

ETHICAL LEADERSHIP AND INTEGRITY AS TOOLS FOR PROMOTING EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Ethical leadership and integrity are critical tools for promoting the effective management of higher education system in Nigeria. The effectiveness of higher education system in Nigeria is inextricably linked to the quality of leadership and the prevailing ethical climate. Achievement of higher educational goals and objectives in turn, is a function of effective management of higher education system. Hence, this study examines the role of ethical leadership in addressing the systemic challenges faced by Nigerian higher education institutions. Some of these challenges include corruption, low productivity, inadequate funding, and declining academic standards. The paper argues that leaders who exemplify ethical behaviour and integrity inspire trust, foster a positive organisational culture, and facilitate improved academic outcomes. It highlights how leaders with strong moral principles, integrity and a commitment to excellence, transparency, accountability, and fairness can inspire confidence, enhance positive institutional governance, and drive sustainable development in the education sector. The study also explores the interplay among integrity, ethical leadership and higher education management in creating a culture of excellence, promoting stakeholder confidence, and ensuring equitable access to resources and quality education. The paper concludes by proposing strategies for cultivating ethical leadership and promoting a culture of integrity in higher education institutions across the country.

Keywords: Integrity, Ethical Leadership, Effective Management, Higher Education

Introduction

In Nigeria, higher education is planned among others to contribute to national development through the production of high-level manpower training that is relevant to the needs of the labour market. Hence, higher education plays a crucial role in driving the economy by producing skilled manpower, enhancing innovation and reducing skill shortages. However, higher education system in Nigeria is faced with series of challenges which includes poor leadership, low integrity, corruption, poor infrastructure, inadequate funding and poor management.

Effective management of higher education enables the institutions to achieve their objectives, ensure accountability and build trust with stakeholders. According to Geidam et al. (n.d) the responsibility for achieving the objectives of quality education rests with academic administrators who serve as leaders. These leaders must serve with integrity; a quality that helps them takes administrative actions to fulfill evolving everyday climate. Leadership ethical considerations and integrity play a vital role in maintaining public trust and confidence in higher education institutions. When leaders act with integrity and ethical values, they set an example for their subordinates and inspire a culture of trust, accountability, and fairness (Brique & Orlu, 2023). Writing further, the authors maintained that ethical leaders prioritize the needs of students, faculty, staff, and the community, ensuring that decisions are made in the best interest of all stakeholders in the university system. Effective management is critical to the success of higher education system and consequently is a function of ethical leadership and integrity. According to Brigue and Orlu (2023) ethics and integrity are critical aspects of effective leadership. Furthermore, the authors viewed ethics as the moral principles and values that guide leaders in making decisions and conducting themselves while integrity involves consistency between a leader's actions and their ethical principles. Integrity can equally be described as the quality of being honest, transparent and

accountable. According to Mukoro and Ojeje (2024) integrity addresses issues of honesty, trust, morals, personal value, fairness, compassion, character, courage, authenticity and consistency of words and actions.

No society can achieve high levels of sustainable development without good moral standard, behaviour and ways of thinking. Ethics is concerned with the study of morals that deal with the distinction between right and wrong based on the tradition and culture of a people, religion, profession and so on (Unobunjo, 2022). Ethical leaders are therefore guided by a strong and mutual sense of morality and principles, which propel them to take decisions that are in the best interest of the institution and concerned stakeholders. Leaders with integrity on the other hand are able to build trust with their stakeholders, which is essential for effective administrative management.

To make education serve its purpose, according to FRN (2014) of fast-tracking development at individual, community and national level, ethical leadership and integrity must be enshrined and integrated into higher education management in Nigeria. Despite the importance of ethical leadership and integrity in the management of higher education, there seems to be little research work on the topic in the Nigeria context. This paper therefore, examines the importance of ethical leadership and integrity in higher education management as well as their roles in addressing the challenges of higher education system in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on transformational leadership theory which focuses on how leaders can motivate, mobilise and inspire their followers to work towards a shared vision or goal and how its achievement can lead to positive change. The theory, according to Ugochukwu (2024) was propounded by James V. Downton in 1973 and was later furthered by James Burns in 1978 and Bernard Bass in 1990. Transformation leaders are those who stimulate and inspire followers to both achieve extraordinary outcomes and, in the process, develop their own leadership capacity (Bass and Riggio (2006), cited in Ugochukwu, 2024).

