

LEADERSHIP ROLES AND THE GROWTH OF UNIVERSITY EDUCATION IN NIGERIA: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The study examines the impact of democratic governance on leadership challenges in Nigerian university education from 1999 to 2024. It explores key issues such as funding deficits, political interference, corruption, and conflicts between university administrators and academic unions. The research employs a qualitative historical approach, utilizing secondary sources such as books, journal articles, government reports, and policy documents. The findings reveal that despite democratic governance offering greater institutional autonomy and opportunities for reform, Nigerian universities continue to face severe governance crises. Inadequate funding, politicization of university leadership, mismanagement of resources, and frequent ASUU strikes have significantly disrupted the academic calendar and lowered education standards. However, initiatives such as TETFund and public-private partnerships have contributed positively to university development. The study concludes that without comprehensive leadership reforms, improved funding, and transparent governance, the Nigerian university system will remain unstable. Recommendations include merit-based leadership appointments, increased education funding, and better conflict resolution strategies to enhance university governance and academic excellence.

Keywords: University Leadership, Democratic Governance, Higher Education in Nigeria, Academic Union Conflicts, Education Funding Policies

Introduction

University education in Nigeria has undergone significant transformations since the establishment of the first university in the country. Leadership has played a crucial role in shaping the direction of higher education, from the colonial period through post-independence expansion, military rule, and democratic governance. Each phase in Nigeria's history has introduced new policies, opportunities, and challenges that have defined the trajectory of university education. Leadership decisions, both by political leaders and university administrators, have determined the quality, accessibility, and funding of tertiary education in Nigeria.

The foundation of university education in Nigeria was laid during the colonial era with the establishment of University College Ibadan (UCI) in 1948, which later became the University of Ibadan. The institution was initially an affiliate of the University of London, reflecting British colonial interests in producing a limited number of educated elites for administrative roles. This colonial model of higher education was restrictive and did not adequately address Nigeria's growing need for an expanded and diversified university system.¹ The demand for more universities grew as Nigeria approached independence, driven by nationalist movements and increasing calls for self-governance.

Following independence in 1960, Nigerian leaders prioritized the expansion of university education. The establishment of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN) in 1960 under the leadership of Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe marked a shift toward an autonomous Nigerian higher education system. Other universities, such as Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) in 1962, the University of Lagos (UNILAG) in 1962, and Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU) in 1962, followed, reflecting the regional aspirations of Nigeria's major ethnic groups. This period also saw significant government investment in higher education to promote national development. As Obafemi Awolowo once stated, "The children of the poor you fail to train will never let your children have peace." This assertion underscores the crucial role of leadership in ensuring access to quality education.²

However, the expansion of university education in Nigeria has not been without challenges. The military regimes of the late 20th century imposed centralized control over universities, reducing academic freedom and stifling intellectual growth. Despite efforts at reform, issues such as poor funding, political interference, and policy inconsistencies have continued to hinder the growth of Nigeria's universities. The Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) of the 1980s, introduced under General Ibrahim Babangida's administration, significantly affected university funding, leading to strikes and a decline in educational standards.³ Understanding the historical interplay between leadership and university education in Nigeria is crucial in addressing present challenges. This paper examines the evolution of higher education leadership in Nigeria, from the colonial era to the present, highlighting the successes, setbacks, and prospects of university education in the country.

The colonial foundations of university education in Nigeria

The establishment of university education in Nigeria was largely a product of British colonial rule, designed primarily to serve the administrative and economic interests of the colonial government. Before the formal introduction of university education, the British administration focused on primary and secondary education to produce clerks, interpreters, and low-level administrators for the colonial bureaucracy. However, by the early 20th century, the demand for higher education began to grow due to increasing nationalist movements and the need for indigenous professionals. The British government initially resisted calls for the establishment of a university in Nigeria, arguing that Nigerians could receive higher education in Britain. Instead, many early Nigerian elites such as Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo, and Ahmadu Bello traveled abroad for their university education, which later influenced their push for indigenous university institutions.⁴ The British reluctance to establish universities in Nigeria reflected their broader policy of indirect rule, which sought to limit the educational advancement of the colonized population.

