate governance, public governance, and global governance. Corporate governance focuses on the mechanisms and structures guiding corporations to balance the interests of stakeholders, including shareholders, employees, and customers. Public governance, on the other hand, pertains to the actions and policies of governments in managing public resources and delivering services efficiently. Meanwhile, global governance involves the collaboration of international organizations, states, and other actors in

the international environment to address global concern like global security, regional economy and power balancing (Rhodes, 1996).

Politics

Politics and governance are inseparable in closer perspective. Politics is a means to securing legitimacy to govern. As reiterated by Oyekanmi etal, (2022) politics is a gateway to whatever happens in government. This is why political parties are formed as competitive platforms through which those who are inclined to government and take authoritative decisions contest elections. Oyekanmi (2024) sees politics as the contrivances of interests to achieve psychological, economic and political interest. The Nigerian students are not exempted from political logjams and scheming being an interest group. It is not arguable why the students' leadership has remained active participant and regular interested party in government policies and programmes. These interests are not particular to government alone but have also become part of the engagement with management of higher institution.

Democracy

Democracy is a people- oriented model of governance that emerged as alternative to militarised or aristocratic ascension to political power. The operationalisation of the concept of democracy beyond rhetorical persuasion, offers citizens the highest form of political expression through leadership preferences. Within the context of electoral processes, democracy dwells on the pattern and dynamics of citizens' active engagements to determining how political powers are earned through credible and popular consented process. (Yagboyaju, 2013 as cited in Oyekanmi *etal* 2021).

In the established thought of Huntington (1991) democracy exists where the principal actors of a political system hold political power through a competitive election with the active participation of the majority of the population. The Huntington's perception is though profound, but also deficient from majoritarian perspective. He contends that the sanctity of democracy depends on the electoral legitimacy through the participation of a bulk part of the population. However, what happens in reality with indirect democracy in modern time is that only active minority of the population participates through the electoral processes and automatically decides the fate of other majority. In this instance, it may not be right to allude to democracy, the status of 'the rule of the majority', but rather as the rule of the active minority political participants who give power to small fraction of political office occupiers to rule over the majority.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The paper adopts feminist theory as the explanatory index. Feminism theory in the 20th century was accentuated by leading theorists such as Betty Friedman, Julia Kristeva, Judith Butler, Audre Lorde, and Carol Gilligan. The theory gained prominence as a strengthened critique of the male dominated political power and the accompanying influence in the socio- political and economic affairs. The trajectory of feminism theory became intense in 1970's and 1980's, wherein the theory received many scholarly attentions through the work of new radical feminist scholar like Catherine Mackinnon (Bradly & Cassy, 2020).

The theory argued that gender prominence and accompanying influences play active role in shaping every aspect of human lives. Hence suppression of the rights of females by opposite gender is not to be taken with levity. In the analysis of Tong (2001) Mackinnon while emphasising the immutable role of the theory, adopted an "insubordination model to the theory that all policies, laws and practices that place men above women must be repealed. The theory recommends that new paradigms and models of distributing leadership roles, political power and recognition must replace patriarchal order, for the sake of justice, equality and fairness. The theory argued that females are endowed with required qualities and capacity to function better in any given opportunity like their male counterparts. Thus, the continued special status to males over female is considered as injustice and suppression of female capacity that can help to advance the cause of national development in the area of politics, economy and social stability.

In Nigeria, the students' movements played active roles in the decolonisation and actualisation of Nigeria's democracy in the Fourth Republic. Students' activism in this period was not an exclusive affair for male students. It was a collaborative effort, with female students playing key roles during students' struggles and protests against military juntas. The female students were key supporters and motivators. In their numbers, they helped shared terse press releases against government and joined in the composition of "Aluta songs" with strong chorography to keep protesters entertained. However, with the growing gender disparity in Nigeria's students' activism, the females across Nigeria's have been pushed to pecking order. Thus, the argument that gender balancing in students' activism is capable of retooling the Nigerian students' roles towards the sustainability of her democracy.

The theory's self-appraisal on the impeccable capacity and quality of females to perform better on duties that have been socially and politically reserved for males students suffice to be

accessed with the happenings in Nigeria's students' leadership structure. However, the theory can be faulted for excessive self- praising and allusion to self-infallibility of the female folks when given leadership responsibility. The theory failed to demonstrate how females' counterpart can respond to emotional fragility and psychological disposition to wither the many layers of challenges in students' activism on various campuses and political turfs in Nigeria.

