

## DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A STUDY OF FACULTY LEADERSHIP AND ITS IMPACT ON UNIVERSITY EFFECTIVENESS

Chinomso Edna OMEZURIKE

Department of Educational Management, Faculty of Education, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Nigeria

[talk2chinomso@yahoo.com](mailto:talk2chinomso@yahoo.com)

<https://orcid.org/0009-0006-1293-7441>

**ABSTRACT:** This paper advances a strong position in support of distributed leadership in higher education, specifically within the context of public universities in sub-Saharan Africa, with emphasis on Nigeria. It critiques the enduring dominance of centralized administrative governance models that systematically exclude faculty from key decision-making processes, thereby limiting institutional effectiveness, responsiveness, and academic relevance. Drawing from Complexity Leadership Theory and the Adaptive Leadership Perspective, the paper argues that distributed leadership grounded in shared responsibility and collective agency offers a more context-sensitive, participatory, and adaptive alternative. Faculty members, being central to teaching, research, curriculum reform, student development, and scholarly innovation, are best positioned to lead institutional transformation from within. Their empowerment enhances academic standards, fosters inclusive governance, and supports organizational learning and performance. The paper synthesizes theoretical insights and documented institutional challenges to highlight how faculty exclusion reinforces governance inefficiencies, weakens professional agency, and inhibits reform. It proposes actionable strategies to institutionalize distributed leadership through policy revision, cultural reorientation, inclusive governance practices, and structured capacity building. The paper concludes by asserting that the future of African higher education depends on abandoning hierarchical rigidity in favor of faculty-led models that promote trust, shared accountability, and academic integrity. Distributed leadership, when genuinely adopted, offers a sustainable path toward institutional innovation, relevance, and long-term effectiveness.

**Keywords:** Distributed Leadership, Faculty Governance, University Effectiveness, Academic Leadership, Institutional Reform, African Higher Education, Public Universities, Policy Innovation.

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## INTRODUCTION

The evolution of leadership in higher education has been deeply influenced by inherited colonial governance structures, bureaucratic traditions, and the steady expansion of managerial rationalism that privileges hierarchical models of control. Historically, leadership in universities has followed a top-down trajectory where administrative elites like vice-chancellors, registrars, and governing councils exert considerable authority over institutional processes, often with limited input from academic stakeholders (Deem, 2015). This centralization, while useful for administrative clarity and regulatory compliance, has often resulted in rigid decision-making cultures that undermine responsiveness, innovation, and internal accountability. The prevalence

of centralized models in African higher education, particularly in public universities in Nigeria, can be traced to postcolonial legacies that valorize command-based administration over collaborative governance (Saint et al., 2003). Over time, these systems have reinforced a vertical power dynamic where faculty members despite being central to the knowledge production function of universities remain marginal in leadership discourse and practice.

This administrative dominance in higher education has created conditions that systematically exclude academic staff from key institutional decisions, particularly in areas related to strategic planning, budgeting, quality assurance, and policy formulation. As Oanda and Jowi (2013) observed that many African universities have become overly managerial in orientation, reducing the influence of academics to functional implementation rather than strategic leadership. The resulting alienation of faculty voices contributes to disconnect between academic priorities and institutional goals, weakening the legitimacy and effectiveness of university governance. In Nigeria, for instance, the power asymmetry between administrative leaders and academic staff is evident in the underrepresentation of teaching faculty in governing boards, the sidelining of academic unions in institutional policy discussions, and the procedural limitations placed on senate-level participation (Nwagwu, 2020). These practices not only diminish morale and professional agency among faculty but also erode the intellectual foundation upon which the university as an institution is built.

Contemporary discourse in leadership studies, however, increasingly critiques these hierarchical models and advocates for more participatory frameworks that recognize the complexity of higher education environments. One such framework is distributed leadership, which emphasizes leadership as a shared and collective process enacted by multiple actors across an organization (Spillane, 2006). Unlike traditional models that concentrate authority at the top, distributed leadership acknowledges the value of lateral and collaborative forms of engagement where faculty, staff, and even students contribute meaningfully to institutional direction. According to Bolden et al. (2009), distributed leadership aligns with the democratic ethos of the academy and fosters trust, autonomy, and professional accountability. It allows academic institutions to harness the diverse expertise within their communities and adapt to changing educational, social, and technological landscapes. Within African contexts, this model presents a promising alternative to administrative rigidity, enabling universities to respond more effectively to internal challenges and external expectations (Lukong & Ubogu, 2022).

In Nigeria's public universities, the case for distributed leadership is particularly compelling. Institutions face multiple crises like underfunding, infrastructural decay, strikes, and deteriorating research output many of which are exacerbated by leadership that is disconnected from the academic mission. Centralized governance has proven insufficient in navigating these complexities, often resulting in decision paralysis or misalignment between administrative imperatives and academic realities. Studies by Obasi and Eboh (2019) revealed that when faculty are empowered to lead within their disciplinary and administrative spaces, institutions exhibit greater responsiveness, curricular relevance, and research productivity. Yet, most Nigerian universities continue to operate with a narrow leadership bandwidth that excludes those best positioned to understand and solve institutional problems: the academics themselves.

This paper asserts that a shift toward distributed leadership with a deliberate emphasis on faculty inclusion is essential for revitalizing governance and improving institutional effectiveness in public universities across Nigeria and the broader sub-Saharan African region. This position is anchored not in empirical fieldwork but in a synthesis of theoretical perspectives, policy analyses, and documented challenges confronting African higher education. Faculty members

must not be viewed merely as service providers but as strategic partners whose intellectual engagement and professional experiences can guide decision-making, reform processes, and institutional innovation. Such an orientation aligns with the African Union's (2015) Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA), which calls for participatory and inclusive governance in higher education as a pathway toward continental transformation.

The scope of this paper is intentionally delineated to reflect the governance realities of public universities in sub-Saharan Africa, with a strong emphasis on Nigeria as a case reference. This focus is justified by the systemic nature of faculty exclusion, the enduring influence of colonial-era leadership structures, and the urgent need for structural reform within public higher education systems. While global trends and Western scholarship inform the conceptual foundations of distributed leadership, this paper prioritizes African perspectives, experiences, and institutional specificities. It draws heavily on insights from local scholars, regional policy documents, and contextual literature to ground its argument in the socio-political realities of African academia. Narrowing its institutional focus to public universities ensures a targeted critique of bureaucratic entrenchment and facilitates practical proposals rooted in the lived realities of faculty and administrators within Nigeria's educational landscape.

Unlike empirical studies that seek to measure outcomes or test hypotheses, this paper adopts a normative and analytical stance. It critiques existing leadership practices, synthesizes theoretical insights, and constructs a persuasive argument for why and how faculty-led distributed leadership can enhance university effectiveness. As such, the paper seeks to bridge the conceptual and operational gaps in governance by reasserting the centrality of academic leadership in institutional reform. Through this critical and reflective exploration, it positions distributed leadership as not merely an administrative alternative, but a necessity for cultivating inclusive, accountable, and high-performing universities in the African context.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS**

The call for distributed leadership in higher education institutions necessitates a solid theoretical foundation capable of explaining why traditional hierarchical models falter in complex academic environments and why shared leadership holds transformative potential. Given the intricate, dynamic, and multi-layered nature of universities particularly in the public sector of sub-Saharan Africa it becomes essential to draw from theoretical constructs that reflect the challenges of change, complexity, and institutional engagement. This section advances the integration of Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT) and the Adaptive Leadership Perspective, arguing that together they provide the conceptual scaffolding for promoting a faculty-centered distributed leadership model. These theories frame leadership as emergent, contextual, and interactive fitting models for navigating the bureaucratic inertia and systemic leadership exclusions facing Nigerian and African universities. They challenge conventional hierarchies by emphasizing collaboration, responsiveness, and institutional learning, all of which are central to advancing faculty-driven leadership structures within the distributed leadership discourse.