The first significant step toward university education in Nigeria came with the Elliot Commission of 1943, set up by the British government to examine higher education in West Africa. The commission recommended the establishment of university colleges in Ghana, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone, which would be affiliated with British universities to ensure academic standards. As a result, in 1948, the University College Ibadan (UCI) was founded as an affiliate of the University of London. The college was structured in line with British academic traditions, emphasizing liberal arts, medicine, and the sciences.⁵ However, it was highly elitist, admitting only a small number of students, and it was largely inaccessible to the majority of Nigerians. The curriculum and teaching methods were also heavily Eurocentric, reinforcing British cultural dominance. According to Walter Rodney "The education system was designed to produce a class of Africans who would serve as intermediaries between the British rulers and the local population, rather than to foster true intellectual and economic independence."⁶

Despite its limitations, the establishment of UCI marked a turning point in Nigeria's educational history, as it provided the first opportunity for Nigerians to receive university education within the country. Over time, nationalist leaders and intellectuals began to demand a fully independent Nigerian university system. One of the strongest advocates for educational reform was Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, who argued that university education should be tailored to meet Nigeria's developmental needs rather than merely reproducing British academic traditions.⁷ This led to the push for more universities that would reflect Nigerian values, traditions, and economic aspirations. The pressure mounted by nationalists and the growing number of secondary school graduates seeking higher education compelled the colonial administration to reconsider its restrictive policies on university expansion.

By the late 1950s, the movement for self-governance further intensified calls for a more inclusive higher education system. The Ashby Commission of 1959, set up by the British government to review Nigeria's educational needs for independence, recommended the establishment of new universities across the country. This led to the founding of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN) in 1960, the first fully autonomous university in Nigeria, modeled after the American system rather than the British one. UNN represented a shift in Nigeria's higher education landscape, as it sought to combine academic excellence with practical skill development, in contrast to the British model that emphasized theoretical

knowledge. The emergence of UNN and other universities in the post-independence period marked the beginning of a more Nigerian-centered approach to higher education, though many of the colonial legacies in curriculum design and administration persisted.

The colonial foundations of university education in Nigeria were, therefore, both a blessing and a limitation. While British colonial rule introduced higher education to Nigeria, it did so with a structure that prioritized British interests and limited African agency. The universities established during the colonial period were designed to produce a small elite class that would assist in administration rather than foster mass education and national development. However, the emergence of nationalist movements and the transition to independence forced significant reforms in university education. The legacy of colonial education continues to influence Nigeria's higher education system today, particularly in areas such as governance, funding, and curriculum content. As Nigeria continues to grapple with challenges in its university sector, understanding its colonial origins is essential for developing policies that promote a truly indigenous and self-sustaining higher education system.

Post-independence expansion and government policies on higher education in Nigeria

The expansion of higher education in Nigeria after independence in 1960 was driven by the urgent need to produce skilled manpower for national development. At independence, Nigeria had only one university, the University of Ibadan (UI), which remained an affiliate of the University of London until it attained full autonomy in 1962. Recognizing the limitations of a single university, the First National Development Plan (1962-1968) emphasized the expansion of higher education to meet the growing demand for professionals in sectors like education, administration, and engineering.⁸ As a result, three new regional universities were established: the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN) in 1960, Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) in 1962, and the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University) in 1962. These universities were tailored to reflect regional economic and political interests, marking the beginning of a decentralized approach to higher education. The UNN was modeled after the American system, promoting a balance of academic and practical education, while ABU and Ife adopted modified versions of the British system. These early expansions laid the foundation for Nigeria's growing university sector, but they also introduced regional and ethnic rivalries in educational policy planning.⁹

Following the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970), the federal government took a more centralized role in higher education to promote national unity and reconstruction. In the Second National Development Plan (1970-1974), the government prioritized the establishment of more federal universities to provide opportunities for education across all regions. Consequently, four additional universities were established in Benin, Calabar, Maiduguri, and Sokoto between 1970 and 1975.¹⁰ Additionally, the National Universities Commission (NUC) was strengthened in 1974 to regulate the sector, ensuring uniform standards and policies. One of the major post-war policies that shaped higher education was the 1978 Federal Takeover of Universities, where regional universities like UNN and Ife were converted into federal institutions. This policy aimed to eliminate regional disparities in university education and ensure equal access, but it also led to increased bureaucratic control and funding constraints. Tai Solarin, a Nigerian educationist, criticized government policies at the time, stating, "Education should not be the property of any government, but the collective responsibility of the people".¹¹ The federal takeover of universities reduced the influence of regional governments but also centralized decision-making, leading to inefficiencies in governance.

