Leading Change Without Formal Authority and Governance: Proposing a Model for 21st-Century Public University Development in Nigeria

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Abstract

Leadership in Nigerian public universities has traditionally been constrained by rigid hierarchical structures, despite growing evidence that meaningful transformation often emerges through informal channels. In this exploration, we explained how change effectively flourishes without formal authority in the university system characterized by bureaucratic principles, which is said to limit administration in public universities. This administrative process is said to hinder the leadership practice of Nigerian public universities. However, proposing a model that empowers the distribution and implementation of effective leadership model for faculty, administrators, and students to advance change in the university environment is the way to go in order to improve the administrative mechanism of the university remains apt. This paper adopted a conceptual review to analysis case studies from Nigerian universities and compare same to some African universities. Five key strategies (leadership recognition, institutional reforms, digital integration, policy framework and capacity building) were proposed to enable the institutionalization of informal leadership in Nigeria universities. Nigeria universities that embrace these five key strategies will be laying the foundation to success compared to out-of-date bureaucratic models. Therefore this paper revealed how academics can serve as crucial institutional movers that bridge formal and informal university administrative structure to drive teaching, learning and research quality. This paper contributes to the global debate and practice on leadership in resource-constrained university education systems, in as much as we offer institutional and policy reforms to Nigerian university leadership and governance processes, with a redefinition of university leadership as a collective, rather than personal effort, and significant implications for institutional resilience and graduates employability.

Keywords: Servant leadership, employee performance, harmonious passion, creativity, emotional exhaustion

Introduction

Public universities in Nigeria and in most developing countries continuously to struggle with difficult leadership and governance setbacks, these setbacks ranges from insufficient funding, infrastructural deficit and decay, and labor disputes that has undermined institutional progress and stability, and the quality of teaching, learning research (Ololube et al., 2012). The situation becomes more hectic because of the rigid administrative hierarchies that resist and undermine genuine innovation that leaves Nigerian public universities ill-equipped to embrace the ever evolving changes in the transformation of the global higher education movements and reforms.

Leading change without authority involves influencing others to achieve objectives without depending on formal positions. It is all about the promotion of collaboration, building trust among and between employees, and creating valuable ways that inspires others to follow their leader. Leading change procedures are particularly relevant to institutions like the universities where traditional hierarchical structures are pronounce, but cross-functional teamwork is needed as much as they are essential. As such, in this paper we shall examine how informal leadership can complement formal governance structures to promote resilience in Nigeria's public universities, where traditional leadership models have proven to be inadequate and ineffective.

Leading without formal authority has become instrumental in today's dynamic and collaborative university work environments. It is an art that combines several factors like emotional intelligence, employees' proficiency, knowledge and relationship-building that creates impact to drive change. Therefore, understanding the art of leading without authority has over the time significantly enhanced employees' effectiveness and prospects. Studies have shown the importance of information leadership in the university systems around the world, especially in the West

Freeman et al. (2021) argued that leading change without formal authority relies on how to influence others rather than personal and positional power that allows university faculty and administrators to drive reforms through their expertise, collaboration, and peer networking to impact students' quality of learning. Nigerian public universities have been affected by bureaucratic inefficiencies that often stifle modernization, the needed core qualities that are instrumental to the advancement of digital learning and research initiatives (Ololube et al., 2023). Limited studies have paid attention to how informal leadership functions within Nigeria's public universities and the cultural context in which they operate. The existing gap in literature, which several studies failed to propose a model, motivated this current study that proposed a leadership model that integrates cultural context strategies with informed governance

mechanisms to enhance proactive measures that are adequately responsive to their needs.

According to Ololube et al. (2012), when faculty and administrators are poorly trained, the result is that poor quality of teaching ensue, which directly and invariably affects students' quality of learning in Nigerian public universities. As a result, to drive change, training of faculty and administrators are inevitable to improve the quality of education in universities, while ignorance towards the policies and requirements of faculty and administrators training could be a setback to social, economic, political and educational development, the importance of leading changes becomes crucial. The significance of leading change without formal authority extends beyond administrative and faculty efficiency to broader academic transformation and systemic barriers like political interference in the appointment of institutional leaders has continually hindered progress in Nigerian public universities. Therefore, there is the need to restore value in Nigerian public university education, both morally and materially, and to give faculty and administrators the status, recognition and dignity their profession deserves.

Observations have shown that the issue of effective leadership and governance in Nigerian public universities stems from the bureaucratic inefficiency, enormous corruption and the hierarchical structure of the system. This has collectively slowed innovation and institutional progress. The existing structure in the public universities have in a great way affected and have proven inadequate towards providing remedy for the delays in decision-making, resistance to change and the disconnect between policy and practice in Nigerian university environment. Another major difficulty experienced in the Nigerian public universities is the issues of mismanagement and misappropriation of allocated funds and those that are generated internally. Government interference is not left out in the numerous challenges. The absence of proper accountability has undermined the success of public universities in Nigeria, and the absence of a well-structured framework to connect the leadership and change leaves mush to be desired.

Therefore, there is an urgent need for a leadership model that intentionally integrates non-positional leadership leveraging influence, collaboration, and expertise to complement formal governance structures and foster adaptive, progressive transformation in Nigerian public university education.

Literature Review and Research Hypotheses

The study is anchored on two major theories, namely; The Adaptive Leadership Theory and Transformational Leadership Theory. These theories collectively validate and provide a theoretical foundation for the crucial role of leading change despite lacking formal authority, while offering a structured framework to recognize and institutionalize their contributions.

Adaptive Leadership Theory

Adaptive Leadership Theory, developed by Heifetz and Linsky (1994) cited in Wasserman and Fisher-Yoshida (2021) posited that effective leadership in complex environments requires diagnosing systemic challenges, mobilizing collective problem-solving, and promoting organizational resilience.

Adaptive Leadership Theory is a model that allows organizations and individual to successfully navigate the complex environmental challenges and changes through collective learning and innovation rather than relying on a single or group of leaders for immediate solution. The focus of the theory is the mobilization of employees to do adaptive works that require change in their values, beliefs, and behaviors in order to move through the conflicting values held by different individuals or groups.

