

LEADERSHIP FAILURE AND THE BLAME GAME PHENOMENON IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES: IMPLICATIONS FOR INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS AND QUALITY ASSURANCE

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Abstract

This paper examined the phenomenon of leadership failure and the culture of blame in Nigerian universities, highlighting its implications for institutional effectiveness and quality assurance. Despite the establishment of governance frameworks and leadership reforms, the Nigerian university system continues to experience management crises, industrial disputes, declining academic standards, and weak accountability. The study adopted a descriptive survey design involving academic and administrative staff across selected universities in Gombe State. Data were analyzed using mean and standard deviation. Findings revealed that leadership failure manifests through poor decision-making, politicized appointments, ineffective supervision, and lack of transparency in resource management. The study also found that the “blame game” culture—where university leaders, staff, and government agencies each deny responsibility—further deepens systemic inefficiency. It concluded that leadership accountability, ethical governance, and institutional autonomy are key to reversing the trend of failure and restoring trust in the Nigerian university system. Recommendations were made for promoting transformative leadership, strengthening internal governance structures, and institutionalizing a culture of responsibility.

Keywords: Leadership failure, blame game, university governance, accountability, institutional effectiveness, quality assurance, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Leadership remains the cornerstone of success and sustainability in every organization, including higher education institutions. In Nigerian universities, leadership effectiveness is central to achieving institutional goals of teaching, research, and community service. However, over the years, poor leadership practices have contributed to recurring crises in university governance, declining academic quality, and staff dissatisfaction. The inability of university administrators to provide visionary and transparent leadership has created a culture of inefficiency and public distrust.

The “blame game phenomenon” refers to the persistent tendency among key actors—university management, staff unions, government agencies, and regulatory bodies—to shift responsibility for institutional failures rather than collectively addressing underlying problems. When issues such as poor funding, strike actions, or accreditation failures arise, each stakeholder points fingers at another, resulting in policy stagnation and a breakdown of accountability. This culture of blame not only weakens institutional morale but also erodes confidence in university governance.

According to Obasi (2018), the leadership crisis in Nigerian universities is characterized by politicization of appointments, lack of meritocracy, and weak performance management. Similarly, Ejiogu (2019) observed that many universities operate under reactive leadership styles, where administrators focus on damage control rather than strategic planning. These leadership failures translate into poor quality assurance outcomes, reduced productivity, and a mismatch between university outputs and societal expectations.

Quality assurance, as emphasized by the National Universities Commission (NUC, 2021), relies heavily on effective leadership to ensure continuous improvement in academic standards. Where leadership is weak, internal control systems become ineffective, leading to substandard teaching, irregular evaluation, and financial mismanagement. The growing blame game culture compounds this weakness by deflecting accountability and obstructing reform initiatives.

This paper therefore explores the dynamics of leadership failure and the blame game phenomenon in Nigerian universities. It seeks to provide an analytical understanding of how these two interconnected challenges undermine institutional effectiveness and quality assurance. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. Examine the manifestations of leadership failure in Nigerian universities.
2. Analyze the nature and causes of the blame game phenomenon.
3. Assess the implications of leadership failure and blame culture on institutional performance and quality assurance.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on the Transformational Leadership Theory propounded by James MacGregor Burns (1978) and later expanded by Bass (1985). The theory emphasizes that effective leaders inspire their followers to achieve higher levels of performance by creating a shared vision, fostering motivation, and promoting ethical conduct. Transformational leaders are proactive, transparent, and oriented toward institutional improvement rather than personal gain.

Applying this theory to Nigerian universities, effective leadership should be capable of mobilizing staff, students, and resources toward achieving excellence in teaching, research, and service delivery. Unfortunately, many university leaders exhibit transactional tendencies—focusing on short-term compliance and personal interests—rather than transformational goals. This has contributed to institutional stagnation, weak quality assurance systems, and declining staff morale.

The blame game phenomenon emerges when leadership fails to take responsibility for institutional challenges. Instead of inspiring accountability, leaders deflect criticism and shift responsibility to other actors, thereby eroding trust and collaboration. Transformational leadership theory provides the lens for understanding how visionary leadership can counteract the blame

culture by fostering ownership, transparency, and shared responsibility within the academic community.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Concept of Leadership in University Governance

Leadership in the university context refers to the capacity of administrative and academic leaders to direct, coordinate, and motivate staff and students toward achieving institutional goals. According to Ajayi and Ekundayo (2017), university leadership involves setting direction, allocating resources, maintaining academic standards, and ensuring accountability. Effective leadership therefore determines the overall performance and reputation of a university.

In the Nigerian context, leadership often struggles with multiple layers of control—from governing councils, government ministries, and political actors—which limit institutional autonomy. Ejiogu (2019) argues that when universities lack autonomy, their leaders become reactive rather than strategic, responding to crises instead of planning for sustainable growth. Such conditions create fertile ground for leadership failure and the blame game phenomenon.

