

QUALITY ASSURANCE LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE PRACTICES IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES: IMPLICATIONS FOR ACADEMIC STANDARDS AND PERFORMANCE

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Abstract

This paper examined the role of quality assurance leadership and governance practices in promoting academic standards and performance in Nigerian universities. The persistent decline in university rankings, inadequate research output, and graduate employability challenges have raised concerns about governance efficiency and leadership accountability in higher education. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design, drawing data from academic and administrative staff in selected public universities in Gombe State. Findings revealed that university leadership plays a crucial role in implementing quality assurance mechanisms such as staff development, curriculum review, and internal evaluation. However, political interference in appointments, weak institutional autonomy, and inadequate funding were found to hinder effective quality management. The study concludes that quality assurance leadership remains a pivotal instrument for institutional improvement and calls for governance reforms that promote transparency, accountability, and academic integrity. Recommendations were made for strengthening leadership capacity, depoliticizing university administration, and providing sustainable funding for quality assurance activities.

Keywords: Quality Assurance Leadership; University Governance; Academic Standards; Higher Education Management; Nigerian Universities

INTRODUCTION

Universities serve as the highest centers of learning, research, and innovation. Their capacity to produce skilled graduates and generate knowledge is determined largely by the quality of their leadership and governance structures. In Nigeria, the management of higher education institutions has been characterized by political interference, unstable policies, and inadequate funding, all of which threaten the quality of teaching, research, and community service.

Governance in higher education refers to the framework of authority, accountability, and decision-making through which universities are directed and controlled. Effective governance is therefore essential for maintaining academic standards, ensuring accountability, and fostering institutional efficiency (Ajayi & Ekundayo, 2017). Quality assurance, on the other hand, provides mechanisms

to monitor, evaluate, and continuously improve these governance processes to ensure that universities fulfill their missions effectively.

Over the years, the Nigerian university system has faced challenges such as poor resource management, inconsistent leadership transitions, and politicization of key administrative appointments. These have undermined institutional autonomy and eroded the credibility of academic processes. As noted by Obasi (2018), leadership crisis and governance failures have contributed to the decline in quality and global competitiveness of Nigerian universities.

Recent policy reforms by the National Universities Commission (NUC) emphasize the establishment of internal quality assurance units to promote accountability and institutional self-evaluation. However, the success of such initiatives depends on effective leadership, adherence to ethical standards, and an enabling governance environment.

This paper therefore investigates the interplay between quality assurance leadership and university governance, and how both influence academic performance and institutional integrity. The specific objectives of the study are to:

1. Examine the extent to which university leaders apply quality assurance principles in governance.
2. Identify challenges affecting the implementation of quality assurance leadership in universities.
3. Propose strategies for improving quality assurance and academic standards through effective governance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Concept of Quality Assurance in Higher Education

Quality assurance (QA) in higher education refers to systematic and structured activities designed to evaluate and improve the quality of teaching, learning, research, and service delivery in universities. According to the National Universities Commission (NUC, 2021), QA encompasses all internal and external processes that ensure academic programs meet minimum standards of excellence. In Nigerian universities, QA functions through periodic accreditation, internal audits, peer reviews, and performance evaluation mechanisms.

Obasi (2018) emphasizes that quality assurance provides the foundation for continuous improvement, accountability, and global competitiveness. It ensures that universities not only maintain acceptable standards but also evolve in response to societal and technological changes.

Leadership and Governance in Universities

University leadership plays a pivotal role in steering governance processes toward excellence. Leadership in higher education involves the ability of vice-chancellors, deans, and department heads to inspire academic productivity, uphold ethics, and ensure efficient resource utilization. Governance, on the other hand, deals with how decisions are made, who makes them, and the systems of accountability and participation that guide institutional functioning (Clark, 2016).