According to Onyekwere (2024), adaptive leaders recognize that there are two kinds of problems vis-à-vis the technical and adaptive problems. The technical problems are a satisfactory pre-determined response to already available problem, and experts who possess great expertise are wanted to address the situation at hand. Globally, the technical problems of public university systems are mechanical in nature and can only be solved by professionals in the field (Wale, n.d). The adaptive problems are absolutely does not require trained experts to resolve the problems at any given situation or instance. Also, there are no set of established rules or procedures employed to resolve the problem. Severally, the situation presents itself because there are no definite ways to identify the problem, which in most cases are vague and no technical fixes for such situation when they arise. In such situations, the expertise of an adaptive leader comes handy and useful. The adaptive leader must first identify and define the problem and mobilize professional to come up with possible solutions to the problem (Ololube, 2024).

In addition, Sott and Bender (2025) noted that adaptive leadership is premised that organizations that desire to succeed in the market environment are those that most effectively adapt to the changing conditions. Thus, they defined adaptability as the capacity to adjust to the market environmental shifts, which is essential for the survival and evolution of complex systems like the universities. Based on this perspective, we

are motivated on how the principles of adaptation are relevant and can be applied to the theme of this review, which is leading change without formal authority.

Broadly, adaptive leadership is seen as the ability to adjust to evolving situations that demands, responds flexibly and creatively to complex unpredictable situations. The adaptive leadership theory encourage leaders to identify and resolve both the individual and collective needs of team members, promote collaboration and innovation in the systems environment, and cultivate institutional resilience in the work environment and with the needed changes.

Transformational Leadership Theory

Transformational leadership (TL) theory was first introduced by James MacGregor Burns in (1978) cited in Ololube (2024) is all about transforming leadership and the term is now used in organizational psychology to mean a leadership approach that causes change in organizations, institutions, individuals and the social systems. TL creates valuable and positive change in every share of life when properly applied, with the end goal of developing subordinates into valuable leaders.

According to Bass (1998), TL enhances employee motivation, their morale and job performance through many ways. These ways include connecting the employee's sense of identity and self-worth to the mission and the collective identity of the organization, acting as a role model for leaders that inspires employees, challenge employees to take ownership for their job, and understanding the strengths and weaknesses of employees. TL assists leaders to get to their full potentials, which help them align their employees with tasks that help them to optimize their job performance.

According to Burns, TL is a process by which leaders and employees help each other in advancing high level of morale and motivation for employees. In addition, Burns established the relationship and difficulty in the differentiation between management and leadership, and noted that the differences are in their characteristics and individual and organizational behaviors. TL recognized two concepts, which are namely 'transforming leadership' and 'transactional leadership'. Transforming is the act, while transformational is the process in organizational leadership (Ololube, 2024).

According to Burns, the transforming approach creates significant change in the life of people and organizations. It redesigns perceptions and values, and changes expectations and aspirations of employees. Unlike in the transactional approach, it is not based on a give and take relationship, but on the leader's personality, traits and ability to make a change through example, articulation of an energizing vision and challenging goals. Transforming leaders are idealized in the sense that they are a moral exemplar of working towards the benefit of the team, organization and/or community. Burns theorized that transforming and transactional leadership were mutually exclusive

styles. Transactional leaders usually do not strive for cultural change in the organization but they work in the existing culture while transformational leaders can try to change organizational culture. The full range of the elements of transformational leadership is as depicted in figure 1.
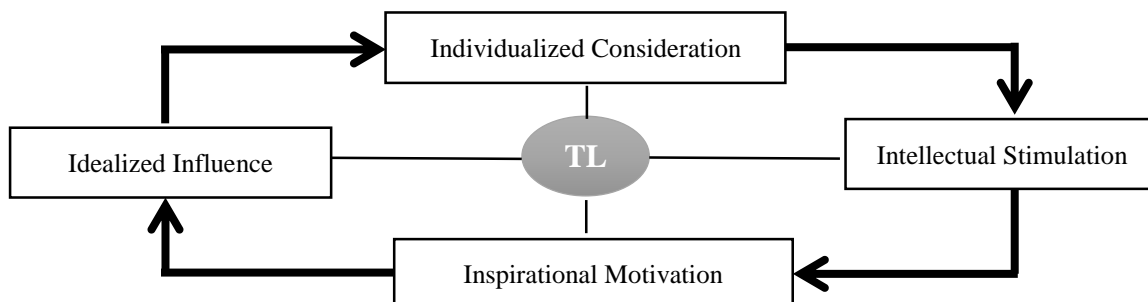

Figure 1. *Theoretical Framework*

Individualized consideration (IC) is the strength to which university leaders attend to employee's needs, and acts as a mentor or coach to his employees and listens to their concerns and needs. University leaders' are supposed to stretches their empathy and support to their employees, keeps regular communication channels open and places challenges before their employees. IC also involves the need for respect and the celebration of individual contribution that make up the team. However, employees have their will and aspirations in their journey towards for self-development and they can be intrinsically motivated for their role or tasks.

Intellectual stimulation (IS) is the strength to which university leaders' challenge assumptions, takes risks and solicits employees' ideas. University leaders with this type of disposition stimulate and encourage creativity among employees. They are able to nurture and develop employees that think independently. To effective a university leader, learning is a virtue and value, and an unexpected situation that arises is seen as opportunities to learn. Employees are given the freehand to ask questions, think deeply about things in order to figure out better ways to accomplish their day-to-day tasks.

The third step is known as inspirational motivation (IM) which is the strength to which a university leader articulates the vision that is appealing and inspiring to employees. University leaders adapt the inspirational motivation challenge their employees with high level standards, communicate organizational optimism about the future goals, and provide the significance of the day-to-day task. Followers need to have a strong sense of purpose if they are to be motivated to act. The purpose and significance provided by university leaders proves the energy that drives employees

towards goal attainment. Therefore, effective communication skills supported by the visionary aspects of institutional leadership make the university vision understandable to the employees. As such, the employees follow the will of the leaders to invest more effort in their day-to-day tasks, because they are encouraged by the transformational leadership of the university leaders and they are optimistic about the future and their abilities.

Lastly, the idealized influence (II) of university leaders acts as a role model for high ethical behavior of employees and instills pride to gain respect and trust. The idealized influence of transformational leadership is unique in all sectors of Western university leadership and governance, including governmental agencies. For example, the Finnish university systems use basic solution in its leadership training and development.

