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Leadership in Kenyan Public Universities: Structural Forces and Transformative Futures

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Abstract

The paper employs a qualitative desktop research approach and adopts Baldridge's Political model framework, drawing on the regulatory framework established by the University's Act No. 42 of 2012 to examine how structural forces, such as political interference, shape university leadership and governance.

The analysis suggests that leadership challenges are mainly driven by deep-rooted systemic factors such as ongoing political interference in appointments of key leaders, overlapping regulatory roles, university chronic underfunding by government, and uneven digital infrastructure. These dynamics undermine institutional independence, weaken leadership and governance, and make conflict a standard aspect of university operations.

The paper recommends transparent and merit-based appointment processes, streamlined regulatory coordination among key oversight institutions, sustainable public funding of universities, and enhanced digital governance capacities. Additionally, it advocates for adoption of ethical, and adaptive leadership practices to advance gender equity, digital justice, and socially responsive university leadership and governance.

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Background of the Study

The development of university education in Kenya was influenced by the educational, political, and economic transformations in the East African region over the past century. Understanding this evolution reveals the historical systemic pressures that shape contemporary leadership in Kenya's public universities. Historically, Kenya's university education system traces its foundation to the establishment of Makerere College in Uganda in 1922 and the University of East Africa in 1963, serving as a regional institution across East Africa (Chacha, 2004; Jowi, 2009). As a regional powerhouse, Makerere University influenced the early governance, academic, and leadership structures that led to the establishment of the first university in Kenya, the University of Nairobi, in the 1970s (Chacha, 2004).

According to the Commission for University Education (2025), Kenya's university education comprises 79 private and public universities, with 43 being public universities. Compared to the 1970s, when Kenya had only one university, this signifies a substantial growth and is associated with the improved access to education and diversified programs offered within Kenya's higher education sector. However, it has also escalated challenges pertaining to institutional leadership, funding sustainability, and regulatory coherence. Odhiambo (2014) observes that the rapid expansion of public universities in Kenya has not been matched by commensurate reforms in leadership capacity, governance coordination, or sustainable financing, thereby intensifying managerial complexity and institutional strain.

Currently, in Kenya, university leadership and governance structure is guided by the University's Act No. 42 of 2012, which establishes an internal governance framework and structure to guide university operations (Republic of Kenya, 2024). According to the Act, the

University Council oversees policymaking and acts as the financial oversight organ within the university, the Senate is the chief academic authority responsible for learning and research standards, while the Vice-Chancellor and management team oversee the daily administration and implementation of institutional strategies. To complement the internal structure, the Act also establishes national bodies responsible for all public universities and comprises of the Commission for University Education (CUE), which is responsible for quality assurance, the Kenya Universities and Colleges Central Placement Service (KUCCPS) manages the placement of all qualified students to various universities, and the Universities Funding Board (UFB) is mandated to develop funding criteria for public universities (Republic of Kenya, 2024).

In practice, leadership in Kenyan universities has been widely characterized by fragmented authority, overlapping regulatory mandates, bureaucratic constraints, and strong political influence, which complicate decision-making and weaken institutional autonomy (Odhiambo, 2014; Siringi & Letting, 2016). These dynamics appear to stem largely from how governance roles intersect within the broader governance framework articulated by the University Act. Although the mandates of key actors such as the Ministry of Education, university councils, the Commission for University Education (CUE), and the Universities Funding Board (UFB) are clearly defined by the Act, their operational boundaries frequently overlap, resulting in contested authority, bureaucratic tensions, and delayed decision-making. Key positions subject to political control include the appointment of vice-chancellors and council members, reflecting patterns of ethnicization, political patronage, and leadership instability (Siringi & Letting, 2016). These implementation gaps, most notably limited institutional autonomy, role ambiguity, and persistent political interference, undermine the effectiveness of

the well-outlined governance framework established in the University Act (Odhiambo, 2014; Republic of Kenya, 2024; Sifuna, 2012).

Leadership, governance, and management can sometimes be used interchangeably, however, conceptually, they represent different ideas. In this paper, the focus is on leadership as a relational process of influencing people and guiding institutional direction through shared goals and collective action (Northouse, 2022). This perspective provide a foundation for examining leadership practices in Kenya's university education environment in this paper.

Statement of the Problem

Despite decades of reforms in the university education sector, institutional expansion, and the establishment of policy reforms such as the University Act of 2012, the leadership in Kenyan universities continues to be shaped by persistent structural and political challenges. Political interference is perceived to present a significant challenge by undermining institutional autonomy through the dictation of vice-chancellor appointments, and overlapping authority from regulatory institutions contributes to leadership instability (Siringi & Letting, 2016; Gudo, Oanda, & Olel, 2011).

