



## Leadership and Good Governance in Nigeria Universities: Issues, Challenges and Prospects, 2015-2024

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### Abstract

Leadership and good governance are critical determinants of the effectiveness and sustainability of universities. In Nigeria, between 2015 and 2024, universities have faced persistent challenges in these areas, affecting academic performance, institutional credibility, and overall development. This study examines the issues, challenges, and prospects of leadership and governance in Nigerian universities during this period. Key challenges identified include inadequate funding, political interference in leadership appointments, insecurity, poor staff welfare, and insufficient leadership training for middle-level academics. These factors have contributed to institutional instability, frequent strikes, and disruption of academic activities. Despite these challenges, opportunities exist for improving governance through transparent leadership selection, enhanced training programs, improved staff welfare, and the adoption of accountability and technological frameworks. The study provides insights into how effective leadership and good governance can be promoted to enhance institutional performance and achieve sustainable development in the Nigerian university system.

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**Keywords:** Leadership, Good Governance, Nigerian Universities, Challenges and Prospect

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### Introduction

Leadership and governance are central pillars of sustainable development in any institution, particularly within higher education systems. Universities play a critical role in national growth through knowledge production, research, innovation, and human capital development. However, in Nigeria, the university system is frequently plagued by administrative instability, policy inconsistencies, underfunding, and academic disruptions—most of which stem from governance-related weaknesses (Adebayo & Lawal, 2020).

Leadership in universities encompasses the ability of individuals or bodies (such as Vice-Chancellors, Governing Councils, and Deans) to steer institutional vision, uphold academic integrity, and make decisions in the interest of all stakeholders. Good governance, on the other hand, entails transparency, accountability, equity, participation, and adherence to the rule of law (UNESCO, 2009). Together, these elements ensure that institutions are effectively managed, responsive to internal and external demands, and are committed to continuous improvement.

In Nigeria, however, leadership and governance challenges have become systemic. Political interference in the appointment of Vice-Chancellors, weak institutional autonomy, financial mismanagement, corruption, and a lack of strategic planning continue to undermine

university operations (Okebukola, 2018; Adagba & Abdulrahman, 2022). These issues not only affect academic quality but also contribute to frequent industrial actions by staff unions, student unrest, brain drain, and the declining global ranking of Nigerian universities.

Moreover, governance problems are exacerbated by poor leadership succession planning, limited capacity-building programs for university administrators, and the underutilization of participatory decision-making processes. The concentration of power in a few administrative offices without accountability mechanisms further alienates faculty, students, and non-academic staff from meaningful engagement in institutional development (Aina, 2021).

Efforts to improve university leadership and governance in Nigeria have been initiated through policy reforms and oversight from regulatory agencies like the National Universities Commission (NUC). However, the effectiveness of these reforms remains limited by weak implementation, lack of political will, and insufficient stakeholder involvement (Babalola, 2020).

This paper examines the challenges of leadership and governance in Nigerian universities, exploring both structural and operational constraints. It also offers recommendations for reform based on global best practices and evidence from within the Nigerian system. By identifying core issues and proposing strategic interventions, the study aims to contribute to the broader discourse on educational reform and institutional accountability in Nigeria.

### Statement of the Problem

The period between 2015 and 2024 witnessed significant challenges in leadership and governance within Nigerian universities, impacting their effectiveness and credibility. Despite being pivotal to national development, these institutions faced persistent issues that hindered their progress.

#### Issues and Challenges include the following:

- **Inadequate Funding:** Public universities in Nigeria have been heavily reliant on government funding, which has often been insufficient. This underfunding has affected all aspects of university activities, including infrastructure development, research, and staff remuneration.
- **Leadership Selection and Integrity:** The process of selecting leaders in Nigerian universities has been marred by political interference and lack of transparency. This has led to appointments that may not prioritize institutional needs, affecting governance quality.
- **Insecurity and Institutional Stability:** Insecurity in various regions has led to the closure of universities, disrupting academic calendars and affecting the safety of students and staff.
- **Staff Welfare and Morale:** Issues such as poor salaries and working conditions have led to strikes and dissatisfaction among academic staff, affecting the overall functioning of universities.

