

Transformational Leadership and Compliance with NUC Benchmarks: Pathways to Quality Assurance in Nigerian Universities

Adetunji Lukman Olajide

Department of Educational Management, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria
adetunjilukman01@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper examines the role of transformational leadership in enhancing quality assurance within university administration, with a specific focus on Kwara State, Nigeria. Transformational leadership is conceptualized as a model that emphasizes inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, and idealized influence. The paper argues that these attributes are crucial in higher education governance, particularly in addressing the quality assurance challenges confronting Nigerian universities. Through an exploration of the National Universities Commission (NUC) benchmarks, the study situates quality assurance as central to maintaining academic standards and institutional credibility. It further highlights how transformational leadership promotes accountability, innovation, participatory decision-making, and a culture of continuous improvement in teaching, research, and community service. Findings underscore the nexus between transformational leadership and the development of robust quality assurance systems that are sustainable and responsive to local and global educational demands. The paper concludes with recommendations on leadership development, participatory governance, capacity building, and policy support to strengthen quality assurance in Kwara State universities.

Keywords: Transformational leadership, Quality assurance, University administration, Higher education, Kwara State, Nigeria.

Introduction

In contemporary higher education, leadership and quality assurance are two inseparable concepts that determine institutional sustainability and effectiveness. Universities, as the highest centres of learning, are entrusted with the responsibility of driving knowledge creation, innovation, human capital development, and societal transformation. To achieve these mandates, institutions must uphold high standards in teaching, research, and service delivery. In Nigeria, however, concerns about falling academic standards, graduate unemployability, inadequate funding, infrastructural decay, and weak governance have intensified debates about the quality of university education (Adeyemi, 2023). At the heart of these challenges lies the crucial role of leadership. The style and practices adopted by university administrators significantly influence accountability, innovation, and the institutional culture of quality. Among the diverse leadership paradigms, transformational leadership has emerged as one of the most effective in promoting quality assurance in higher education globally (Bass & Riggio, 2021; Yusuf & Bello, 2024).

Quality assurance in universities refers to a continuous and systematic evaluation of academic and administrative practices to ensure compliance with established benchmarks (Ofojebe &

Chukwuma, 2022). In Nigeria, this responsibility rests primarily with the National Universities Commission (NUC), which sets minimum academic standards and conducts periodic accreditation exercises. However, the implementation of quality assurance policies depends largely on the leadership commitment of individual institutions. Administrators such as Vice-Chancellors, Deans, Directors, and Heads of Departments play pivotal roles in translating policies into practice. Thus, leadership is not just about management routines but about articulating shared visions, motivating staff, and building structures that guarantee accountability and improvement. Transformational leadership, which emphasizes vision, intellectual stimulation, inspiration, and individualized consideration, provides a powerful framework for addressing quality challenges in universities across Kwara State and Nigeria at large (Adebayo & Lawal, 2023).

The concept of transformational leadership was first articulated by Burns (1978) and later expanded by Bass (1990), who highlighted its potential to move followers beyond self-interest toward collective institutional goals. Unlike transactional leadership, which is driven by compliance through rules, sanctions, or rewards, transformational leadership focuses on inspiring creativity, commitment, and shared ownership of outcomes (Bass & Riggio, 2021). In university settings, where intellectual autonomy, innovation, and collaboration are essential, this leadership approach has particular relevance. Kwara State universities, like many others in Nigeria, face persistent challenges such as resource shortages, poor staff motivation, and weak internal quality assurance systems. Transformational leadership can help create enabling environments where excellence is pursued as a shared responsibility rather than an imposed requirement (Ogunyemi & Adetunji, 2022).

The challenges of higher education in Kwara State mirror national trends. Public universities often grapple with limited funding, inadequate infrastructure, and strike actions, while private universities struggle with sustainability, credibility, and staff retention. In both cases, leadership plays a decisive role. Administrators who rely on authoritarian or laissez-faire leadership styles frequently fail to inspire confidence, resulting in apathy and resistance to quality assurance measures. Conversely, transformational leaders can foster a sense of belonging and shared commitment that strengthens a culture of quality across the institution (Olatunji, 2021). For instance, a Vice-Chancellor practicing inspirational motivation can articulate a vision that aligns with NUC benchmarks and global best practices, while intellectual stimulation can encourage staff to adopt innovative teaching methods and engage in high-impact research, thereby enhancing quality assurance outcomes (Ezekiel, 2024).