Conceptual Review

Historical Evolution of Leading Change Without Formal Authority in sub-Saharan Africa

Research developments on leading change without formal authority can be traced to the 20th century. Follett (1924) provided the first conceptualization of the principles of share leadership into the organizational system like the universities. It is a process that influences organizational transformation through the use of experts otherwise known as professional to enhance the attainment of the goal for which it intends to achieve (Heifetz & Linsky, 2017). However, Liden et al. (2025) noted that the influence of leadership as a discipline has over the decades have permeated the history of human existence for thousands of years, right from human civilization where leaders organized and coordinated essential activities like hunting and gathering. These explorations have played important role in the survival and development of societies.

The attainment of independence brought about the needed changes in the governments of sub-Saharan Africa and their university academics realized that the type of education they inherited from the colonial maters was not adequate and could not address the region's development needs. The post-independence historical period in sub-Saharan African counties witnessed the informal leadership in university management, because the universities were seen as avenues for the nationalist intellectual movements using that era. The academia in universities in Sub-Saharan Africa in the 70's and 80's bypassed the bureaucratic bottlenecks to decolonize the existing curricular through underground reading groups and interdisciplinary collaborations (Ochwa-Echel, 2013). Nigeria university academics were not left out in this struggle.

The digital age provided a paradigm shift in the transformation and practices of leading change without formal authority. According to Butler (2024), leading change without formal authority manifest through the exercises of formal authority and informal influence within and outside the system. Formal leaders, like university Vice chancellors, Deans, Head of Departments, etc. ratify their leadership through formal authority and processes. Informal leaders usually express their leadership role through informal spheres alone. However, the capability of formal leadership authorities are largely determined by positions occupied in the organizational hierarchy, which may be combined with the varying degrees of personal power. Informal leadership on the on other hand, rarely hold official managerial positions, but they are able to wield considerable influence over their contemporaries and colleagues through their personal qualities and attractiveness (Serrat, 2017). Within the university system, Vice chancellors, Deans, Head of Departments, etc. leadership, influence, and power can be conceptualized from their roles of formal and informal position in combinations with academic rank and personal power to exert change and guide other employees (Ololube, 2024).

Leading Change without Formal Authority in Nigerian Public Universities

The Nigeria public university education system is changing rapidly and more dramatically than ever before through technology, globalization, competition, and the rise in the expectations of stakeholders in the education industry. Leading change without formal authority in Nigerian public universities requires a shift in the shared vision, the engagement of stakeholders, effective communication and the building the culture of accountability and commitment. In order to be able to deal with the complex and dynamic environment of the Nigerian public universities, universities do not only need experts and experienced persons with fully developed leadership abilities but those who are strategic in leadership competencies (Abamba, 2023). Considering the globalization and the challenges linked the complex Nigerian public university milieu, the significant role of university leaders cannot be overstressed in the management of change.

In the university system in Nigeria, the form of institutional leadership that has permeated the environment has over the decades become critical because of the structure of traditional governance and interference from government, the governance style has not been able to critically address the growing global technological advancement that is revolutionizing classrooms and instructional leadership. Faculty members in Nigerian public universities, academic staff and student unions have severally demonstrated the need for policy change, curriculum review and reforms, and research collaboration with Western countries (Mmom, 2022a). Similarly,

postgraduate student associations frequently influence research priorities and resource allocation through persistent advocacy and demonstration of needs (Okafor, 2024).

The duty of public university leaders is to ensure that the institutions have a-fit-for-the-purpose strategic plan to propel and implement change effectively (Murphy & Crowfoot, 2021). To this end, never has the task of initiating change been more important to institutional leaders because of the rapid expansion of the social media and the way knowledge is being proliferated. This has also placed universities in difficult position because of its role of human creativity and learning, which are critical to the survival and thriving of societies. Meanwhile, Mmon (2022b) maintained that the pressures acting on universities have grown in complexity and are continuously accelerating in the demand for change. Stakeholders in universities serve and rely on informal authority to enable them succeed and keep on expanding continuously both in number and diversity accompanied with very high expectations.

In spite of the aforementioned, the evidence remains that the effectiveness of leading change without formal authority in universities depends on several contextual factors. Adegbite (2021) identified institutional culture as particularly significant in environments where dissent is tolerated and innovation valued, informal change efforts are more likely to gain traction. Conversely, in highly bureaucratic systems, such leadership may remain marginalized or ephemeral (Uzochukwu & Ibrahim, 2023). Eze (2023) further cautioned that without some degree of eventual formal recognition, changes initiated through informal leadership may fail to become institutionalized. Nevertheless, as global university education faces increasing pressures to adapt, the ability to lead change without formal authority represents both a necessary survival skill and a potential catalyst for more democratic, distributed forms of academic governance.

The Role of Leading Change without Formal Authority in University Development

Leading change without formal authority is a critical driver of institutional transformation in university education, particularly through faculty and postgraduate students led innovation. Clark (2018) demonstrated how professors at research-intensive universities often initiate pedagogical reforms by piloting new teaching methods within their departments before these approaches gain institutional adoption. In the African contexts, Lebeau and Ogunsanya (2021) documented cases where academics have circumvented bureaucratic hurdles to establish interdisciplinary research centers by leveraging international partnerships to secure funding and infrastructure. The initiatives deliberately and frequently fill the needed gaps in public universities infrastructural development, particularly in resource-constrained university environments where formal leadership is slow. The efforts and success of

the initiatives depends on the innovator's capability in building coalitions across departments and administrative units (Mamdani, 2022).

Additionally, the strategic determinants of the administrative capabilities of staff members have been underexplored. Specifically, administrators' role in human capital and in shaping the strategic choices of leading change without formal authority has led to successful innovations in the administration of public universities in Nigeria (Ololube, 2024). Notable in this regards also is the South African university experience where significant changes have taken place to improve institutional decision-making behind the scenes (Nkomo & Ngambi, 2019). However, the circumstances have not been adequately documented in the existing literature on the role of Africa university administrators' active role in leading change (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018).

Characteristics of Effective Leaders Leading Change without Formal Authority in Public Universities

The growing dynamics and the rapidly evolving changes in the academic landscape of the 21st century public universities across the world face several challenges that demand comprehensive, immediate and effective leadership strategies and practiced change in the management of such institutions (Agbor et al., 2023). Particularly, this is true of Nigerian public universities and in sub-Saharan African universities by extension, because of the increasing need for transformation and adaptability. Nigeria has on several scenarios struggled to achieve sustainability in its developmental goals to enhance the quality of public universities, but the influences of leadership behavior and the ineffectiveness of public universities change management processes has made it impossible to the public universities to lead without formal authority.