The 1980s saw further expansion in higher education, driven by the implementation of the Third National Development Plan (1975-1980), which emphasized mass education and technological development. In 1980, Nigeria established seven new universities of technology, such as the Federal University of Technology Owerri (FUTO), to address the need for scientific and technological advancement. However, by the mid-1980s, the country's economic crisis, worsened by falling oil prices, led to severe funding shortages in the education sector. The Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) introduced in 1986 forced the government to reduce subsidies for higher education, leading to an increase in tuition fees and a decline in university infrastructure.¹² This period also saw a rise in student protests, as organizations like the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS) strongly opposed government neglect of universities. Additionally, the introduction of private universities was prohibited

until 1999, which meant that public universities bore the burden of Nigeria's growing population of university applicants. The JAMB (Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board) was created in 1978 to regulate university admissions, but it also introduced controversies over quota systems and federal character principles, which some regions saw as discriminatory.¹³

By the 1990s, Nigeria's higher education system was in crisis, characterized by frequent strikes, underfunding, and brain drain. The Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) emerged as a major force, advocating for better working conditions and increased funding for universities. The 1993 Education Decree No. 9 marked a shift in policy, allowing for the establishment of private universities, which was seen as a way to reduce the burden on public institutions. However, private universities remained expensive and out of reach for most Nigerians. The Obasanjo administration (1999-2007) sought to address some of these challenges by increasing education budgets and introducing the Universal Basic Education (UBE) program, but higher education funding remained inadequate.¹⁴ The Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund) was established in 1998 to supplement university funding, but corruption and mismanagement limited its effectiveness. The government also introduced policies to encourage more universities, leading to the rapid proliferation of both public and private institutions, often at the expense of quality.¹⁵

Today, Nigeria's higher education sector continues to grapple with challenges related to funding, governance, and quality assurance. While the National Universities Commission (NUC) has attempted to enforce academic standards, many universities suffer from overcrowding, inadequate facilities, and inconsistent government policies. The proliferation of universities, particularly state-owned and private universities, has provided more access to education, but it has also raised concerns about the dilution of academic quality. As of 2023, Nigeria had over 200 universities, including federal, state, and private institutions.¹⁶ However, unemployment among graduates remains high, raising questions about the relevance of university curricula to national development. Moving forward, experts argue that Nigeria must strike a balance between expansion and quality assurance, ensuring that universities are not only accessible but also capable of producing graduates with relevant skills for the modern economy. According to S. Akinyemi "Higher education in Nigeria has expanded in quantity, but without the necessary quality, it will fail to fulfill its role in national development."¹⁷ A sustainable higher education policy must address governance inefficiencies, funding challenges, and curriculum relevance to ensure that university education contributes meaningfully to Nigeria's development.

Military rule and the transformation of university education in Nigeria (1966–1999)

The period between 1966 and 1999 was marked by military rule in Nigeria, except for a brief democratic interlude between 1979 and 1983. The military governments of this period significantly influenced the transformation of university education, implementing policies that expanded access, increased government control, and introduced funding challenges. The first military regime under General Yakubu Gowon (1966–1975) initiated major educational reforms as part of post-Civil War reconstruction. Recognizing the need for skilled manpower, the government implemented the Second National Development Plan (1970–1974), which prioritized higher education.¹⁸ As a result, several universities, including the University of Benin (1970) and the University of Ilorin (1975), were established. The 1975 federal takeover of all regional universities, such as Ahmadu Bello University (ABU), University of Ife (now OAU), and University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN), aimed at centralizing control and ensuring uniformity in academic standards.¹⁹ However, this move also introduced bureaucratic inefficiencies, as universities became increasingly dependent on military-controlled government funding and directives. The Gowon regime's investment in education resulted in the rapid expansion of university enrollment, but it also led to overcrowding and resource constraints, which would become a persistent challenge in later years.

Under General Olusegun Obasanjo's military government (1976–1979), the transformation of university education continued with an increased focus on federal control. The government established seven new universities in 1976, including the University of Calabar, University of Jos, and Usmanu Danfodiyo University.²⁰ This period also saw the establishment of the National Universities Commission (NUC) in 1974 to regulate university education and ensure compliance with federal

policies.²¹ However, the heavy centralization of university administration led to reduced institutional autonomy, with vice-chancellors appointed directly by the federal government rather than through academic processes. The military government also introduced compulsory national service for graduates through the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) in 1973, aimed at fostering national unity among university graduates.²² While the Second Republic (1979–1983) attempted to increase funding for universities, the return of military rule under General Muhammadu Buhari (1983–1985) saw harsh austerity measures, resulting in severe underfunding of the education sector. University lecturers frequently protested against deteriorating working conditions, setting the stage for prolonged academic instability.

