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Transformative Educational Leadership for Equity and Innovation in
Nigeria: Evaluating Educator Professional Growth and Change Practices
in Public Universities

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Abstract

This Capstone discusses how transformative educational leadership contributes to the progress of equity, innovation, and teacher development in the Nigerian public universities. This Capstone is placed in the context of the on-going governance issues, failure of policy implementation, and underfunding of higher education sector in Nigeria to pose a question of how leadership practices influence the outcome of institutional change and professional development. Based on the Transformative Leadership Theory and the Transformational Leadership frameworks, the research approach qualitative where peer-reviewed literature, policy documents, and empirical research will be analysed. The results demonstrate that although Nigerian universities are governed by inflexible hierarchical systems, the transformative leadership practice, including shared vision, mentoring, learning communities, and reflective practice, has not been exploited because of politicking interfering with university activities, bureaucratic centralization, ineffective accountability and inconsistent policy implementation. The analysis also shows that the lack of teacher professional growth is strongly connected with the leadership approaches which focus on the administration manipulation instead of the equity-based and innovation-driven change. Ultimately, the paper emphasizes the urgent necessity of the leadership models that will disrupt the existing patterns of inequalities, promote the on-going professional development and inclusive institutional culture.

Introduction

In this 21st century, the process of change and variety of tools that apply in our everyday life are becoming more and more complex. These shifts are occurring at such a rapid rate that it becomes difficult to predict. The high unstable environment has been brought about by global competition and increased business in East and West, in both developed and developing countries. Leaders are very much required to cope with this unpredictable environment and constant changes. The role of leadership in the change management process has been highlighted by the fact that this change involves new system and institutionalization of new approaches. Certainly, the type of needs and awareness of staff depend greatly on behaviour and leadership style of a manager. The manner in which the organization members react and attitude towards organizational changes and how they strive to either support, or resist organizational changes heavily relies on the leadership style of a leader as a prototype of his/her sustainable behaviour. (Farazja and Khademi, 2011, p. 51) Quality professional development is a key ingredient in the education sector in the realisation of goals that are of global standards. Policy-makers are becoming more and more aware of the fact that schools cannot be better than the teachers and administrators, who operate in them. Although these suggested professional development programs are diverse in content and format, the majority of them have a common goal that is a change in the professional practices, beliefs, and knowledge of school persons towards a defined purpose (Feinberg, 2015). In the vast majority of instances, the result of that end is the enhancement of student learning. Professional development programmes are structured endeavours that strive to initiate change in practice of teachers in their classroom set ups, in their beliefs and attitudes, and the learning outcome of the students. Transformational educational leadership offers a conceptual framework on how to rethink professional development as being an ongoing,

reflective and collaborative process. Such leadership puts emphasis on mentoring, learning communities and feedback systems that motivate educators to embrace new ideas and technologies. Leaders can transform Universities into places that simply react to the present day issues, but also look into the future and predict the need to gain knowledge in the future through creation of environments that embrace innovation, equity and collective learning. The higher education system in Nigeria is among the largest and most intricate in Africa and it consists of federal, state and privately owned universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education. These institutions are very important whether in national development in form of research, innovation and human capital formation though they work in an environment that is unstable politically, lacks consistent financing and political changes. Structural adjustment policies and underinvestment in education that have undermined institutional capacities to result in deteriorating infrastructure, poor staffing and access to quality learning materials is one of such policy failures. As Adeyinka (1993) notes, the system was at cross roads in funding the education sector because the government was no longer able to support proper development of different educational institutions, also, the welfare and professional development of teachers were sidelined, the salaries lost their purchasing power and teachers had to resort to other money making activities to support their earnings.

Like any other organization, higher education institutions require proper administration so that they can fulfill their institutional mandate. Its topicality cannot be overestimated. According to Behery (2008), transformational leaders can attain the goals by ensuring that the organizational communication is strong, cultural models are transferred between the institutional structure and individual dispositions, and administrative styles are supported that play a significant role in goal achievement. These leaders influence, encourage and inspire their followers to achieve their

goals thus they shape their inner values and motivation and align their behaviors with the mission, vision and values of the institution. Empirical research suggests that transformational leadership promotes the willingness of the followers to put in extra effort, as well as to substitute their routine with more productive methods. According to Jovanovic and Ciric (2016), transformational leadership is associated with improved organizational learning, effectiveness, and culture. Through planning, organizing, directing, and integrating the key needs of the institution such as those of the faculty, transformational leaders are able to come up with strategies that are not only productive but also motivational to the individual staff. According to Chinenye (2020), university leaders who use transformational leadership establish objectives and visions to their followers and encourage teamwork, trust, and enthusiasm. Transformational leaders boost and maintain the morale of followers by rewarding them upon the completion of complex and demanding tasks. They also develop new systems that ensure timely execution of policies, strategies and action plans that are required to realize the objectives. Oloolube (2013) supports this argument by stating that transformational leaders formulate the best educational policies and strategies that improve educational programs and administrative services, thus creating competency.

Analysis of Leadership Structures in Nigerian Universities

The leadership framework in most Nigerian universities follows a hierarchical structure, with the Vice-Chancellor (VC) at the top, supported by Deputy Vice-Chancellors (DVCs), Deans of Faculties, and other administrative officers. This hierarchy is designed to provide clarity in decision-making, but it has limitations in terms of flexibility and responsiveness to academic needs and institutional changes (Opatunde & Oredein, 2023).

Adebola (2025) highlights the responsibility of the principal officers of the university, starting with the Vice-Chancellor who is identified as the administrative head of the ivory tower. The VC is seen as first among equals; however, he provides strategic direction for the overall administrative structure of the university. Next is the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic), who is responsible for the management of academic affairs including curriculum, research, and faculty development. The Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Administration) specifically oversees all administrative issues like finance and student affairs within the university. The table also highlights the function of the Deans of Faculty, who oversee departments within the faculty to ensure that academic programs run smoothly according to the academic calendar. The Registrar serves as the General Secretary of the University, responsible for maintaining records and documentation of both staff and students. The University Librarian heads the University Library and manages materials for research and study, while the Bursar is responsible for all financial activities, ensuring proper budgeting and payroll management. The Dean of Students' Affairs handles student welfare, including extracurricular activities. The Head of Department ensures that academic activities and programs are executed on time and in line with established standards and policies. Academic staff are responsible for delivering lectures, research, and mentoring, while students are the primary beneficiaries of the university's services (Babalola, 2024).

The Vice-Chancellor holds significant authority in steering the university's vision and strategic direction. However, findings indicate that the VC's effectiveness is often compromised by political interference, resource constraints, and bureaucratic inefficiency (Awoyemi et al., 2024; Adebola, 2025). Political interference in the selection of vice-chancellors often undermines merit-based leadership, as political motivations take precedence over academic qualifications or institutional needs. This results in a leadership environment that is unstable and often short-term,

with frequent leadership changes that disrupt long-term institutional goals (Opatunde & Oredein, 2023).