Recent leadership disputes also demonstrate how institutional conflicts increasingly escalate into formal legal battles, requiring judicial resolution rather than being settled through internal governance mechanisms. A prominent example is the 2025 Kenyatta University vice-chancellor dispute, where the Employment and Labour Relations Court heard consolidated petitions involving the Vice Chancellor, the University Council, the Public Service Commission, and the staff union, and ultimately ordered that Prof. Wainaina resume duty and complete his contractual

term (Wainaina v. Principal Secretary, Ministry of Education, State Department for Higher Education & Research, 2025).

Furthermore, role ambiguity arising from the mandate overlap of the different bodies that oversee university operations creates constraints that limit leaders' capacity to make strategic decisions. Additionally, while structural changes are essential, the way in which they are implemented exacerbates existing problems by creating a volatile governance environment that hinders institutional agility and long-term planning (Nyandoro & Oluoch, 2025).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine contemporary leadership and governance forces, such as political, financial, institutional, and technological pressures, in Kenyan public university education, and how they shape institutional leadership and autonomy. The study will also examine and propose strategies to support ethical, accountable, and sustainable leadership in the university education sector.

Research Objectives

The study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To examine contemporary leadership and governance challenges affecting leadership in Kenyan public university institutions.
2. To analyze the influence of political, financial, institutional, and technological factors on leadership practices and institutional autonomy in Kenyan public universities.

3. To propose future-oriented strategic approaches that promote ethical leadership, digital justice, and institutional autonomy in Kenyan universities.

Research Question:

How do contemporary structural forces shape leadership in Kenyan public universities?

Sub-Questions:

1. What contemporary leadership challenges affect leadership in Kenyan public universities?
2. How do political, financial, institutional, and technological pressures influence leadership practices and institutional autonomy in Kenyan public universities?
3. What future-oriented strategic approaches can address the challenges and structural forces identified in the study and how might these approaches contribute to ethical leadership, digital justice, and institutional autonomy in the sector?

To address the gaps identified in this study, the sub-questions are organized logically to unpack the main research question. The first sub-question identifies contemporary leadership challenges in Kenyan universities. The second sub-question is used to examine the structural forces shaping these challenges. In contrast, the third sub-question builds on the analysis of the second sub-question to explore future-oriented strategic approaches that respond to the identified constraints and consider their implications for ethical leadership, digital justice, and institutional autonomy.

Significance of the Study

This study will be significant in different ways to scholars, policymakers, and university leaders, mainly within the Kenyan context. The study will contribute to general knowledge by identifying systemic forces that persistently undermine leadership in Kenyan universities, grounded in Kenya's historical and political context. It will also provide policymakers and regulatory agencies with strategies on how to enhance regulatory coherence, strengthen leadership selection processes, and improve financial accountability.

For university leaders and administrators, this study will offer practical approaches to addressing today's challenges by focusing on political awareness, ethical decision-making, and the use of digital tools. It will also provide a theoretical foundation for future studies on university leadership, autonomy, digital governance, and decolonial approaches to reforming university leadership.

Scope of the Study

The scope of the study is to examine contemporary structural forces that influence leadership and governance in Kenya's public universities. The primary focus will be on how political, financial, institutional, and technological forces shape leadership practices and institutional autonomy. It analyzes the roles of key regulatory bodies, the Commission for University Education (CUE), the Kenya Universities and Colleges Central Placement Service (KUCCPS), and the Universities Funding Board (UFB) and will entirely rely on secondary data and adopt a desktop research approach.

Researcher Positionality

My interest in this study originates from my professional experience as a Kenyan educator and university administrator. I worked in a public university where I was responsible for learning management system (LMS) support and training for instructors and students, and I also served in a departmental leadership role as Head of Department. By virtue of my roles, I experienced firsthand leadership and governance dynamics shaped largely by external pressures, which, in some instances, affected long-term institutional operations and decision-making processes

In particular, I observed how regulatory and oversight bodies, such as CUE and KUCCPS influenced student admissions and institutional planning, alongside program-specific regulatory agencies such as the Engineering Board of Kenya. These experiences had a great influence on my understanding of how external structural forces intersect with internal governance and leadership practices within Kenyan universities.

My perspective in this study is informed by my commitment to ethical leadership, educational equity, and institutional accountability. While my professional experience shaped the formulation of the research questions, the analysis remains grounded in peer-reviewed scholarship, national policy documents, and established theoretical frameworks, particularly Baldridge's Political Model.