During General Ibrahim Babangida's rule (1985–1993), university education underwent a major crisis due to economic austerity and the implementation of the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) in 1986.²³ The SAP led to severe reductions in government spending, including education, causing universities to struggle with infrastructure decay, lack of research funding, and frequent strikes by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU).²⁴ The introduction of tuition fees and cost-sharing policies further strained students and parents, leading to widespread protests. Babangida's regime attempted to address these challenges by allowing the establishment of private universities in 1993, breaking the government's monopoly on university education.²⁵ However, these private universities remained inaccessible to most Nigerians due to high tuition costs. Additionally, Babangida's government was accused of suppressing student activism, as seen in the 1992 killing of students at Ahmadu Bello University during anti-government protests.²⁶ His administration's policies created long-term consequences, as the commercialization of university education led to growing inequality in access to higher education.

The military government of General Sani Abacha (1993–1998) further worsened the crisis in university education. Under Abacha, funding for universities declined drastically, leading to a near-collapse of the sector.²⁷ Many universities were unable to pay staff salaries, resulting in prolonged ASUU strikes. In 1996, ASUU was banned, and many lecturers went into exile due to political persecution and economic hardship. This period also saw rampant corruption in university administration, with reports of funds meant for university development being misappropriated.²⁸ Despite these challenges, Abacha's government attempted to expand higher education access by establishing more state universities, but the lack of adequate funding rendered many of these institutions ineffective. Student protests were met with military crackdowns, as seen in the 1996 killings of students at the University of Lagos and other campuses.²⁹ The repression of academic freedom and the decline in research output during Abacha's rule had long-term negative effects on Nigeria's university system.

The end of military rule in 1999 under General Abdulsalami Abubakar marked the beginning of attempts to restore academic freedom, improve funding, and address structural problems in higher education. Abubakar's transitional government lifted the ban on ASUU, leading to renewed negotiations between the government and university staff over improved working conditions.³⁰ His administration also initiated reforms aimed at reviving higher education, though many of the problems inherited from military rule—such as underfunding, poor infrastructure, and declining academic standards—persisted into the democratic era.³¹ According to J. A. Okojie “military regimes expanded university education but failed to provide the necessary support, leading to decades of instability and decline in academic excellence.”³² The transition to democracy in 1999 offered a new opportunity for reforms, but the effects of decades of military mismanagement continue to shape Nigeria's higher education landscape today.

Democratic governance and contemporary leadership challenges in university education in Nigeria

The return to democratic governance in 1999 brought renewed hopes for the revitalization of university education in Nigeria. Successive democratic administrations have sought to address the chronic underfunding, infrastructural decay, and governance inefficiencies inherited from decades of military rule. However, contemporary leadership challenges in university education persist, largely due to poor policy implementation, corruption, inadequate funding, and conflicts between university management

and academic unions.³³ The 1999 Constitution of Nigeria granted greater autonomy to universities, allowing for a more participatory governance structure. Despite this, political interference in the appointment of vice-chancellors, arbitrary dissolution of university governing councils, and a lack of transparency in decision-making have hindered effective university leadership.³⁴ The 2003 and 2009 agreements between the federal government and the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) were aimed at improving university funding and academic conditions, but persistent government failures to meet with these agreements have led to frequent ASUU strikes.³⁵ The inability of university leaders to effectively negotiate with the government or prevent industrial actions has further disrupted academic activities and eroded public trust in higher education governance.

One of the most pressing leadership challenges in Nigeria's university system under democratic governance has been chronic underfunding and poor financial management. While government funding for education increased from 7.02% of the national budget in 1999 to about 10% in 2023, this remains below the UNESCO recommendation of at least 26% of national budgets for education.³⁶ As a result, many universities struggle with inadequate infrastructure, outdated laboratories, and overcrowded lecture halls. University leaders often find themselves unable to implement meaningful reforms due to financial constraints. To address funding gaps, successive governments have introduced cost-sharing measures, including tuition hikes and the introduction of student loans.³⁷ However, these measures have been met with resistance from students and lecturers, leading to frequent protests and further disruptions. Additionally, cases of embezzlement of university funds by administrators have undermined public confidence in the leadership of these institutions. A notable example is the 2016 corruption scandal at the University of Calabar, where top officials were accused of mismanaging over ₦200 million meant for staff welfare and infrastructural development.³⁸ These financial mismanagement issues highlight the deficiencies in university governance and the need for greater accountability.