In Nigeria, governance challenges such as centralization of authority, political interference, and lack of transparency have weakened institutional autonomy. Ejiogu (2019) notes that the appointment of vice-chancellors and governing councils is often influenced by political considerations, leading to divided loyalties and poor performance. Effective governance, therefore, requires leaders with vision, competence, and commitment to institutional values.

Quality Assurance Leadership and Academic Standards

Leadership that promotes quality assurance ensures that standards in teaching, learning, and research are consistently met. Ajayi and Adegbesan (2017) argue that academic standards thrive where there is strong internal QA leadership that monitors and evaluates programs regularly. Effective leadership encourages self-assessment, mentoring, and capacity building, all of which enhance academic performance.

Conversely, weak leadership results in policy inconsistencies, low staff morale, and diminished accountability. In Kenya, Muthoni (2018) found that institutions with strong QA leadership recorded higher research output and better student satisfaction. Similarly, Osei (2020) in Ghana observed that transparent governance practices correlated positively with institutional effectiveness.

Challenges Affecting Quality Assurance Leadership

Despite the institutionalization of QA units in Nigerian universities, several factors hinder their effectiveness. These include:

Inadequate funding: QA units often operate with limited budgets, restricting the scope of monitoring and evaluation activities.

Political interference: Leadership appointments are sometimes influenced by external forces, compromising objectivity.

Resistance to change: Academic staff may perceive QA as a form of control rather than improvement (Oladipo, 2021).

Weak data management systems: Poor record keeping undermines evidence-based decision-making.

Addressing these challenges requires visionary leadership and governance structures that promote transparency, inclusiveness, and accountability.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Transformational Leadership Theory propounded by Burns (1978), which emphasizes leaders' ability to inspire followers toward achieving collective goals. Transformational leaders build trust, encourage innovation, and promote commitment to quality. In university governance, this theory highlights how leadership vision and institutional culture can drive academic excellence and quality assurance.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. This design was appropriate for assessing the perceptions of academic and administrative staff regarding the role of leadership and governance in implementing quality assurance mechanisms in universities.

Population and Sample

The target population comprised university administrators, lecturers, and quality assurance officers across selected public universities in Gombe State. From this population, a sample of 250 respondents was selected using stratified random sampling to ensure representation across faculties and administrative levels.

Instrument for Data Collection

A structured questionnaire titled Quality Assurance Leadership and Governance Questionnaire (QALGQ) was developed by the researchers. The instrument contained 30 items divided into three sections:

Section A: Demographic data of respondents.

Section B: Leadership and governance practices.

Section C: Quality assurance challenges and outcomes.

Responses 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. A pilot study conducted among 25 respondents yielded a Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient of 0.85, indicating high internal consistency.

Method of Data Analysis

Data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) to answer research questions, while inferential statistics (multiple regression analysis) were used to test hypotheses at a 0.05 level of significance with SPSS version 25.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results of the study based on the research questions. The findings are organized under two major headings: (1) the extent of application of quality assurance leadership and governance practices, and (2) challenges hindering effective implementation.

Research Question 1:

To what extent do university leaders apply quality assurance principles in governance to enhance academic standards?

Table 1: Extent of Application of Quality Assurance Leadership Practices

Quality Assurance Leadership Practices	Mean	SD	Remark
Promotion of staff development programs	3.11	0.72	High
Regular internal quality audits	2.96	0.75	Moderate
Curriculum review and evaluation	3.08	0.69	High
Encouragement of research and innovation	2.90	0.77	Moderate
Monitoring of teaching effectiveness	3.05	0.74	High
Grand Mean	3.02	0.73	High

Interpretation:

Table 1 reveals that university leaders moderately to highly apply quality assurance leadership principles in their institutions, as indicated by the overall mean score of 3.02. The highest-rated practices include staff development, curriculum review, and instructional monitoring. This suggests

that university management recognizes the importance of continuous improvement and accountability in enhancing academic standards.