Theoretical Framework: Baldridge's Political Model

This study employs Baldridge's Political Model, developed by Baldridge (1971), which views universities not as harmonious or neutral entities but as political arenas where negotiation,

competing interests, and influence struggles occur. Pusser (2003) expands this perspective, noting that university decision-making is driven by bargaining, coalition-building, and conflicts among various stakeholder groups, rather than purely rational planning. This approach is particularly relevant for analyzing leadership in Kenyan universities, where political interference, contested authority, and conflicting institutional priorities are common.

The literature review, therefore, will be guided by Baldridge's Political Model components as described below:

Multiple Interest Groups: According to the Baldridge model, universities comprise diverse actors, government bodies, administrators, faculty, and external organizations, and each is pursuing distinct goals (Baldridge, 1971; Pusser, 2003).

Conflict as a Normal Condition: The model assumes that conflict is inherent and can arise from divergent goals and interests (Manning, 2018).

Power Beyond Formal Structures: The model notes that, even though decision-making is shaped by formal hierarchies, informal political forces and external pressures are at its centre (Baldridge, 1971).

Coalition-Building and Negotiation: The model asserts that universities function through shifting alliances among groups that negotiate institutional priorities (Pusser, 2003).

Fragmented Authority: The model views authority in universities to be shared across overlapping bodies, which affects decision-making (Baldridge, 1971).

When comparing Baldridge's model with other governance theories, such as institutional logics, state-centred governance, and managerialism, which have aimed to expand upon it, Baldridge's model remains highly relevant for analyzing leadership in a politically charged environment, (Pusser, 2003). Additionally, the study also draws conceptually on insights from collegial governance, managerialism, ethical leadership, and decolonial critiques of higher education to illuminate the complexity of leadership practices in Kenyan public universities.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative desktop research approach, which involves the systematic analysis of secondary data sources, such as peer-reviewed academic literature, policy documents, including the University Act No. 42 of 2012, and institutional reports from national and international bodies relevant to higher education governance, without collecting primary empirical data (Bassot, 2022). The approach was used to examine how contemporary structural forces in Kenyan public universities shape leadership and governance.

The selected literature materials were analyzed thematically, guided by Baldridge's Political Model, with particular attention to power distribution, conflict, coalition-building, negotiation processes, and institutional autonomy. This analytical framework enabled a structured interpretation of how competing interests and structural constraints shape leadership practices within Kenyan public universities.

Literature Review

In practice, universities are highly influenced by and operate within environments that are politically charged, financially unstable and affected by external factors, which have made

leadership and governance in public universities urgent areas of inquiry. In Kenya, even though public universities are the epitome of the national mandate for public knowledge production, workforce development, and social transformation, they face heightened scrutiny because they remain deeply embedded in political, economic, and bureaucratic systems that constrain their leadership autonomy. Therefore, in Kenya, due to the interconnected issues, leadership and governance in public universities cannot be fully explained by administrative structures alone. Instead, adopting a theoretical lens can help to explore how power dynamics, competing interests, and institutional alliances influence leadership and organizational outcomes.

This section will review literature, guided by Baldridge's Political Model components to examine the historical concepts and current scholarship on leadership and governance in public universities by placing Kenya's system within the broader global, African, and local contexts of leadership and governance debates. The literature review will focus on matters related to state control, market reforms, managerial practices, austerity measures, and digital change. The model is useful as it offers a well-structured system approach to interpret how political players, internal alliances, and overlapping authorities influence decision-making.

Historical, Conceptual, and Theoretical Foundations of Governance in Kenyan Public Universities

Across cross the globe, university governance has developed and been shaped by historical, political, and global changes, particularly the rise of market-driven reforms, neoliberal policy shifts, and digital disruption - the rapid integration of digital technologies in teaching,

administration, and data-driven decision-making processes - and the increased withdrawal of the state from higher education funding.

The literature shows that modern university governance dates back to medieval European institutions, which relied on collegial structures that valued scholarly independence and collective decision-making (Marginson, 2016). However, currently, it is increasingly becoming politicized, bureaucratic, and influenced by external organizations' governance models, which now define public universities worldwide and in Kenya. On this basis, from an analytical perspective, these changes reflect universities' expanding roles in nation-building, research, and workforce development, as well as the rising influence of state interests, market forces, and regulatory bodies in shaping institutional decision-making.