### **Complexity Leadership Theory**

Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT), initially proposed by Mary Uhl-Bien, Russ Marion, and Bill McKelvey and cited in Jaseen (2021) offered a compelling lens for understanding leadership in systems that are dynamic, adaptive, and structurally non-linear such as higher

education institutions. CLT shifts the focus from individual agency and positional authority to the broader processes through which leadership emerges in complex, knowledge-intensive environments. The theory identifies three primary leadership roles: adaptive, administrative, and enabling. Administrative leadership represents traditional hierarchical management, while adaptive leadership is embedded in informal, emergent, and often horizontal interactions among organizational members. Enabling leadership serves as a bridging function, facilitating interactions between administrative control and adaptive processes to stimulate innovation and institutional transformation (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007, as cited in Jaseen, 2021).

One of the core assumptions of CLT is that leadership is a social process that arises from complex interactions rather than from formal roles or titles. In the context of universities, this implies that leadership can and should emerge at multiple levels, especially from academic staff who are intimately familiar with the institutional ecosystem. In African public universities, where administrative bottlenecks often limit agility and responsiveness, CLT provides a conceptual escape from rigid hierarchies by validating the informal, horizontal leadership enacted by faculty through research collaboration, curriculum reform, and mentorship practices (Tandoh-Offin, 2022). Furthermore, the theory promotes adaptive capacity, a vital quality in environments where leadership must address unpredictability and change without overreliance on centralized control. The emphasis on knowledge flow and distributed intelligence makes CLT highly relevant in institutional settings where faculty expertise is the university's core asset.

CLT's relevance to distributed leadership lies in its endorsement of collective intelligence and emergent leadership patterns, which align with faculty-led governance. In institutions where formal structures exclude or marginalize faculty input, CLT empowers academic staff by recognizing the value of their informal leadership roles. It shifts institutional legitimacy from rank to influence, and from structure to process that highlights the importance of internal collaboration and learning. This is particularly crucial for Nigerian universities that are struggling with static governance models and limited innovation due to top-heavy administrative control (Lukong & Ubogu, 2022). Thus, CLT not only advocates for decentralization but also helps articulate **how** faculty can function as transformative agents within distributed leadership ecosystems.

### **Adaptive Leadership Perspective**

Adaptive Leadership, developed by Ronald Heifetz in 1994 and cited in Liking and Igbogi (2022), offers another complementary theoretical foundation for distributed leadership in higher education. While CLT focuses on the systemic dynamics of complex organizations, Adaptive Leadership emphasizes the behaviors, mindsets, and processes required to mobilize people to tackle challenges that lack easy technical solutions. Heifetz distinguishes between technical problems, which can be solved by authority figures using established procedures and adaptive challenges, which require collective learning, experimentation, and shifts in values, roles, or attitudes. Leadership, in this model, is about mobilizing people to do adaptive work, often in situations where solutions lie beyond the scope of hierarchical decision-making (Heifetz & Laurie, 2001).

A fundamental assumption of the Adaptive Leadership framework is that leadership is not confined to those in formal authority positions but is a practice distributed across individuals who help their institutions confront difficult realities. In university contexts, this means that faculty given their proximity to teaching, research, and academic governance are often better

positioned than administrators to identify emerging issues, test new solutions, and drive change. The theory places strong emphasis on engagement, learning, and relationship-building, values that naturally align with the principles of distributed leadership. Liking and Igbogi (2022) argue that in sub-Saharan African universities, adaptive leadership is particularly relevant given the complexity of policy reforms, shifting student demographics, globalization pressures, and resource constraints.

What makes Adaptive Leadership vital for African institutions is its insistence on tackling institutional inertia and political entrenchment problems that are deeply rooted in Nigerian higher education. It encourages confronting discomfort and ambiguity, creating “productive disequilibrium” that pushes institutions to evolve beyond outdated structures. Faculty leaders, in this context, are viewed not as administrative substitutes but as co-creators of institutional resilience, who can reframe problems, negotiate shared values, and encourage experimentation in curriculum, pedagogy, and institutional planning. These principles are particularly meaningful in contexts where authoritarian tendencies in university leadership stifle bottom-up innovation and reinforce academic disengagement.

### **Integration of Theories for Faculty-Centered Distributed Leadership**

The integration of Complexity Leadership Theory and Adaptive Leadership creates a robust, multi-dimensional foundation for advocating distributed leadership as a viable governance strategy in higher education. Both theories challenge the traditional paradigms of control and command, instead emphasizing emergence, shared influence, and collective agency. These theoretical frameworks serve not only as analytical tools but as ideological and strategic anchors for redefining leadership in African higher education. They help move the discourse beyond critiques of centralized governance toward practical and context-sensitive solutions. In aligning the principles of distributed leadership with the lived experiences and institutional aspirations of African faculty, these theories offer a compelling blueprint for reform. The advocacy for distributed leadership in this paper, therefore, is grounded in this dual-theoretical logic one that embraces complexity and adaptiveness as foundational to revitalizing university effectiveness through faculty engagement.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Concepts of Distributed Leadership**

Distributed leadership has emerged as a significant and evolving concept in organizational theory, particularly within educational leadership discourses. It refers to an approach where leadership is not confined to formal roles or hierarchical positions but is dispersed across individuals, teams, and networks throughout an institution. At its core, distributed leadership recognizes the collective capacity of an organization to enact change and respond to complex challenges through shared responsibility and collaborative agency. According to Spillane (2006), distributed leadership is a distributed practice stretched over the social and situational contexts of the organization that emphasizes both the interaction between individuals and the institutional structures in which leadership occurs. Harris (2013) further reinforces this view by arguing that leadership in educational institutions thrives best when it is seen as a reciprocal and participatory process rather than a command-and-control activity exercised by a select few. This perspective

provides a conceptual shift from leadership being a noun, something possessed by individuals, to a verb, something enacted across the organization.

Despite its growing adoption, the term distributed leadership is often conflated with related ideas such as shared leadership, collaborative leadership, and delegated leadership. While these concepts may overlap, they are not synonymous. Shared leadership, for instance, emphasizes mutual influence among team members but does not necessarily account for institutional structures or the interplay between formal and informal authority. Delegated leadership implies a top-down assignment of responsibilities, which still assumes a hierarchical origin of power and thus does not align fully with the relational and emergent dynamics of distributed leadership (Gronn, 2008). Collaborative leadership focuses on teamwork and joint decision-making but may lack the structural depth and system-wide integration that distributed leadership entails. What distinguishes distributed leadership is its foundational belief that leadership is embedded in the day-to-day activities, professional agency, and contextual expertise of members at all levels of an organization not just those formally designated as leaders (Bush & Glover, 2016).

Ideologically, distributed leadership is rooted in democratic and constructivist paradigms that view institutions as sites of mutual learning, knowledge exchange, and participatory governance. It rejects the notion that effective leadership is necessarily linked to hierarchical control or charismatic authority, advocating instead for pluralistic engagement where knowledge and expertise are recognized as diffused rather than concentrated (Woods, 2020). The conceptual origins of distributed leadership can be traced to the work of social constructivists and complexity theorists who argued that in uncertain and rapidly evolving environments, for example, modern universities leadership must be fluid, interactive, and multi-directional. These ideological foundations resonate strongly with the principles of academic freedom, collegial governance, and intellectual decentralization that underpin the university as a social institution. They reinforce the relevance of faculty involvement in decision-making, not merely as implementers of administrative directives but as co-creators of institutional vision and direction.



Figure 1: Distributed Leadership. Source: Harris, A. (2004).