Quality assurance is not simply a technical or administrative process; it is deeply embedded in governance and leadership practices. Establishing quality assurance units, conducting accreditation, and adopting policy frameworks are insufficient without committed and visionary leadership. Tella (2022) notes that leadership failure remains a root cause of poor outcomes in Nigerian universities, as many policies are either poorly implemented or outright resisted. Transformational leadership addresses this problem by embedding quality assurance within institutional culture and values, making the process more participatory, sustainable, and results-driven (Ofojebe & Chukwuma, 2022). Globally, universities are under pressure to demonstrate competitiveness, accountability, and relevance in the knowledge economy. Accreditation agencies, employers, governments, and students demand evidence of innovation, efficiency, and effectiveness. Nigerian universities, including those in Kwara State, must

respond to these demands to remain relevant. Transformational leadership equips administrators with the vision to anticipate changes, mobilize resources, and engage stakeholders in continuous improvement (Yusuf & Bello, 2024). This leadership approach is particularly critical in an era of digital learning, globalization, and increasing emphasis on research productivity. Universities are expected to provide not only robust curricula but also technology-enabled learning, globally competitive research, and strong industry-community linkages. Meeting these expectations requires more than bureaucratic management it requires transformative leadership (Adeyemi, 2023).

The experiences of universities during the COVID-19 pandemic underscore this reality. Institutions led by transformational leaders were quicker to adopt blended learning and sustain academic continuity, thereby safeguarding quality assurance processes (Okafor & Nwosu, 2021). In Kwara State, institutions such as the University of Ilorin, known for its discipline and strong quality structures, and Al-Hikmah University, a rising private institution, exemplify the opportunities and challenges in linking leadership with quality assurance. While both categories of universities contend with limited resources and external pressures, their ability to sustain and improve quality standards rests heavily on leadership vision and practices (Ogunyemi & Adetunji, 2022). The primary purpose of this paper is to examine the role of transformational leadership in enhancing quality assurance within university administration, with a specific focus on universities in Kwara State, Nigeria. In the face of rising concerns about falling academic standards, infrastructural decay, inadequate funding, and weak governance, there is an urgent need to explore leadership models that can inspire innovation, accountability, and sustainable improvement in higher education.

Specifically, this paper seeks to:

1. Clarify the concept of transformational leadership and highlight its relevance to higher education governance in Nigeria.
2. Examine the meaning and importance of quality assurance in university administration and its role in sustaining academic standards.
3. Evaluate the NUC Benchmark Minimum Academic Standards (BMAS) as a regulatory framework for ensuring quality in Nigerian universities.
4. Identify challenges affecting quality assurance in Kwara State universities and how leadership practices contribute to or mitigate these challenges.
5. Explore the nexus between transformational leadership and quality assurance, focusing on how visionary leadership can foster accountability, innovation, and participatory governance.
6. Propose suggestions for strengthening leadership practices and quality assurance mechanisms in Nigerian higher education, with implications for policy, practice, and institutional sustainability.

The Concept of Transformational Leadership

Leadership remains one of the most widely studied and debated concepts in organizational studies, political science, and education. The concept of transformational leadership was first introduced by James MacGregor Burns in his seminal work *Leadership* (1978). Burns defined transformational leadership as a process in which leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of morality and motivation. Unlike transactional leadership, which is based on

exchanges and compliance through rewards and punishments, transformational leadership seeks to inspire followers to transcend their self-interests for the sake of higher organizational or societal goals. Building on Burns' foundation, Bernard Bass (1990) expanded the theory by operationalizing its dimensions and proposing that transformational leaders achieve performance beyond expectations by inspiring trust, motivating commitment, and encouraging creativity. Bass argued that transformational leaders are not only concerned with task completion but also with developing the full potential of their followers and creating a shared vision that drives organizational progress (Bass & Riggio, 2021).

Attributes of Transformational Leadership

Bass (1990) and later Bass and Riggio (2021) outlined four major attributes of transformational leadership, often referred to as the "Four I's": inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, and idealized influence. These dimensions collectively explain how transformational leaders achieve extraordinary results by engaging the emotions, values, and intellectual capacities of their followers.