Transformational leadership therefore, is a leadership style where leaders inspire, motivate and stimulate their followers intellectually to work towards a shared and valued goal. These leaders encourage innovation, creativity and personal development among their team members, fostering an environment of trust, respect and admiration. They aim to transform their followers, individual and collective consciousness to achieve organizational success

Transformational leadership can also be viewed as a leadership model that relies on a team's encouragement to realize overall success. By raising a team's morale and self-confidence, the team can then align itself to an overall vision or common purpose (Ugochukwu, 2024).

Importance of Ethical Leadership and Integrity in Higher Education Management

Ethical leadership and integrity are fundamental in higher education management as they directly influence institutional reputation, academic excellence, and stakeholders' trust. They also ensure that higher education institutions are managed effectively, fairly, and responsibly. These values play a critical role in creating an environment conducive to teaching-learning process, promoting social responsibility, and ensuring the long-term sustainability of educational institutions and systems. Ethical leadership and integrity are not just about making the right decisions, but also about cultivating a culture of fairness, transparency, and accountability (which may no longer be very common today) in every facet of the institution's operation.

Below are some of the key reasons why ethical leadership and integrity are vital in higher education management:

1. Promotes trust, transparency and credibility

Building Trust with Stakeholders: Ethical leadership helps build trust with students, faculty, staff, and the community. When leaders act with integrity and uphold ethical standards, they demonstrate a commitment to fairness, openness, and accountability making stakeholders to believe in the institution's decisions and policies. This enhances a trusting relationship, which is essential for collaborative efforts and overall institutional success.

Transparent Decision-Making is also enhanced along the line. Ethical leaders make decisions based on clear principles and transparent processes. This transparency helps prevent corruption, favoritism, or the mismanagement of resources, ensuring that all stakeholders understand how and why decisions are made.

2. Enhances academic excellence and integrity:

Ethical leaders in higher education are particularly crucial in upholding academic integrity and excellence. By establishing policies and practices that discourage cheating, plagiarism, research misconduct, biased decision-making and other forms of academic dishonesty, they ensure that the integrity of academic processes is maintained. This equally helps the institutions to maintain high standards in education and research. Hence, ethical leadership preserves the credibility of degrees and the overall reputation of the institution.

3. Ensures fairness, equity and accountability

Integrity in leadership ensures that policies and practices are applied fairly, preventing favoritism, discrimination, and corruption. Ethical leadership should evolve policies that promote equal opportunities for students and staff regardless of their background, gender, race, or social status. Leaders should be advocates for policies that support diversity and inclusivity, ensuring that the institution remains a welcoming environment for all individuals. Ethical leaders should therefore hold themselves and others accountable for their actions.

4. Promotes a positive organizational culture

Ethical leadership set the tone for ethical behaviour for the entire institution. Leaders who consistently exhibit honesty, fairness, and respect for others lay a powerful example encouraging faculty, staff, and students to adopt similar values. This creates a positive organizational culture where ethical behavior is not only encouraged but expected.

5. Protects the rights and well-being of students and staff

By prioritizing welfare, ethical leaders place a high value on the well-being of both students and staff. They create policies and practices that prioritize mental health, work-life balance, and a safe environment for learning and work. They also ensure a safe and inclusive environment where students and faculty can voice concerns without fear of retaliation. By respecting the rights and needs of individuals, ethical leadership promotes a thriving academic community. This is crucial for fostering academic freedom and intellectual growth.

6. Supports sustainable decision-making

Leaders who act ethically and are integrity-driven make decisions that benefit the institution in the long run rather than focusing on short-term personal or political gains. This ensures that the institution can

continue to thrive for future generations, enhancing financial sustainability, effective resource allocation, and long-term success.

7. Promotes adaptability and ethical innovation

Ethical leaders are also more likely to embrace innovations in ways that align with the institution's core values. This includes adopting new educational technologies, promoting digital teaching and learning or creating sustainable programs that will benefit the academic community in the long run. They ensure that such changes do not compromise the institution's ethical standards or the quality of education.