Deans of Faculties, who manage academic programs, often face barriers when trying to implement changes. The findings show that bureaucratic delays and limited decision-making power are major constraints faced by deans in fulfilling their roles (Adeoye & Ainnubi, 2024). Although deans play a crucial role in ensuring academic quality within their faculties, they are often unable to introduce necessary innovations without waiting for approval from the central administration, leading to slower implementation of reforms (Ozopelide, Binuyo, & Akpa, 2024).

Furthermore, the role of governing boards was found to be inconsistent across universities. In some institutions, boards are actively involved in governance and provide strong oversight of leadership actions, while in others, their influence is minimal, leading to weak governance and ineffective leadership (Abiola, Abiodun, & Afolaranmi, 2024).

Nigeria Higher Education System

Nigeria's university education system includes both public and private universities. Public Universities are run by both federal and state Governments. There are currently 170 approved universities in Nigeria, comprising 74 federal universities, 68 state universities, and 159 private universities (NUC, 2025).

The National Universities Commission of Nigeria is a government agency saddled with the responsibility of promoting quality higher education in Nigeria. The Commission is also responsible for approving all academic programs run in Nigerian universities and approving the

establishment of all higher educational institutions offering degree programs. The Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) is the Nigerian central admissions agency. They conduct the entrance examination - Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME) for prospective undergraduates into Nigerian universities.

As education has become an essential factor for economic development in the 21st century (Saint, et al., 2003), an instrument for national development, and social change, vital for the promotion of a progressive country (NERDC, 2013), challenges have arisen. Nigeria is struggling with meeting the needs of prospective students craving for education, especially at tertiary level.

Public Universities in Nigeria

Public universities in Nigeria were established and managed by the government. The federal government owns some of these public universities, while the state governments own some others. The public universities have continually dominated the higher education landscape in Nigeria for several decades. On the other hand, private universities are licensed to address the problem of excessive demand over supply (Oyebade, 2005). Private universities are described as non-public or independent universities, solely owned, financed and managed by private individuals, denominational or secular boards. Often they are operated for profit (Mogaji 2019). While there has been a global trend in private proprietorship of educational institutions over the years (Akpotu & Akpochofo, 2009), Nigeria is not an exception. This aligns with practices in other parts of the world where both private, and public sectors of the economy are involved in the provision and management of university education (Ajayi & Ekundayo, 2008; Marginson, 2007).

The spread of private universities is a recent development as compared to the public universities owned by the government (Ajadi, 2009). Private University evolved during two crucial phases: the first during the second republic under

President Shehu Shagari administration 1979 – 1983. They were abolished in 1983 by the Federal Military Government and prohibited the establishment of new ones, through Decree 19 of 1984 (Akindele, 2013). The second phase was during the fourth republic when a new democratically elected government came into power in 1999. New sets of private universities were approved as the 1999 Constitution approved their establishment to cater for the training of the urgent needed human resources requirement of the country (Adeyemi, 2009). This led to the establishment of the first three private universities. They could be referred to as the pioneer of private universities in Nigeria (Ademola, et al., 2014). These Universities are Babcock at Ilishan Remo in Ogun State(owned and operated by the Seventh-day Adventist Church) Madonna in Okija, Anambra State(owned by the Catholic Church in Nigeria Catholic), and Igbinedion in Okada, Edo (founded by Sir Gabriel Osawaru Igbinedion, a prominent Benin Chief). Since then, private universities have continued to grow in quantity. As of August 2019, there were seventy-nine (79) approved private universities in Nigeria (NUC, 2019).

Unlike public universities, private universities take pride in ensuring that their students finish their degree at the stipulated time; there is no disruption to their studies. Also, these universities are better funded, because the students pay a considerably large amount of money and the infrastructure is present, though the quantity is often debated as the universities are just developing. They may not have many facilities, but apparently, the available ones are very conducive.

The proliferation of private universities in Nigeria as a business enterprise in Nigeria is seen as an emerging phenomenon (Ajadi, 2010), even though ownership of universities as an investment has come to be universally accepted (Akpotu & Akpochafo, 2009). Private universities are often founded by the two main religion in the country and wealthy individuals. The possibilities of other denominations and individuals entering this higher education market to meet the growing demands of students cannot be ignored, with the additional supply, the dynamics of the market is bound to change.

Also, the fees being charged is always a concern for prospective students. Akindele (2013) argued that private universities have the goal of making a profit from their investment, and called for the government to regulate the fees being charged, suggesting there should be benchmarks that should be approved for all private universities in Nigeria. Private universities have been criticised on the basis that they are profit-making ventures. Acknowledging the economic situation and the cost of education in Nigeria, not many people can afford private education, and this is suggested to be widening the social gap, bringing about greater inequality and widening the existing gap between the 'haves' and the 'have nots' (Ajayi & Ekundayo, 2008).

Akindele (2013) further noted that children of wealthy individuals are in private universities creating a class for themselves in society. Concerns have been raised about the criteria for admission into most private universities and quality of training being received by students as admission requirements have been lowered than that of the public universities to attract more students. Akindele (2013) argued that private universities are for those who were left out by the public Universities and those who could not make JAMB cut off marks for the selected university. It must be noted that there is no credible empirical research to verify these claims, suggesting the need for further research, as these contribute to the dynamics of the market. There

will be students choosing private universities because of the lack of facilities, support and strikes experienced by students of public universities.

Conventional Accounts of Policy Failures in Nigeria

Unclear Policy Goals

It has been observed that most policies and plans are inefficient at learning from past experiences. As a result, they often devise ambitious targets which ultimately fall short of their desired outcomes (Ahsan, 2003; the World Bank, 2000). One of the main reasons for such a situation is the absence of reliable data for educational planning in Nigeria. It is very often the case that even official documents carry discrepancies. Ahsan (2003) shows that great variation exists among official and semi-official sources, including basic educational statistics on the percentage of literacy. Tsang (1988) strongly suggests that there is a dire need in developing countries to strengthen the information base to improve policy frameworks. The lack of reliable data hampers policymakers' ability to devise clear policy goals with well-defined implementation plans and evaluation mechanisms which results in poor policy outcomes.

Political Commitment

Issues to do with politics and politicians lie at the root of the problems of implementation in Nigeria. The literature on implementation highlights the importance of political commitment by leadership as critical to policy success (Sabatier and Mazmanian, 1983:158-59). Citing the example of civil service reform in Swaziland, Mc Court (2003) notices that the lack of "political commitment" of government was the principal reason for failure of reform programmes. In the case of Nigeria, there have been many instances where governments have failed to provide the political support needed for implementing and sustaining policy initiatives. Each new

government has discontinued most programmes or projects of its predecessors soon after assuming power. For example, in Akwa Ibom State, the Science Park project started in 2005 and was discontinued in 2007 with the change of government. Other projects and programmes have also failed due to low political commitment at federal, state and local levels.

Ideally, elected representatives are expected to improve mass education in their constituencies by facilitating proper implementation of education development programmes.