Nigerian Public universities are expected to play fundamental role in shaping the future by nurturing intellectual human capital, promote innovation, and contribute to the socioeconomic development. However, public universities are confronted with critical setbacks that have limited its progress. Among them are outdated and dilapidate infrastructures, slow or poor network connectivity, and their inability to meet up with global standard because of poor funding, mismanagement and misappropriation (Ololube, 2016).

Education is an instrument for change and innovation and change is the process through which new ideas, concepts, programs, techniques and practices are inoculated into the day-to-day operation of the university educational system to replace outdated or existing norms. Innovation in leading change shows the act or process of bringing in novel ideas or improving on the existing ones to guarantee educational success in the 21st century (Osuya & Osakpo, 2024). Therefore, change and innovation are

significant in public university system since evolving societal needs drives technological advancements for educational development.

Boitano (2020) posited that effective informal leaders establish and measure up to the needs of the task of leading the indispensable changes and should be able to create the enabling environment and atmosphere for change and novelty to thrive. The existing methods otherwise known as the traditional methods of instructions in Nigerian public universities are no longer adequate to prepare its students for the challenges and complexities of the 21st century.

However, informal leaders effectiveness does not from position of authority alone, rather it colleagues based on proven track records of proficiency. Informal authority within the public university systems is a significant force that shapes how decisions are made, tasks allocated, and goals attained. It involves the informal authority to influence and direct the actions of others towards achieving common organizational objectives. In public university context, informal authority plays crucial role in directing collective effort towards institutional success. It is the foundation upon which leadership and management of public institutions are built.

Parashar (2024) identified to sources where authority can be derived. The first is the derived authority, which is often associated with leaders position or leaders title in organizations. It allows leaders the right and decision-making responsibilities to guide subordinates. This is inherently tied to the scope of influence held, which is based on the hierarchical position. Inherently authority is tied to the formal structure of an organization. The second is the earned authority, which in many circumstance not bound by the hierarchical levels but rooted in personal characteristics or traits, professional knowledge, and the contributions universities makes to the society at large. The job title does not determine authority, but grows boundlessly through a combination of expertise, behavior, genuine and collective commitment to the growth and success of the system.

Leading Change in the 21st Nigerian Public University

The academic landscape of public universities in Nigeria is increasing in scope and dimension, and the role of informal leadership is driving change drastically. Leadership is a concept that has been defined, explained and described by many authors; however, the definitions put forward are based on the author's experiences and situation that relates to organization change (Anunobi, 2020). At the heart of leadership debate as gathered from different author's boarders around the impact, influence, inspiration and enthusiasm initiated. The leadership in the 21st century is often perceived as the vanguard, goal setter and the roadmap toward achieving organizational goals. According to Anele and Ogona (2022a), the outcome of any functional

organization is largely dependent on the leadership prowess, tenacity and proficiency of the leader. In other words, Anele and Ogona (2022b) posited that if universities succeed, the leaders are applauded, but if the universities fail, the leaders' are blamed, therefore, the place of university leaders cannot be undermined. Institutional leaders are presumed to be pace setters, they are expected to give the direction and roadmap if they provide clear vision and the need bearing for other members to follow (Ogona & Ololube, 2022; Ogona & Mmom, 2023).

Leading change in the public universities is one of the basic and most important needs, and often considered to be the solution to most problems (Daft & Marcic, 2006). It directs human resources toward the objectives of the university and ensures that organizational functions and behavior align with the needs of the external environment. In universities, leaders are expected to evaluate extent the goals of its establishment are achieved at various levels (Ogona & Mmom, 2023).

The goals of tertiary education according to the National Policy on Education (FRN, 2014), include to:

• Contribute to national development through high-level relevant manpower training;

• Develop and inculcate proper values for the survival of the individual and society;

• Develop the intellectual capability of individuals to understand and appreciate the local and external environment;

• Acquire both physical and intellectual skills for self-reliance;

• Promote and encourage scholarship and community service;

• Forge and cement national unity; and

• Promote national and international understanding and interaction.

To effectively attain these goals, proficiency in the leadership and management of universities must be dynamic to accomplish the needed change (Agwoje & Okeleke, 2023). University leaders, therefore, must proactively be involved in knowledge management, knowledge impartation and dissemination through research, teaching and services delivery. Leading the 21st century public university system involves leading and directing the knowledge, which requires that the Vice Chamcellors, Deans, Heads of Department, etc. provides excellence and value leadership for two reasons, vis-à-vis, is to win the respect of the subordinates for adequate followership and the other is to ensure that knowledge management and development flows (Anele & Ogona, 2022a,b; Ogona & Ololube, 2022).

Leading Change without Formal Titles in Nigerian Public Universities

Universities around the world have been driven by scholars who have made significant changes through informal leadership. A notable case in Nigeria is Professor Prince Nwachukwu Ololube at Ignatius Ajuru University of Education. His works in educational management and leadership in higher education, organizational culture, justice and change, ICT in higher education, instructional effectiveness, research methodologies, etc. have exceeded formal titles. Webometric Ranking of World Universities (2023) and AD Scientific Index (2025) ranked Ololube consistently since 2015 among the best 200 of the top 800 scientist in Nigeria and the best scientist in Ignatius Ajuru University of Education based on his research productivity.

According to Elisha et al. (2019), non-positional leadership manifest with what is termed 'moral courage', and when they identified Professor Ololube's efforts at initiating transformational leadership in educational technology integration through mentorship and academic publications. Ololube bypassed conventional bureaucratic procedures to mentor students and colleagues.

Dr. Kelvin I. Ogona' mentoring programs and instructional leadership have impacted graduate students and colleagues across disciplines in spite of not holding formal institutional position. Boitano in (2024) documented the ways in which faculty at South Africa universities reformed graduate supervision through informal networks.

The Social Sins of Institutional Leaders in Public Universities in Nigeria

The authors of this paper observed that leaders in Nigeria and in most developing nations do not lack the ability in designing beautiful policies for institutional development but implementing such policies because we overlook the treasure in our very own self. Undeniably, there is more to leadership than feeling affection for misconduct. Yet without love and eagerness to serve, leadership loses its values and heart.