In East Africa, university governance evolved through successive colonial and post-colonial influences, with Makerere University (established in 1922) and the University of East Africa (established in 1963) following British governance frameworks characterized by centralized authority and significant government engagement in academic matters (Chacha, 2004; Jowi, 2009). In 1970, the University of Nairobi became the first Kenyan public university after the regional university system was dissolved. Over time, however, the leadership and governance structure of the University of Nairobi remained the same, reinforcing a governance approach linked to state priorities, more so in leadership appointments, resource distribution, and institutional direction (Jowi, 2009). While the government of Kenya, through the Universities Act, intended to reduce political influence by assigning oversight roles to CUE, KUCCPS, and UFB (Republic of Kenya, 2024), recent research shows that notable governance

challenges, limited institutional independence, overlapping regulatory roles, political interference, and uneven policy enforcement persist (Kiboiy & Wosyanju, 2022; Nyandoro & Oluoch, 2025). These ongoing challenges, stemming from historical state dominance and strengthened by current regulatory structures, play an important role in demonstrating how governance, leadership, and institutional autonomy work within Kenya's university education sector, as these concepts guide the primary focus of this study.

Conceptually, governance refers to the structures, processes, and relationships through which universities make decisions, allocate resources, and exercise accountability (Bargh, Scott, & Smith, 1996), while leadership relates to the actions, decisions, and influence processes through which an individual or group shapes the institutional direction. Conversely, institutional autonomy is the university leader's ability to make independent academic, financial, and administrative decisions without external influence, and it is interconnected and essential to understanding how governance functions within public universities.

This paper will therefore be based on a literature review guided by Baldridge's Political Model, which views universities as political arenas shaped by competing interests, negotiations, and power dynamics (Baldridge, 1971; Pusser, 2003).

Global and Regional Perspective on Leadership and Governance of Public Universities.

Leadership and governance of higher education, especially universities across the globe, have been reshaped immensely by neoliberal reforms, education marketization, state retreat, and digital transformation - a strategic, systemic, and intentional reconfiguration of institutional practices, governance, and culture through adoption of digital technologies. Although

the extent of their impact varies across countries and continents, their ideas influence leadership expectations, funding mechanisms, accountability frameworks, and institutional autonomy. Exploring these global pressures presents a foundational ground, as they reflect and intensify many of the governance challenges faced by Kenyan public universities today.

Education Marketization and Neoliberal Restructuring in Higher Education.

Due to changes and improvements in global economic models, market forces, competition, and performance goals, universities are increasingly driven and influenced by these factors, shaping their decision-making structures. For instance, Desjardins (2018) and Jongbloed (2023) argue that in North America and Europe, funding models have shifted from reliance on public investment to cost-sharing, private revenue, and quasi-market competition approaches. Likewise, Raaper (2016) argues that neoliberal reforms have advanced the commodification of education, leading universities to prioritize global competitiveness and labour-market needs over long-standing educational goals. Conversely, Marginson (2016) warns that excessive marketization undermines academic values, concentrates resources within elite institutions, and exacerbates inequalities in access and outcomes.

In African settings, these issues are more pronounced as the situation is compounded by influences from donor-led reforms, reduced government tuition fee funding, and population and institutional growth, worsening institutional fragility (Manning, 2018; Samoff & Carroll, 2004). These global and regional trends have influenced Kenya's move towards cost-sharing, commercialization, and competitive funding, thereby influencing leadership choices and the independence of public universities.

Collegiality to Managerial Command

Managerialism, as an approach that focuses on efficiency, accountability, and measurable outputs, with power centralized and decision-making placed in the hands of professional managers, has had a significant impact on university leadership. This is because university education has increasingly regulated leadership in academic work through rankings, key performance indicators (KPIs), and performance metrics, what Raaper (2016) describes as an "audit culture" that negates the freedom associated with education. Such managerial approaches shift authority, erode the collective, dialogic, and knowledge-driven foundations of decision-making away from collegial bodies toward senior executives, and replace them with top-down administrative priorities that conflict with academic values (Jarvis, 1993). In their view, Raaper (2016) and Marques et al. (2024) argue that the managerialism approach restructures decision-making and reshapes academic identities by fostering compliance, competitiveness, and self-surveillance at the expense of participatory and shared leadership and governance practices.

In many African universities, tension arises when leaders focus on strategic leadership but are constrained by structural contradictions that arise from managerial factors and long-standing political oversight, which push them to ensure efficiency while being pressured by state interference and resource scarcity that limit actual autonomy (Kiboiy & Wosyanju, 2022; Sifuna 2012). In Kenya, managerial practices include performance-based contracts for university leaders, a push for financial sustainability, and extensive regulatory reporting, which exposes friction between policy ideals and operational realities.