DECOLONIZATION AND DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA: AN OVERVIEW OF THE ROLE OF STUDENTS' MOVEMENTS

Student unions played a particularly significant role in mobilizing Nigerians toward independence. Research by Ubaku, Emeh, and Anyikwa (2014, p. 59) highlights how Nigerian diaspora students influenced the nationalist movement. WASU, in particular, was a major force in the independence struggle during the 1940s, submitting a memorandum to the Colonial Office demanding full self-governance for West African colonies within five years of World War II's end, giving the "people of the Empire something to fight for." Many prominent nationalist leaders from West Africa, including Leopold Senghor of Senegal, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, and Nnamdi Azikiwe of Nigeria, studied abroad and gained the education needed to challenge colonial supremacy. The intellectual elite recognized the need to oppose policies that marginalized them, reinforcing the nationalist movement's strength.

WASU served as a vital forum for protest, linking West African leaders with Britain's Parliament. Publications such as its journal and various pamphlets helped expose the negative effects of colonial rule and emphasized the urgency of self-government. Ubaku et al. (2014, p. 59) describe WASU as a "pivotal point for young Nigerians, who were politically aggressive in advocating for their countries' freedom from foreign control." The organization fostered unity, cooperation, national consciousness, and racial pride among members. Additionally, it functioned as an information and research center on African history and culture, presenting an authentic representation of African life while promoting goodwill between Africans and other global communities. Many student activists associated with WASU later emerged as political leaders in their nations, demonstrating the movement's lasting impact.

The resistance against foreign-dominated rule in Africa was largely driven by the unwavering ideological commitment of African students, particularly those studying abroad. As Kukuh (1999) observed, these students transitioned from nationalist leaders during the pre-independence era to influential political elites in the early post-independence period. Research has shown that the

ideological perspectives of figures like Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, Obafemi Awolowo, and Nnamdi Azikiwe of Nigeria—who were once students in foreign universities—played a crucial role in shaping Africa's political landscape.

From this perspective, it is evident that Africa's decolonization process was significantly influenced by the efforts of the West African Students' Union (WASU), which served as a vital training ground for political leadership in West Africa. Many nationalist movements across British West Africa recruited active members from WASU. Most importantly, through the Union's sustained efforts, alongside other nationalist movements, political independence was secured for Nigeria and other British West African nations at the earliest possible time.

STUDENTS' ACTIVISM AND STUDENTS' UNION MOVEMENTS IN NIGERIA

This section explores the evolution of student activism in Nigeria, tracing its roots from diaspora mobilizations through WASU to contemporary student unions like NANS. It highlights how student movements have historically functioned as catalysts for political change, nation-building, and democratic governance.

Scholarly discussion on student activism and movements in Nigeria trace their origins to the founding of the West African Student Union (WASU) (Wonah, 2019; Ebimobowei, 2015; Akinsolu, 2009; Adelabu & Akinsolu, 2009; Kukah, 1999; Olugbade, 1990). Established in London on August 9, 1925, WASU brought together students from various West African nations. At University College London, a group of twenty-one law students, led by Ladipo Solanke and Herbert Bankole-Bright, formed the Union to represent African students in the diaspora. Recognized as a crucial platform for Nigerian nationalists (Federici, 2000, p. 90), WASU was not just a student organization—it was a political and advocacy group that actively opposed colonial racism, forced labor, land expropriation, and the exploitative ties between colonial powers and their African territories (Zeilig, 2005, p. 47).

Before WASU emerged, Ladipo Solanke had established a local organization known as the Nigerian Progress Union (NPU) on July 17, 1924. Its primary objective was to support the well-being of Nigerians living abroad, with Solanke serving as its honorary secretary. However, Ochiai (2018) noted that the NPU lasted for only a short period (July 17, 1924 – June 8, 1925), remaining a small gathering of Nigerian students in the United Kingdom. Solanke and his

associates were unable to fully develop the initiative, as their focus soon shifted toward forming WASU the following year. Unlike the NPU, which struggled to gain influence, WASU expanded rapidly, reaching a membership of over 300 African students within its first year. Comparing these two movements, Ochiai (2018) emphasized their distinct trajectories and impact:

> *While the NPU and WASU were separate organisations as such – the former being for Nigerians and the latter for West Africans (including Nigerians) – they were at the same time closely linked, as is evident by the fact that they were both founded on Solanke's initiatives and that they both had many commonalities, including shared goals, activities, and members. To put it rather crudely, being around a year older, the NPU was WASU's precursor or prototype* (p. 398).