The seven social sins vis-à-vis wealth without work, pleasure without conscience, knowledge without character, commerce without morality, science without humanity, religion without sacrifice, and politics without principle (Ololube, 2021), serves as a moral guide for evaluating the behaviors that erode both personal and institutional integrity (see Figure 2). Thus, Leal-Filho et al. (2022) noted that educational institutions hold the responsibility of shaping ethical, knowledgeable leaders who can address global challenges.
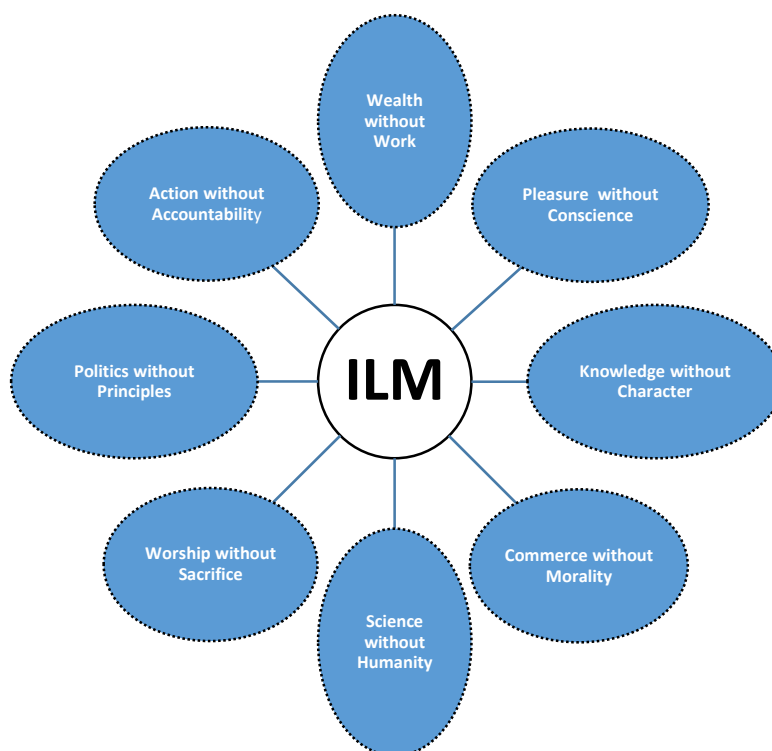
Figure 2. *Social sins and the quality of institutional leadership and management (ILM).*

Note. Adapted from Ololube (2019, p. 660) and Ololube (2021, p. 6).

As the governance of public universities became more formalized, social sins became more pronounced within the realm of educational leadership. According to Asaju (2023), this unethical leadership behavior has weakened the core functions of public universities, which are responsible for promoting academic innovation, social change, and sustainable development, particularly in developing nations like Nigeria. Therefore, leaders who engage in unethical behaviors such as wealth without work where they benefit financially from the institution without contributing meaningfully to its academic mission demonstrate how social sins manifest in higher education today (Ololube, 2019).

In addition, the failure of educational leaders to align their practices with moral principles reflects knowledge without character, where institutional focus shifts toward prestige rather than ethical responsibilities (Ololube, 2024; Steingard, 2024). This undermines the capacity of universities to engage with societal issues and meet the demands for sustainable development goals. Thus, Ololube (2021) and Ololube et al. (2023) noted that Nigerian public universities are vulnerable to leadership failures that can bring change because when social sins is so openly done, institutional decision-

making processes suffers and the ability to provide quality education and promote social justice become eroded (Ananyi et al., 2024).

In addition, since public universities play a critical role in driving sustainable economic development, particularly through the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), social sins within and among institutional leadership hinder universities from fulfilling their economic and educational mandates. Yet, when leaders engage in practices such as commerce without morality or politics without principle, they prioritize personal gain over long-term societal benefits, ultimately compromising the institution's contribution to sustainable development (Ololube, 2021).

Strengthening Leading Change without Formal Authority Universities in Africa

In spite of the nations involved, public university education is a basic necessity aimed towards the creation of a knowledge economy. Investment in public university is an excellence way to invest in citizens' well-being. The goal and objectives of university education is to educate citizens, develop professionals, captains of industries, leaders and the discovery of new knowledge that may either strengthen or challenge the establishment of great ideas and norms, and to deepen human understanding and improvement of and development of the human mind. The broad perspective of the universities in Nigeria is that they occupy fundamental position in national development, especially in developing high-level human resource. Therefore, there must be value-added relations among the various stakeholders to strengthen, stabilize and innovate the governance structures (Mukoro & Ojeje, 2024). Therefore, the world cannot afford to neglect the importance of the universities to stabilize the internal and external tensions in human activities. As such, leadership integrity provides all that it takes to enables universities respond to societal needs.

For example, At Makerere University, a simple policy change allowing departments to allocate 15% of their budgets to staff-proposed reforms generated 62 viable institutional improvements within two years (Amadi & Ogona, 2024). Digital credentialing systems present another underutilized strategy for amplifying informal leadership. Research by Okafor (2024) demonstrated how blockchain-based micro credentialing at the University of Lagos has made previously invisible mentoring and curriculum development work measurable for career advancement. When combined with cross-institutional leaderboards that spotlight successful grassroots initiatives as implemented in South Africa's University of the Witwatersrand, these systems create competitive incentives for informal leadership while maintaining academic rigor (Association of African Universities, 2024; Blackmore, 2023).