Instead they indulge in rewarding their favourites by posting teachers to their desired locations and awarding lucrative contracts to acquaintances. Parliamentarians are also unsure of their tenure owing to continuous political instability; hence many are mainly preoccupied with strategies of strengthening their chances of getting re-elected. For these reasons parliamentarians use their political patronage ineffectively and this causes serious harm to the goals of development projects. This lack of both political will and sustained interest amongst the political leadership largely leaves the task of mass literacy programme to the civil service, which has also been unable to improve the situation so far (Ahsan, 2003:266). Therefore, despite the availability of public policies that exist to better the lot of the average Nigerian, the state unfortunately lacks the political will to positively realise such policy objectives (Paki and Ebiefa, 2011).

Corruption and Misappropriation of Funds

The issues of ineffective governance and corruption, particularly among politicians and civil servants, have also been described as a major obstacle to proper policy implementation in Nigeria. One of the major reasons for the ineffectiveness of governance is lack of coordination and trust among political representatives and government officials, as well as the lack of cooperation among different government departments (Obanya, 2004).

In the case of SAP, the lack of trust among finance and education departments has caused a shortage of finances for the project, which has seriously affected the envisaged outcomes (World Bank: Human Development Sector Unit, 2003:16). This observation suggests issues that are related to the joint action of multiple actors and its inherent problems. The Sri Lankan experience suggests that a reform that involves fewer government agencies would experience more cooperation, and stand a better chance of successful implementation (Cummings et al., 1992:16). The lack of cooperation among different organs of government and their mutual disrespect create several "clearance points" that hamper the overall organisation and implementation of policy (Sabatier and Mazmanian, 1983:6). Eventually, owing to distrust among different agencies and owing to the tendency of the civil service to resist change, policies are implemented only symbolically (Firestone and Corbett, 1988).

This helps to explain the reasons for the ineffectiveness of such recognised policies as community participation in education in Nigeria. Under this policy, the public schools were required to organise Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) with school managing powers. However, because most of such associations were created hastily without proper training, the envisaged benefits to the schools did not materialise. Many community members were also hand-picked by head teachers, and this severely curtailed the effectiveness of community participation.

Lack of proper accountability mechanisms, excessive transfers and corruption are also mentioned as serious governance issues which affect proper implementation of development programmes (World Bank, 2009). Developing countries in general are criticised for their high level of corruption in the machinery of government, and Nigeria falls well below average on key governance indicators including corruption (Stern, 2001:91).

Frequent transfers of officials among education bureaucracies further aggravate the issue; for example, the average tenure of an education secretary in Nigeria was approximately a year at the federal level, which led Stern (2001) to conclude that as a reform program begins to take shape which almost inevitably threatens the interests of some entrenched and powerful group the secretary is dismissed and the reform once again loses momentum. As a result of these reasons, governance structure plays a negative role in policy implementation in Nigeria.

Centralization

One of the recurring criticisms of educational planning in Nigeria is its orientation towards centralisation. Usually the policies and plans are developed in the capital with little or controlled consultation with concerned stakeholders, particularly teachers, parents and head teachers. Due to this centralisation, education policy often fails to capture the subtleties of educational initiatives at the grassroots level, and therefore appears alien to the educational managers who have to implement the policy (Ahsan, 2003). The distance of policymakers from practice not only causes problems for educational managers, but also creates a lack of harmony among different elements of the same policy, such as curriculum development, assessment, teacher education and educational management. Thailand's experience of primary education improvement suggests that involving those who are most affected by policy during the planning phase is strongly related to successful implementation

Resources

Both financial and technical resources along with quality human resources are key factors that contribute to the proper implementation of any policy, particularly if a policy requires the creation of new structures and the hiring of new personnel (Sabatier and Mazmanian, 1983).

Since the 1950s, there has been a rising trend in educational expenditure among developing countries, perhaps due to a perceived positive link between education and economic growth (Edwards, 1980; Simmons, 1980). The trend of public expenditure on education in Nigeria has also been growing since the first five-year National Development Plan (1962-68). However, this still does not seem sufficient to address the current situation, which is dismal compared to other developing countries (Haq and Haq, 1998).

Nigeria spends less than 9% of her annual budget on education; Botswana spends 19.0%, Swaziland, 24.6; Lesotho 17.0; South Africa 25.8; Cote d' Ivoire, 30.0; Burkina Faso, 16.8; Ghana 21; Kenya, 23.0, Uganda, 27.0; Tunisia, 17.0; and, Morocco, 17.7%, (cited in Akinyomi 2012). In the Universal Basic Education (UBE) guidelines, every primary or junior secondary school in Nigeria is expected to have one general science laboratory for elementary science and domestic science; one ventilated improved toilet for a maximum of 40 pupils or students per toilet; and one teacher to handle only 40 pupils or student, in a class. But these criteria are yet to be met and this is considered a major obstacle in realising the implementation targets of education policy in Nigeria.

Furthermore, there is a gap between allocated and actual expenditure on education, as the education budget is allocated based on estimated results and there is a reduction in actual expenditure (Ahsan, 2003:271; Haq and Haq 1998:51). Although the resources allocated to education are meager, it is interesting to note that on many occasions even the amount allocated to education is not fully utilised within the plan period, and the achievement of desired results against the spent amount is consequently not encouraging.

Foreign Aid

A unique problem of education policy in developing countries like Nigeria is the dependence on foreign aid and loans to bridge the budget deficit and finance their development plans. As of March 2013, the total foreign debt of the government of Nigeria stood at around US \$6.65 billion; hence, a large portion of its budget goes to debt servicing each year, which requires further borrowing. As a result, the country is ensnared in the debt trap, with a high degree of dependence on lenders. Financial dependence increases the political pressures that the lending agency or banks can exert on Nigeria and there has been instances when the development loans were clearly linked with some reform packages (Haque, 2004).

The marks of such pressures are visible in many recent policies. For example, instead of working out another five-year poverty reduction strategy, which mainly focuses on economic revival, good governance, poverty alleviation and devolution, where education is considered a tool for poverty alleviation (Ahsan, 2003), the government would be overburdened with debt repayment. This appears to be closely in line with the current focus of the IMF and World Bank. Likewise, after a comparative analysis of education policies of four African countries: Ethiopia, Mozambique, Namibia and Zambia — Takala (1998) concludes that these countries' education policies are significantly influenced by the World Bank agenda and the Jomtien conference recommendations. Such influences hamper the government's effort to develop its policies and plans free of external interference, and push for short term measures to fulfil the immediate requirements of lenders rather than concerted policies and plans to maximise the effects of meagre resources in line with domestic development priorities (Ali, 2005).

The discussion so far clearly shows that many of the developing countries generally and Nigeria particularly have been facing implementation problems for most of their policy history in

education development. At this juncture, let us examine Nigeria aspirations of becoming one of the 20 economies in the world by 2020.

Governance Structures

In private universities, decision-making and directives on major institutional matters typically originate from a single authority the proprietor or president, depending on the institutional nomenclature. Governance is therefore largely centralized and often operates as a “one-man affair.” In contrast, governance in public universities follows established protocols and a committee-based system. Public universities have both internal and external governance structures. Internally, the Vice-Chancellor serves as the executive head. Externally, governance involves multiple actors, including the Visitor, the Federal or State Ministries of Education, the National Universities Commission (NUC), the Chancellor, and the Governing Council headed by the Pro-Chancellor.