The West African Student Union (WASU) played a significant role in fostering political consciousness among Nigerian nationalists who later assumed leadership positions. It served as a crucial platform for advocating and protecting the rights of African students. WASU's activities had a profound impact, raising awareness about student unionism. Consequently, the establishment of University College, Ibadan in 1948 provided students with an avenue to organize a union aimed at advancing student welfare within Nigeria's socio-political and educational landscape. This development led to the founding of the National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS) in 1956, with the late Ambassador Emmanuel Obe serving as its first elected president.
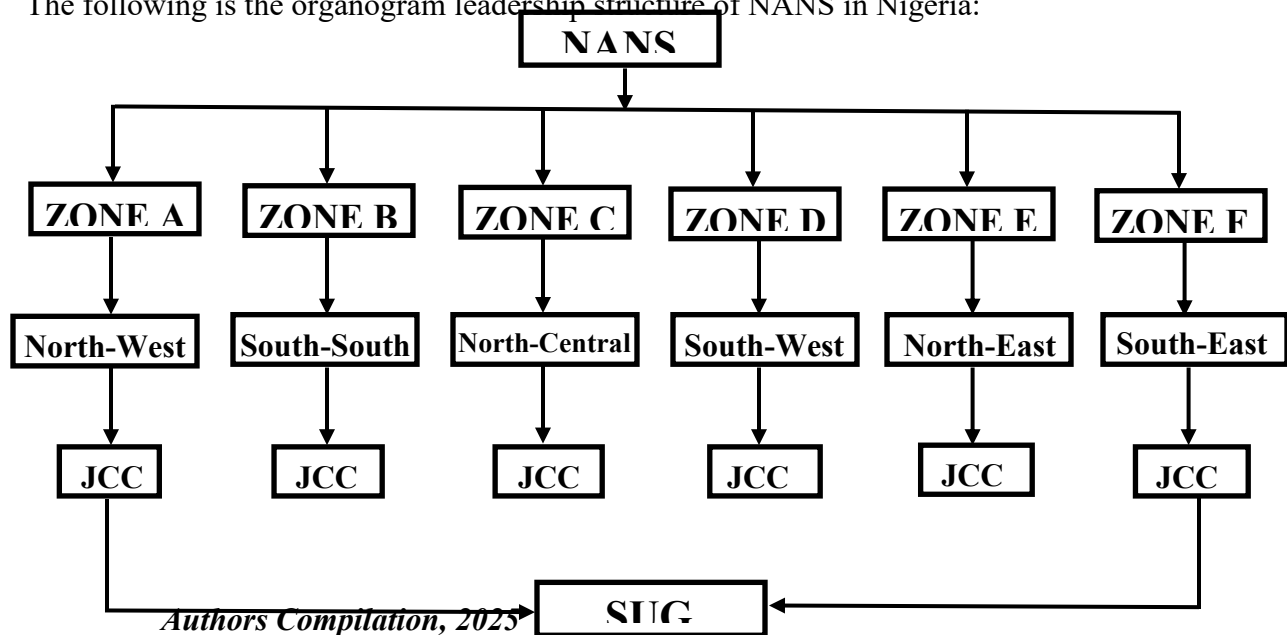
It is believed that the formation of NUNS was influenced by structural changes within WASU (NUNS Fact File, 2013). According to Okagbare (2019), NUNS was established as an umbrella body uniting Nigerian students both domestically and internationally. Beyond serving as a forum for discussing student-related concerns and safeguarding their interests, NUNS also reflected broader governance and democratic challenges in Nigeria. Ogunbodede, Idowu, and Odeyemi (2020, p. 104) observed that NUNS upheld the same ideological principles as WASU, reinforcing the notion that "a student union could consistently be a platform for change and informed activism." True to this vision, NUNS actively resisted government policies that undermined students' rights and the quality of education (Kukah, 1999).