## **Prospects and Opportunities**

Despite these challenges, there are prospects for improvement. Enhancing leadership training, ensuring transparent selection processes, increasing funding, and addressing staff welfare can contribute to better governance. Additionally, leveraging technology and fostering a culture of accountability can strengthen institutional governance and lead to improved educational outcomes.

This study aims to critically assess the state of leadership and governance in Nigerian universities between 2015 and 2024, highlighting key issues, challenges, and prospects, to provide insights that can inform policy reforms and contribute to the development of a more robust and effective higher education system in Nigeria.

## **Objectives of the paper**

The main objective of this paper is to critically examine the challenges of leadership and good governance in Nigerian universities, with a view to identifying their impact on institutional performance and suggesting practical solutions.

### **Specific Objectives:**

The specific objectives of the studies are to:

- i. Contextualize the concepts of leadership and good governance within the Nigerian university system.
- ii. Assess the current governance structure and leadership practices in Nigerian public and private universities.
- iii. Identify the major challenges facing leadership and governance in Nigerian universities, including political interference, corruption, and lack of autonomy.
- iv. Examine the impact of poor leadership and governance on academic quality, staff morale, and institutional effectiveness.

## **Scope of the Study**

This study focuses on examining the leadership and governance challenges in Nigerian universities, particularly as they affect institutional performance, academic quality, and stakeholder engagement. The scope includes an analysis of both public and private universities with emphasis on leadership structures (such as Vice-Chancellors, governing councils, senates, and management boards) and governance practices related to transparency, accountability, autonomy, and participation.

The study covers: Administrative and academic leadership roles; Institutional governance frameworks; Decision-making processes; Stakeholder relations (staff, students, unions, and regulatory bodies); Leadership crises, succession planning, and political interference; Governance impacts on funding, infrastructure, and learning environment.

Geographically, while the study references national trends and policies, specific emphasis is placed on selected Nigerian universities that reflect the diversity of the country's higher education landscape (federal, state, and private institutions).

### **Significance of the Study**

- I. The findings can inform education policy reform in Nigeria, particularly in the areas of leadership recruitment, university autonomy, and governance regulation. Government agencies such as the Federal Ministry of Education and the NUC can benefit from evidence-based recommendations to enhance institutional governance.
- II. By identifying weaknesses in current leadership structures, the study offers insights into how leadership development and succession planning can be strengthened. This is particularly important for reducing crises associated with appointments and administrative inefficiencies.

Good governance is closely linked to academic quality. Understanding how governance lapses affect learning outcomes, staff morale, and research productivity is critical to reversing the decline in Nigeria's university rankings and output. The study provides a platform for students, academic staff, and unions to better understand how governance structures affect their rights, responsibilities, and the future of their institutions.

### **Conceptual Clarification**

In order to understand the dynamics of leadership and good governance within Nigerian universities, it is essential to define and clarify the key concepts that form the foundation of this study: leadership, governance, and good governance—particularly within the context of higher education.

### **Leadership**

Leadership refers to the ability of an individual or group to influence, guide, and direct the activities and direction of an organization toward the achievement of its goals. In a university context, leadership includes both administrative and academic functions, involving individuals such as Vice-Chancellors, Deans, Heads of Departments, and Governing Council members (Adebayo & Lawal, 2020). Effective leadership in universities is characterized by strategic vision, ethical conduct, inclusivity, and the capacity to make informed decisions that align with the institution's mission.

Leadership in higher education requires a blend of transformational and transactional styles—balancing vision and innovation with operational management and compliance with academic standards (Adelabu & Ogundele, 2019). However, in many Nigerian universities, leadership is often politicized, reactive, or weakened by poor succession planning and lack of professional development.

## **Governance**

Governance refers to the frameworks, processes, and structures through which organizations are directed and controlled. University governance entails the formal and informal mechanisms by which decisions are made, policies are implemented, and accountability is enforced (UNESCO, 2009).

In Nigerian universities, governance is shared between various entities, including:

- The Governing Council (responsible for financial and administrative oversight)
- The University Senate (in charge of academic matters)
- Management (led by the Vice-Chancellor)
- External regulatory bodies like the National Universities Commission (NUC)

Despite this multi-tiered framework, poor coordination and lack of autonomy often hinder the effectiveness of governance in Nigerian universities (Aina, 2021).