The Consequences of Dysfunctional Leadership in Nigerian Public Universities

Dysfunctional leadership in Nigerian public universities manifests through rigid, hierarchical governance models that systematically undermine institutional effectiveness. Recent studies reveal that 68% of faculty members across twelve federal universities report being excluded from meaningful decision-making processes, with Delta State University (2023) and University of Benin (2023) showing particularly severe participation gaps of 72% and 69% respectively (NUC Quality Assurance Report, 2024). This authoritarian approach creates what Ololube (2024) conceptualizes as "innovation deserts", evidenced by a 47% decline in cross-disciplinary research initiatives and 58% reduction in teaching innovation grants between 2019-2023 (TETFund Annual Report, 2024). The University of Ibadan's experience illustrates this crisis - despite housing Nigeria's largest concentration of STEM PhDs, its patent filings dropped by 34% during this period, while Obafemi Awolowo University saw 42% of its mid-career researchers migrate to foreign institutions (JAMB Research Audit, 2024).
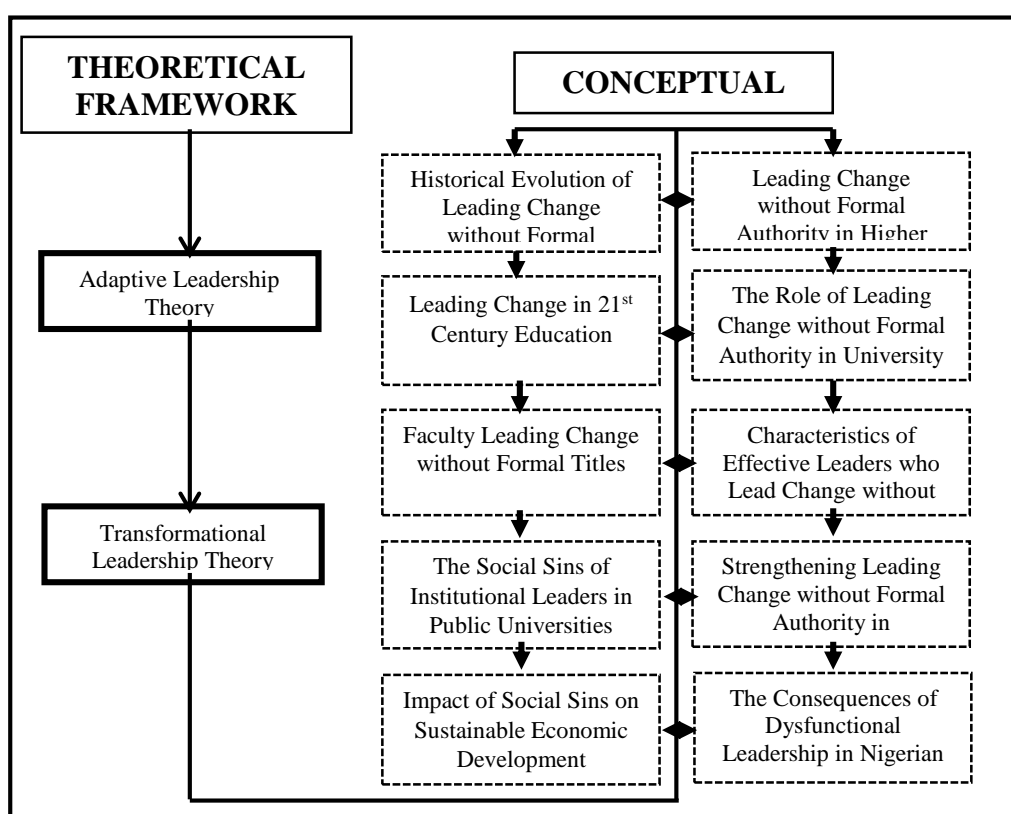

Figure 3. *Theoretical Framework and Conceptual Review summarized*

The dysfunction extends beyond research to compromise core teaching missions and graduate outcomes. Curriculum modernization delays average 5.7 years in Nigerian universities, compared to 2.3 years in Ghanaian and South African counterparts (AAU Benchmarking Study, 2024). This institutional inertia directly impacts graduate employability, with University of Lagos and Ahmadu Bello University reporting only 41% and 38% employment rates respectively for recent graduates - significantly below the 63% average for West African universities (NBS Education Sector Report, 2024).

Nigerian universities must similarly transition to hybrid governance models that combine formal structures with empowered innovation networks. Key interventions should include mandatory cross-rank curriculum committees, protected "innovation sandboxes" for pilot projects, and digital platforms that track and reward informal leadership contributions - approaches that have shown success in comparable contexts (Boitano, 2024; Nkomo & Ngambi, 2019). Figure 3 shows the theoretical framework and conceptual review of this study.

Methodology

The methodology adopted in this study was strategically designed to provide a strong foundation for developing the proposed model for leading change without formal authority in Nigerian public universities. Since the phenomenon under investigation involves understanding the lived experiences of individuals who have successfully influenced institutional transformation despite lacking formal leadership roles, the research approach needed to be both flexible and contextually grounded. The five key strategic pillars that support the conceptualization of informal leadership vis-à-vis Leadership Recognition, Institutional Reforms, Digital Integration, Policy Framework and Capacity Building, were built from the theories, previous studies and perceived patterns. A theoretical review was therefore considered the most suitable, as it enables the researchers to capture detailed, descriptive information that highlights the meanings participants attach to their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

We chose this method because it tends to be more suitable in meeting the objectives of the study. The review focused on gathering multiple sources of documented evidences. The triangulation of multiple information did not only enhance the validity of the paper but also ensured a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Out of the over 200 sources that were systematically downloaded from the internet, we chose 70 because of their validity and direct bearing to the theme of this study.

Proposed model for leading change without formal authority

The proposed model in this paper summary's the key mechanisms that can empower informal leaders to lead change in public universities through leadership recognition, institutional reforms, digital integration, policy framework, and capacity building. Faculty members, administrative staff, and students, can be able to derive significant innovative, collaborative and inclusivity in the university environment.

Recognition and Institutionalization of Informal Leadership Contributions

This is a key component of the model that involves the formal recognition and the institutionalization of the contributions of informal leadership within Nigerian public universities. It is important that faculty members, administrative staff, and students that initiate change without formal titles are not overlooked because such moves undermines and diminishes their impact and contributions to the growth of the public universities in Nigeria:

- First an institutional mechanism should be put in place to recognize the efforts of the informal leaders in the success of university management. These could be in the form of awards, public recognition, and institutional honors for their selfless contributions to institutional governance, academic innovation, and student-led initiatives.

- The establishment of leadership recognition frameworks (LRF) will go a long way to systematically track and reward the efforts informal leader.

- The establishment of institutional advisory boards, which should be composed of senior faculty members, senior administrators, and student union representatives to oversee the framework, identify and support the efforts of informal leaders within the public university.

Capacity-Building Initiatives

The development of leadership capacity-building initiatives among informal leaders is essential to promote innovation and lead institutional reforms. This model advocates initiatives aimed at empowering faculty members, administrative staff, and students with leadership skills necessary to initiate change:

- Initiating leadership development programs designed for staff without formal titles is essential to equip them with the necessary skills in strategic decision-making, conflict resolution practices, and cross-disciplinary collaboration. The programs should be aimed at enhancing their ability to stimulate institutional change processes and promote the needed reforms for effective operation of the system.