Although private universities also maintain governing councils, these bodies are appointed by the proprietors, whereas in public universities, councils are constituted by the government—either federal or state—depending on the institution’s ownership. The National Universities Commission (NUC) exercises regulatory oversight over both public and private universities, though its influence is more pronounced in the public sector due to the latter’s greater dependence on government structures. This pattern of governance differences aligns with the observations recorded by Okojie (2009) as cited in the study.

Entry Requirements

In Nigeria, competition for admission into public universities is extremely high. Students who are unable to secure placement in public institutions typically turn to private universities as

alternatives. Some private universities, particularly those with strong religious orientations, tend to attract students from their associated denominations or communities. For the 2008/2009 admissions cycle, approximately 1.3 million candidates sat for the JAMB examination, but only a little over nine hundred thousand (900,000) results were released. Based on assessed carrying capacities, the National Universities Commission (NUC) approved a total admission quota of 183,000 for all universities—federal, state, and private combined.

Assuming that at least 450,000 candidates passed the examination, this would still leave about 267,000 qualified applicants without admission after the NUC's approved quota of 183,000 had been filled. Despite the NUC's efforts to ensure that universities adhere to their carrying capacities, some institutions exceeded their limits by enrolling far more students than their infrastructure and resources could reasonably support. A study conducted by the National Universities Commission on university carrying capacity revealed that, of the 53 universities surveyed, thirty (56.6%) were over-enrolled, twenty (37.7%) were under-enrolled, and only three (5.7%) had not admitted any students (NUC, 2005).

The reason for this finding is not difficult to identify. Generally, all Nigerian universities—whether federal, state, or private—apply the same basic entry requirement: a minimum of five credit passes, including Mathematics and English Language, obtained at a single sitting, or six credit passes at two sittings. Additional requirements vary depending on the specific programme of study, but overall, the basic admission criteria remain uniform across institutions.

However, variations still occur in practice. In public universities, certain programmes or waivers may be introduced to accommodate applicants from specific ethnic groups or states under the quota system or the “educationally less advantaged” category. Similarly, private universities may exercise preferential considerations influenced by religious affiliation, community networks, or

social groups when admitting students. These practices introduce subtle differences in how admission policies are implemented, even though the formal entry requirements appear uniform

Academic Performance

Research consistently demonstrates a significant difference between students' academic performance in private and public universities in Nigeria, and this gap can be explained through several structural and environmental factors. One key determinant is the availability and quality of educational resources. Private universities generally operate with smaller class sizes, better student–teacher ratios, and improved monitoring systems. These conditions allow lecturers to provide more individualized attention, consistent feedback, and closer academic supervision, all of which contribute to higher student achievement. In contrast, public universities frequently struggle with overcrowded classrooms, limited contact hours, and overstretched academic staff, conditions that make effective teaching and learning more difficult.

Institutional stability also plays a major role. Private universities maintain uninterrupted academic calendars due to their autonomy from national labour union strikes, particularly those involving the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU). This stability promotes steady academic progression, reduces learning disruptions, and minimizes the psychological stress associated with prolonged school closures. Public universities, however, are subject to frequent industrial actions that interrupt academic sessions for months at a time, leading to learning decay, demotivation, and reduced academic momentum, all of which negatively affect student performance.

Another factor is the socioeconomic background of students. Students in private universities often come from families with higher socioeconomic status, giving them access to additional

learning resources such as private tutoring, digital devices, stable internet access, and conducive home environments. These advantages reinforce academic success. Public university students, by comparison, tend to reflect a wider socioeconomic mix, including many who face financial constraints, unstable housing conditions, or competing economic responsibilities that may limit academic concentration and performance.

Resource allocation also differs meaningfully across both sectors. While public universities traditionally possess stronger classroom and library infrastructure due to government investment, private universities tend to prioritize modern laboratories, ICT tools, and digital learning environments. This technological advantage supports more practical, research-based, and interactive learning experiences. Consequently, students in private institutions often benefit from updated facilities that align with contemporary academic and professional demands.

Academic culture and institutional discipline further contribute to the performance gap. Private universities typically enforce strict regulations regarding attendance, dress codes, moral conduct, and academic engagement. These rules create a structured environment that encourages consistent study habits and discourages behaviours that undermine academic success. Public universities, though governed by official regulations, often face challenges with enforcement due to large student populations and administrative limitations.

Despite these distinctions, the credibility of Nigerian university degrees remains an emerging concern. Issues such as inconsistent academic standards, insufficient quality assurance mechanisms, and the mass production of degrees across the system have contributed to declining public confidence in the value of higher education qualifications (Adamu, 2008). This crisis affects both public and private institutions, though its causes vary by sector.

Empirical evidence from the study shows that the average mean score of students in private universities was significantly higher than that of students in public universities. This statistically significant difference reinforces the argument that institutional environment, resource quality, governance structure, and academic support systems collectively shape student performance outcomes across the Nigerian higher education landscape.

The findings of Nwankwoala, (2018) expose the deeply political nature of higher education in Nigeria, particularly the tensions between public and private universities and the policy gaps that sustain these disparities. Although students reported similar factors influencing academic performance across both sectors—such as over-enrolment, inadequate facilities, poor lecturer commitment, and weak learning environments—the divergence in lecturers' perceptions highlights a structural asymmetry embedded in the system. This asymmetry reflects broader political dynamics where public institutions, historically prioritized by government policy, now suffer from chronic underfunding, weak accountability mechanisms, and inconsistent supervision. The issues of overcrowded classrooms, poorly motivated lecturers, and inadequate facilities in public universities are direct outcomes of long-standing policy neglect, bureaucratic interference, and fragmented implementation frameworks.

In contrast, private universities appear to compensate for state inefficiencies through stricter managerial oversight, better monitoring of staff, and more targeted investments in laboratory and computing facilities. This produces a performance gap that is not merely educational but political, signaling the state's gradual retreat from its responsibility to provide equitable, high-quality higher education. Yet national policies—including the National Policy on Education—continue to frame higher education as a public good without addressing the systemic governance

failures, funding inconsistencies, or regulatory loopholes that allow performance gaps to persist between public and private institutions.

The contradictory findings from previous studies regarding the influence of school type on academic performance further reveal the absence of a coherent higher education policy that responds to evolving realities. While some research suggests school type matters, others indicate it does not—a reflection of inconsistent standards, variable institutional capacities, and uneven resource allocation across the system. The study's revelation that private universities generally achieve higher mean performance scores underscores how market-driven educational models are increasingly shaping outcomes, even though national policy continues to rely on outdated assumptions about uniformity across institutions.

Overall, the public–private divide in Nigerian higher education is not simply a matter of institutional difference but a manifestation of deeper political choices and policy failures. The persistence of infrastructural deficits, weak supervision, poor lecturer motivation, and inequitable resource distribution demonstrates that national policies have not adequately responded to the systemic challenges confronting public universities. Until national policy formulation adopts a more realistic, context-sensitive approach—one that confronts governance weaknesses, funding instability, and the operational dynamics of private institutions the disparities in student performance and institutional quality will continue to reflect unresolved political tensions at the heart of Nigeria's higher education system.