8. Improves stakeholder relationships and encourage students' success

Higher institutions rely more on government bodies, donors, accreditation agencies, and the public for positive outcomes. Ethical management strengthens these relationships by demonstrating transparency, adherence to regulations and ethical standards.

Similarly ethical leadership ensures that the institution's priorities are aligned with the needs of students by focusing on student-centered practices. This includes offering accessible support services, ensuring the quality of education, and creating an environment where students can thrive academically and socially.

(Adapted from Brown, et al., 2005; Astin & Astin, 2000; Paine, 1994; Treviño et al., 1999; Bennis & Nanus, 1985).

Ethical Leadership, Integrity, and Effective Management of Higher Education System in Nigeria: The Nexus

The interconnection of ethical leadership, integrity, and effective management is crucial for transforming the education sector and ensuring sustainable development and progress. Ethical leadership and integrity have the potential to drive effective management of higher education system.

Ethical leadership and integrity cannot be separated from effective management of higher education system in Nigeria. The twin concepts of ethical leadership and integrity are not only critical to, but also serves as the cornerstone of university administration in the country. Ethical leadership promotes integrity in the sense that leaders who uphold ethical values inspire a culture of integrity among staff and students. According to Idogbe (2012) cited by Unobunjo (2022) ethics of the administrative performance is among the basic foundations for running responsibilities efficiently and effectively, and an important issue for an administrator to carry out his/her duties. Furthermore, Unobunjo (2022) believed that there are three major components of academic ethics: these are commitment, criticism and responsibility. The author argued that these components are critical preconditions for the production and reproduction of knowledge and are equally crucial for the passionate, methodical and painstaking pursuit of truth. Essentially, ethical leadership is characterized by fairness, transparency, accountability, and a commitment to justice. In Nigerian higher education, ethical leadership involves:

Decision-making Based on Principles: University management and administrators must uphold policies that enhance fairness, academic excellence, and meritocracy.

Accountability and Transparency: Ethical leaders must ensure there is openness in resource allocation and utilization, admission processes, and employment.

Commitment to Staff and Students' Welfare: Leaders must prioritize the needs of staff and students, ensuring that quality education, fair assessment, and conducive teaching and learning environment is put in place.

Role Modeling: University heads and administrators should set a good example for staff and students in ethical behaviour hence, serving as effective role models.

Integrity on the other hand, is a fundamental aspect of effective leadership which entails being honest, transparent and consistent in words and actions (Brigue & Orlu, 2023). In addition, integrity involves adherence to moral and ethical principles. Brown et al (2005) found that perceived leadership integrity positively influenced faculty members' perceptions of ethical climate and their job satisfaction within the university. The impact of leadership integrity therefore, extends beyond individual leaders to the overall organizational culture and outcomes. Universities with leaders of high integrity are more likely to have positive ethical climate, increased organizational commitment, and improved performance (Brigue & Orlu, 2023). In essence, integrity is the hallmark of administrative excellence and managerial effectiveness. In Nigeria's higher education system, integrity is vital in:

Admissions and Examinations: Eliminating nepotism, bribery, corruption and malpractice in students' admissions and assessments.

Academic Research: Upholding ethical research standards and practice to prevent plagiarism and falsification of results.

Financial Management: Eliminating reckless spending by ensuring that funds allocated to universities are used for the intended purposes.

Staff and Faculty Conduct: Encouraging ethical behaviour among lecturers, administrators, students and other staff members.

For Nigeria's higher education system to thrive, effective management practices must be adopted. This includes:

- i. **Strategic Planning:** Universities and other higher institutions in the country must set clear goals aligned with national development objectives.
- ii. **Resource Optimization:** Proper utilization of financial, human, infrastructural and instructional resources must be ensured.
- iii. **Quality Assurance:** Strengthening accreditation and monitoring bodies to maintain high academic standards and practice.
- iv. **Technology Adoption:** Leveraging digital and modern technological tools for efficient administration, learning, and research.

The connection among ethical leadership, integrity, and effective management is strong. Attainment of organizational goals and objectives is a function of integrity, ethical leadership and effective management. Ethical leadership promotes integrity: Leaders who uphold ethical values inspire a culture of integrity among staff and students. Integrity enhances trust and credibility: A system built on integrity earns public confidence, attracting more funding and partnerships. Effective management is rooted in ethics and integrity: When leaders manage resources transparently and fairly, universities function more efficiently. According to Gerdam et al. (n.d), the philosophies, values and beliefs of ethics and morality characterize the basis of organisational behaviour and thus formulate the footprint on which the leaders influence staff members in attaining the organisation's goals.