1. Inspirational Motivation: Inspirational motivation refers to the ability of leaders to articulate a compelling vision that inspires followers to commit to shared goals. Transformational leaders use symbolic actions, optimistic communication, and enthusiasm to energize their teams (Northouse, 2022). In higher education, inspirational motivation manifests in the way Vice-Chancellors, Deans, or Heads of Departments communicate institutional missions, inspire academic staff to embrace innovation, and foster a collective pursuit of excellence in teaching, research, and service delivery (Ezekiel, 2024).

2. Individualized Consideration: Individualized consideration involves attending to the unique needs, aspirations, and development of each follower. Transformational leaders act as mentors and coaches, providing personalized support and opportunities for growth. They recognize that followers have diverse talents and motivations, and they create enabling environments where individuals feel valued and empowered (Bass & Riggio, 2021).

3. Intellectual Stimulation: Intellectual stimulation is the capacity of transformational leaders to encourage creativity, innovation, and critical thinking among followers. Leaders who display this attribute challenge existing assumptions, promote problem-solving, and encourage new approaches to institutional challenges (Northouse, 2022). Instead of imposing rigid solutions, they invite staff and students to contribute ideas and explore alternative perspectives.

4. Idealized Influence: Idealized influence refers to the leader's ability to serve as a role model, earning trust, respect, and admiration from followers. Transformational leaders demonstrate high ethical standards, integrity, and consistency, which inspire confidence in their followers (Bass & Riggio, 2021). Followers emulate such leaders because they embody the values and principles the institution upholds.

Relevance of Transformational Leadership to Higher Education Governance

The governance of higher education institutions is a complex process that involves balancing multiple and sometimes conflicting demands from government, students, faculty, industry, and society at large. Effective governance requires visionary and adaptive leadership capable of navigating these complexities while sustaining institutional effectiveness. Transformational leadership is particularly relevant to higher education governance for several reasons.

1. Promotes a Quality Culture: Quality assurance in higher education extends beyond compliance with external regulations; it requires the development of an internal culture where excellence is valued and pursued consistently. Transformational leaders, through inspirational motivation and idealized influence, foster shared values that embed quality into institutional practices. By articulating clear visions and modeling ethical behavior, they ensure that quality becomes a collective goal rather than a bureaucratic exercise (Ofojebe & Chukwuma, 2022).

2. Enhances Staff Motivation and Retention: Universities often struggle with issues of low staff morale, brain drain, and resistance to change. Transformational leaders address these challenges by providing individualized consideration and inspiring commitment. Studies show that academic staff under transformational leadership report higher levels of job satisfaction, loyalty, and productivity (Ogunyemi & Adetunji, 2022). This is particularly relevant in contexts like Nigeria, where limited funding and frequent industrial actions threaten staff motivation.

3. Drives Innovation and Adaptability: The global higher education landscape is characterized by rapid technological changes, internationalization, and shifting labor market demands. Transformational leaders encourage intellectual stimulation, thereby driving innovation in curricula, pedagogy, and research. For example, leaders who foster digital learning adoption not only enhance institutional competitiveness but also ensure that students are prepared for 21st-century challenges (Ezekiel, 2024).

4. Strengthens Accountability and Trust: Governance in higher education requires trust between administrators, faculty, students, and external stakeholders. Idealized influence ensures that leaders serve as ethical role models, thereby strengthening institutional trust and legitimacy. This is vital in Nigeria, where perceptions of corruption and favoritism often undermine governance systems. Transformational leaders who demonstrate integrity and fairness enhance institutional credibility (Tella, 2022).

5. Facilitates Stakeholder Engagement: Universities are multi-stakeholder organizations where decision-making must reflect the interests of diverse groups. Transformational leaders, by virtue of their participatory and inspiring approach, are more likely to build consensus and facilitate collaboration. This inclusive governance approach reduces resistance, enhances transparency, and strengthens institutional resilience (Adeyemi, 2023).