Furthermore, the expression of distributed leadership is shaped significantly by contextual variability, including cultural, institutional, and policy environments. In African higher education contexts, and particularly in Nigerian public universities, the practice of leadership often reflects entrenched hierarchical traditions and rigid administrative protocols, which can stifle informal leadership initiatives and faculty agency. Nonetheless, distributed leadership offers a conceptual framework that is adaptable to local realities, encouraging universities to leverage the strengths of academic communities in addressing systemic challenges (Lukong & Ubogu, 2022). Its contextual elasticity allows it to be applied in diverse institutional landscapes, from highly bureaucratic universities to those pursuing reforms in governance and accountability. When implemented meaningfully, distributed leadership becomes a vehicle for inclusivity, innovation, and sustainable institutional development, especially within under-resourced and structurally complex systems like those found in sub-Saharan Africa.

### **Leadership in University Governance**

University governance has historically evolved through a delicate negotiation between academic autonomy and administrative control, a balance that has become increasingly strained in the contemporary era of managerialism. Traditional university models emphasized collegial governance, wherein faculty senates, academic boards, and scholarly communities played central roles in institutional decision-making. This model upheld the values of academic freedom, disciplinary integrity, and shared authority. However, recent decades have witnessed a significant shift toward more centralized, management-driven governance structures especially in public universities reflecting global trends in neoliberal policy, performance-based funding, and state control over higher education (Deem et al., 2007). In Nigeria and other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, this transition has been compounded by historical factors such as colonial administrative legacies and state-centered regulatory frameworks, which have entrenched hierarchical governance patterns and eroded collegial cultures (Saint et al., 2003).

This evolution has intensified tensions between academic leadership and administrative authority, creating a structural dichotomy that undermines both operational efficiency and institutional legitimacy. On one hand, administrative leaders such as vice-chancellors, registrars, and governing councils are increasingly tasked with meeting externally imposed accountability standards, including financial audits, quality assurance metrics, and government-mandated reporting. On the other hand, faculty members often find themselves marginalized from strategic decisions affecting curriculum development, research prioritization, staff welfare, and institutional visioning (Obasi & Eboh, 2019). The result is a fragmented governance environment where administrative imperatives are often pursued in isolation from academic realities, leading to discontent, policy disconnects, and a general decline in institutional effectiveness. This structural imbalance is particularly acute in Nigeria's public universities, where union agitation, top-down decision-making, and leadership politicization have become recurring challenges (Nwagwu, 2020).

Moreover, the management-centric models adopted in many African universities tend to valorize compliance, control, and risk avoidance over innovation, creativity, and academic leadership. While administrators are often rewarded for meeting financial or infrastructural targets, the contributions of faculty to institutional development for instance mentoring students, driving research, or fostering international collaborations receive little recognition in governance structures. This misalignment has serious implications for university effectiveness. According to

Oanda and Jowi (2013), African universities that ignore the governance potential of their academic staff risk creating alienated institutions where reform is externally imposed rather than internally generated. The over-bureaucratization of decision-making processes, coupled with limited faculty participation, hinders responsiveness to local and global academic challenges, including curriculum modernization, digital learning, and interdisciplinary research.

However, the governance discourse is not without potential for transformation. A growing body of literature advocates for reintegrating academic voices into governance through hybrid models that blend managerial competence with collegial engagement (Santiago et al., 2015). Distributed leadership becomes a strategic response to these governance tensions by creating spaces where faculty are not only consulted but empowered to lead from within their professional and disciplinary domains. It recognizes the interdependence of academic and administrative leadership and encourages a relational approach where leadership is co-constructed rather than delegated. In public universities where resource constraints, policy volatility, and institutional rigidity persist, distributed leadership offers a viable pathway to rebuild trust, collaboration, and shared ownership in governance. This is especially relevant in Nigeria, where the legitimacy of university governance will increasingly depend on its ability to align with the academic community's aspirations and values.

### **Faculty Leadership and Institutional Progress**

The academic faculty of a university serves not merely as educators and researchers but as the intellectual and operational foundation upon which institutional growth and credibility are built. Their roles go far beyond classroom teaching, extending into curriculum design, academic policy shaping, student mentorship, community engagement, and strategic governance through various academic and administrative committees. Faculty members are the primary agents through which curriculum reform is envisioned and implemented, drawing from disciplinary knowledge, pedagogical trends, labor market shifts, and socio-cultural contexts to ensure curricular relevance and responsiveness. In Nigerian public universities, where national policy reforms such as the Nigerian Universities Commission (NUC) Benchmark Minimum Academic Standards (BMAS) often require institution-specific contextualization, faculty are best positioned to operationalize such reforms in ways that maintain academic integrity and local relevance (Ezeanolue & Osakwe, 2019). When empowered, their engagement in curriculum renewal serves as a mechanism for institutional alignment with national priorities while sustaining scholarly standards.

Beyond curriculum reform, faculty contributes significantly to institutional progress through sustained mentorship of students and early-career academics. Mentorship in this regard is not simply an ancillary academic responsibility but a foundational process through which intellectual traditions, disciplinary practices, and professional ethics are transmitted from one generation to the next. It also serves as a support mechanism for reducing attrition, enhancing student success, and promoting postgraduate research productivity. In the Nigerian context, faculty mentorship often compensates for infrastructural deficiencies and institutional bottlenecks, playing a pivotal role in guiding students through bureaucratic hurdles and academic uncertainties (Oghuvbu & Ekeh, 2017). Moreover, when faculty takes on mentoring roles in leadership development and career progression, they nurture a culture of excellence and succession planning within the institution. This mentoring ecosystem, when supported by institutional structures and recognition mechanisms, becomes a pillar for sustained academic

leadership and organizational learning particularly in environments plagued by leadership turnover and administrative discontinuities.

Faculty leadership is also intricately embedded in the day-to-day governance and policy formulation of universities through participation in departmental boards, faculty committees, research panels, and senate-level decision-making structures. Although such involvement is often undervalued in traditional leadership models, these committee-based responsibilities are essential for maintaining academic standards, ensuring internal quality assurance, and facilitating bottom-up decision-making. Faculty who serve on committees contribute institutional memory, disciplinary rigor, and normative clarity to governance processes, thereby enhancing policy coherence and operational transparency. Their intimate understanding of institutional strengths, weaknesses, and cultural dynamics enables them to make context-sensitive contributions that administrative leaders may overlook. According to Obasi and Eboh (2019), institutions that incorporate faculty voices into strategic planning processes are more likely to develop governance models that align with academic priorities, thereby achieving greater internal legitimacy and reduced policy resistance. Faculty-led committees also serve as venues for collaborative problem-solving, thus fostering a shared sense of ownership and institutional identity across departments.

The impact of empowered faculty on research excellence and innovation is perhaps the most visible and globally consequential contribution to institutional development. In universities where academic freedom is respected and faculty are encouraged to lead research initiatives, the outcomes often include increased research outputs, improved grant acquisition, enhanced global rankings, and more effective engagement with industry and policy stakeholders. These outcomes are not only beneficial for institutional visibility but also critical for knowledge production and national development. In sub-Saharan Africa, and Nigeria in particular, universities face systemic constraints such as underfunding, infrastructural decay, and policy volatility. Yet faculty-led research initiatives have managed to sustain scholarly activities and generate innovation despite these limitations (Okebukola, 2020). Empowering faculty through distributed leadership frameworks allows for decentralized research management, promotes interdisciplinary collaboration, and enables academic units to respond flexibly to emerging research opportunities. Moreover, when academic staff are actively involved in shaping research policy and funding priorities, institutions are more likely to pursue innovation pathways that are contextually grounded and socially impactful.