Statement of the Problem

According to Eneh and Owo (2009), policy reforms have become the way of life for the government. This is done in order to continue to improve the university educational system so as to achieve the expected goals. However, despite these policy reforms and constant summersaults in Nigeria, which are attempts at correcting the wrongs in the system, very little has been achieved. Nwankwaola (2018) and Daniel-Kalio (2018) highlighted that the problem is not so much about making sound policies but it is with poor policy implementation. He further states that Nigeria's education sector is facing many challenges mainly because successive governments failed to properly continue the various policies so far introduced. Thus, the institutional activities often lack alignment with institutional goals or fail to translate into sustainable practice changes. This study therefore investigates the practices, challenges, and impacts of transformative leadership in enhancing equity, innovation, and professional development among educators in Nigerian higher education institutions.

Significance of study

The significance of this study lies in its potential to contribute to leadership theory and practice within Nigeria's educational landscape. The findings are expected to:

1. Inform policy decisions regarding professional development and institutional reforms
2. Bridge the gap between Transformation leadership theory and practice by offering contextually relevant strategies for educational transformation
3. Contribute to the academic discourse on equity-oriented and innovation-driven leadership in Nigeria and other developing countries.

Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to examine the role of transformative educational leadership in promoting equity and innovation through educator professional growth and in Nigerian public universities. Specifically, to evaluate how relevant studies on transformation leadership drive development in education.

By highlighting best practices and systemic challenges, this literature review aims to empower educational leaders to cultivate more equitable, creative, and sustainable learning institutions.

Definition of Terms

Transformational educational leadership is an emerging paradigm that redefines the role of leaders in shaping equitable and innovative learning environments. Unlike traditional managerial approaches that emphasize control, compliance, and hierarchy, transformative leadership focuses on inspiring and empowering educators, fostering shared vision, and promoting systemic change (Ozopelide et al., 2024). It calls for leaders who can challenge the status quo, embrace diversity.

Description of Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership, as a concept, was first introduced by James V. Downton in 1973 and has been further developed by numerous scholars, including James MacGregor Burns, Bernard M. Bass, and Bruce J. Avolio (Cherry, 2023). The core idea behind transformational leadership lies in the ability of leaders to inspire and motivate followers to achieve more than what they initially thought possible. This type of leadership focuses on fostering positive change within individuals, teams, and organizations by promoting growth, innovation, and collaboration.

Marshall Sashkin and Molly Sashkin (2003) describe the elements of transformational leadership as “ABC”: Affect emotion and feelings; Behavioural intent, confidence to act; and Cognition, the basis for vision (Sashkin & Sashkin, 2003). Transformational leaders are characterized by their ability to create and communicate a compelling vision, empower, and support followers, and model the desired behaviours, values, and attitudes. They are known for strong emotional intelligence, adaptability, and ability to inspire and engage others (Gill, 2011).

Validity, Practicality, and Usefulness of Transformational Leadership

The validity of transformational leadership as a highly effective leadership approach has been well-established through numerous empirical studies across various contexts, including education (Jovanovic & Ciric, 2016). Research has consistently demonstrated that transformational leaders can positively influence the motivation, engagement, and performance of their followers (Cherry, 2023). In the educational context, transformational leadership has been linked to numerous positive outcomes, such as increased student achievement, teacher satisfaction, and school climate improvement (Jovanovic & Ciric, 2016).

Practically, transformational leadership is a highly applicable and adaptable approach, as it can help leaders effectively navigate the complexities of the ever-changing educational landscape by focusing on collaboration, innovation, and continuous improvement. They can tailor their leadership strategies to meet the unique needs of their followers and the specific contexts in which they operate (Tech, 2023). This flexibility makes transformational leadership a highly practical and relevant choice for educational leaders.

The usefulness of transformational leadership in education is evident through its ability to bring about positive change and improvement at multiple levels. Transformational leaders promote a culture of learning, growth, and collaboration, which fosters a sense of collective ownership and

responsibility among educators and students alike (Jovanovic & Ciric, 2016). By empowering and supporting their followers, transformational leaders can create an environment in which all members of the educational community can thrive and contribute to the overall success of the institution.

Leadership

Leadership as a concept has enjoyed numerous definitions by various scholars. It is seen as an elastic concept that transcends all fields of human endeavours. At face value, when asked about what leadership is all about, we often say it is simply the act of leading people. Meaning that followership is an element to be seen if one is leading. According to Nye (2008), Leadership can be described as assisting a group in formulating and attaining common objectives. Also, Akinbode, Fagbohunbe (2012) see leadership as the “process of impacting the actions of a person within a group with the consciousness of goal attainment in a given circumstance. It has to do with affecting people so that they will strive eagerly and excitedly towards the accomplishment of group goals.” Similarly, Northouse (2021) posits that leadership involves a process in which an individual influences a group of people to achieve mutual objectives.

Corroborating the preceding, leadership is also seen as “a means to impact followers through a correspondence procedure to accomplish certain objectives” (Alipour, Aslani, Rahimi, 2013). Fasola, Adeyemi, Olowe (2013) argue that “leadership is tied to having a mental picture of the future and exhibiting the capacity to transform that vision without hesitation by affecting others to perform at more elevated levels and advancing the significance of organisational and interpersonal citizenship practices”. In a similar vein, Ogbah (2013) sees leadership “as how the leader implements and rouses its subordinates towards achieving the organisational objectives”.

Armstrong, Taylor (2014) avers that leadership is the act of “rousing followers to do their best to accomplish the ideal outcome”.

His definition considers the development and effective communication of a vision that is futuristic, encourages people and secures their commitment. Leadership can also be described as the development of a future vision, alongside the motivation of members to achieve the visions set aside which ultimately determine the performance of the organisation (Schiuma, Schettini, Santarsiero, Carlucci, 2022). The various definitions imply that one of the roles of leadership is to establish clear goals for a group of people and harness the contribution of those members to achieve those pre-determined goals. In other words, leadership is defined as a recognisable activity or set of activities that occurs in a group and this involves a leader and followers who enthusiastically buy into common goals and work together to achieve them. This leads to the unending debate on the distinction between leadership and management.

Policy Implementation

Policy is a law, regulation, procedure, administrative action, incentive, or voluntary practice of governments and other institutions. Policy decisions are frequently reflected in resource allocations (Centers for Disease Control and Protection, 2015). According to Torjman (2005) policy is a broad concept that embodies several different dimensions. He further defined public policy as “a deliberate and (usually) careful decision that provides guidance for addressing selected public concerns”. Policies guide organizations, institutions and the world at large. Without policies in a place, activities/programmes will be without direction and purpose. Okoroma (2006) argued that policy serves the purpose of ensuring that every official action of an organization/institution has a backing. It brings about a meaningful relationship between the

objective of a business and the operations of the business and discourages deviations from planned courses of action. Accordingly, the formulation of the right policies and their effective implementation are very critical to the success of any organization. After the policy makers have gathered experts to plan and formulate good and flawless policies, the second stage of the policy process is ensuring its proper implementation. Policy implementation therefore means the putting into action all the plans enunciated in a policy. The implementation gives life to the policy itself. Reason implementation is considered by some scholars as the most active and important phase of the policy process. In Nigeria, policy implementation involves all of the activities designed to carry out the policies made by the legislative arm of government or any other authorized body (Daniel-Kalio, 2018). The implication of the above in Nigerian universities is that all the different types of policies formulated by the Federal Government, National Universities Commission (NUC), University Governing Council, University senate etc are implemented by the leadership of the universities at different levels to facilitate goal achievement (Atelhe & Akande 2018).