Public Education Disinvestment

State withdrawal from university funding is a recurring global pattern, and according to Desjardins (2018), universities have been pushed towards an income diversification approach, which has affected leaders' strategies for balancing academic values and financial sustainability. This pattern extends further as Samoff and Carroll (2004) demonstrates that austeritymeasures associated with structural adjustment programmes, which require universities to reduce public expenditure by adopting cost-sharing models. Additionally, Muzzatti (2022) presents austerity as a tool that reshapes institutionalized crisis culture, in which scarcity becomes a permanent management logic that moulds how institutions set priorities, approach leadership, and imagine a better future for the institution.

In sub-Saharan Africa, chronic underfunding fuels and amplifies governance instability, leading to staff strikes and deteriorating infrastructure. These conditions are attributed to fundamentally constrained institutional leadership and long-term academic planning due to an entrenched crisis of management, hence affecting the university's educational mission. Similarly, Kiboiy and Wosyanju (2022) argue that funding deficits magnify internal power struggles due to competition for scarce resources. This may lead to weakening leadership legitimacy as managers are forced to make reactive, crisis-driven decisions rather than pursue strategic governance focused on long-term planning, policy coherence, and institutional sustainability. In Kenya, these conditions are associated with the decline of the Privately Sponsored Students (PSSP), a tuition-based funding stream for self-sponsored students, inconsistent government capitation (per-student public funding allocations), and institutional debt, creating governance environments in

which leaders must negotiate competing demands under severe fiscal pressure, thereby strengthening the political nature of decision-making.

Leadership and Governance in the Digital and Artificial Intelligence Era

Digital transformation now acts as a global governance force, transforming leadership roles, institutional strategies, and regulatory systems. According to Czerniewicz et al. (2020), COVID-19 accelerated digital adoption in diverse fields, especially online learning, and revealed existing disparities in infrastructure, readiness, and institutional capacity. While supporting the idea of digital adoption, Oncioiu and Bularca (2025) further argued that the emergence of artificial intelligence has created new governance areas of concern, which are data privacy, cybersecurity, algorithmic decision-making, and digital ethics, that demand leaders develop skills beyond those articulated by traditional academic leadership frameworks. Conversely, studies show that technological governance in universities can reinforce inequalities when systems for data protection, cybersecurity, and digital access are unevenly developed across institutions. In the Kenyan context, for example, universities increasingly rely on Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) systems, cloud services, and distance learning. Yet, many institutions continue to experience persistent cybersecurity vulnerabilities due to insufficient investment and weak policy implementation (Gichubi et al., 2024).

These gaps in digital readiness put institutional leadership under strain by exposing universities to regulatory noncompliance and widening disparities between well-resourced and under-resourced institutions.

Governance, Gender Equity, and Decolonial Perspectives

University leadership in Kenya faces significant gender inequality, reflected in the persistent underrepresentation of women in senior leadership and decision-making positions within a deeply patriarchal social and institutional context. These inequalities are reinforced by colonial structures that historically entrenched patriarchal systems, shaping leadership hierarchies that continue to marginalize women and other historically excluded groups. Scholars such as Sifuna (2012) and Grande (2018) critique the persistence of colonial governance structures in higher education as many African universities continue to operate under inherited administrative colonial logics that marginalize local knowledge systems and reproduce hierarchical decision-making.

Similarly, Teferra and Altbach (2004) argue that power imbalances and overlapping mandates among state ministries, university councils, and academic units limit genuine institutional autonomy and undermine leadership, and that these issues must be addressed through transformative approaches. As such, the present-day governance struggles cannot be separated from the historical colonial architectures of control that still shape university decision-making in the modern world. Meanwhile, extending this analysis, understanding, Gerrard et al. (2021) argue that educational institutions continue to operate within racial capitalism, which shapes whose labour and knowledge are institutionally valued and colonial logics, which sustain inherited governance structures and hierarchical decision-making, dynamics that remain evident in the leadership and governance of Kenyan public universities.

These insights paint a picture of Kenya's governance landscape, which extends beyond university education, as almost every sector is affected by political appointments and regulatory dominance that reproduce hierarchical, externally oriented governance logics. To ensure that leadership and governance in Kenyan institutions achieve equality and embrace decoloniality, structures and strategies must be put in place to advance transformative reforms to challenge and transform existing structural forces that sustain gender inequality.

Contemporary Leadership Challenges in Kenyan Public Universities

Baldridge's Political Model pillars provide a robust framework for analyzing governance and leadership challenges and therefore form the basis for analyzing contemporary issues affecting leadership in Kenyan public universities.