Consequently, faculty leadership plays a transformative role in driving institutional progress and sustainability. Their meaningful inclusion in leadership structures enhances the university's capacity to navigate change, align with societal expectations, and contribute to national development agendas. Promoting a leadership model that recognizes and supports the academic contributions of faculty; whether through policy development, mentoring, curriculum design or research innovation, universities can achieve greater institutional coherence, academic excellence, and public accountability. This is especially vital for Nigerian public universities where the centralization of authority has historically alienated academics from leadership spaces, weakening the intellectual legitimacy of institutional governance. A reorientation toward distributed leadership that centers faculty agency thus represents not merely a reform in leadership style but a strategic imperative for institutional revitalization, policy responsiveness, and long-term academic sustainability.

## Critique of Centralized and Distributed Leadership Models in University

Universities in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in Nigeria, continue to be governed predominantly through centralized administrative systems that prioritize hierarchical control over shared responsibility. These models, often inherited from colonial bureaucratic legacies and reinforced by state-driven regulatory traditions, have shaped leadership practices that exclude meaningful faculty involvement and restrict institutional agility. The pervasive dominance of such centralized structures has led to increasing scrutiny in contemporary leadership discourse, as universities struggle to remain innovative, relevant, and responsive to the evolving educational, societal, and technological demands of the 21st century. This section offers a critical evaluation of the dysfunctions of centralized leadership and builds a compelling rationale for transitioning toward distributed leadership frameworks. It examines the systemic inefficiencies engendered by top-down governance, proposes distributed leadership as a pragmatic and transformative alternative, highlights the necessity of engaging faculty as institutional co-architects, and analyzes how shared leadership fosters both autonomy and institutional cohesion in African higher education systems.

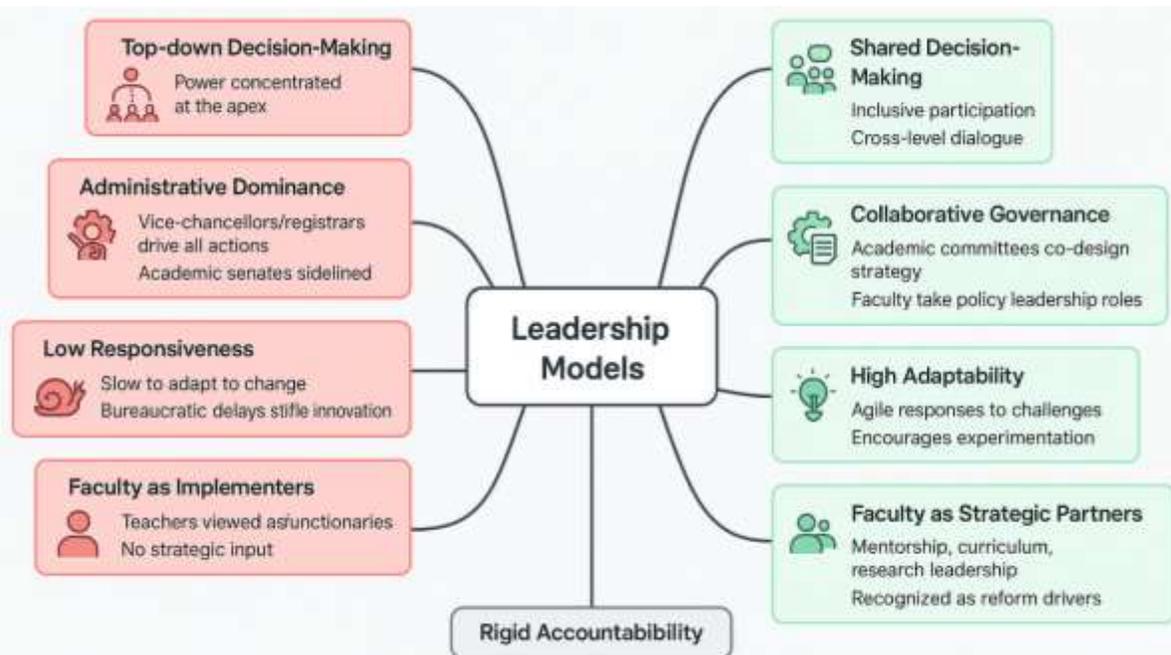


Figure 2: Contrasting centralized and decentralized leadership models in university governance. Source: Author's conceptualization 2025.

Figure 2 presents a comparative flowchart that highlights the fundamental differences between centralized and distributed leadership approaches in university governance. The left side depicts centralized leadership as hierarchical, bureaucratic, and rigid characterized by top-down decision-making and limited innovation due to process-heavy controls. In contrast, the right side outlines distributed leadership as a participatory and dynamic model where faculty input is prioritized, collaboration is institutionalized, and outcomes are co-owned and adaptable. This side-by-side illustration underscores the inefficiencies of centralized systems while making a strong case for distributed leadership as a more responsive and empowering approach to

managing complex academic environments, particularly within African higher education contexts.

### **Limitations of Centralized Leadership**

Centralized leadership models in higher education are often characterized by rigid hierarchies, bureaucratic layers, and an overconcentration of authority in the hands of a few administrative elites. In many African and Nigerian public universities, such structures have resulted in institutional inertia, with decision-making processes bogged down by excessive proceduralism and a reluctance to delegate meaningful authority to academic stakeholders. These dysfunctions are visible in the slow responsiveness to curriculum reform, delays in research funding disbursement, and the routine exclusion of academic staff from strategic planning and policy development. For instance, Nwagwu (2020) highlighted that in several Nigerian federal universities, vice-chancellors and governing councils make key decisions without input from faculties or senates, thereby creating policy blind spots and implementation failures. This top-heavy orientation also undermines innovation, as academic initiatives are often subjected to administrative gatekeeping that prioritizes control over creativity. Furthermore, centralized systems often produce leadership vacuums in departments and faculties, where decision-making is deferred upward, eroding grassroots engagement and accountability. The cumulative effect is a disempowered academic workforce, a stagnant governance culture, and declining institutional trust conditions that hinder not just performance but also legitimacy in the eyes of staff and students.

### **Distributed Leadership as an Alternative to Centralized Governance**

In contrast to the limitations of centralized governance, distributed leadership presents a more viable, responsive, and context-sensitive framework for managing complex academic institutions. By conceptualizing leadership as a relational and collective process, distributed leadership challenges the monopoly of formal office-holders and instead promotes leadership agency at multiple levels of the institution. This approach fosters co-ownership of institutional direction, thereby enhancing organizational resilience, adaptability, and innovation qualities that are especially critical in the fluid policy environments of African public universities. Distributed leadership enables faculty to engage meaningfully in governance by aligning decision-making processes with areas of disciplinary expertise and pedagogical practice (Harris, 2013). In doing so, it helps protect academic values such as autonomy, peer review, and scholarly integrity, while also ensuring that institutional decisions are informed by those closest to the academic core of the university. In the Nigerian context, where universities face persistent challenges such as brain drain, infrastructural decay, and policy inconsistency, distributed leadership offers a mechanism for institutional renewal by leveraging internal capacities and fostering participatory change. Lukong and Ubogu (2022) argue that institutions that adopt distributed leadership frameworks are better positioned to innovate, adapt, and sustain academic quality, even in the face of external pressures and limited resources.

## **Engaging Faculty as Strategic Actors for University Reforms**

Repositioning faculty from passive implementers to strategic institutional actors is an imperative for any meaningful reform in university governance. Faculty members possess deep disciplinary expertise, institutional memory, and a strong stake in the academic mission of the university qualities that make them uniquely suited to influence strategic planning, quality assurance, and policy formulation. However, under centralized models, their roles are often confined to teaching and service delivery, with minimal input in institutional decision-making. This marginalization disregards the intellectual capital and professional judgment that faculty bring to governance processes. According to Obasi and Eboh (2019), Nigerian universities that institutionalize faculty leadership across key governance platforms like curriculum committees, strategic planning boards, and research councils. They tend to demonstrate higher levels of internal cohesion, policy relevance, and academic productivity. Moreover, faculty are more likely to exhibit institutional loyalty and commitment when they perceive their roles as integral to the university's vision and not merely instrumental to administrative mandates. Empowering faculty as co-leaders affirms their professional identity and deepens institutional ownership, thereby creating an environment in which leadership is distributed according to competence, trust, and shared purpose.