The success and/or failure of any policy are majorly determined by its implementation. The need for effective policy implementation and the likely factors that may constitute an obstacle is perhaps the reason Ikelegbe (2006) in Atelhe and Akande (2018; 1) identified some crucial questions bordering on policy implementation to be answered by those involved which include questions like, how is the policy being implemented by the implementing institution and how is the target group responding to the implementation of the policy, etc? A policy is a mere statement on paper if not implemented. So these and many more questions should be considered always in policy implementation.

Ikelegbe (2006) in Atelhe and Akande (2018; 2) submits the following questions critical to the implementation process of policies.

- How is the policy being implemented by the implementing institution?
- How is the target group responding to the implementation of the policy?
- Does the implementing institution have the resources to effectively implement the policy?
- Does the implementing institution have the willingness and motivation to implement the policy as directed?
- Is the societal problem adequately understood through wide consultation and proper analysis and for which the policy being implemented considered adequate and in the right direction
- To what extent does personal, group or institutional interest or prejudice predispose the implementing institution not to implement the policy the way it is intended or not to implement it at all?
- How does the relevant government organ monitor and supervise the implementation of the policy?

Teachers Professional Development

According to Darling-Hammond et al., (2017) effective professional development can be defined as structured professional learning that results in changes in a teacher's knowledge and practice.

Desimone (2009) argues that effective professional development possesses a strong content focus, features active learning, is collaborative and aligned with relevant curricula and policies,

and provides sufficient learning time for participants. Pedagogical staff development can take many different forms and may vary depending on the institution and its priorities but generally should include a mix of workshops, seminars, coaching, mentoring, and other forms of support. It may be mandatory or voluntary. However, the goal is always to provide instructors with the support they need to continually improve their teaching skills and stay current with the latest trends and practices in higher education.

A growing interest in this field can be found across European higher education institutions as more and more aim to promote pedagogical training programs to enhance the quality of teaching and learning and address the challenges of student-centered learning (Gaebel et al., 2018). Reports from European organizations provide evidence of the importance of pedagogical staff development in higher education institutions. For example, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) has developed a set of Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (Cardoso, 2015). The ESG highlights the importance of providing support for the professional development of academic staff, including training in new pedagogies and teaching methods. The European University Association (EUA) also published a report on the state of teaching and learning in the European higher education area (Gaebel et al., 2018). The report emphasizes the need for universities to prioritize staff development, arguing that training and support for academic staff in their teaching role is essential to ensuring that they can design and deliver high-quality teaching and learning experiences. The literature has also addressed the reasons why professional development programs in higher education are needed (Cardoso, 2015). These are critical to promote teaching quality, fostering a culture of continuous improvement, supporting faculty career development, meeting the needs of diverse student populations, and supporting institutional goals. Although

academics enter the teaching profession with excellent knowledge of the content of their fields, most of them received very little preparation for teaching (Al-hattami et al., 2013). The literature on teachers' professional development has focused on several topics, including the support provided to teachers at their institutions (Robinson, and Hope, 2013; Elmahdi et al., 2015), the impact of such programs on faculty members and students (Kamel, 2016; Postareff et al., 2007), and the different purposes underpinning professional development activities (Muammar and Alkathiri, 2017) among others. The literature on pedagogical training and professional development in higher education calls attention to the fact that pedagogical training, rather than aiming at the mere acquisition of techniques, should, above all, give priority to providing spaces for joint reflection of teachers on the curriculum and on pedagogical practices and decisions (Steinert et al., 2016).

Teacher Professional Growth

Teacher education refers to professional education of teachers towards attainment of attitudes, skills and knowledge considered desirable so as to make them efficient and effective in their work, in accordance with the need of a given society at any point in time. It includes training and or education occurring before commencement of service (pre-service) and during service (in-service or on-the-job). Every society requires adequate human and material resources to improve its social organization, preserve the culture, enhance economic development and reform the political structures. Education is often seen as a prerequisite for quality manpower development and creation of wealth, a sure path to success in life and service to humanity. Thus, teachers have an important role to play to adequately prepare the young for their roles in the society in order to achieve the set national objectives.

Education is an inevitable tool for sustainable development and a vehicle for advancing the frontier of knowledge (Abdul-Kareem, 2001). In this regard, education is severally conceived and inculcated by people of varying backgrounds, ages, needs and aspirations for sustainable development. The potency of education is more evident in its globalization trends imbued with instrumental values of nurturing productive citizens for sustainable development and democracy. Education has been recognized as a process of imparting knowledge, skills and attitudes to the learners. Teachers' influence is always felt in every aspect of society. The effectiveness of any educational system depends greatly on the educational attainment of teachers because no system of education can be qualitatively higher than the quality and commitment of its teachers.

The fact remains that teaching and learning depend on teachers for there can be no meaningful socio-economic and political development in any country without teachers. It is on teachers' numbers, quality and devotion that rest the effectiveness of all educational arrangements, development and growth. Even the educational planners may have the best educational policies and designs, the government may vote the largest sum of its revenue to education, but the ultimate realization of any set of aims for education depends on the teacher. It is the teacher who will ultimately be responsible for translating policy into action and principles into practice in their interactions with their students. (Ukeje, 1996). supported this fact when he stated that education unlocks the door to modernization, and added that it is the teachers who hold the key to that door. (Afe, 1992), states that the realization of the educational objectives depends on the quality and quantity of the available teaching manpower. This can be influenced by the availability of adequate training and retraining programmes for those about to teach and those already teaching respectively. Hence, the efficiency of teacher training should be the main determining factor in the success or failure of education to meet the country's needs. The training

is the policies and procedures designed to equip prospective teachers with the knowledge, attitudes and skills they require to perform their tasks effectively in the classroom, school and wider community. Education is the most powerful instrument for social and economic progress.

It is the greatest power known to man for his\her own improvements. Teachers are the heart and soul of the educational enterprises, indeed, the life of the school system depends on them. Teachers belong to the profession which has the only potential of determining the social, economic, political and moral destiny of every Nigerian citizen. This fact underscores the necessity for teacher education to be perceived as a sacred duty that must never be toyed with if teaching must fulfill its divine professional mandate of cultivating generations of highly responsible, disciplined and useful Nigerians. However, teacher education should be regarded as the bedrock for national development. (Talabi, 1985) (Bofarin, 1986) (Afe, 1995) the major problem facing the nation has been getting teachers of quality. For teacher quality to rise above the educational system, a strong teacher education programme is required. This paper talks about the need for teacher education, the ideal teacher education, teacher education and national development, reviews the historical development of teacher education in Nigeria, and further examines teacher education reforms as undertaken by Phelps-Stokes and Ashby commissions, Nigeria regional governments, as well as the post-independence efforts. Subsequently, the paper identifies and discusses the challenges facing teacher education in the country and gives suggestions towards improving the system.