After the National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS) was banned in 1976 by the military administration of Olusegun Obasanjo, students regrouped and formed a new association called the National Organisation of Nigerian Students (NONS). Kukah (1999) noted that despite

NUNS' dissolution, students remained resilient and committed to their cause, leading to NONS' establishment in 1979. However, that same year, the organization faced a major setback when its newly elected president, Mr. Tanimu Knifi of Bayero University, Kano, accused the Vice-Chancellor and Registrar of financial misconduct. In response, both he and his secretary were promptly expelled from the university.

With the return to democratic governance in 1979, the administration of Alhaji Shehu Usman Shagari fulfilled its promise to lift the ban on student unionism and grant formal recognition to student organizations. Despite this, student leaders opted to redefine their identity, eventually agreeing on a new name: the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS), officially established in 1980. As stated on its website, NANS aspires to be the largest student movement in Africa, uniting student bodies across Nigeria and beyond. Since its formation, NANS has championed justice, good governance, and the rule of law, advocating for students' rights, academic freedom, and youth involvement in decision-making, democratic sustainability, and peacebuilding. Its first president was Comrade Sunday Danladi.

The following is the organogram leadership structure of NANS in Nigeria:

```
                              ┌─────────┐
                              │  NANS   │
                              └────┬────┘
    ┌──────────┬──────────┬───────┼────────┬──────────┬──────────┐
    ▼          ▼          ▼       ▼        ▼          ▼
┌────────┐ ┌────────┐ ┌────────┐ ┌────────┐ ┌────────┐ ┌────────┐
│ ZONE A │ │ ZONE B │ │ ZONE C │ │ ZONE D │ │ ZONE E │ │ ZONE F │
└───┬────┘ └───┬────┘ └───┬────┘ └───┬────┘ └───┬────┘ └───┬────┘
    ▼          ▼          ▼          ▼          ▼          ▼
┌──────────┐┌───────────┐┌─────────────┐┌───────────┐┌───────────┐┌────────────┐
│North-West││South-South││North-Central││South-West ││North-East ││South-East  │
└────┬─────┘└─────┬─────┘└──────┬──────┘└─────┬─────┘└─────┬─────┘└──────┬─────┘
     ▼            ▼             ▼             ▼            ▼             ▼
  ┌─────┐      ┌─────┐       ┌─────┐       ┌─────┐      ┌─────┐      ┌─────┐
  │ JCC │      │ JCC │       │ JCC │       │ JCC │      │ JCC │      │ JCC │
  └──┬──┘      └─────┘       └─────┘       └─────┘      └─────┘      └──┬──┘
     │                                                                 │
     │                     ┌─────────┐                                 │
     └────────────────────►│   SUG   │◄────────────────────────────────┘
                           └─────────┘
```

Authors Compilation, 2025

In the analysis of Oyekanmi (2024) the students' union body in Nigeria created affiliated structures of NANS for each geopolitical zone to ensure administrative convenience because of the rise in public tertiary institutions in Nigeria. These structures are; NANS Zone A in the North West comprising Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto and Zamfara States; Zone B in the South South consists of Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo and Rivers States;

Zone C in the North Central comprises Benue, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger and Plateau States, as well as the Federal Capital Territory; Zone D in the South West covers the Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ekiti, Lagos and Ondo States; Zone E in the North East contains Adamawa, Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Taraba and Yobe states; and Zone F in the South East covers Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo states. Structurally, NANS executive organ is headed by a President and other executive officers, who are elected at the National Convention of NANS. The Senate organ is headed by the Senate President. Leadership position at the zonal level of NANS is through Convention, with the leader of the students' structure thereof referred to as Coordinator.

It is pertinent to situate that the leadership structures of NANS extend to the state and campus levels. As noted by Oyekanmi, et al. (2023), the students' leadership in each of the state within the zonal structure is known as Joint Campus Committee (JCC), whose leadership is elected by the students' union presidents from public higher institutions of learning in the state at a special convention. The JCC is a coordinating structure of NANS at the state level. While the students' unions on various campuses are at the bottom of NANS pyramid with her leadership elected through election on various campuses, which include embracing public Universities, Polytechnics and Colleges of Education.

Students' union is typically coordinated by group of students with hierarchical organisational structure. The Central Executive Council (CEC) wing of the student union is led by the President and other officers elected by the students for different positions. The second wing of the Student Union is Student House of Representatives (SHR) from colleges/faculties and departments. SHR is headed by the Senate President or Speaker, depending on the institutional nomenclature as adopted. The other elements are non-elected wings of the Student Union, which includes the Judicial Arm, whose officers are appointed from the Students' Bar Association (SBA) on campus.