### **Autonomy, Responsibility, and Institutional Cohesion**

Distributed leadership not only decentralizes authority but also fosters a balance between institutional autonomy and collective accountability. By engaging a broader base of academic stakeholders in governance, it helps build a collaborative culture where responsibility is shared and integrity is upheld through mutual oversight and dialogue. This model encourages horizontal communication, joint problem-solving and reflective practice, all of which contribute to organizational harmony and operational transparency. In settings like Nigeria's public universities, where tensions between academic and administrative units often arise due to conflicting agendas or unilateral decision-making, distributed leadership can mediate these conflicts by institutionalizing shared norms and distributed responsibilities. The model affirms autonomy at both institutional and departmental levels, while embedding accountability mechanisms that are peer-driven rather than administratively imposed. Santiago et al. (2015) assert that distributed leadership creates institutional cohesion by reducing disconnect between those who plan and those who implement, thereby enhancing trust, legitimacy, and overall governance effectiveness. When autonomy is exercised responsibly and inclusively, it strengthens the moral and professional fabric of the institution, creating a governance ecosystem where integrity is not enforced but internalized.

Figure 3 presents a visual framework that illustrates the central role of faculty leadership within a distributed governance model and its direct link to university effectiveness. The framework is structured around concentric relationships, where core faculty leadership roles such as mentorship, research oversight, and policy input form the nucleus of institutional engagement. These roles connect with enabling leadership dimensions like shared decision-making, ethical accountability, and collaborative governance, which in turn influence key outcomes of university effectiveness including enhanced teaching quality, increased research productivity, and institutional responsiveness. The model emphasizes that when faculty are positioned as strategic

actors, their contributions create a ripple effect across governance, accountability, and performance dimensions that promotes a sustainable and inclusive academic ecosystem.



Figure 3: Cyclical flowchart of Faculty-Led Distributed Leadership and University Effectiveness  
Source: Author’s conceptualization 2025

### **Dimensions of Faculty Leadership Practices in University**

The leadership practices of faculty members in universities represent a dynamic intersection of intellectual stewardship, strategic planning, and academic advocacy. These practices are especially vital in public universities across sub-Saharan Africa, including Nigeria, where institutional complexity, underfunding, and policy inconsistency require resilient and contextually grounded leadership. Faculty leadership goes beyond administrative roles or formal titles it is embedded in pedagogical vision, curricular oversight, mentoring, ethical modeling, and collaborative governance. Despite operating within hierarchies that often marginalize academic voices, faculty continually contributes to institutional advancement through deliberate engagement in decision-making, innovation, and inclusive community building. This section outlines seven major dimensions of faculty leadership in university contexts: (1) setting a vision and goals, (2) managing the teaching and learning environment, (3) promoting a positive academic climate, (4) fostering faculty development, (5) facilitating communication and collaboration, (6) building a supportive and inclusive academic community, and (7) modeling ethical leadership. Each of these dimensions reflects a core aspect of faculty agency and institutional influence and collectively affirms the importance of empowering academics as institutional leaders.

#### **Setting a Vision and Goals**

One of the foundational dimensions of faculty leadership is the capacity to articulate and sustain a clear academic vision that aligns departmental or programme objectives with the overall

mission of the university. Faculty leaders, particularly heads of departments or programme coordinators, are responsible for setting strategic directions that define teaching priorities, research thrusts, and community engagement trajectories. These visions must not only reflect institutional mandates but also respond to local and global academic challenges, including emerging labour market demands and disciplinary shifts. By formulating SMART goals that are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound faculty leaders guide collective efforts toward shared academic targets (Okebukola, 2020). Importantly, vision-setting in African universities must be participatory, ensuring that junior academics, support staff, and students understand and contribute to institutional directions. When faculty leadership fosters a shared understanding of purpose, it enhances departmental coherence, nurtures institutional loyalty, and promotes strategic thinking that transcends routine academic operations.

### **Managing the Teaching and Learning Environment**

Faculty leadership also plays a central role in designing, sustaining, and refining the teaching and learning environment. Effective faculty leaders engage in curriculum development, programme review, pedagogical quality assurance, and student academic support. These responsibilities are particularly crucial in Nigeria, where curriculum reform is a recurring national policy demand and local contextualization is required to make generic frameworks operational. Faculty leaders ensure that course contents reflect current knowledge trends, societal needs, and accreditation standards set by regulatory bodies such as the NUC (Ezeanolue & Osakwe, 2019). Beyond curriculum, faculty leaders support pedagogical innovation by promoting active learning methods, encouraging the use of educational technology, and mentoring colleagues in instructional improvement. They also shape student learning environments by advocating for academic support services and monitoring classroom practices. This dimension of leadership directly impacts the academic quality of programmes and determines how effectively institutions meet their educational mandate in challenging socio-economic conditions.

### **Promoting a Positive Academic Climate**

The cultivation of a healthy academic climate is another key area where faculty leadership manifests. Academic climates characterized by intellectual curiosity, openness to debate, mutual respect, and collegial trust are more likely to produce academic excellence and institutional resilience. Faculty leaders contribute to this climate by fostering dialogue, encouraging interdisciplinary conversations, and affirming scholarly rigor in all aspects of academic life (Lukong & Ubogu, 2022). In many Nigerian public universities, systemic pressures—such as frequent industrial actions, overcrowded classrooms, and administrative bottlenecks—can erode morale and stifle innovation. Faculty leaders mitigate these risks by promoting a culture of belonging, creating spaces for reflection, and modeling positive interpersonal engagement. The academic climate they help build affects student learning, faculty retention, and the institution's public image. A well-nurtured climate enables universities to function not merely as teaching centers but as communities of practice grounded in knowledge creation and ethical academic citizenship.

## **Enhanced Faculty Development**

One of the most transformative roles of faculty leadership is in supporting the professional growth of colleagues. In resource-constrained settings like Nigeria, where external funding for professional development is limited, faculty leaders play a crucial role in creating informal mentorship networks, facilitating access to research opportunities, and advocating for conference and training support. By championing developmental initiatives, they ensure that both junior and mid-level academics have pathways to build teaching competence, research productivity, and leadership acumen. Faculty development also involves promoting a culture of academic lifelong learning, where self-improvement, feedback reception, and knowledge exchange are normalized (Oghuvbu & Ekeh, 2017). Such efforts are vital to academic succession planning, the retention of high-performing staff, and the long-term intellectual sustainability of the university. When faculty leaders prioritize developmental equity, they nurture institutional continuity and foster a performance culture grounded in academic ethics and excellence.

## **Facilitating Communication and Collaboration**

Effective faculty leadership is predicated on transparent and inclusive communication. Faculty leaders must manage vertical communication with institutional authorities and horizontal communication across peer groups and departments. Open communication channels enhance decision-making, reduce misinformation, and facilitate collaborative projects that span disciplines and faculties (Obasi & Eboh, 2019). In many Nigerian public universities, lack of communication breeds mistrust and disjointedness. Faculty leaders mitigate this by organizing regular meetings, peer consultations, and collaborative forums that ensure broad participation in institutional deliberations. Through promoting cross-unit collaboration, they foster synergy, maximize scarce resources, and model democratic engagement. Inter-faculty collaboration has also proven critical in grant applications, co-authored research, and team-based programme design all of which strengthen institutional capacity and innovation. Faculty leadership that prioritizes communication thus builds the connective tissue that holds complex university systems together.