Quality Assurance in University Administration

Universities occupy a pivotal position in national development as centers for knowledge generation, innovation, and human capacity building. However, the effectiveness of universities in fulfilling this mandate is heavily dependent on the extent to which their processes, outputs, and outcomes meet defined standards of excellence. This necessity has

given rise to the concept of Quality Assurance (QA), a structured mechanism that ensures that higher education institutions deliver value, meet accreditation requirements, and produce graduates with the knowledge, skills, and competencies needed in society. In university administration, QA is not merely a compliance tool but a strategic framework for continuous improvement and institutional sustainability. The term *quality assurance* in higher education refers to the systematic and planned processes by which institutions monitor, evaluate, and enhance their academic and administrative activities to ensure that educational goals are achieved effectively (Harvey & Green, 1993; Materu, 2007). It is a multidimensional concept encompassing teaching, learning, research, community service, governance, infrastructure, and student support systems.

According to the National Universities Commission (NUC, 2019) in Nigeria, QA involves activities designed to ensure that the provision of higher education meets acceptable standards of quality as set by national and international benchmarks. This includes processes such as accreditation, internal monitoring, peer reviews, and external evaluations. In essence, QA answers critical questions such as: *Are universities producing competent graduates? Are academic programs relevant to labor market needs? Are research outputs impactful and innovative? Are governance and management structures effective?* International organizations have also defined QA broadly. The World Bank (2020) views it as an integrated system of policies, structures, and procedures that assure stakeholders students, employers, governments, and the public that higher education institutions are meeting expected performance and accountability standards. Similarly, the UNESCO (2021) report stresses that QA should not only be about meeting minimum standards but also about fostering a culture of excellence, innovation, and relevance to societal needs.

Importance of Quality Assurance in Higher Education

Quality assurance in higher education is both a necessity and a catalyst for institutional excellence, accountability, and sustainability. In the context of university administration, it provides a structured pathway for achieving academic standards, stakeholder confidence, and continuous improvement. For universities in Kwara State and Nigeria at large, embedding a strong QA culture is not optional but essential for achieving relevance in the 21st-century global knowledge economy. Without robust QA systems, universities risk producing graduates who are ill-prepared for societal challenges, thereby undermining national development.

1. Promotes Academic Standards and Excellence: One of the foremost purposes of QA is to uphold and enhance academic standards. Through mechanisms such as curriculum reviews, staff development, and program accreditation, QA ensures that teaching and learning processes remain relevant, rigorous, and aligned with global best practices (Ajayi & Ige, 2020). In Nigeria, the NUC accreditation process is designed to enforce minimum standards across programs while encouraging institutions to strive for excellence beyond compliance.

2. Ensures Institutional Accountability: QA strengthens accountability by requiring universities to justify their use of resources and demonstrate the value of their academic outcomes. This is particularly important in public universities where government funding and public trust must be safeguarded. Accountability also extends to private universities, which must assure parents and students that tuition fees translate into quality learning experiences and employable graduates (Ogunode, 2022).

3. Supports Continuous Improvement: QA creates a feedback mechanism that drives ongoing improvement in teaching, research, and administration. Internal quality audits and external reviews help identify weaknesses and recommend strategies for improvement. This culture of continuous improvement is essential in the dynamic landscape of higher education, where universities must adapt to technological innovations, global competition, and changing labor market demands.

4. Enhances Employability of Graduates: The employability of graduates is one of the most visible outcomes of a strong QA system. By aligning curricula with industry needs, promoting soft skills development, and encouraging experiential learning, QA helps ensure that graduates are not only knowledgeable but also job-ready (Okebukola, 2021). Employers in Kwara State, Nigeria, often emphasize the need for graduates with practical competencies, problem-solving abilities, and entrepreneurial skills qualities that QA mechanisms help instill.

5. Facilitates Accreditation and Recognition: Accreditation is both a requirement and a benefit of QA. Programs and institutions with strong QA frameworks are more likely to secure local and international accreditation, which enhances their reputation and global competitiveness (World Bank, 2020). Accreditation also facilitates student mobility and cross-border recognition of degrees, a key factor in globalization of higher education.

Challenges of Quality Assurance in Nigerian Universities

Quality assurance in Nigerian universities is central to maintaining global competitiveness, producing employable graduates, and sustaining academic credibility. Despite the efforts of the National Universities Commission (NUC) and internal university mechanisms, several systemic and institutional challenges continue to hinder effective implementation of quality assurance policies. These challenges are multidimensional, encompassing funding, governance, infrastructural, and human resource issues.