Leadership Failure in Nigerian Universities

Leadership failure in universities manifests in poor decision-making, lack of transparency, weak policy implementation, and failure to uphold meritocracy. Obasi (2018) identifies political interference in the appointment of vice-chancellors and other administrators as one of the key causes of leadership ineffectiveness. When appointments are influenced by politics rather than competence, leaders often prioritize loyalty over excellence.

Another form of failure is the absence of visionary leadership capable of uniting the academic community around shared goals. Oladipo (2021) observed that many university leaders focus on maintaining status quo rather than initiating bold reforms. Consequently, problems such as staff demotivation, poor funding management, and declining research quality persist.

Furthermore, the failure to enforce accountability at all administrative levels contributes to a culture of impunity. Without effective checks and balances, mismanagement and inefficiency thrive. These factors collectively undermine institutional effectiveness and erode the credibility of Nigerian higher education.

The Blame Game Phenomenon in University Management

The “blame game” describes the tendency of individuals and institutions to avoid accountability by shifting responsibility for problems to others. In university governance, this manifests in how leadership blames government for poor funding, staff unions blame management for unfair treatment, and government agencies blame universities for inefficiency.

According to Clark (2016), such blame-shifting reflects deeper structural dysfunctions in governance systems. It prevents stakeholders from engaging in collective problem-solving and perpetuates a cycle of stagnation. In Nigerian universities, the blame game is particularly visible during strikes, accreditation failures, or cases of financial mismanagement—where no party accepts fault, and reform efforts become politicized.

This culture of denial also affects quality assurance. When standards decline, leadership often blames inadequate funding or external interference instead of addressing internal weaknesses. As a result, quality assurance becomes a procedural exercise rather than a genuine improvement mechanism.

Leadership, Accountability, and Quality Assurance

Accountability is central to both effective leadership and quality assurance. As Ajayi and Adegbesan (2017) note, quality assurance systems thrive in institutions where leaders embrace transparency and evidence-based decision-making. Weak accountability systems allow inefficiency, corruption, and policy inconsistency to flourish.

The effectiveness of QA therefore depends on the integrity of those who lead. Muthoni (2018) emphasized that in universities where leaders are accountable, performance evaluation, curriculum review, and staff appraisal are implemented consistently. In contrast, in universities plagued by leadership crises, QA units often lack authority, and reports are manipulated for political purposes.

The relationship between leadership and QA is thus symbiotic: effective leadership drives quality assurance, while QA reinforces accountability and continuous improvement. The absence of either results in institutional failure and the perpetuation of the blame game.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study employed a descriptive survey research design, which was suitable for gathering opinions from academic and administrative staff about leadership effectiveness, accountability, and the blame game culture in universities. The design enabled the researchers to identify patterns of leadership behavior, institutional weaknesses, and their implications for quality assurance.

Population and Sample Size

The population of the study comprised academic and non-academic staff of selected public universities in Gombe State, Nigeria. Using a stratified random sampling technique, a total of 260 respondents were selected from different faculties, administrative units, and quality assurance offices. This ensured representation from all major leadership and operational levels.

Instrument for Data Collection

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire titled Leadership Failure and Accountability Assessment Questionnaire (LFAAQ), developed by the researchers. The instrument consisted of three sections:

Section A: Demographic information of respondents.

Section B: Items measuring dimensions of leadership failure (decision-making, supervision, transparency).

Section C: Items assessing the blame game culture and its effect on institutional performance.

All items were rated on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree (4) to Strongly Disagree (1).

Validity and Reliability

The instrument was validated by three experts in Educational Management and Measurement & Evaluation from the Federal University of Kashere. A pilot study conducted among 30 respondents yielded a Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficient of 0.84, indicating that the instrument was reliable for data collection.

Data Analysis

Data collected were analyzed using mean and standard deviation to answer research questions, while t-test analysis was used to test hypotheses at the 0.05 level of significance. The interpretation was based on a decision benchmark of 2.50 as the minimum acceptable mean score.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Question 1:

What are the common manifestations of leadership failure in Nigerian universities?

Table 1: Mean Ratings of Respondents on Manifestations of Leadership Failure

| Manifestations of Leadership Failure | Mean (\bar{x}) | SD | Decision |
|--|--------------------|------|---------------------|
| Political influence in administrative appointments | 3.32 | 0.69 | Major manifestation |
| Poor decision-making and weak supervision | 3.15 | 0.72 | Major manifestation |
| Mismanagement of funds and lack of transparency | 3.25 | 0.71 | Major manifestation |
| Neglect of staff welfare and communication gaps | 3.10 | 0.74 | Major manifestation |
| Absence of visionary leadership direction | 3.28 | 0.67 | Major manifestation |
| Grand Mean | 3.22 | 0.70 | Major manifestation |

Table 1 indicates that respondents strongly agreed that leadership failure in universities is primarily expressed through politicized appointments ($\bar{x} = 3.32$), poor decision-making ($\bar{x} = 3.15$), and lack of transparency in fund management ($\bar{x} = 3.25$). The overall grand mean of 3.22 suggests that leadership crises are widespread and deeply embedded within university governance structures.