## **Building a Supportive and Inclusive Community**

Another critical dimension is the role of faculty leaders in building a socially supportive, culturally inclusive academic environment. In increasingly diverse university communities, inclusion goes beyond access. It requires intentional efforts to recognize and affirm differences across gender, ethnicity, religion, and professional rank. Faculty leaders contribute to inclusion by ensuring equity in decision-making, supporting vulnerable or underrepresented groups, and promoting policies that protect academic freedom and respect. In the Nigerian context, where institutional cultures are often hierarchical and gendered, faculty leaders can challenge exclusionary norms by modeling inclusive behavior, mentoring minority colleagues, and advocating for inclusive hiring practices (Adepoju & Faboyede, 2021). Furthermore, social belonging strengthens collegiality, reduces attrition, and improves mental well-being, hence, factors that have direct implications for institutional effectiveness. A leadership style that embodies inclusion is not only ethical but strategic, as it aligns the university with broader social justice imperatives and enhances its legitimacy within and outside the academy.

## **Modeling Ethical Leadership**

The final dimension explored is ethical leadership, which is foundational to building trust and institutional credibility. Faculty leaders must uphold and promote values of transparency, fairness, honesty, and respect in their professional conduct and decision-making. This ethical orientation is especially important in environments where corruption, favoritism, and policy inconsistency have historically eroded institutional trust. Ethical faculty leadership sets a moral benchmark that others can emulate, particularly students and early-career academics that are forming their professional identities (Nwagwu, 2020). Decisions regarding resource allocation, promotion recommendations and academic assessment must reflect impartiality and procedural integrity. Additionally, ethical leadership involves taking responsibility for failures, protecting academic freedoms, and courageously confronting institutional malpractice. When faculty leaders act ethically, they validate the university's commitment to truth and justice, reinforcing the institution's credibility in the public sphere. It is through these ethical commitments that faculty leadership becomes a stabilizing force in the governance and cultural evolution of African universities.

## **STRATEGIES FOR ADOPTING DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP**

The movement toward distributed leadership in higher education must be viewed not as a spontaneous adjustment but as a strategic reform effort shaped by intentional actions and systemic support. In many African contexts, particularly in Nigeria, the persistence of rigid administrative models, inherited colonial traditions, and limited policy flexibility presents formidable barriers to institutional transformation. Therefore, establishing distributed leadership structures requires coordinated actions across institutional and national levels, beginning with reforms in governance policy and followed through with cultural, technological, and structural realignments. Faculty must be repositioned not only as participants in leadership but as vital agents of institutional direction, working alongside administrative structures to improve academic responsiveness, policy coherence, and overall effectiveness. This section explores five interrelated strategies that can anchor the adoption of distributed leadership in public universities: policy direction, cultural shifts, capacity development, recognition systems, and technological enablement.

### **Policy Direction**

The first and most fundamental step toward adopting distributed leadership is the reconfiguration of institutional and national policy frameworks to explicitly mandate shared governance structures. In Nigeria and across much of sub-Saharan Africa, many university governance charters prioritize hierarchical models that concentrate decision-making authority in governing councils, vice-chancellors, and senior administrators, leaving little room for faculty participation beyond advisory roles (Nwagwu, 2020). For distributed leadership to thrive, policies must be restructured to enshrine collaborative leadership as a normative principle. This includes revising university statutes to establish inclusive decision-making bodies that formally include faculty members in budget planning, strategic development, and curriculum oversight. Regulatory agencies such as the National Universities Commission (NUC) must also revise institutional

accreditation frameworks to emphasize participatory governance as a metric for institutional quality and effectiveness.

Beyond internal institutional reform, national education policies must align with broader continental frameworks such as the African Union's *Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA)*, which promotes participatory leadership as central to sustainable educational development (African Union, 2015). Policymakers must embed distributed leadership principles within national higher education blueprints, white papers, and funding guidelines to ensure systemic adoption. This should be accompanied by targeted policy instruments such as faculty leadership charters, inclusive governance protocols, and leadership accountability frameworks. When policy direction is unambiguous and grounded in law, it becomes possible to challenge institutional inertia and drive change that is enforceable, measurable, and institutionalized beyond individual administrative regimes.

### **Cultural Shifts**

While policy reform provides structural legitimacy for distributed leadership, cultural transformation ensures its practical and sustainable enactment. In most African universities, entrenched leadership cultures shaped by autocracy, bureaucracy, and elite administrative control have created environments where leadership is equated with authority and not service. Faculty are often conditioned to perceive themselves as subordinates in decision-making hierarchies, thus limiting their engagement in strategic institutional matters. To change this culture, universities must foster new norms that valorize shared responsibility, trust, and inclusive dialogue (Obasi & Eboh, 2019). Faculty should be encouraged to see leadership as a collective process rather than a hierarchical title. This cultural shift must begin from the top, with university leaders modeling openness, delegation, and recognition of faculty voices.

Institutional efforts to promote cultural change should also involve continuous sensitization through workshops, orientation programs, and leadership retreats that deconstruct traditional myths of leadership and present collaborative leadership as both effective and ethical. Furthermore, university-wide campaigns can promote faculty participation in institutional planning processes while creating avenues such as leadership roundtables and academic forums for cross-level engagement. Recognizing informal leadership, mentorship, and peer-guided innovation also reinforces a leadership culture that is inclusive and dynamic. Ultimately, when institutions cultivate a participatory ethos, distributed leadership becomes not just a management style but a deeply embedded academic value.

### **Capacity Development**

One of the most pressing challenges in institutionalizing distributed leadership is the insufficient capacity among faculty to take on leadership roles effectively. This capacity gap is not indicative of a lack of talent or intellect, but rather a reflection of the neglect of academic leadership development in most higher education systems. Many Nigerian universities lack structured programmes that prepare faculty for leadership, often promoting individuals based solely on seniority or research productivity without leadership orientation. This results in academic leaders who may be ill-prepared to navigate complex institutional responsibilities such as resource allocation, conflict resolution, or change management (Okebukola, 2020). Therefore, a robust

leadership capacity development strategy is essential to equip faculty with the competencies required for participatory governance.

This strategy must go beyond ad-hoc training workshops to include well-funded academic leadership institutes, modular leadership courses embedded within postgraduate curricula, mentorship programs, and international leadership fellowships tailored to higher education contexts. Staff development centers within universities must institutionalize faculty leadership pathways that integrate both academic and administrative training. Leadership development should also target underrepresented groups, including early-career academics and women faculty, thereby democratizing access to institutional influence. When capacity development becomes a strategic institutional goal, universities produce academic leaders who are not only excellent scholars but also visionary stewards of governance and reform.

### **Recognition Systems**

A major disincentive to faculty engagement in leadership roles is the absence of appropriate recognition and reward systems. In most African academic institutions, professional success is defined almost exclusively in terms of research output and teaching effectiveness. Faculty leadership and service roles like chairing academic boards, participating in governance committees, or leading departmental innovations are rarely factored into promotion criteria or annual performance evaluations (Lukong & Ubogu, 2022). This disconnect discourages proactive engagement and leaves distributed leadership underappreciated. Universities must, therefore, revise their appraisal systems to include leadership effectiveness as a core component of academic performance metrics.

Beyond formal appraisal, institutions should introduce both symbolic and tangible rewards for faculty who demonstrate exemplary leadership. Annual awards, public citations, leadership sabbaticals, and research grants linked to leadership activities can help elevate the profile of faculty-led initiatives. Recognition mechanisms must also celebrate collaborative achievements, thus reinforcing the communal ethos of distributed leadership. Institutions should further engage alumni and industry partners to sponsor faculty leadership prizes and grants that reward policy impact, curricular innovation, and institutional reform. When leadership is recognized and celebrated, it becomes aspirational and cultivates a new generation of academics eager to contribute beyond the classroom and laboratory.