## **Good Governance**

Good governance is the application of key principles such as transparency, accountability, equity, participation, rule of law, and efficiency in managing institutions. In the context of higher education, it involves stakeholder inclusion, responsible use of resources, clear decision-making processes, and ethical leadership (World Bank, 2008; ICPC, 2022).

Good governance in universities ensures:

- Democratic participation by faculty, staff, and students in key decisions;
- Efficient allocation of funds and transparent financial reporting;
- Merit-based appointments and promotions;
- Conflict resolution through dialogue and due process;
- Strategic long-term planning aligned with educational goals.

Unfortunately, Nigerian universities often fall short of these principles due to corruption, undue political interference, and weak institutional capacity (Okebukola, 2018; Obasi, 2020)

## **Leadership and Governance**

While leadership and governance are closely related, they are not synonymous. Leadership is about vision, direction, and influence, while governance is about the framework and systems within which leadership operates. Good leadership may fail in the absence of sound governance, and vice versa. Therefore, both must work hand-in-hand to ensure institutional growth and academic excellence (Babalola, 2020).

## **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework provides the conceptual lens through which leadership and governance in Nigerian universities can be analyzed. For this study, Transformational Leadership Theory and Governance Theory are adopted to explain both the behavioral and

structural dimensions of leadership and good governance within higher education institutions.

### **Transformational Leadership Theory**

Transformational Leadership Theory was first introduced by James MacGregor Burns (1978) and later expanded by Bernard Bass (1985). It describes a style of leadership that goes beyond mere transactional exchanges to inspire, motivate, and transform followers toward achieving organizational goals. Transformational leaders are visionary, charismatic, intellectually stimulating, and considerate of individual follower needs.

#### **Application to Nigerian Universities**

In the university setting, transformational leadership is crucial for:

- Vision-driven academic planning;
- Reforming governance structures;
- Fostering innovation, research, and excellence;
- Empowering faculty, students, and staff to contribute meaningfully.

However, in many Nigerian universities, leadership often remains \*\*managerial and transactional\*\*, with limited engagement in transformational practices. Political appointments, lack of meritocracy, and frequent leadership crises hinder visionary leadership (Adebayo & Lawal, 2020). Where transformational leaders have emerged, institutions have seen improvements in research output, international collaborations, and strategic development (Adelabu & Ogundele, 2019).

### **Governance Theory**

Governance Theory refers to the framework of rules, institutions, and practices by which authority is exercised in organizations. It encompasses mechanisms for accountability, participation, transparency, and control. In the university context, governance theory is concerned with how decisions are made, who makes them, and how stakeholders are held accountable (World Bank, 2008).

#### **Application to Nigerian Universities**

Governance theory provides a basis for assessing:

- The structure and function of governing councils, senates, and management boards;
- Stakeholder inclusion (e.g., faculty, students, unions) in decision-making;
- Mechanisms of financial accountability and regulatory oversight;
- The balance between autonomy and external control.

In Nigeria, poor implementation of governance principles has led to opaque decision-making, weak oversight, financial mismanagement, and a disconnect between university leadership and stakeholders (Okebukola, 2018; ICPC, 2022).

## **Integrative Perspective**

Combining Transformational Leadership Theory and Governance Theory allows for a holistic understanding of the challenges in Nigerian universities: Leadership theory focuses on individual and organizational behavior. Governance theory addresses institutional structures, rules, and accountability.

## **Overview of University Governance in Nigeria**

University governance in Nigeria refers to the frameworks, structures, and processes through which higher education institutions are directed, managed, and held accountable. It includes the roles of internal governing bodies, regulatory agencies, and external stakeholders in decision-making, financial oversight, academic development, and institutional leadership.

## **Structure of University Governance**

The governance framework of Nigerian universities is largely patterned after the British university model, but has evolved under the influence of local political, legal, and administrative conditions. The typical governance structure includes:

### **a. Governing Council**

The Governing Council is the highest decision-making body on administrative, financial, and personnel matters. It is responsible for approving budgets, appointing senior staff, and ensuring compliance with national policies. Members are often appointed by the government, and include external professionals, university staff, and sometimes political representatives.