The Need for Teacher Education

Ogunyinka et al., (2015) opines that teacher education is policies and procedures designed to equip prospective teachers with the knowledge, attitude, behaviors and skills they require to

perform their tasks effectively in the classroom, school, the church/mosque and the local and wider society. Although, ideally it should be conceived of and organized as a seamless continuum, teacher education is often divided into three stages:

- Initial teacher training (teacher candidates)
- Induction (the process of providing training and support during the first few years of teaching or the first year in a particular school).
- Teacher development or continuing professional development (CPD) (an intensive process for practicing

Methodology

The method used to address the question and sub-questions is a literature review. To conduct the literature search for this paper, I accessed the University of Alberta's library and focused primarily on peer-reviewed articles from the following databases: ERIC, ProQuest, Sage Journals, Taylor & Francis, and Google Scholar. The search was predominantly limited to scholarly journal articles published between 2015 and 2025 to ensure the inclusion of current research; however, relevant literature from outside this time frame was also incorporated. Key search terms included "Nigerian education system," "Systems Thinking," "Transformational educational leadership," "Reflective Practitioner," and "leadership theories". Additionally, I used insights and literature from my previous inquiry projects and books on educational leadership, educational change, and educational policy to enrich the analysis and contextualize the findings.

Theoretical framework

Transformative Leadership Theory

Transformative Leadership Theory provides the moral and social foundation for equitable and innovative education. According to Shields (2010), transformative leadership extends beyond improving organizational efficiency to challenging inequities, rethinking institutional culture, and creating conditions for inclusive growth. In the context of Nigerian higher education, transformative leadership entails fostering a culture where university leaders actively question entrenched hierarchies, promote inclusive participation, and develop educators as agents of change. As Nnaji, (Nnaji, 2024) argues, transformation begins with critical consciousness, and the ability to perceive and to act upon social, cultural, and institutional constraints. This approach aligns with the need to advance equity and innovation in Nigerian universities by:

- Encouraging leaders to prioritize fairness, diversity, and access in academic and administrative practices.
- Developing professional learning environments where educators' voices influence decision-making.
- Creating a collective vision that links innovation to social responsibility.

Thus, transformative leadership serves as the ethical compass of this study, grounding the evaluation of professional growth and change practices in moral, social, and educational justice (Shields and Hesbol, 2020).

Senge's Systems Thinking Framework

Peter Senge's (1990) *Systems Thinking* offers an organizational and structural lens for understanding how Nigerian public universities function as interconnected systems. Senge

identifies five key disciplines—Personal Mastery, Mental Models, Shared Vision, Team Learning, and Systems Thinking—which together form the foundation of a learning organization.

This study adopts Senge's framework to explain how leadership practices can promote collective learning and sustainable change within complex educational systems. The definitions of the components are as follows.

- Personal mastery: involves continuous self-improvement by both leaders and educators, aligning personal aspirations with institutional goals.
- Mental models: encourage leaders to challenge assumptions and traditional bureaucratic patterns that hinder innovation.
- Shared vision: builds commitment to a common purpose that transcends individual or departmental boundaries.
- Team learning: fosters collaboration, dialogue, and reflective practice among educators.
- Systems thinking: The integrative discipline, enables leaders to see patterns, feedback loops, and interdependencies rather than isolated events.

Applied to Nigerian universities, Senge's model highlights the need for leadership that views professional growth not as isolated training activities but as part of an evolving institutional ecosystem. It underscores that meaningful change occurs when all actors—administrators, faculty, and policy stakeholders—interact within a coherent learning culture.

Through this lens, transformative educational leadership becomes a systemic process of aligning structures, relationships, and capacities toward shared goals of equity and innovation.

Transformative and Transformational Leadership

Uhl-Bien (2006) describes leadership as a relational process that elevates both leaders and followers toward higher levels of morality and motivation. Its four core dimensions: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration, collectively empower followers to exceed expectations through shared vision and intrinsic motivation (Bass, 1990).

Contemporary interpretations of transformational leadership emphasize its human-centred and change-oriented nature, positioning leaders as visionaries who mobilize others for change (Northouse, 2017). In educational contexts, Leithwood (2014) and Marzano (2015) argue that transformational leadership fosters teacher empowerment, collaborative culture, and innovation.

Building on this foundation, Shields (2010) introduces Transformative Leadership Theory, which extends transformational leadership by infusing it with principles of equity, social justice, and moral purpose. According to Shields, transformative leadership not only inspires followers but also challenges systemic inequities and reimagines institutions as inclusive spaces of empowerment. This distinction is crucial in the Nigerian context, where structural inequality, funding disparities, and policy inconsistencies have constrained educational advancement (Opatunde & Oredein, 2023).

Components of transformational leadership:

(Avolio et al., 2019) identified four dimensions of transformational leadership: these are intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, inspirational motivation and idealized influence.

Intellectual stimulation: is concerned with the role of leaders to challenge creativity and innovation among followers; the leader stimulates followers to explore new ways of doing things, opportunities to learn and finding solutions to difficult problems (Bass, 1985).

Individualized consideration: refers to leaders who pay attention to the needs of each individual for accomplishment and growth to their full potential. They provide customized socio-emotional support to the followers while developing and helping them to self-actualize (Bass and Avolio, 1990).

Inspirational motivation: refers to the way leaders motivate and inspire their followers to reach ambitious goals and view the future with optimism. These leaders are also able to help followers experience the same passion and motivation to fulfill goals. They encourage them to achieve levels of performance beyond their own expectations. Leaders with inspirational motivation have a collective vision that they are able to articulate to followers (Bass, 1985).

Idealized influence: refers to leaders who act as strong role models for their subordinates due to their exceptional abilities and high principles of ethical and moral conduct. They prioritize subordinates' needs as compared to their own needs and offer them a vision. Idealized influence has two aspects: first, idealized influence behavior, which is linked with the charismatic actions of the leader reflecting his values, beliefs, sense of mission, ethical and moral orientation. Second, idealized influence is attributed, which is related to the attributes given to the leader by

their subordinates, and how the leader is perceived by the follower as being confident and powerful (Avolio et al., 1999).

According to the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ), transformational leadership may be applied in a range of circumstances and has a favorable impact on followers' happiness, motivation, and performance. The MLQ has also been shown to assist leaders in critically evaluating their own leadership styles and pinpointing opportunities for development, according to Avolio and Bass (1990).

In light of this, "Building on the work of Burns (2018), Bass (1985) and Leithwood (2014) developed the transformation model of school leadership" (Marzano, 2015). The fact that "transformational leaders not only manage structure but also purposefully impact the culture in order to change it" (Harris, 2013) is significant as the engagement between leaders and followers who have the same goal is a key component of transformational leadership (Burns, 1985). The performance of followers must be improved, and followers must be fully developed, according to transformational leaders (Avolio, 2019). A significant and remarkable impact may be had on followers by transformational leaders because they can motivate followers to go beyond their own self-interests (Robbins & Judge, 2015). According to Feinberg, Ostroff, and Burke (2015), transformative leadership primarily inspires followers.