GENDERED STUDENTS' ACTIVISM IN NIGERIA: CAUSES, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR DEMOCRATIC SUSTAINABILITY

In African traditional societies before contact with Western or Oriental, there is a permeated African civilisation wherein gender disparities in access to education persist, with females often facing cultural, societal, and economic exclusion (Smith, 2018). However, due to civilization and transformative democratic reforms in modern times, qualification to attend higher institutions of

learning is no longer gender based but a subject of individuals' ability to fulfil certain requirements that are rooted in competence and success in statutory entry examination. Thus, admission to Nigerian universities was no longer gender biased.

While there is no differential gender status of studentship, there are unequal level of students' participation in students' unionism and other campus life as influenced by gender stereotypes in Nigerian universities. The Nigerian universities have consistently displayed apposite gendered experiences that influence students' participation in activism. This gender disparity has set conventional guiding rules and influences on the composition and dynamics of students' movements, as well as the issues they prioritise (Johnson & Brown, 2020).

As argued by Okoye (2019) a preponderant number of male students evidently participate in active unionism, campus advocacy and other deviant or leftist behaviours in greater percentage than their female counterparts. This is owing to the tapestry of violence and other associated risks in students' activism. Oyekanmi et al (2023) argued that the engagement strategy of students' activists which include protests, rostrums of opposition and other deviant ways against constituted authorities places female students at disadvantage to actively participate. It was argued further that the female students socio-cultural constraints*, risk aversion due to threats, or* institutional deterrents are not receptive to the associated difficulties in students activism, hence their preponderance exclusion. The corollary effect of the above influence the general perception of female students and most university communities that students' activism and public advocacy are familiar turfs for male students; hence the reason males have dominated students' activism in Nigeria.

It is worrisome that despite the female students' constituting the larger percentage of the active voters in during SUG elections on various campuses, female aspirations into students leadership position has not received the popular supports even from the female folks. This was why Ademola (2020) noted that members of students' unions in executives, bodies and students' parliaments in Nigerian institutions of learning are always dominated by male activists. Although, it could be due to general belief that male students could go through the rigour of electioneering campaign, unending protests, intense meeting and scheming among various caucuses (Okafor & Adams, 2017).

Ibe (2016) in his submission on why female students have taken back seats in students' activism on Nigerian campuses, identified socio-cultural stereotypes and expectations as two indices that

have influenced the roles of male and female activists in Nigerian universities. Traditional gender value has ceded leadership responsibilities and decision-making positions to male students, while female students have been moved to the pecking order to playing supporting roles within the student movements. The popular convention of having female students to deputising male students' union presidents in many universities in Nigeria is a classic example of the stereotypes.

The pressure to balance activism with academic and personal responsibilities is an additional burden for female activists, who often face societal pressures and expectations to prioritise marriage and family over activism (Okeke, 2020). These gendered roles and expectations influence the strategies, visibility, and impact of student movements. Several case studies illustrates the complexities of gendered activism in Nigeria's universities. For example, during the "Bring Back Our Girls" movement, some females played a pivotal role in advocating for the release of abducted schoolgirls. However, this intervention and advocacy was not driven within the periscope of higher institutions of learning. The females who participated in this advocacy were members of civil societies and parents' forums (Uzodike, 2018).

In contrast, Obi (2017) noted that male students have been at the vanguards of protests against tuition fee increment, protection of students' rights and continued advocacy for political reforms. These examples demonstrate the gender disparity issues that shape the activism landscape in Nigeria's universities and the associated roles and narratives that have assigned more integrated and active influence on male students in campus advocacy and related students' matters than female gender.

Eesuola (2014) reiterates that Nigerian students played active roles in post-independence struggle for good governance through collaboration and alliance with civil societies. However, a curated role of students' activism in Nigeria and assessment of its influence on the sustainability of democracy and good governance within the last twenty five years is not encouraging, when compared to pre- democracy era. The students' activism of the Fourth Republic has failed to lived up to her role as the conscience of the nation. It rather has remained in the web of internal squabbles, leadership crisis and corruption. This declined qualities and roles have allowed the institution of democracy to flounder and dissipated her values of good governance, electoral fairness and accountability in Nigeria (Oyekanmi, 2024; Abati, 2005).