### **Technology as Enabler**

In an increasingly digitized academic landscape, technology serves as a critical enabler for distributed leadership. Digital platforms enhance faculty engagement by eliminating geographical and temporal barriers to participation, enabling real-time collaboration, and facilitating transparent governance. In Nigeria and across sub-Saharan Africa, where large public universities are spread across multiple campuses and often suffer from infrastructural constraints, the adoption of technology can significantly improve inclusivity in leadership processes. Tools such as Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, and Moodle can be utilized for virtual senate meetings, faculty consultations, and joint project management (Adepoju & Faboyede, 2021).

Additionally, survey platforms and institutional dashboards can gather faculty input on policies and disseminate real-time information on institutional planning and performance.

However, for technology to effectively support distributed leadership, it must be embedded within a broader institutional strategy that includes digital literacy training, infrastructure investment, and secure data governance policies. Institutions should develop internal platforms for leadership development, such as e-learning modules on university governance, conflict resolution, and resource management. Moreover, digital transparency tools such as leadership performance dashboards and faculty feedback portals can enhance accountability and participatory decision-making. To Ololube and Wome (2025), Technology does not replace human engagement, but it amplifies the reach, efficiency, and equity of leadership participation. When appropriately deployed, it becomes a vital pillar in building the kind of inclusive and dynamic academic communities envisioned by distributed leadership frameworks.

## **FACULTY LEADERSHIP AND UNIVERSITY EFFECTIVENESS**

The concept of university effectiveness has evolved beyond traditional performance metrics such as graduation rates or student enrollment numbers. It now encapsulates the holistic functioning of institutions through parameters including teaching quality, research productivity, institutional governance, student development, and the capacity for policy innovation. In contemporary academic literature, university effectiveness is often measured by a set of dynamic indicators—these include responsiveness to societal needs, alignment with national development objectives, staff morale, research output, community impact, and the relevance of academic programs (Materu, 2007; Okebukola, 2015). These components are not isolated; rather, they are interconnected by the quality and inclusivity of leadership systems within the institution. At the heart of this interconnected framework lies the role of faculty. Faculty leadership plays a critical role in sustaining the core functions of a university, primarily because of their proximity to the knowledge-generation processes and direct engagement with students and the curriculum.

Universities that empower faculty as strategic contributors in governance and reform consistently exhibit stronger institutional resilience and academic integrity. When academics participate actively in the design and evaluation of curricula, they ensure that programs are aligned with evolving disciplinary standards and societal expectations. For instance, in the University of Cape Town, faculty-led curriculum reforms have been credited for integrating decolonial perspectives and contextually relevant knowledge frameworks that resonate with African realities (Bozalek & Boughey, 2012). Faculty leadership in such processes enhances the legitimacy of reforms, fosters internal buy-in, and ensures that academic programs remain relevant to student needs and industry demands. Additionally, the strategic positioning of faculty in committees and task forces enables the integration of research insights into institutional policy formulation, leading to evidence-informed decisions that optimize resource allocation and institutional focus.

One of the most visible areas where faculty leadership impacts university effectiveness is in research productivity. Faculty members are the principal drivers of research grants, journal publications, academic collaborations, and innovations that place universities on the global map. In Nigerian public universities such as the University of Ibadan and Ahmadu Bello University, strong departmental leadership by faculty members has been linked with increased research outputs and externally funded projects (Tijani & Yahaya, 2020). These successes are not

coincidental, they emerge from environments where faculty are given decision-making autonomy to align departmental priorities with funding opportunities and disciplinary advancements. When institutional policies allow academics to lead research centers or influence strategic priorities, universities become more responsive to emerging challenges and opportunities, thus elevating their institutional profile.

Beyond research, faculty leadership significantly enhances student-centered outcomes, including mentorship, academic advising, and extracurricular development. Students often engage more effectively when academic staff take ownership of both pedagogical delivery and the broader learning ecosystem. In the University of Ghana, for example, faculty-led mentorship programs have been instrumental in improving student retention and success rates by offering personalized academic guidance and psychosocial support (Atuahene & Owusu-Ansah, 2013). Such initiatives do not only promote student well-being but also strengthen institutional reputation, as graduates emerge more competent, resilient, and prepared for societal contribution. In this way, faculty leadership contributes to the development of human capital, which is a core function of higher education institutions in Africa's development agenda (Ololube, 2024).

Another domain through which faculty impact university effectiveness are policy, innovation and internal governance reform. In contexts where faculty voices are respected and integrated into policymaking, institutions tend to exhibit more coherent and inclusive decision-making processes. For instance, in Makerere University, Uganda, faculty involvement in senate-level planning helped revise assessment frameworks and academic progression policies in ways that enhanced academic standards and reduced dropout rates (Ssebuwufu et al., 2012). These changes were informed by faculty experience with student learning patterns and disciplinary benchmarks insights typically unavailable to administrators with limited classroom engagement. The ability of faculty to influence institutional policy thus enables universities to remain pedagogically and administratively agile in an ever-evolving academic environment.

Furthermore, faculty leadership contributes to institutional cohesion and staff engagement. When academic staff perceive that their voices matter and their expertise is valued, it cultivates a culture of ownership, motivation, and shared responsibility. In contrast, exclusion from governance often breeds resentment, disengagement, and resistance to institutional reforms (Badat, 2009). Faculty-led decision-making structures like curriculum committees, academic boards, and departmental leadership teams foster collegiality, trust, and professional development, all of which are essential for academic excellence and administrative stability. In African institutions struggling with low morale due to underfunding or labor unrest, empowering faculty leadership becomes not just an option but a necessity for institutional resilience.

Faculty leadership is not peripheral to university effectiveness, it is foundational. The unique positionality of academic staff enables them to drive reforms that are both context-sensitive and discipline-informed. Whether in curriculum transformation, research competitiveness, student engagement, or institutional policymaking, the leadership contributions of faculty members directly correlate with performance indicators that define effective and reputable universities. Particularly in the African context, where universities face multiple systemic challenges, distributed leadership that empowers faculty represents a strategic pathway to institutional renewal and development. Therefore, any serious reform agenda aimed at improving university performance must place faculty leadership not at the margins, but at the center of the conversation on effectiveness.

## **CHALLENGES AND INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS TO DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP**

The advocacy for distributed leadership in African public universities, especially in Nigeria, often confronts deep-seated institutional and cultural obstacles that impede meaningful transformation. These barriers stem from historical governance frameworks, professional role expectations, narrow legal mandates, entrenched inequities, internal power dynamics, and communication limitations. To understand why distributed leadership remains aspirational in many contexts, it is essential to dissect these barriers not merely at the surface but through their systemic reinforcement and lived impact on faculty participation, leadership dynamics, and institutional adaptability.

### **Bureaucratic Resistance and Hierarchical Cultures**

The pervasive resistance within bureaucratic structures across African universities significantly undermines the implementation of distributed leadership models. Many of these systems adhere to colonial-era administrative legacies that prioritize centralized authority and hierarchical decision-making pathways. In practice, this means faculty-driven proposals for curriculum innovation, policy revision, or strategic planning are often required to pass through several layers of approval controlled primarily by vice-chancellors, registrars, and deans (Shava & Tlou, 2018). Consequently, faculty participation is often reduced to token consultation germane primarily to administrative optics, rather than substantive inclusion in decision-making processes.

This hierarchical track also reinforces the notion that academic authority correlates exclusively with positional power, breeding suspicion toward any initiative that threatens existing governance norms. Leadership becomes interpreted as prerogative, not practice. Faculty leaders who signal a desire for participatory processes are often labeled as disruptive or aspirational troublemakers. As a result, bureaucracies may covertly and sometimes overtly suppress initiatives that challenge established order (Ogiela & Pedzi, 2018). Without intentional culture investment and structural recalibration, these resistance patterns can actively block distributed leadership from gaining meaningful traction, leaving it as decorative rhetoric rather than transformative strategy.