Transformational Leadership and Equity

Transformational leadership features practice that promotes shared vision, mutual understanding, and participatory engagement between the institutions and lecturers for the development of the students. Educational equity is referred to as ensuring that all learners and educators have fair

access to resources, opportunities, and support. From available sources, some Nigerian universities that have recorded significant progress in gender equity demonstrate the central role of transformative and transformational leadership in addressing historical gender imbalances in higher education. At the University of Ibadan and Obafemi Awolowo University, gender-sensitive and affirmative action policies, supported by institutional structures such as Gender Mainstreaming Offices and Centres for Gender and Social Policy Studies, have created formal pathways for women's advancement into senior academic and administrative roles (Ekine et al., 2013; Ogunlade, 2020). These institutions have complemented policy reforms with structured mentorship, leadership training, and family-friendly workplace practices, including flexible work schedules and extended maternity leave, which reduce structural barriers that disproportionately affect women's academic progression (Adedoyin & Adedoyin, 2020). Such approaches reflect equity-driven leadership that embeds fairness and inclusion into institutional governance rather than treating gender equity as a peripheral concern. Also, Adebola (2025) found that transformative leadership traits, intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, idealized influence, and inspirational motivation serve as critical catalysts for educational growth and development. Using data from colleges of education in South-West Nigeria, Adebola demonstrated that leaders who mentor staff, stimulate creativity, and model ethical behaviour foster both academic excellence and institutional trust.

Similarly, Awoyemi et al. (2024) conceptualized transformational leadership as a model for enhancing educational quality and addressing accessibility challenges. Their research highlights the role of visionary and inclusive leadership in bridging socio-economic and infrastructural disparities, particularly through collaboration with stakeholders and the integration of digital

technologies. By inspiring shared goals and mobilizing community engagement, transformational leaders address both structural inequities and pedagogical innovation.

Thus, transformative leadership for equity in Nigeria extends beyond the moral dimension, it embodies strategic empowerment, leveraging participatory leadership and contextual responsiveness to ensure inclusivity and sustainability in higher education.

Educational Leadership and Innovation

Innovation in education entails rethinking traditional teaching, learning, and administrative paradigms to respond to emerging global and local demands. Transformative educational leadership, through its emphasis on intellectual stimulation, encourages critical thinking, creativity, and openness to new ideas (Bass, 1990; Harris, 2013).

Empirical findings across Nigeria demonstrate a growing link between leadership innovation and institutional effectiveness. Ozopelide, Binuyo, and Akpa (2024) observed that transformational leadership significantly influences teaching efficiency and institutional performance in federal universities in South-west Nigeria. Similarly, Babalola (2024) and Adeoye and Ainnubi (2024) emphasize that visionary leadership practices—such as encouraging experimentation, promoting research collaboration, and integrating technology-- directly correlate with institutional growth and knowledge production.

The integration of Senge's (1990) *Systems Thinking Framework* provides an additional layer of understanding. Senge's concept of the *learning organization* underscores the interconnectedness of leadership, institutional structures, and professional learning communities. The five disciplines personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, team learning, and systems thinking

offer a practical roadmap for universities to sustain innovation through collective learning and reflective feedback. Transformative leaders apply these principles to cultivate adaptive systems where educators continuously learn, reflect, and innovate in alignment with institutional goals.

Transformative Educational Leadership in the Nigerian Context

Nigeria's higher education landscape is characterized by challenges such as limited funding, infrastructural decay, leadership inefficiency, and low staff morale (Dei, 2024). Despite these constraints, studies have documented instances of transformative leadership in action. Ozopelide et al., (2024) highlights educational leadership as a catalyst for community transformation, advocating participatory governance and context-driven solutions to systemic problems showing instances of federal universities in South-West Nigeria, which empirically validates that transformative leadership practices are significantly correlated with institutional development outcomes. His findings mirror the broader national trend toward leadership that integrates vision, mentorship, and inclusivity. Moreover, Awoyemi et al. (2024) demonstrate that transformational leadership is effective across diverse educational contexts, urban and rural, and underserved underscoring its scalability and adaptability within Nigeria's complex educational system.

However, both Adebola (2025) and Awoyemi et al. (2024) note persistent implementation barriers: resistance to change, resource constraints, and limited leadership training opportunities. These challenges highlight the need for policy frameworks that institutionalize transformative leadership principles across Nigeria's public universities.

Rethinking Professional Learning: From Professionalism to Practitioner Learning

The concept of professionalism has long been at the centre of debates concerning teacher development and continuous professional learning. However, the term itself remains highly contested and politically charged, often carrying contradictory meanings, depending on the historical, social, and institutional contexts in which it is used. J. Derrick's (year of publication) discussion on *practitioner learning* offers a critical departure from traditional notions of professionalism, proposing instead a practice-based approach to teacher development that extends beyond the limitations of technocratic and elitist frameworks.

Implications for Theory and Practice

This literature review contributes to the evolving theoretical discourse on educational leadership by reinforcing the relevance of transformative and transformational leadership frameworks in driving systemic change within higher education institutions in developing contexts. The findings affirm that leadership is not solely a managerial function but a transformative social process that aligns institutional goals with moral purpose, professional growth, and innovation.

Integration with Systems Thinking

The results further validate Senge's (1990) *Systems Thinking Framework* as a complementary lens for understanding educational transformation. The interdependence among intellectual stimulation, professional learning, and institutional coherence illustrates that leadership operates within a dynamic system of feedback loops. Nigerian public universities that adopt systemic approaches such as reflective feedback structures, shared visioning, and collaborative learning communities exemplify the effectiveness of applying systems thinking to educational leadership

theory. This reinforces the notion that sustainable change requires holistic, rather than linear, models of reform.

Practical Implications

The practical implications of this study highlight strategic pathways for policy reform, institutional practice, and leadership development in Nigerian public universities. Applying transformative leadership principles can redefine how educational leaders conceptualize equity, professional growth, and innovation within their institutions.

Recommendation

Given the demonstrated influence of transformational leadership on teaching efficiency, it is recommended that educational policymakers and university administrators prioritize leadership development programs focused on cultivating these qualities among academic leaders. Such initiatives should include training sessions, workshops, and mentorship programs tailored to enhance visionary thinking, inspiration, intellectual stimulation, supportiveness, and servant leadership behaviors among university administrators and faculty members. Additionally, fostering a culture that values and encourages these leadership traits within academic institutions can further amplify their impact on teaching efficiency and overall educational quality.

Conclusion

The findings of this study affirm a significant relationship between transformational leadership and the advancement of higher education in Nigeria. This underscores the pivotal role of leadership in shaping educational outcomes. Leaders who exhibit these transformative qualities

are likely to foster an environment conducive to effective teaching practices. This conclusion emphasizes the importance of cultivating and nurturing transformational leadership behaviors within academic institutions to enhance teaching effectiveness and ultimately contribute to the overall quality of education. The effect of transformational leadership style on university performance was examined in the context of Nigerian universities. The paper has established empirically a positive effect among the study variables. Therefore, the paper has further validated the theory of transformational leadership style and concludes that transformational leadership style has a positive effect on university performance,

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