Overview of Challenges in Nigeria's Higher Education System

The higher education system in Nigeria faces numerous challenges that impact its quality, accessibility, and effectiveness. Some of these challenges are briefly discussed below.

- i. **Inadequate Funding:** Many public universities and colleges in Nigeria face chronic underfunding, leading to poor infrastructure, inadequate facilities, poor management and limited resources for teaching and research.
- ii. **Brain Drain:** Qualified lecturers and researchers often leave Nigeria in search of better opportunities and greener pastures abroad due to poor working conditions, low salaries, and lack of recognition.
- iii. **Overcrowded Classrooms:** High demand for tertiary education has resulted in overcrowded lecture halls, overburdened faculty, and strained facilities making teaching-learning process less effective and attractive.
- iv. **Poor Infrastructure:** Many institutions lack modern classrooms, libraries, laboratories, instructional materials and ICT resources needed to provide quality education.
- v. **Corruption:** Issues such as admission racketeering, misappropriation of fund, embezzlement of funds, and examination malpractices undermine the integrity of the higher education system.
- vi. **Strikes and Disruptions of Academic Programmes:** Frequent strike and industrial actions by academic and non-academic staff due to unmet demands disrupt academic calendars thus, prolonging students' time in school.
- vii. **Curriculum Irrelevance:** In today's digital world, many higher institutions' programs are outdated, irrelevant and not aligned with the demands of the labour market, leading to high graduate unemployment and other vices associated with unemployment.
- viii. **Limited Access and Inequality:** Many qualified students cannot gain admission due to limited spaces, and there is inequality in access for disadvantaged groups and rural communities. Adoption of quota system policy by the government has equally put some candidates at great disadvantage.
- ix. **Lack of Research and Innovation:** Research outputs in Nigerian universities are low due to lack of funding, mentorship, and collaboration with industries and other stakeholders. The few research outputs did not attract the necessary and needed government support.

(Adapted from Ekundayo & Ajayi, 2009; Transparency International, 2013; Adeniran, 2011; Adeniran, 2020).

Role of Ethical Leadership and Integrity in Addressing These Challenges

- i. **Promoting transparency and accountability:** Ethical leaders can address corruption by ensuring transparent management of funds, fair admission processes, and accountability in all administrative activities.
- ii. **Advocating for adequate funding:** Leaders with integrity can effectively lobby the government and private sectors to source and increase funding for higher education and ensure proper allocation of resources.
- iii. **Creating conducive teaching-learning environment:** Ethical leadership involves prioritizing the development of infrastructure, procurement of modern facilities, and fostering a culture of excellence in institutions.
- iv. **Improving staff welfare:** By addressing issues like fair salaries, professional development opportunities, and recognition of staff contributions, ethical leaders can reduce brain drain and strikes.
- v. **Curriculum reform:** Ethical leaders can champion reforms to align academic programs with the needs of the modern economy, equipping students with relevant skills.
- vi. **Combating examination malpractices:** Ethical leadership fosters a culture of academic integrity and excellence by implementing strict anti-corruption measures in the examination and grading systems.

- vii. Fostering inclusive policies: Ethical leaders promote equitable access to education by developing policies that cater to marginalized groups and ensure no one is left behind.
- viii. Encouraging research and partnerships: Leaders with a vision can foster partnerships with industries, international institutions, and funding bodies to promote research and innovation.
- ix. Building trust and stakeholder engagement: Ethical leaders engage with stakeholders (students, staff, government, and alumni) to address issues collaboratively and build trust within the system.
 - a. (Adapted from Ibijola, 2014; Transparency International, 2013; Adegbite, 2007).