The central argument on the declining quality and ideological prowess of students' leadership to the steady growth of democracy and good governance in Nigeria can also be explained from the dysfunctional recruitment process from the higher institutions. Given the insights from Makinde (2022) analysis on why Nigerian students' bodies have not been able to impact democratic governance paradigm, he concluded that students activism in Nigeria has been taken over by hardened hearted young men who are lacking the required empathy and kindness to embrace democratic ethos. The study of Oyekanmi (2024) inferred that it was understandable for the male Nigerian students dominating engagement with government through radical opposition in request and advocacy for self – governance and democracy before 1999 which symbolises the dawn of Nigeria's democracy. The study however, argued further that such radical disposition through protest via other instruments of violence was no longer effective, with many male students' leaders turning to political profiteers, cultism and other socially abominable behaviors. The table below offers a clear index analysis of the current disproportional representation in gendered students' activism in Nigeria.

Table 1:   Female Students' Union Presidency in Nigeria's University

S/N	University	Year of Establishment	Female Student Leaders	Year (SUG)
1.	Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria	1962	Naja'atu Muhamed	1983/1984
2.	University of Benin	1970	Chineloma Eleodimuo/Lauretta Obakpolor	2010/ 2016
3.	Kogi State University	1999	Abubakar Fatima Zahara	2021
4.	Lagos State University	1983	Hassan Mojirade Monsurat (MJ)	2013
5.	Tai Solarin University of Education	2005	Awotunde Abimbola(Acting)	2014
6.	FUNAAB	1988	Ahmed Adeola Tawakalt	2019
7.	University of Maduguri	1975	Zahirat Galleon	2018
8.	Benue State University	1992	Aker Agatha Soohmba	2021
9.	Usman Danfodio University	1975	Yahaya Aminat(Acting after the suspension of the president	2016
10.	Alvan Ikoku Federal	1963	Ugonna Gloria	2019

	University Of Education		Alozie	

Source: Authors' Compilations, 2025.

Table 1 is an x-ray representation of the few times where and when females have become students' leaders in some of the Nigerian universities. The disproportionate leadership configuration of male and female in university campus is wider as shown in the table. For instance, many of the universities have only had one female elected as Students' Union President for once in many decades of the university establishment, while male students have always dominated the students' leadership structure. A further reality into this gender disparity is that some of the female students' leaders got to that position by defaults, having profited from the impeachment of the elected SUG Presidents who the females were previously elected to deputise. The male students' activists who have taken over students struggle for many decades have become the harbingers of democracy struggle in Nigeria. The higher institutions in Nigeria have become incubators of electoral violence and rigging in Nigeria's elections. Political elites now recruit ballot snatchers from students' unions leaders on campuses. This anti- democratic principle has become associated with many elections in Nigeria. There have also been records of violence and destructive protests across Nigeria's ivory towers under the control of male dominated students' leaders whose leadership psychology is prone to violence and protests as method of engagement. This has also led to academic disruption in many higher institutions (Oyekanmi, 2024).

The higher institutions which are expected to function as recruitment grand where young students leaders are to be recruited as political elites into larger political spectrums of the state have been turned to theatres of guns and orgy violence through cultism which is now like a Siemens twins with male dominated students unionism. The failure of students' activism to live up to expectations is rooted in its gender disparity to students 'leadership. The weakness in student leadership can be addressed through equal opportunities, as the peaceful and conservative nature of females can help to improve the internal leadership crisis in students' movement and stimulate its role to strengthen Nigeria's democracy and students representations.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper concluded that the growth of Nigeria's democracy with the inherent indices of popular participation, bottom-up approach to governance and citizens' centric policies are part of the product of united students' activism in the Pre- Fourth Republic. The efforts of these students

which include thorough interrogation of public policies on governance and educational related issues were keys to some recorded gains of Nigeria's democracy before the Fourth Republic. It thus, concluded that gender discrimination in students' activism which is reflecting in the recruitment of students' leadership and low- level of trust in the capacity of female students' leaders will continue to weaken the capacity of the students' constituency from engaging government policy and governance issues. If this trajectory of gendered students' activism continues, the students' inability to keep up with its statutory roles as conscience of the nation and to responding positively to addressing leadership and democratic cracks in Nigeria's polity will persist. The study also concludes that female active participation in students' welfare advocacy and union related matter is a central thesis and apogee to strengthening the quality of young generational leadership from the ivory towers that will help to respond to leadership deficit and rebound democratic values.