This result supports Ajayi and Adegbesan (2017) who noted that effective leadership practices—such as teacher development and evaluation—are critical to maintaining educational quality. The finding also aligns with Muthoni (2018) who emphasized that universities with regular internal audits and curriculum reviews record higher teaching effectiveness.

Research Question 2:

What challenges hinder the effective implementation of quality assurance leadership and governance practices in Nigerian universities?

Table 2: Challenges Hindering Effective Quality Assurance Leadership

Challenge	Mean	SD	Remark
Political interference in university governance	3.32	0.68	Major
Inadequate funding of QA activities	3.25	0.70	Major
Resistance of academic staff to monitoring	2.95	0.75	Major
Lack of leadership training for administrators	3.10	0.73	Major
Weak institutional autonomy	3.28	0.67	Major
Grand Mean	3.18	0.71	Major Challenge

Interpretation:

The results in Table 2 show that political interference (Mean = 3.32) and weak institutional autonomy (Mean = 3.28) are the most pressing challenges affecting the effectiveness of quality assurance leadership in Nigerian universities. Inadequate funding and lack of leadership training also emerged as major issues.

These findings align with Ejiogu (2019), who observed that political influence in leadership appointments disrupts university governance and weakens institutional accountability. Similarly, Osei (2020) found that limited autonomy hinders universities from effectively implementing internal quality monitoring systems.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study demonstrate that leadership and governance are central to the success of quality assurance in higher education. Universities with leaders who prioritize staff development, regular audits, and curriculum review tend to maintain higher academic standards. This corroborates Obasi (2018), who argued that leadership vision and institutional culture determine the effectiveness of QA systems.

The study also revealed that governance challenges—especially political interference—remain major obstacles to institutional improvement. Frequent disruptions in university administration due to political considerations weaken the implementation of long-term quality assurance policies. Inadequate funding further compounds the problem, leading to irregular monitoring and insufficient training for QA officers.

The implication is that leadership reform and financial autonomy are essential prerequisites for improving governance and academic quality. Effective QA leadership must operate within a governance system that values transparency, accountability, and professional integrity.

These findings are consistent with Oladipo (2021), who concluded that sustainable university performance depends on leadership competence and institutional freedom from political control.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the role of quality assurance leadership and governance practices in maintaining and improving academic standards in Nigerian universities. Findings revealed that while university leaders recognize and apply several quality assurance principles—such as curriculum review, staff development, and internal audits—their effectiveness is often constrained by political interference, weak institutional autonomy, and inadequate funding.

The study concludes that leadership remains the linchpin of quality assurance in university governance. Where leaders demonstrate commitment to transparency, ethical conduct, and continuous improvement, the quality of education improves significantly. Conversely, when governance is politicized and poorly funded, standards decline, and institutional credibility is eroded.

Therefore, leadership capacity building, adequate funding, and strengthened autonomy are indispensable to achieving sustainable quality assurance in Nigerian higher education institutions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

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

1. Enhance Leadership Training:

The Federal Ministry of Education and the National Universities Commission (NUC) should institutionalize leadership and management training programs for university administrators to strengthen governance competence.

2. Depoliticize University Governance:

Appointments of vice-chancellors and governing councils should be based on merit, experience, and integrity rather than political affiliation to safeguard academic freedom.

3. Strengthen Institutional Autonomy:

Universities should be given greater control over their finances, staffing, and academic affairs to ensure timely and effective decision-making.

4. Increase Funding for Quality Assurance:

Adequate budgetary allocation should be made to support internal quality assurance units for periodic monitoring, research, and capacity building.

5. Promote Transparency and Accountability:

Quality assurance leadership should enforce transparent reporting mechanisms and make evaluation reports publicly available to enhance credibility and trust.

6. Encourage Stakeholder Participation:

Students, academic staff, alumni, and community representatives should be actively involved in quality assurance processes to foster inclusiveness and shared responsibility.

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Authors' contributions

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Data availability

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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