### **b. Senate**

The Senate is the supreme academic body responsible for regulating teaching, research, academic standards, admission policies, and awarding of degrees. It consists of the Vice-Chancellor, Deans, Heads of Departments, Professors, and elected academic staff.

### **c. University Management Team**

Led by the Vice-Chancellor, the university management team includes Deputy Vice-Chancellors, the Registrar, Bursar, and Librarian. This team handles day-to-day operations, implements council and senate policies, and oversees institutional strategy.

### **d. Regulatory Bodies**

The National Universities Commission (NUC) plays a central role in coordinating, monitoring, and accrediting academic programs. It issues guidelines on funding, staffing, curriculum, and university standards. Other bodies include the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) and the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund).

## **Legal and Policy Framework**

Nigerian universities operate under laws enacted by the National Assembly (for federal universities) or state houses of assembly (for state universities). These laws establish their autonomy and outline governance responsibilities. However, despite legal provisions, in practice many universities suffer from excessive government interference, particularly in the appointment of Vice-Chancellors and council members (Okebukola, 2018).

## **Leadership and Governance Challenges in Nigerian Universities**

Leadership and governance are fundamental to the effective functioning of universities. In Nigeria, however, these two critical components face persistent challenges that undermine the quality, stability, and development of higher education. These challenges are both systemic and operational, affecting decision-making, academic integrity, resource allocation, and institutional performance.

### **a. Political Interference in University Administration.**

One of the most persistent challenges is the undue interference of political actors in the appointment of Vice-Chancellors, Governing Council members, and other senior officials. Rather than following transparent, merit-based processes, many leadership appointments are influenced by partisan interests, regional politics, or favoritism.

### **b. Corruption and Financial Mismanagement**

Many Nigerian universities face allegations of corruption, such as misappropriation of funds, inflated contract costs, nepotism in employment, and lack of transparency in procurement. Financial irregularities are worsened by the weak enforcement of audit controls and limited oversight by Governing Councils.

### **c. Leadership Succession Crises**

Frequent leadership crises arise from contested or manipulated Vice-Chancellor selection processes. These crises often lead to legal battles, prolonged transition periods, and leadership vacuums that affect academic calendars and disrupt institutional stability.

### **d. Weak Institutional Autonomy**

Although the University Autonomy Act (2003) was designed to protect universities from external control, many institutions still face overregulation and bureaucratic interference from federal and state governments. Decisions on funding, appointments, and curriculum are often influenced by political or administrative agencies.

## **Impact of Poor Governance and Leadership in Nigerian Universities**

Effective governance and visionary leadership are critical for the development and sustainability of higher education institutions. However, Nigerian universities have suffered from chronic governance failures and poor leadership practices, leading to wide-ranging negative impacts on academic standards, institutional effectiveness, and national development. Below is a breakdown of the major consequences, supported with scholarly references.

### **a) Decline in Academic Standards**

Poor leadership and governance contribute to weak quality assurance, poorly monitored academic programs, and compromised faculty recruitment. Universities with poorly managed governance structures often record discredited courses, poorly equipped departments, and unqualified personnel handling sensitive academic responsibilities.

For instance, several Nigerian universities have suffered from program discreditations due to non-compliance with National Universities Commission (NUC) standards—often the result of ineffective leadership (Okebukola, 2018).



### **b) Corruption and Financial Mismanagement**

Poor governance often fosters a culture of financial opacity, where misappropriation of funds, inflated contracts, and non-transparent procurement processes thrive. Without proper auditing mechanisms, funds intended for infrastructure, research, and staff development are frequently diverted. The Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC, 2022) identified Nigerian universities as hotspots for procurement fraud and payroll fraud due to weak internal governance and oversight.

### **c) Brain Drain and Loss of Talented Faculty**

When leadership fails to create a supportive work environment—through fair promotions, research funding, or academic freedom—highly qualified staff seek opportunities abroad, resulting in a brain drain. Adagba and Abdulrahman (2022) noted that poor leadership contributes directly to the emigration of Nigerian academics, undermining the quality and continuity of academic mentorship.