Given the current small number of female students activists in Nigeria, the current students structure as dominated by male activists are not likely to desist from cultism, campus rascality, electoral violence and internet frauds that have dominated students activism in the Fourth Republic. This has no doubt created distraction from contributing to good governance and the stability of Nigeria's democracy. The study concludes that students' movement is likely to embrace diplomacy, lobby and social- particularized contacts to influence public policy and engendered dividends of democracy, a departure from violence ridden and self-entitlement postures which have been the hallmark of male dominated students' movement over the last two decades.

The study therefore recommends for collaboration, solidarity and allyship among male and female activists on various campus in order to remove existing patriarchal mentality and other resistance to female activism in Nigeria's higher institutions of learning. This will create more leadership experience and responsibilities for the female folks to participate actively in civic engagement and help to de-escalate the zero-sum approach to political power as exemplified by the male politicians.

The Benjing affirmative actions to ceding 35percent of political appointment to women in politics must also become an integral part of students' leadership configuration on various campuses and that of the National Association of Nigerian Students.

Gender equality and inclusivity within student movements must also be promoted as strategies. This will help to creating safe and inclusive spaces for activism, free from gender-based violence and discrimination. When this is done, it would propel enriching contribution to the on-going conversation on renaissance of Nigeria's democratic values through gender perspective.

The study also recommends that SUG should have 40percent females so that they can be encouraged and be motivated to improve their participation in campus leadership responsibilities. They should make strategic in-road to participate in different students' associations group on various campuses. There is plethora of students groups and associations, whose sphere of responsibilities cut-across academic, socio-cultural and advocacy. The active membership and ascension to leadership positions therein will serve as propeller to female leadership in the core students' unions and other NANS engagements.

REFERENCES

Abati, R. (2005, December 11). How Nigerian students murdered democracy. Guardian News. https://www.nairaland.com/nigeria/topic-3800.0.html#msgl27316

Abia, R. (2006). *Decolonization process in Africa: Shapes and dimension*. Maktaba Press

Adelabu, M., & Akinsolu, A. (2009). Political education through the university: A survey of Nigerian university students. *African Journal of Political Science and International Relation,3*(2).https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237554953_Political_education_through_the_universityauniversity_a_survey_of_Nigerian_university_students

Ademola, C. E. (2020). Female students and activism in Nigeria: A paradox opportunities and challenges for leadership development. *Journal Community Development, 4* (2), 43-53.

Akinboye, S. O., & Eesuola, O. S. (2015). Students' Union, university administration and political development of nations. *African Research Review (AFREV), 9* (1), 146–158. Bevir, M. (2012). *Governance: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press.

Bradly, O., & Cassy, W. R. (2020) *Institutional capacity, female power and influence in the new order*. Edmund Press

Chiamogu, A. P. (2018). Student activism and social change in Nigerian tertiary institutions: A call to service. *Multidisciplinary Journal of Science, Management and Technology (MJSMT), 1* (1), 66–76.

Ekeh, M. E. (2024). Population, poverty and victimisation females in Nigeria. *Journal Economic Development and Civic Engagement, 3* (2), 17- 43.

Huntington, S. P. (1991). Democracy third wave. *Journal of Democracy*, *2*(2), 12-34.

Ibe, C. O. (2016). Gender, activism, and student politics in Nigeria: The role of female student leaders. *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations, 10* (8), 97–105.

Johnson, D. (2012, January 4). Oil subsidy removal: NANS gives Jonathan 24 hours ultimatum. *Vanguard News*. https://vanguardngr.com/oil-subsidy-removal-nans-gives-jonathan-24-hour-ultimatum/

Johnson, M. O., & Brown, O. A. (2020). Gender inequalities in access to education in Nigeria. *Gender issues*, *37* (4), 383–397.

Kukah, M. H. (1999) *Democracy and civil society in Nigeria.* Spectrum Books Limited.

Martelli, J. T., & Garalytė, K. (2019). Generational communities: Student activism and the politics of becoming in South Asia. *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal, 22*, 1-44.