Multiple Interest Groups and Competing Agendas

Kenyan public universities operate within complex governance structures, comprising the University Council as the highest policy body, the Senate as the chief academic organ, and executive management led by the Vice-Chancellor, and in environments where competing interests from actors such as the Ministry of Education, CUE, KUCCPS, UFB, academic staff unions, and political elites make effective decision-making difficult. According to Pusser (2003), multiple actors with divergent agendas are foundational to political governance systems, while studies of Kenyan higher education show that regulatory agencies coordinate the sector and shape institutional priorities through funding decisions, programme approvals, and compliance requirements (Kiboiy & Wosyanju, 2022; Sifuna, 2012). Meanwhile, Munene (2021) argues that leaders experience internal pressure from actors such as staff unions and senates, which exert

significant influence over strategic and operational decisions, often challenging formal leadership structures, suggesting that governance struggles stem not only from external pressures but also from deep-rooted internal conflicts.

These intersecting interests foster an environment where decision-making is more of a negotiated process than an administrative one, in which leaders often have to balance state expectations, union demands, student pressures, and regulatory requirements, which restrict their capacity to develop coherent, long-term strategies for the institution. Thus, the multiplicity of power centres reinforces Baldridge's view of universities as political arenas characterized by competition, negotiation, and shifting alliances, and forms one of the main challenges facing Kenya's public university leadership team.

Conflict as a Normal and Recurring Governance Condition

Baldridge's model views conflict not as a dysfunction but as an inherent product of competing institutional interests, and in Kenyan universities, it vividly reflects this condition. Frequent leadership disputes, labour strikes arising from labour bargaining agreements, student protests due to poor leadership or delayed government funding, and internal power struggles among competing individuals illustrate this entrenched conflict culture. Notably, some leadership disputes now extend beyond institutional bargaining into judicial intervention, illustrating how conflict is increasingly managed through courts rather than internal governance processes. For instance, the 2025 Kenyatta University vice-chancellor dispute proceeded to the Employment and Labour Relations Court through consolidated petitions and resulted in an order reinstating the Vice Chancellor to complete his tenure (Wainaina v. Principal Secretary, Ministry of

Education, State Department for Higher Education & Research, 2025). Kiboiy and Wosyanju, (2022) contend that financial scarcity arising from government funding cuts intensifies internal tensions as departments compete for limited resources. Likewise, Sifuna (2012) illustrates how recurring conflicts between university councils and senates over authority, arising from mandate overlap and resource allocation, constitute a structural issue that undermines institutional stability.

From these findings, it can be argued that conflict is not incidental but foundational to governance patterns in Kenyan public universities. Consequently, to achieve change and a better future for university leadership, leaders must manage recurrent disputes even under external pressures and, most importantly, envision and propose a strategic vision for a better future (Nyandoro & Oluoch, 2025).

Informal Power, External Influence, and Political Interference

Kenyan public universities offer a case in point, with the appointment of vice-chancellors and council members, where influential politicians override formal governance procedures. Owing to informal power, political actors tend to advance leadership candidates who reflect their own ethnic, regional, or partisan interests, and as a result, override institutional merit or autonomy (Gudo, Oanda, & Olel, 2011; Siringi & Letting, 2016). Studies shows that patterns continue to exist despite the Universities Act's intent to professionalize leadership appointments and enhance institutional autonomy, underscoring the entrenched nature of informal political authority within the sector (Kilonzo, 2011; Sanga, 2019).

Since the early 1990s, the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) have exerted external pressure on the Kenyan government to cut university education funding. This has led to policy changes and new financing models that continue to evolve to align with their demands and conditions (Samoff & Carrol, 2004). The results create ripple effects that trickle down to university leaders, exerting pressure on them to navigate multiple centres of authority while balancing expectations from government, global policy frameworks, and internal stakeholders.

As Baldridge (1971) argues, the real centres of power in universities often lie outside formal structures, and Kenya exemplifies this dynamic vividly, as informal political influence not only restricts institutional autonomy and distorts decision-making but also undermines leadership legitimacy, generating governance instability that continues to challenge long-term institutional development.

Coalition-Building, Negotiation, and Institutional Bargaining within University Context

The increasing complexity of decision-making in Kenyan public universities is evident in coalitions such as academic unions, university councils, ministerial representatives, student leaders, and educational boards, each advancing its interests in a politically influenced, resource-strained environment. Pusser (2003) contends that coalitional governance is a defining feature of political university systems, a pattern strongly mirrored in Kenya's public institutions. For example, in staffing and resource disputes, university management and unions such as the University Academic Staff Union (UASU)[1] frequently align their interests in response to government decision-making, particularly when advocating for improved funding, salaries, and

working conditions. This collective pressure challenges government directives and intensifies political tensions around institutional leadership.

