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Leadership Selection Process and Governance of Federal Universities in Nigeria

1993 – 2024

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SECTION 1

● Background and Problem Statement



The ideal

Universities are the “ivory towers” for research, teaching and the training of leaders. At independence in 1960, Nigeria had one of Africa’s most developed university systems.



The decline

The system has not met national aspirations — inadequate funding, brain drain, incessant strikes, corruption, political interference and contested institutional autonomy.



The distortion

Departure from merit-based, federal-character appointments bred deepening localization, nepotism, violence and manipulation of universities’ extant laws.

191st

globally / 23rd in Africa in educational advancement

1979

year the federal-character principle was enshrined in the constitution

THE PROBLEM

There is little empirical evidence on how the selection method affects actual governance outcomes: “How does the leadership selection process influence governance effectiveness in federal universities?”

SECTION 2

● Research Questions and Objectives



Research Questions

- 1 Current leadership selection processes and how they impact university governance.
- 2 The nexus between selection processes and academic excellence, research productivity, innovation and prudent financial management.
- 3 How political interference, nepotism and corruption shape selection — and the consequences for governance.
- 4 How leadership selection and governance systems can be improved.



Objectives

- 1 Examine current selection processes and their impact on governance.
- 2 Investigate the relationship between selection and academic excellence, research productivity and innovation.
- 3 Determine the influence of political interference, nepotism and corruption.
- 4 Develop a framework for improving selection and university governance.

HYPOTHESES

H1 Transparent, inclusive selection correlates positively with effective governance. H2 Interference, nepotism & exclusion yield poor governance and decline. H0 Selection process has no significant impact on governance.

SECTION 3

● Literature and Conceptual Framework



Principal-Agent Theory

Jensen & Meckling, 1976

Accountability, information asymmetry and moral hazard between councils, administrators and staff.



Institutional Theory

Meyer, Rowan & Selznick, 1970s–80s

Universities seek legitimacy by conforming to norms while balancing autonomy and accountability.



Stewardship Theory

Davis & Adams, 1990s

Leaders act as stewards, prioritising the institution’s long-term interests over personal gain.



Stakeholder Theory

Freeman, 1984

Governance must serve students, staff, government, alumni and community — the adopted lens.

ADOPTED

KEY GAPS ADDRESSED IN THE LITERATURE

Geographical

Methodological

Technology

Diversity

Frameworks

External factors

SECTION 4

● Methodology

Research philosophy: pragmatism, emphasising practical application and research context (Creswell, 2014).

Design: a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative techniques.



Surveys

300 faculty, students & administrators across federal universities.



Case studies

12 universities spanning 4 generations of institutions.



Interviews

10 in-depth semi-structured interviews with vice-chancellors.



Focus group

8 accomplished administrators / VCs, past and present.



Empirical review

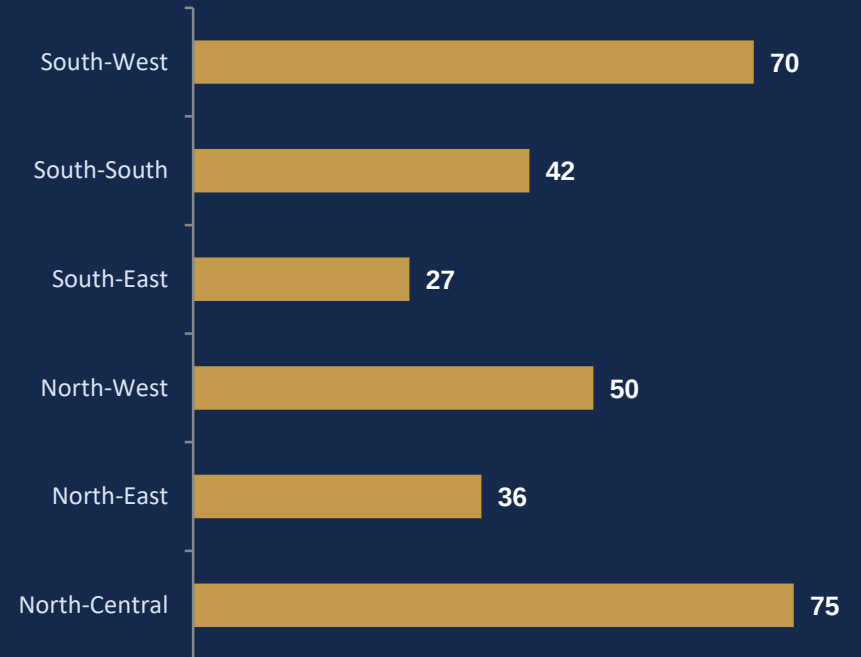
Cross-country review across Africa, Asia, Europe & the Americas.



Data analysis

SPSS, NVivo, ANOVA, t-test & Pearson correlation.

Survey participants by geo-political zone



Total: 300 respondents

● Discussion of Major Findings

Nigerian federal universities employ varied leadership selection processes — each shaping governance differently:



Governing Council appointments

The Governing Council declares the vacancy and makes the appointment, weighing institutional needs alongside wider considerations.



Search committees

A Council–Senate committee drawn from faculty, alumni and external stakeholders assesses each candidate’s qualifications and governance vision.



Stakeholder consultations

Incorporating input from faculty and students builds transparency and inclusivity, strengthening the legitimacy of the appointment.