- The development of leadership incubation units that will be able to provide informal leaders with a dedicated space to practice and experiment their innovative ideas, collaborate with colleagues, and propose solutions to institutional challenges and promote a culture of continuous leadership development across every sector in the university.

- Develop a structured mentorship programs that will be able to connect informal leaders with experienced mentors across other disciplines, promote the exchange of leadership knowledge and globally accepted best practices.

Institutional Reforms that Support Leading Change without Formal Authority

Institutional reforms that support leading change without formal authority is critical at this stage of universities wanting to do more with less resource, and the needed reforms should be able to eliminate the barriers that hinder leading change without formal authority in university systems:

- Constantly reviewing and revising the existing policies that constrain informal leaders without titles contributions is necessary to create a more inclusive and effective leadership structure within the university system. Strengthen the informal leaders to support change and creating flexible policies that enables them to participate in the governance and strategic decision-making drives change in the university.

- Efforts towards broadening the scope of performance evaluations and the recognition of informal leadership roles are critical for university development. Faculty members, administrators and students who make extensive contribution towards institutional change without formal titles must be assessed and rewarded for their efforts.

Digital and Technology Integration

The integration of digital and technology tools enhances the participation of informal leaders in governance and institutional leadership development. Therefore, the proposed model highlights the importance of integrating technology to support informal leaders' efforts and participation in decision-making:

- The use and significance of the online platforms enable faculty members, administrators, and students to engage in governance, decision-making, and leadership discussions, notwithstanding their formal roles in the university. Online platforms offer staff and students' access and inclusivity, and ensure that informal leader or leaders without title participate extensively in university leadership discussions.

- Virtual leadership hubs and collaboration tools to promote cross-departmental engagement and innovation has to be created to enhance debates. In such platforms, informal leaders will have the opportunity to collaborate with their colleagues and peers to exchange ideas, thereby enhancing university governance.

- The integration of e-learning platforms, virtual mentorship programs, and other technology assisted tools provide avenue for continuous leadership training and development for informal leaders. They make leadership development resources more accessible to staff and students' at all levels of the university.

The Integration of Policy Framework

Institutional policies that support informal leadership play a vital role in enabling contributions from faculty, staff, and students. Specific policy reforms must be in tandem with the university wide programs to make sure that informal leaders thrive:

- The university wide policies must be aimed that promoting distributed leadership to empower faculty members, administrators and students to enable them collaborate in the decision-making and university governance processes. The needed policies must be made to encourage shared responsibility and collective action among staff and students. Leadership must not be concentrated or centralized.

- The creation of flexible committees is germane. Informal leaders should be welcomed into the universities' governance structures to give room for informal leaders without title to enthusiastically participate in the decision-making process.

- The establishment of leadership participatory forums provides faculty members, administrators' and students the avenues to participate and discuss the challenges and opportunities within and outside the university systems.

This proposed model illustrates is designed to empower faculty members, administrators and students in Nigerian public universities. The model is aimed at driving innovation without relying mush on formal titles or positions. The framework is built around five essential pillars that support the institutionalization of informal leadership: Leadership Recognition, Institutional Reforms, Digital Integration, Policy Framework and Capacity Building. These dimensions consist of strategic mechanisms that highlight critical and practical methodologies, to improve and formalize informal leaders' contributions to the growth and development of university goals. In addition, the model is aimed at promoting leadership development through mentorship and interdisciplinary collaboration, as well as, to create policies framework that encourages participatory decision-making. Leadership that is focused dimensions proposed have the potential of laying the foundation for goal attainment through enhanced inclusivity,
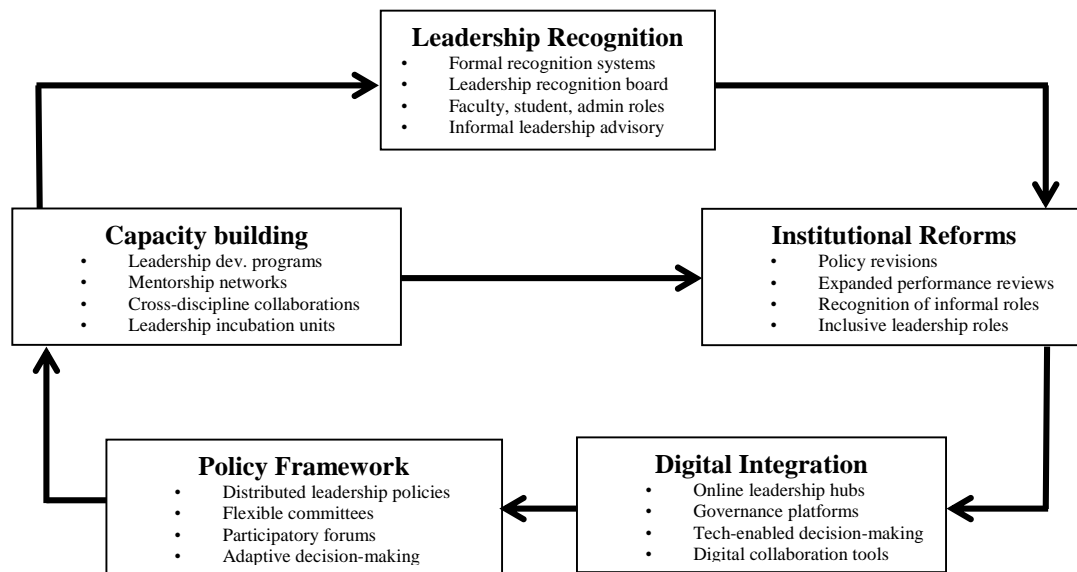
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                        ┌─────────────────────────────────┐
                        │     Leadership Recognition       │
                        │  •  Formal recognition systems   │
                        │  •  Leadership recognition board │
                        │  •  Faculty, student, admin roles│
                        │  •  Informal leadership advisory │
                        └─────────────────────────────────┘

  ┌─────────────────────────────┐              ┌─────────────────────────────┐
  │     Capacity building        │              │     Institutional Reforms    │
  │  •  Leadership dev. programs │              │  •  Policy revisions         │
  │  •  Mentorship networks      │              │  •  Expanded performance reviews│
  │  •  Cross-discipline collaborations│        │  •  Recognition of informal roles│
  │  •  Leadership incubation units│            │  •  Inclusive leadership roles│
  └─────────────────────────────┘              └─────────────────────────────┘