Another critical leadership challenge under democratic governance has been the politicization of university appointments and decision-making processes. While universities are expected to operate with autonomy, the appointment of vice-chancellors and members of governing councils has often been influenced by political considerations rather than merit.³⁹ In many cases, government interference in these appointments has led to internal conflicts, factionalism, and administrative instability. For instance, the 2016 crisis at the University of Lagos, where the federal government attempted to remove the vice-chancellor without following due process, sparked national outrage and legal battles.⁴⁰ Similarly, state governments have been accused of using university leadership positions as rewards for political loyalty, undermining the credibility of these institutions. This excessive political interference not only weakens university governance structures but also affects academic freedom and institutional decision-making. University leaders are often caught between maintaining academic integrity and satisfying political interests, leading to ineffective administration and stagnation in educational reforms.

The frequent conflicts between university management and academic unions, particularly ASUU, further illustrate the governance crisis in Nigerian universities. Since the return to democracy, ASUU has embarked on over 15 nationwide strikes, mostly due to the government's failure to implement agreements on funding, staff welfare, and infrastructure development.⁴¹ University administrators, instead of engaging in proactive dialogue, often adopt confrontational approaches, leading to prolonged disruptions. The 2022 eight-month ASUU strike, one of the longest in Nigeria's history, highlighted the failure of university leaders and government officials to find lasting solutions to the sector's challenges.⁴² Beyond ASUU, conflicts with the Non-Academic Staff Union (NASU) and the Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities (SSANU) over salary disparities and working conditions have further deepened leadership crises in the sector.⁴³ The failure of university leaders to manage these conflicts effectively has significantly affected academic calendars, research output, and the global ranking of Nigerian universities. To restore stability, university governance structures must prioritize negotiation, transparency, and proactive engagement with stakeholders.

Despite these challenges, there have been some positive developments in university leadership under democratic governance. Several universities have embraced public-private partnerships to improve

funding and infrastructure, leading to projects such as the Dangote Business School at Bayero University, Kano, and the Tony Elumelu Centre for Leadership at the University of Lagos.⁴⁴ Additionally, the establishment of the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund) in 2011 has provided research grants, infrastructure development, and capacity-building programs for university staff.⁴⁵ However, corruption and bureaucratic inefficiencies continue to limit the full impact of these initiatives. As Nigeria seeks to build a globally competitive university system, there is an urgent need for leadership reforms that prioritize accountability, merit-based appointments, adequate funding, and proactive engagement with academic unions. As Okojie rightly observes, “The quality of leadership in Nigerian universities determines the extent to which they can fulfill their mandate of producing skilled manpower for national development.”⁴⁶ Without significant leadership improvements, the challenges facing university education will continue to hinder Nigeria’s progress in higher education and national development.

Conclusion

The study set out to examine the relationship between democratic governance and leadership challenges in Nigerian university education. It explored key issues such as underfunding, political interference, corruption, governance inefficiencies, and conflicts between university management and academic unions. The research findings indicate that despite the return to democracy in 1999, Nigerian universities continue to face serious leadership crises that hinder their ability to deliver quality education. While democratic governance has created opportunities for university autonomy and policy reforms, these have been largely undermined by poor financial management, political appointments, and frequent disruptions caused by strikes. The study found that university leaders often struggle to balance institutional independence with government directives, leading to administrative instability. Furthermore, the inability of successive governments to fully implement agreements with academic unions, particularly ASUU, has led to persistent industrial actions, affecting academic calendars and the overall quality of education.

However, some positive developments have been recorded under democratic governance. The establishment of TETFund has contributed to infrastructural development and academic research, while public-private partnerships have played a role in supplementing funding for universities. Despite these improvements, the research concludes that without comprehensive leadership reforms, Nigerian universities will continue to struggle with governance challenges, financial instability, and academic disruptions. To address these issues, university leadership must prioritize merit-based appointments, transparent financial management, and proactive dialogue with academic unions. The government must also demonstrate a commitment to adequately funding the education sector in line with global best practices. As Nigeria aspires to build a globally competitive university system, strategic leadership and policy consistency will be crucial in transforming the higher education sector for sustainable national development.

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