1. Inadequate Funding: One of the most pressing challenges affecting quality assurance in Nigerian universities is insufficient funding. Most public universities rely heavily on government allocations, which are often inadequate to cover recurrent and capital expenditures (Okebukola, 2020). This underfunding hampers the acquisition of modern teaching aids, laboratory equipment, and ICT facilities, thereby weakening universities' ability to meet global standards. Private universities, on the other hand, depend on tuition fees, which limits their capacity to invest in large-scale infrastructural development. The consequences include overcrowded classrooms, obsolete instructional materials, and reduced capacity for research and innovation all detrimental to quality assurance (Adeyemi, 2023).

2. Infrastructural Decay and Limited Facilities: Many Nigerian universities face infrastructural challenges such as inadequate lecture halls, insufficient student hostels, outdated libraries, and poorly equipped laboratories (Adebayo & Lawal, 2023). This situation undermines effective teaching, learning, and research. For example, science and engineering students in several universities work with obsolete equipment, making it difficult to compete globally in innovation and technology. Poor internet connectivity and insufficient ICT resources further compromise the adoption of digital learning platforms, which are now integral to quality assurance in higher education.

3. Brain Drain and Academic Staff Shortages: The emigration of qualified academics in search of better remuneration and working conditions abroad, popularly known as brain drain, has negatively affected the quality of teaching and research in Nigerian universities. According to Ogunyemi and Adetunji (2022), many departments are understaffed, forcing lecturers to handle excessive workloads. This reduces the quality of student engagement, research supervision, and mentorship. Furthermore, universities often resort to hiring part-time or adjunct lecturers who may lack the commitment or time to ensure quality service delivery.

4. Leadership and Governance Inefficiencies: Leadership remains a critical determinant of quality assurance outcomes. Authoritarian or laissez-faire administrative styles often fail to inspire staff commitment to institutional goals (Olatunji, 2021). Leadership conflicts, political interference in appointments, and corruption also undermine accountability and transparency in resource management. When leadership does not embody transformational principles, the implementation of NUC benchmarks is often perceived as a bureaucratic requirement rather than a shared institutional goal (Tella, 2022).

5. Overpopulation and Large Class Sizes: The rapid expansion of student enrollment without corresponding infrastructural development has led to overcrowded lecture halls and hostels in many universities. Large class sizes compromise effective teaching, assessment, and lecturer-student interaction (Okebukola, 2020). This situation is particularly common in public universities in Kwara State, where demand for affordable education exceeds institutional carrying capacity. Overpopulation also puts pressure on facilities and staff, thereby lowering the quality of education delivered.

National Universities Commission (NUC) Benchmarks in Nigeria

Quality assurance in higher education is a crucial process for maintaining academic standards, enhancing institutional credibility, and ensuring that graduates are equipped with relevant knowledge and skills for societal development. In Nigeria, the primary regulatory body responsible for overseeing and maintaining the quality of university education is the National Universities Commission (NUC). Established in 1962 and formalized as a statutory body in 1974, the NUC plays a central role in coordinating university education, accrediting academic programmes, and setting minimum standards to ensure quality and relevance (Okebukola, 2020). One of the key mechanisms through which the NUC ensures quality is the development and enforcement of the Benchmark Minimum Academic Standards (BMAS), which serve as guidelines for the structure, content, and delivery of university programmes in Nigeria. The NUC benchmarks, often referred to as BMAS, are comprehensive policy documents that define the minimum acceptable academic standards for all undergraduate and postgraduate programmes offered in Nigerian universities. They outline the curriculum content, duration, learning outcomes, course credit requirements, teaching methods, staff qualifications, infrastructural needs, and quality assurance mechanisms necessary for programme accreditation (Ofojebe & Chukwuma, 2022).

Objectives of NUC Benchmarks

The BMAS system was introduced to achieve the following goals:

1. **Ensure Academic Standards:** Establish minimum quality requirements for programme design, delivery, and evaluation.
2. **Enhance Curriculum Relevance:** Align academic content with national socio-economic needs and international developments.
3. **Promote Accountability:** Provide a reference for internal and external quality assurance audits.
4. **Facilitate Accreditation:** Guide the accreditation process by defining criteria for programme approval and renewal.
5. **Encourage Continuous Improvement:** Promote regular curriculum review and institutional self-assessment.