       ┌──────────────────────────┐       ┌──────────────────────────┐
       │     Policy Framework      │       │     Digital Integration    │
       │  •  Distributed leadership policies│  •  Online leadership hubs│
       │  •  Flexible committees   │       │  •  Governance platforms  │
       │  •  Participatory forums  │       │  •  Tech-enabled decision-making│
       │  •  Adaptive decision-making│     │  •  Digital collaboration tools│
       └──────────────────────────┘       └──────────────────────────┘
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Figure 4. *The Proposed Model for Leading Change without Formal Authority in Universities*

Application of the Model to Nigerian Public Universities

Models are proposed to principally guide or suit the cultural and institutional context for which the proposition is directed. Leading change without formal authority Nigerian public universities are practically impossible because of constrains from the bureaucratic structures. The scares resources and the political interference make leadership of public universities in Nigeria stunted in development. This model suggests lead ways to institutional changes that will not relying exclusively on formal leadership roles, instead rely on the strengths of the numerous stakeholders in the Nigerian public university space:

• Faculty members can use their expertise to lead curriculum reforms and mentor junior staff and students, fostering a culture of continuous learning and improvement.

• Administrative staff can identify inefficiencies in university operations and propose practical solutions, collaborating with other university stakeholders to implement changes.

• Researchers can align their research with societal needs and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), influencing university policies and governance through evidence-based insights.

- Students, often at the forefront of change, can drive ethical practices and sustainability initiatives, influencing university leadership through advocacy and activism.

The model is supported by real-life examples of informal leadership in action within Nigerian universities.

Expected Outcomes and Impact

The expected outcome and impact of this model is projected to be significant if used across Nigerian public universities. First, leadership diversity in governance structures will expand significantly as the model's innovation committees and student parliaments institutionalize voices from traditionally marginalized groups. Research by Amadi and Ogona (2024) demonstrated that similar frameworks at South African universities increased women's participation in academic leadership by 40% within five years, while Lebeau and Ogunsanya (2024) study of distributed systems shows a 65% improvement in interdisciplinary representation in decision-making bodies.

Enhanced institutional agility will emerge as the adaptive leadership components reduce bureaucratic apathy. Case studies from Ghana reveal that universities implementing sandbox approaches can respond to emerging challenges 3-4 times faster than traditional hierarchies (Tettey, 2024). The model's digital influence portfolios will create real-time feedback loops, enabling Nigerian institutions to replicate the 52% improvement in administrative responsiveness documented at the University of Lagos pilot (Uzochukwu, 2024).

The leadership pipeline will strengthen through deliberate succession pathways embedded in the model. Nkomo and Ngambi's (2019) longitudinal research confirms that faculty who engage in informal leadership initiatives are 75% more likely to transition successfully to formal administrative roles. The proposed innovation fellowships will particularly benefit early-career academics, addressing Nigeria's looming leadership gap as 42% of current university administrators near retirement (National Universities Commission, 2023).

Institutional performance metrics will show marked improvement across teaching, research, and community engagement indicators. Okuru et al.'s (2024) comparative analysis of Self-leadership in Nigerian universities indicated that institutions that embrace distributed leadership models achieve higher scores on accreditation measures. The model's emphasis on student-led initiatives is projected to particularly enhance graduate employability, which is a critical performance indicator where Nigerian universities currently underperform (World Bank, 2023). Figure 5 represents the expected outcomes and impact of this study.
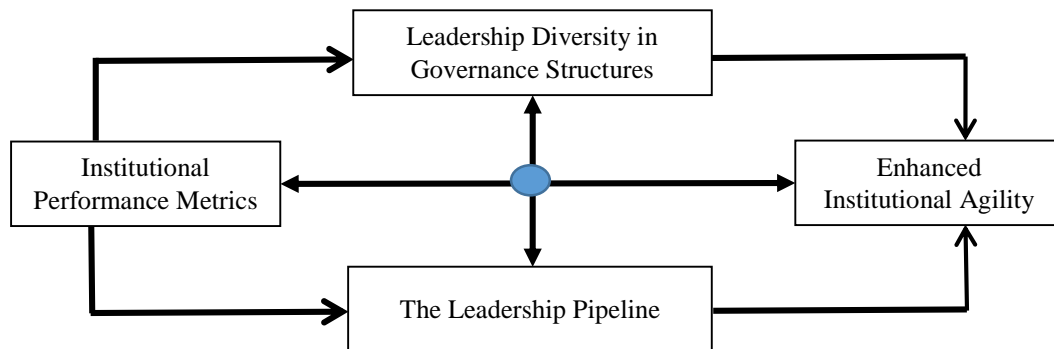
Figure 5. *Expected Outcomes and Impact*

Conclusion

      This study positions leading change without formal authority as a critical mechanism for transforming Nigerian public universities, by offering a theoretically grounded model that institutionalizes grassroots leadership through Adaptive and Distributed Leadership frameworks. The proposed approach: empowering faculty innovators, administrative reformers, research catalysts, and student visionaries, provides a sustainable solution to systemic governance challenges, as demonstrated by successful implementations across comparable African institutions facing similar constraints of bureaucratic inertia and resource limitations. Creating structured channels for organic leadership while maintaining academic standards, can enable Nigerian universities to harness their most valuable asset by the collective expertise and creativity of their academic communities to achieve both institutional resilience and global competitiveness without relying solely on traditional hierarchical reforms.

Suggestions

      Drawing upon the findings from institutional case studies and comparative policy analyses, this study proposes four targeted suggestions to systematically integrate leading change without formal authority into university governance systems:

• University governance councils must institutionalize protected innovation zones with seed funding and decision-making autonomy to formalize faculty-led change initiatives, as demonstrated by the distributed leadership framework at the University of Johannesburg.

• Professional development centers should implement mandatory adaptive leadership training for cultivating institutional entrepreneurship competencies through structured mentorship programs comparable to Ghana's Emerging Scholars Leadership Initiative.

- The national quality assurance agencies (e.g., NUC) need to incorporate weighted metrics for grassroots curriculum innovation and cross-departmental mentorship in accreditation standards.

- The national research foundations (e.g., TETfund) ought to allocate dedicated funding based on merit and quality that must streams for interdisciplinary teams proposing institutional improvement projects.

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