THE STATUTORY ROUTE

A Council–Senate Joint Search Committee screens applicants against set criteria — qualifications, teaching and research record, managerial experience, character and community service — then recommends three names in order of merit. The Governing Council appoints the Vice-Chancellor and notifies the Visitor through the Honourable Minister of Education.

● Discussion of Major Findings

Where selection is structured and transparent, three governance outcomes recur:



Stability & continuity

Merit-based selection aligned to the university's strategic goals produces stable, continuous governance.



Stakeholder trust

When stakeholders feel genuinely involved, governance is perceived as more legitimate and responsive.



Accountability

Leaders appointed through transparent means are more readily held accountable for their actions.

EFFECTIVE SELECTION CORRELATES POSITIVELY WITH

Academic excellence

Prioritising academic credentials raises standards and a commitment to improvement.

Research productivity

Leaders who fund and back research are linked to higher research output.

Innovation

Inclusive selection yields leaders who encourage new ideas among staff and students.

Financial management

Leaders with financial expertise ensure efficient use of university resources.

● Influences of Negative Factors



Political interference

Appointments often align with political affiliations rather than institutional requirements.



Ethnic & religious bias

Tribalism and favouritism undermine meritocracy; the federal-character principle is ignored.



Corruption

Bribery influences outcomes; contractors sponsor candidates in return for patronage.



Election involvement

Politicians sponsor VC candidates in anticipation of favours during elections (INEC roles).



Role of staff unions

Increasingly involved — sometimes a guardrail, sometimes a source of conflict and crisis.



Lack of inclusiveness

Odds stacked against external and, until recently, female candidates.

Undue external influences significantly undermine selection processes across Nigerian federal universities, producing real governance challenges.

● Consequences for University Governance

01



Decline in quality

Political interference and corruption lead to the appointment of sub-par leaders, poor governance and falling academic standards.

02



Erosion of trust

Stakeholder trust diminishes when appointments are seen as driven by personal agendas rather than the institution's interests.

03



Impediment to progress

Ineffective leadership impedes the ability to innovate, secure funding and achieve academic and administrative goals.

Undue external influences significantly undermine selection processes — eroding institutional integrity and the meritocratic basis of university governance.

SECTION 5

● Implications of Stakeholder Engagement

Engaging stakeholders in university governance yields six reinforcing benefits:



Enhanced accountability and transparency



Integration of diverse perspectives



Alignment with institutional goals



Empowerment of stakeholders



Mitigating conflicts and resistance



Accountability in leadership selection

SECTION 6

● Limitations of the Study



Scope of the research sample

300 respondents and 20 of 80 federal universities (25%) may not capture full complexity — mitigated by interviews, focus groups, case studies and triangulation.



Subjectivity of qualitative data

Interview and focus-group data may carry biases shaped by individual perceptions and institutional cultures.



Limited generalizability

Findings may not transfer to other education systems with different governance structures, cultures and frameworks.



Perceptions rather than outcomes

Emphasis on perceptions may understate hard measures such as academic performance and financial health, limiting causal claims.

SECTION 7

● Contribution to Knowledge



Theoretical

- **Governance theories** — extends participatory governance; effective governance depends on how leaders are chosen.
- **Stakeholder theory** — diverse stakeholder input enhances transparency and legitimacy.
- **Ethical leadership** — ethical, transparent leaders strengthen institutional integrity and trust.



Practical

- **Policy formulation** — clear, evidence-based selection policies.
- **Leadership development** — training in ethical governance and best practice.
- **Governance structures** — stronger frameworks for selection and accountability.
- **Culture of inclusivity** — forums and collaborative decision-making.
- **Combating corruption** — oversight bodies and whistleblower protection.
- **Research & engagement** — partnerships for knowledge exchange.

SECTION 8

● Suggestions for Further Studies

1

Longitudinal studies

Track governance and leadership change within an institution over a longer timeframe.

2

Comparative studies

Compare governance and selection models across countries for transferable lessons.

3

Stakeholder dynamics

Examine power, alliances and conflict among stakeholders during selection.

4

Political & social change

Assess how shifting policy and public opinion reshape governance dynamics.

5

Leadership development

Evaluate how well development programmes prepare future leaders.

6

Underrepresented groups

Engage non-academic staff, communities and alumni outside leadership.

SECTION 9

● Recommendations

1

Clear selection guidelines

Standardised, publicly accessible procedures, criteria and stakeholder-involvement mechanisms.

2

Promote stakeholder engagement

Inclusive search committees and regular surveys and forums on desired leadership qualities.

3

Transparent processes

Public vacancies, documented rationale, and technology — portals, e-voting and blockchain records.

4

Strengthen accountability

Independent audits of appointments and grievance / feedback mechanisms for stakeholders.

5

Leadership training & development

Capacity-building in ethical leadership plus mentorship for emerging leaders.

6

Combat interference & corruption

Legislative reform to protect autonomy and robust whistleblower protections.

7

Culture of integrity & ethics

A clear ethical-standards framework reinforced by recognition of exemplary leaders.

CONCLUSION



Implemented together, these recommendations can significantly strengthen leadership selection in Nigeria's federal universities — improving governance, academic integrity and educational outcomes.

They build a sustainable framework for leadership excellence — empowering universities to fulfil their foundational mission of quality education and positive contribution to society.