Through these objectives, the benchmarks serve as both a regulatory tool and a developmental framework for Nigerian universities.

Components of the NUC Benchmarks

1. Curriculum Standards and Programme Structure: The benchmarks specify the minimum curriculum content and structure for all degree programmes. This includes the number of credit units, compulsory and elective courses, general studies requirements, and practical components such as internships, projects, and fieldwork. For example, most undergraduate programmes require a minimum of 120 credit units over four years, with clear distribution across foundational, core, and specialized courses (Adebayo & Lawal, 2023).

2. Learning Outcomes and Competencies: Each BMAS document identifies the expected learning outcomes and graduate attributes for every programme. These outcomes emphasize knowledge acquisition, critical thinking, communication skills, ethical values, entrepreneurship, and practical competencies. This ensures that graduates are not only academically qualified but also employable and socially responsible.

3. Staff Qualifications and Workload: The benchmarks provide detailed requirements for academic staffing. For instance, a minimum proportion of courses must be taught by PhD holders, and the student-to-staff ratio should not exceed recommended limits. These requirements are aimed at promoting quality teaching, mentorship, and research supervision (Ogunyemi & Adetunji, 2022).

4. Infrastructure and Learning Resources: NUC benchmarks outline minimum infrastructural standards, including classroom space, laboratories, libraries, ICT facilities, and student support services. Adequate facilities are essential for effective curriculum delivery and research productivity. During accreditation visits, NUC panels assess the availability, quality, and functionality of these resources.

5. Quality Assurance and Accreditation Processes: The BMAS framework emphasizes the establishment of Internal Quality Assurance Units (IQAUs) in universities. These units monitor teaching quality, student assessment, research output, and administrative efficiency. External quality assurance is conducted through periodic accreditation exercises, where NUC panels evaluate compliance with BMAS requirements and assign accreditation statuses, Full, Interim, or Denied (Okebukola, 2020).

6. Research, Innovation, and Community Service: The benchmarks also stress the importance of research and community engagement as core university functions. Institutions must demonstrate research productivity, collaboration with industry, and contributions to societal development as part of their quality assurance profile.

Implementation of NUC Benchmarks in Nigerian Universities

The implementation of BMAS is a collaborative process between the NUC and individual universities. Universities are expected to design their programmes based on the BMAS guidelines while incorporating institutional priorities and innovations. Periodically, the NUC reviews and updates the benchmarks to reflect changing global trends, technological advancements, and national needs (Adeyemi, 2023). Accreditation visits are a critical aspect of BMAS implementation. During these visits, NUC accreditation teams evaluate programmes based on curriculum quality, staffing, infrastructure, research, governance, and student support. Programmes that fail to meet minimum standards risk losing their accreditation status, which can affect student admissions, graduate recognition, and institutional credibility (Ofojibe & Chukwuma, 2022).

Challenges in the Implementation of NUC Benchmarks

Despite the pivotal role of the National Universities Commission (NUC) Benchmark Minimum Academic Standards (BMAS) in enhancing the quality and relevance of higher education in Nigeria, several challenges continue to impede their effective implementation across universities. These challenges cut across financial, administrative, infrastructural, and attitudinal dimensions, thereby affecting the overall goal of ensuring academic excellence and institutional accountability.

Inadequate Funding: One of the most persistent challenges confronting Nigerian universities in implementing the BMAS is inadequate funding. Most public universities rely heavily on government subventions, which are often insufficient to meet the increasing cost of maintaining standard infrastructure, procuring modern teaching and research facilities, or recruiting and retaining qualified academic staff. The financial shortfall hampers universities' ability to align with the infrastructural and staffing requirements stipulated by the NUC. According to Okojie (2010), inadequate funding has led to dilapidated facilities, obsolete laboratory equipment, and overcrowded lecture halls, all of which undermine the attainment of the expected quality benchmarks.

Leadership Inefficiencies: Weak governance structures and poor leadership commitment also contribute significantly to non-compliance with NUC benchmarks. Effective leadership is crucial in fostering a culture of accountability, innovation, and continuous improvement within universities. However, some institutional administrators lack the managerial capacity or willpower to drive reforms that align with NUC standards. Leadership inefficiency often results in mismanagement of resources, policy inconsistency, and weak internal quality assurance mechanisms. As Nwankwo (2014) observed, leadership lapses at the institutional level tend to compromise strategic planning and hinder the full domestication of national quality frameworks.