### **Role Identity Conflicts**

Faculty members who venture into leadership roles often experience profound dissonance between their scholarly identities and administrative expectations. In the academic setting, faculty self-concept is shaped by disciplinary depth, research output, and pedagogical contribution. Leadership roles, however, typically demand managerial competencies, budget stewardship, personnel management, institutional negotiation that lie outside standard academic training (Ayee, 2014). Without structured role orientation or capacity development, faculty find themselves juggling these identities without clarity, leading to stress, role fatigue, and professional disillusionment.

Simultaneously, peer perceptions further complicate this identity limbo. Colleagues may view their leadership involvement as aligning with managerial agendas rather than scholarly service, resulting in social distancing or criticism. An academic who steps into leadership risks being perceived as having distanced themselves from core academic norms (Venter et al., 2023). Addressing this conflict requires that institutions both expand the legitimacy of faculty-

administrator hybrid roles and normalize these pathways within institutional identity frameworks recognizing that academic expertise and leadership capability are not mutually exclusive but intertwined parts of scholarly contribution.

### **Governance and Policy Incompatibilities**

Governance charters and institutional mandates in many African universities typically vest decision-making power in formal bodies such as senate, governing council, or executive committees. These structures, while ensuring regulatory compliance, often create rigid accountability lines that exclude informal faculty leadership channels even when such expertise is critical to academic quality assurance, resource allocation, or curricular innovation (Teferra & Altbach, 2004). Faculty-led initiatives, for example curriculum task forces or student-success committees, often lack statutory authority or budgetary control, relegating their work to advisory status without real impact.

Moreover, national regulatory frameworks such as those maintained by the National Universities Commission (NUC) in Nigeria rarely highlight faculty agency in governance. Instead, evaluation metrics are biased toward infrastructure, research output, and hierarchy-bound administrative structures (Makoe, 2018). To foster distributed leadership, institutional charters must be revised to grant actionable authority and resource control to faculty bodies. Regulatory agencies should integrate faculty leadership as an evaluation criterion, shifting from a compliance-based model to one that prizes shared governance—enabling academic innovation to be formal, empowered, and legitimized.

### **Representation and Equity Concerns**

While distributed leadership frameworks emphasize inclusivity, many universities fall short in praxis as leadership spaces often reflect entrenched access disparities. Across Africa, gender remains a pronounced equity concern. Women are significantly underrepresented in both formal academic leadership roles and informal faculty-led initiatives (Kele & Mzileni, 2021). Similarly, early-career faculty, postdoctoral scholars, and staff from non-STEM disciplines are frequently sidelined in policy reform or strategic planning roles due to structural biases or the gatekeeping of senior faculty networks.

Such inequities undermine both representation and effectiveness. Leadership that fails to draw from diverse perspectives risks reinforcing existing power structures and missing vital viewpoints necessary for responsive governance. Distributed leadership requires intentional reconfiguration of selection processes such as implementing rotational leadership, cross-career-stage representation, and gender parity in decision-making bodies. Without deliberate action to broaden representation, distributed leadership remains performative rather than transformative, perpetuating elite capture rather than fostering inclusive academic empowerment.

### **Power Struggles**

The systemic injection of distributed leadership into tradition-bound institutions often sparks power contests between faculty and administrative elites. Top administrators may see shared authority as dilution of their influence and respond by limiting faculty roles to token committees or symbolic positions without real operational control (Venter et al., 2023). Parallely, faculty

factions especially those with divergent research paradigms or disciplinary orientations may engage in internal rivalries to secure prestige and resources.

Such dynamics often result in stagnant or clashing governance, with distributed leadership initiatives undermined by turf wars. However, these tensions can be constructive if framed within clear role definitions and conflict-mitigation frameworks. Universities should establish inclusive charters delineating leadership scopes, responsibilities, and accountability mechanisms, which must be ideally codified in institutional statutes. Neutral adjudication bodies, transparent decision-making logs, and jointly set performance indicators can transform what appear as power struggles into opportunities for growth through collaborative checks and balances.

### **Communication Difficulties**

Distributed leadership thrives on transparent and multidirectional communication, however hierarchical systems commonly impose legacy communication logjams. In many universities, vice-chancellor decisions, budget allocations, or policy changes are disseminated via bureaucratic memos accessible only to selected administrative corridors (Ogiela & Pedzi, 2018). Faculty who seek participation are often kept uninformed, excluded from documentation loops, and left unaware of planning rationales and committee outcomes.

Lacking real-time communication, faculty cannot meaningfully contribute or evaluate leadership processes. Institutions need to develop open communication platforms such as governance intranets, real-time virtual forums, and digital repositories for decisions and minutes. Open institutional town halls, periodic “faculty voice” reports, and regular leadership consultation windows provide avenues for faculty authentication and engagement. When transparency becomes culture and protocol, participation becomes grounded in informed choice rather than institutional gossip or exclusion.

### **CONCLUSION**

The imperative for a paradigmatic shift in university leadership is not merely a matter of administrative preference but a necessity grounded in the realities of institutional effectiveness, academic vitality, and organizational coherence. This paper has advanced the central argument that distributed leadership anchored in faculty engagement and shared governance offers a more context-sensitive and academically legitimate model for transforming the leadership landscape of public universities in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in Nigeria. Centralized leadership systems, while historically dominant, have proven structurally rigid, operationally exclusionary, and largely misaligned with the demands of modern academic governance. By excluding faculty from strategic processes, institutions undermine the intellectual agency and disciplinary insight that are essential for innovation, academic relevance, and student-centered development.

Through extensive theoretical discourse, this paper has drawn on Complexity Leadership Theory and Adaptive Leadership Perspective to illustrate how distributed leadership can accommodate the complexity of higher education environments and respond effectively to change. It has synthesized scholarly literature and contextual evidence to demonstrate that faculty are not merely implementers of policy but potential co-creators of institutional vision, academic standards, and strategic direction. Faculty leadership, when structurally recognized and

supported, contributes to curriculum transformation, research excellence, student success, and policy innovation all of which are central to the holistic effectiveness of universities.

Furthermore, the analysis has shown that institutional, bureaucratic, and policy-related barriers continue to impede the realization of distributed leadership. Nevertheless, these challenges are not insurmountable. What is required is a deliberate cultural, structural, and policy reorientation, one that acknowledges the value of collaborative leadership and builds institutional mechanisms to support it. Distributed leadership must move from being a theoretical aspiration to a systemic reality, driven by inclusive governance, participatory policymaking, and professional development for faculty leaders.

Thus, the path toward a more effective and resilient university system in Africa lies in embracing leadership models that reflect the ethos of the academy excellence, critical engagement, and collective responsibility. As universities confront the rising demands for accountability, innovation, and social relevance, distributed leadership offers a viable and sustainable pathway. Therefore, it is time for stakeholders to realign governance practices with the intellectual and moral capital embedded within their academic communities, thereby unlocking the full potential of faculty-driven transformation.

## **Recommendations**

To institutionalize distributed leadership in public universities, the following action-oriented steps are suggested:

- Policymakers in these African countries should reform national higher education frameworks to formally mandate faculty representation and authority in institutional governance structures.
- University governing councils should embed distributed leadership principles into their strategic plans and governance statutes, ensuring shared decision-making across all levels.
- Vice-chancellors and senior administrators must foster a culture of inclusive leadership by facilitating open dialogue, rotating academic leadership roles, and building trust between management and faculty.
- Academic staff should proactively seek leadership development opportunities, contribute to strategic planning, and organize peer-led initiatives that demonstrate the efficacy of collaborative governance.

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