Likewise, collaboration between university councils and ministry officials can influence decision-making, where outcomes emerge through compromise rather than established procedures, leading to compromised leadership practices. In his work, Sifuna (2012) notes that such coalition-based politics can obstruct reforms, create policy inconsistencies, and weaken the authority of formal leaders.

Fragmented Authority within Universities

Within Kenya's public university governance framework, overlapping mandates and bureaucratic complexity undermine effective leadership and complicate decision-making process. Sifuna (2012) and Jowi (2009) describe this fragmentation as a persistent structural barrier, while Nyandoro and Oluoch (2025) argue that regulatory overlap produces inconsistent directives, which leads to delayed decision-making and creates confusion over compliance responsibilities, resulting in weakened strategic coordination and institutional autonomy.

These contested boundaries are also visible in leadership appointment processes, where the lines between University Council authority and ministerial/legal requirements can become disputed and politically vulnerable. For example, in May 2025, Professor Elijah Bitange Ndemo declined the University of Nairobi vice-chancellor appointment, citing an unprocedural recruitment process and the absence of required ministerial concurrence, an episode that underscores how fragmented authority can produce legally contestable leadership outcomes even before disputes formally escalate into litigation (Mbego, 2025).

Findings and Discussion

Building on the literature reviewed, this paper presents findings on how broader structural forces continue to shape leadership practices in Kenyan universities, using Baldridge's Political Model as a lens to make sense of the everyday governance struggles and power negotiations within public universities in Kenya.

Structural Forces and Leadership Autonomy in Kenyan Public Universities

The literature review synthesis has shown that numerous structural challenges affect leadership and governance in Kenyan public universities. One such structural challenge is political interference, which is consistently associated with or can play a key role in the appointment and dismissal of vice-chancellors and council members (Gudo, Oanda, & Olel, 2011; Siringi & Letting, 2016). Consequently, such political interference or intervention may erode the ethical principles of leadership, undermine leadership legitimacy, and, as a result, destabilize institutional governance. Other contemporary factors, including internal power struggles, leadership disputes, student protests, and frequent staff strikes due to salary disputes, have affected Kenyan universities over time.

Additionally, limited institutional autonomy arising from overlapping mandates and pressure from different regulatory bodies, each pushing for its priorities, affects the university's accountability ability, as multiple external and internal authorities present different expectations. This tangle of expectations creates uncertainty on who the leaders are accountable to, and that ambiguity constrains leaders' ability to make strategic decisions (Nyandoro & Oluoch, 2025). As a result, leadership is not held back by the leader's skills, vision, competence, values, or ethics,

but by a system designed to reward political influence over thoughtful, impactful strategic governance. In conclusion, this seems to affirm Baldridge's view that universities can function as political arenas, shaped by leaders who frequently negotiate contested priorities and navigate informal power networks that lie beyond the formal governance structure articulated in the University Act.

Financial and Technological Pressures Influence

Persistent funding shortfalls, resulting from declining government capitation and fewer students in the Privately Sponsored Students Programme, have left institutions with significant financial constraints. This has led institutions to operate under crippling debt, and, consequently, to a reactive crisis mode of operation in which leaders constantly negotiate trade-offs, prioritizing salary arrears, stalled development projects, and student welfare over pursuing long-term strategic priorities (Kiboiy & Wosyanju, 2022; Munene, 2019)

Additionally, digitalization and artificial intelligence-driven governance have created new expectations that demand new competencies related to data privacy, cybersecurity, and digital equity (equitable access to digital infrastructure, skills, and institutional capacity to participate effectively in digitally mediated governance), yet institutions remain unevenly equipped to meet the requirements of technological advancements (Czerniewicz et al., 2020; Oncioiu & Bularca, 2025). Extending this argument, Veletsianos, Johnson, and Houlden (2024) caution that artificial intelligence in higher education is not merely a technical tool but an active actor that reshapes decision-making, accountability, and power relations, requiring institutional leaders to develop

ethical, participatory, and reflexive governance approaches rather than purely managerial or technocratic responses.

Future-Oriented Governance and Leadership Directions

While the literature indicates that there exist substantial leadership and governance challenges within Kenyan public universities, it also suggests some approaches that could help in strengthening leadership legitimacy, institutional resilience, and autonomy within the institutions. First, scholars have called for more transparent, visionary, and ethical leadership structures that reduce political interference in appointment processes and strengthen merit-based governance practices (Kiboiy & Wosyanju, 2022; Teferra & Altbach, 2004). Secondly, there is a call to enhance institutional autonomy through well-structured regulatory coordination and more stable funding systems, which would empower leaders to focus on long-term development rather than short-term survival (Kiboiy & Wosyanju, 2022; Munene, 2019).