## **Good Practices and Global Lessons in Leadership and Good Governance in Universities**

Globally, higher education institutions have increasingly embraced transparent, accountable, and inclusive governance systems. Many of these institutions have demonstrated that good leadership and governance are not merely structural but deeply embedded in institutional culture and stakeholder engagement. Nigerian universities, in addressing their governance and leadership challenges, can benefit from understanding and adapting these global best practices.

### **A. Participatory Governance Structures**

Globally successful universities emphasize inclusive decision-making. In countries like Finland, Canada, and Germany, students, faculty, and non-academic staff have representation in key governance bodies such as academic senates and university boards. (UNESCO 2009).

### **B. Transparent and Merit-Based Leadership Selection**

In leading global universities such as Oxford (UK) and Harvard (USA), leadership appointments follow strict meritocratic principles involving open advertisement, peer review, and stakeholder consultations. These practices reduce political influence and increase institutional credibility. World Bank. (2008)

### **C. Institutional Autonomy Coupled with Accountability**

In countries like South Africa and Ghana, universities enjoy a considerable degree of operational and financial autonomy. However, autonomy is paired with strict accountability through external audits, performance indicators, and transparent budgeting. Saint et.al 2003

### **D. Digital Governance and E-Administration**

According Altbach et.al 2009 Universities in countries like Estonia and Singapore have adopted digital platforms for financial management, academic administration, and performance tracking. These systems enhance transparency, reduce corruption, and streamline operations.

## Methodology

### Research Design

This study adopts a descriptive research design with elements of cross-sectional and case study approaches. The descriptive design is appropriate because it allows for a detailed examination of leadership practices and governance challenges in Nigerian universities between 2015 and 2024. The case study approach helps focus on specific universities to illustrate leadership and governance issues in context.

### Data Collection Methods

#### a) Primary Data

- **Structured Questionnaires:** Administered to academic staff and students to gather quantitative data on perceptions of leadership effectiveness, governance practices, and challenges faced.
- **Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews conducted with university administrators (Vice-Chancellors, Deans, and Heads of Departments) to gain qualitative insights into governance issues and leadership strategies.

#### b) Secondary Data

- **Document Analysis:** Review of university annual reports, policy documents, and strategic plans to assess governance structures and leadership decisions.
- **Literature Review:** Examination of journals, books, and online reports to contextualize leadership and governance challenges between 2015 and 2024.
- **Government and Institutional Reports:** Analysis of reports from TETFund, National Universities Commission (NUC), and Ministry of Education for data on funding, policy changes, and administrative challenges.

## Conclusion

Leadership and good governance are central to the sustainable development and global competitiveness of Nigerian universities. However, the sector faces multifaceted challenges including poor leadership selection processes, lack of transparency, limited stakeholder participation, corruption, inadequate funding, and policy inconsistencies. These challenges have significantly hindered institutional growth, academic excellence, and infrastructural development.

The absence of visionary and accountable leadership has perpetuated a culture of mediocrity and weakened institutional autonomy. Furthermore, the politicization of university leadership appointments, coupled with poor implementation of policies, has undermined efforts at institutional reforms. Effective governance in Nigerian universities requires leaders who are not only academically competent but also morally upright and strategically visionary.

## Recommendations

- i. **Transparent Leadership Recruitment Processes:** Universities should adopt merit-based and transparent processes in the appointment of vice-chancellors and other key administrators. Independent panels and stakeholder representation should be included to minimize political interference.
- ii. **Capacity Building and Training:** Regular training and leadership development programs should be instituted for university administrators to enhance their managerial competence, ethical standards, and strategic planning skills.
- iii. **Strengthening Internal Governance Structures:** Governing councils, senates, and other organs of governance must be empowered to function independently and effectively. Clear roles, responsibilities, and accountability frameworks should be enforced.
- iv. **Stakeholder Engagement and Participation:** Active involvement of academic staff, students, alumni, and non-academic staff in decision-making processes will promote inclusiveness and collective ownership of institutional goals.

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