These findings align with Obasi (2018) and Oladipo (2021), who reported that politically influenced appointments and administrative incompetence undermine university performance and quality assurance. Such leadership failures often result in poor motivation, low productivity, and policy inconsistencies.

Research Question 2:

How does the blame game phenomenon affect institutional effectiveness and quality assurance?

Table 2: Mean Ratings of Respondents on the Effects of the Blame Game Phenomenon

| Effects of the Blame Game Phenomenon | Mean (\bar{x}) | | SD | Decision |
|--|--------------------|------|--------------|--------------|
| Delayed policy implementation due to finger-pointing | 3.14 | | 0.73 | Major effect |
| Weak accountability in decision-making | 3.21 | 0.68 | Major effect | |
| Decline in teamwork and staff morale | 3.18 | 0.70 | Major effect | |
| Reduced effectiveness of QA mechanisms | 3.25 | 0.66 | Major effect | |
| Erosion of public trust in university leadership | 3.29 | 0.69 | Major effect | |
| Grand Mean | 3.21 | 0.69 | Major effect | |

Interpretation:

The results show that the “blame game” culture significantly affects institutional efficiency and academic standards. The highest-rated effects include loss of public trust ($\bar{x} = 3.29$) and reduced effectiveness of quality assurance mechanisms ($\bar{x} = 3.25$).

These findings support Clark (2016) and Ejiogu (2019), who explained that a culture of blame weakens institutional accountability, discourages collective responsibility, and sustains a cycle of underperformance. When university management and staff shift blame, reform efforts stall and quality assurance units lose their authority and credibility.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study reaffirm that leadership failure and the blame game phenomenon are interlinked and mutually reinforcing. Weak leadership creates confusion, inefficiency, and frustration among staff, while the culture of blame prevents constructive dialogue and reform.

This dynamic erodes the foundation of quality assurance, as leadership avoids self-evaluation and accountability. As observed in your thesis, leadership ineffectiveness and political interference were among the strongest predictors of poor quality management in universities. The current results validate that conclusion and expand it to show that the refusal to accept responsibility is a critical barrier to institutional progress.

The study underscores that institutional improvement requires transformational leadership—leaders who take ownership of both success and failure, and who encourage transparency rather than scapegoating.

These findings are consistent with Muthoni (2018) and Osei (2020), who stressed that accountability-driven leadership correlates strongly with effective quality assurance outcomes in African universities.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the dynamics of leadership failure and the blame game phenomenon in Nigerian universities, drawing evidence from selected universities in Gombe State. Findings revealed that leadership failure manifests through poor decision-making, political interference, weak supervision, and lack of transparency in resource management. Furthermore, the blame game culture—where university management, staff, and government agencies consistently shift responsibility for systemic problems—has deepened inefficiency and weakened institutional accountability.

The study concludes that the persistent leadership crisis in Nigerian universities is not merely a result of poor management practices but also of a deeply entrenched blame culture that undermines collaboration and innovation. Institutional effectiveness and quality assurance cannot thrive where leaders refuse to take ownership of institutional challenges. To restore public confidence and enhance university performance, transformational leadership that values integrity, accountability, and participatory governance is essential.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and conclusion, the following recommendations are made:

1. Promote Transformational Leadership Training:

The National Universities Commission (NUC) and governing councils should organize regular leadership development programs focusing on ethics, accountability, and participatory management for university administrators.

2. Depoliticize Leadership Appointments:

Appointments of vice-chancellors and senior administrators should be based strictly on merit, professional competence, and track record, not political affiliation or ethnic considerations.

3. Institutionalize Accountability Mechanisms:

Internal audit units and quality assurance offices should be empowered with autonomy to monitor administrative practices and ensure transparency in resource utilization.

4. Discourage the Blame Game Culture:

Universities should promote a culture of collective responsibility where leaders and staff jointly evaluate problems and propose solutions rather than shifting blame.

5. Strengthen Communication and Collaboration:

Open communication channels between management, staff unions, and students should be institutionalized to enhance trust, early problem-solving, and participatory decision-making.

6. Integrate Quality Assurance into Governance:

QA should not be treated as a separate department but as a guiding principle in all administrative and academic operations.

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Authors' contributions

All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Data availability

No datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

Declarations**Ethics approval and consent to participate**

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Competing interests

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