Additionally, authors suggest that leaders should adopt governance models that support digital justice (understood here as equitable access to digital infrastructure, skills, ethical data governance, and meaningful participation in digitally mediated decision-making) based on equitable access to technological resources as a way to address pressure resulting from emerging technological advancements (Czerniewicz et al., 2020). As Oncioiu & Bularca, (2025) suggest, technological advancement challenges can be addressed by strengthening cybersecurity systems, data governance policies, and professional development for staff navigating new technological demands. Hence, this calls for a transformative and adaptive leadership style grounded in ethical values and future-oriented visions, and adaptable to systemic change.

These future-oriented approaches are supported by Baldridge's model, which suggests that progress will require a shift from political bargaining for personal or partisan gain towards collective institutional goals as a coalition-building strategy. Finally, universities should reimagine and shift their internal and external alliances so that power supports transformation that leads to meeting institutional goals rather than reinforcing instability and internal competition.

Conclusions, Implications and Recommendations

Conclusions

The study examined leadership and governance in Kenyan public universities to understand how political, financial, institutional, and technological pressures influence leadership practices. The results show that governance issues are not just isolated managerial faults but reflect deeply rooted political and institutional dynamics that shape the leadership of public universities.

The literature supports the idea that ongoing political interference, unstable funding, fragmented regulation, and emerging digital governance needs continually influence leadership legitimacy and limit strategic freedom in decision-making. Consequently, leaders often appear to react to external pressures rather than proactively guiding universities towards long-term growth and development. To improve leadership and governance, therefore, there is a need for structural

reforms to address contested authority, promote ethical leadership, anchored in transformative and adaptive leadership and governance styles in the digital era.

Implications for Theory, Policy, and Practice

Based on the study, Baldridge's Political Model is a relevant framework for analyzing leadership in the modern higher education setup, albeit with a few shortcomings. The analysis shows that factors such as power struggles, coalition negotiations, fragmented authority, and informal political influence, as articulated in the Baldridge model, remain fundamental in shaping Kenyan public universities. However, it is essential to note that additional factors, such as financial austerity and technological advancements, can be incorporated into Baldridge's model so as to be more effective in addressing contemporary issues.

From a policy implication perspective, the study has shown that there is a need for reforms to address structures and power relations, which can play a key role in institutional accountability and improved institutional autonomy, necessary for good leadership. Furthermore, securing sustainable funding sources, whether from the government or the private sector, without commercializing or marketizing education (prioritizing revenue generation, cost-recovery, and market competitiveness over public educational missions and academic values), is crucial to preventing financial crises from weakening leadership effectiveness.

In practice, this study emphasizes that university leaders must strengthen their political awareness by understanding the interests and power dynamics shaping higher education, while upholding ethical governance and digital leadership competencies. Despite being appointed through political processes, leaders can assert institutional priorities by practicing strategic

negotiation, promoting transparency, and cultivating collaborative coalitions that align with long-term university goals rather than factional pressures. Ultimately, advancing ethical, transformative, and adaptive leadership capacities is crucial for rebuilding trust in governance and enabling universities to fulfill their roles in national development and social change.

Recommendations

There is a need to strengthen merit-based, transparent leadership governance, in which government involvement in leadership should be limited to policy oversight rather than personal or partisan vested interests and influence. Therefore, a straightforward professional standards guide should be developed to lead independent appointment panels, using transparent evaluation criteria, to reduce informal political interference and enhance leadership credibility.

Additionally, regulatory coordination should be improved by harmonizing governance structures to reduce overlaps among CUE, KUCCPS, UFB, and the Ministry of Education, as a way of streamlining decision-making. Furthermore, financial sustainability based on long-term funding reforms should be seen as a measure to stabilize revenue streams and reduce crisis-driven operations, and as a result, leaders can have adequate resources and time to focus on strategic planning and academic mission.

Technological advancements have been quite instrumental in transforming teaching, research and institutional operations. While this comes with its own set of challenges, universities should build digital governance and cyber-leadership capacity through investing in cybersecurity, data governance frameworks, and professional development programs for leaders to build essential skills.

Lastly, universities should foster ethical, collaborative leadership cultures that strengthen meaningful coalitions that advance institutional interests rather than factional agendas, thereby promoting inclusive decision-making, accountability, and academic freedom, which can rebuild internal trust and create a governance environment that supports innovation and shared purpose.

Endnotes

1. The **University Academic Staff Union (UASU)** is the national trade union representing academic staff in Kenya's public universities. It plays a central role in collective bargaining, industrial action, and negotiations with university management and the government over salaries, funding, and working conditions.

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