Macbeth, O. J. (2020). Activism in developing countries: Dimension to governance and civil liberty. *Journal of Politics and Democracy, 3*(2), 56-79.

McLean, I., & McMillan, A. (2003). *Oxford concise dictionary of politics.* Oxford University Press.

Mengistu, M. (2017). The quest for youth inclusion in African politics: Trends and challenges and prospects. *Journal of Social Economics*, *6* (1), 17-35.

Obi, C. O. (2017). Student activism and political reform in Nigeria: A case study of the "Ali must go" movement. *Journal of African Studies and Development, 9* (3), 29-40.

Olugbade, K. (1990) Nigerian students and political mobilisation. *Journal of Social Development in Africa, 5* (1), 39–57.

Oyekanmi, A. A. (2024). *Students' activism and good governance in Nigeria's Fourth Republic: A focus on the Southwest.* [Doctoral dissertation, Tai Solarin University of Education, Ijagun].

Oyekanmi, A. A. (2014). Strains of Students' unionism and political activism in Nigerian campuses. *Journal of Inquiries in Sociological Studies, 1* (1), 176-191.

Oyekanmi, A. A., Ogundele, S. & Salako, S. A. (2021). Imposition of candidates by political parties and challenges of democratic development in Nigeria's Fourth Republic.

Hyuku Journal of Politics and Development Studies, *7* (1), 75-95.

Oyekanmi, A. A., & Adebajo, A. A. (2023). Students' activism and the challenges of nation-building: The Nigeria's experience. *Ijagun Journal of Social Sciences.*

Oyekanmi**,** A**.** A., Adebajo, A. A., & Shittu, A. K. (2023). Students' activism and institutional governance in Nigerian universities. *Fuwukari Journal of Social Sciences (FUWJSS)*, *2* (1), 148-165.

Ochiai, T. (2018). The Nigerian progress union: An African association in the United Kingdom in the 1920s. *Ryukoku Law Review*, *51* (1), 397-412.

Ogunbodede, O. S., Idowu, H. A., and Odeyemi, T. I. (2020) Students' union-management relations and conflict resolution mechanisms in Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria. *Accord Journal of Conflict Resolution (AJCR), 20,* 103-131.

Ogunleye, I., & Adeniyi, E. (2020). Students' Unions and political leadership in Africa. *Journal of Politics and Development, 6* (2), 21-34.

Okagbare, M. (2019). *Democracy and the role of the National Association of Nigerian Students*. *GRIN. Available from:* https://www.grin.com/document/505891

Okoye, N. (2019). Gender-based violence on Nigerian campuses: Challenges and responses. *Gender Issues, 36* (3), 253-269.

Olusola, F., Olalekan, M., & Adetayo, E. (2019). Students' activism and appraisal of political participation in Nigeria. *Mediterranean Journal of Sociology, 2* (1), 17-32.

Ojo, K., & Adekunle, B. (2020). The heroes of June 12 agitation in Nigeria's democracy: Nigerian students in perspective. *Journal of Labour and National Development*, *3* (1), 40-53.

Peter, Z. E., & Ebimobowei, S. T. (2015). Leadership and student unionism, challenges and solutions in the Nigerian tertiary education system (colleges of education, polytechnics and universities). *European Scientific Journal, 11* (25), 382-392.

Rhodes, R. A. W. (1996). The new governance: Governing without government. *Political Studies, 44*(4), 652-667.

Smith, J. (2018). Gender disparities in Nigerian education: A qualitative analysis. *International Journal of Educational Development, 60,* 58-65.

Tobi, A. A. (2001) *Democracy in Nigeria.* RAD Consultancy Ltd.

Ubaku, K. C., Emeh, C. A., & Anyikwa, C. N. (2014). Impact of nationalist movement on the actualisation of Nigerian independence, 1914-1960. *International Journal of History and Philosophical Research, 2* (1), 54-67.

Wendel, M. O. (2023). The trajectory of gender balancing, cooperation and competition in Africa. *Journal of Government and Society, 4* (2), 21-34.

Wonah, E. I. (2019). Students' Union and politics in Nigeria. *Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science, 7*(7), 28-32.

Zeilig, I. L. (2005) *Students and the struggle for democracy in sub-Saharan Africa, 1995–2005: With a focus on Senegal and Zimbabwe.* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation], Department of Geography and Earth Sciences, Brunel University, London. Available from: https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/tel-01265010