Strategies for Promoting Ethical Leadership and Integrity in Higher Education Management

Promoting ethical leadership and integrity is essential for fostering a positive organizational culture, improving decision-making, and ensuring long-term success. Below are some key strategies:

- i. Establish clear ethical standards and a comprehensive code of ethics: It is imperative to establish a clear and comprehensive code of ethics that outlines expected behaviours and decision-making guidelines for all members of the institution, including administrators, faculty, and students. In addition, this code and ethical policies should be regularly communicated through training and workshops. The code and policies could also be integrated into the institution's policies and procedures (Brown & Treviño, 2006).
- ii. Foster critical thinking and moral leadership: Incorporate critical thinking and moral leadership training into the curriculum and professional development programs to equip stakeholders with the skills necessary for ethical decision-making. Leaders must equally demonstrate ethical behaviour in their actions and decisions. This is because ethical leadership influences followers' behaviour through social learning. Furthermore, workshops and seminars that focus on ethical reasoning and leadership skills for both staff and students could be organized (Bandura, 1986; Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005).
- iii. Encourage open communication and transparency: Create safe channels and develop mechanisms that encourage open dialogue about ethical concerns, allowing stakeholders to report unethical behaviour and misconduct without fear of retaliation. Similarly, a culture where employees feel comfortable discussing ethical concerns should be fostered. Whistleblower policies could also be implemented and it must be ensured that reporting channels are confidential and accessible (Mayer et al., 2012; Kaptein, 2011).
- iv. Establish ethics committees and appoint ethics officers: Create dedicated ethics committees and appoint ethics officers responsible for overseeing ethical policies and standards, addressing ethical dilemmas, and ensuring compliance with the institution's code of ethics. Ethics committees also provide oversight function and guidance on ethical dilemmas. It is essential that these bodies have clear mandates and the authority to enforce ethical guidelines across all levels of the institution (Trevino et al., 1999; Kaptein, 2011).
- v. Establish accountability and evaluation mechanisms: Establish systems for the regular assessment of ethical practices within the institution to identify areas for improvement and ensure compliance with ethical standards. Hence, ethics audits and regular assessments help identify gaps in ethical compliance. Periodic ethics audits should be conducted and feedback mechanisms should be utilised to monitor the effectiveness of ethical policies and initiatives. Reward and punishment systems to reinforce ethical behaviour could also be implemented (Paine, 1994; Treviño et al., 1999).
- vi. Implement ethical training and development: Regular training programs help employees understand ethical dilemmas and decision-making frameworks. Case studies and real-world scenarios could also be used to reinforce ethical reasoning. Essentially, ethics could be integrated into leadership training programs by incorporating ethical leadership modules into existing leadership training to ensure

that current and future leaders understand the importance of ethics in governance. Workshops and courses that focus on ethical decision-making, integrity, and accountability should be offered (Weaver, Treviño, & Cochran, 1999; Rest, 1986).

- vii. Foster a culture of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and inclusive governance: Ethical leadership should be aligned with corporate social responsibility initiatives. Community engagement and sustainability practices should also be encouraged. In addition, governance models that prioritize collaboration, innovation, and adaptability, ensuring that diverse perspectives are considered in decision-making processes could be adopted. This can be implemented by engaging various stakeholders, including faculty, students, and external partners, in governance to promote transparency and shared responsibility (Carroll & Shabana, 2010; Porter & Kramer, 2011).

Conclusion

Ethical leadership and integrity are cornerstones of effective higher education management. They help in building a reputable, fair, and academically sound institution by fostering a positive academic environment where students and staff can engage in meaningful teaching/learning process. By prioritizing ethical decision-making, institutions can cultivate a culture of accountability and excellence. Leaders who demonstrate these values build trust, create transparent processes, and ensure that the institution remains aligned with its core values. In turn, this practice help cultivates an environment of fairness, openness, and inclusivity, which are essential to the success of any higher education institution. Ethical leadership not only impacts the immediate academic community but also plays a vital role in shaping the institution's long-term impact on society and the world at large.

Recommendations

Based on the above, the following recommendations are made:

- Higher education institutions should at all times imbibe the spirit of excellence and exemplify a culture of integrity and ethical leadership.
- Higher institution administrators should sanction staff guilty of dereliction of duty and all forms of professional misconduct in line with stipulated rules and regulations.
- The administrators should also uphold the principles of fairness, transparency, accountability and due process and protects the rights of all individuals.
- The government should provide conducive environment for effective teaching/learning process and administration of educational programs.
- Higher institution administrators should prioritize the welfare and well-being of staff and students in all decisions and actions

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