Overcrowding and Infrastructural Deficit: The rapid growth in student enrollment without a commensurate expansion in physical and instructional facilities poses another serious challenge. Many universities operate beyond their carrying capacity, leading to overcrowded classrooms, inadequate hostels, and overstretched laboratories. This imbalance negatively affects teaching quality and student learning outcomes. Afolabi and Oyebade (2019) note that the pressure of accommodating growing student populations within limited resources has rendered compliance with BMAS guidelines on student–teacher ratios and instructional space impractical in many institutions.

Resistance to Change: Institutional inertia and staff resistance to reforms also obstruct the smooth implementation of updated benchmarks. Some academic and administrative staff perceive policy reforms introduced by the NUC as externally imposed rather than participatory, leading to reluctance in adopting new practices. Bureaucratic bottlenecks further slowdown the integration of innovations into existing academic structures. In some cases, university senates or departments delay curriculum reviews or the adoption of modern pedagogical approaches recommended by the BMAS due to traditional attitudes and a preference for status quo operations (Ogunyemi, 2021).

Monitoring and Evaluation Limitations: Another major bottleneck lies in the NUC’s capacity to effectively monitor and evaluate compliance across the nation’s expanding higher education system. With over 200 universities federal, state, and private the Commission faces significant logistical and manpower constraints in carrying out regular and comprehensive accreditation exercises. Limited human and financial resources make it difficult to maintain consistent oversight, resulting in lapses in quality assurance processes. As pointed out by Etebu (2020), periodic accreditation visits are sometimes delayed or inadequately executed, thereby weakening the feedback mechanism that should ensure continuous improvement.

Impact of NUC Benchmarks on Quality Assurance

Despite these challenges, the BMAS has significantly improved the quality landscape of Nigerian higher education. It has enhanced curriculum relevance, improved staff qualifications, and promoted institutional accountability. The benchmarks have also facilitated Nigeria’s participation in international academic collaborations and student mobility programmes, as foreign institutions and employers increasingly recognize degrees from accredited Nigerian universities (Okebukola, 2020). Moreover, the emphasis on entrepreneurship, digital literacy, and research within the BMAS framework is gradually bridging the gap between university education and labor market needs. The benchmarks encourage universities to innovate in teaching, diversify programme offerings, and build partnerships with industries, thereby improving graduate employability and national development outcomes.

Quality Assurance Challenges in Kwara State Universities

Kwara State is home to both public and private universities, including the University of Ilorin (Unilorin), Kwara State University (KWASU), Al-Hikmah University, and others. These institutions play a vital role in human capital development, innovation, and research. However, ensuring quality assurance (QA) in these universities remains a persistent challenge due to systemic, institutional, and socio-economic factors. Despite efforts by the National Universities

Commission (NUC) through accreditation and benchmarking, Kwara State universities still grapple with issues that undermine the quality of teaching, learning, research, and governance.

1. Inadequate Funding and Resource Constraints: One of the most pressing challenges is the chronic underfunding of universities, particularly public institutions like KWASU. Insufficient financial resources affect the provision of infrastructure, modern laboratories, digital libraries, and teaching aids (Ogunode, 2022). Inadequate funding also limits staff recruitment, capacity building, and research grants, thereby weakening quality standards. Private universities such as Al-Hikmah University rely heavily on tuition fees, which are often insufficient to sustain robust QA mechanisms.

2. Shortage of Qualified Academic Staff: Many universities in Kwara State face staff shortages, particularly in specialized fields such as engineering, health sciences, and ICT. The situation is compounded by brain drain, as experienced academics migrate to better-paying jobs abroad or in federal universities (Okebukola, 2021). This shortage results in high student-to-lecturer ratios, limited supervision for postgraduate students, and reduced research productivity, which undermine quality benchmarks.

3. Leadership and Governance Issues: University administration in Kwara State sometimes suffers from weak governance structures, leadership instability, and political interference. For example, frequent changes in leadership or disputes over Vice-Chancellor appointments often disrupt academic calendars and QA processes. According to Yusuf and Bello (2024), transformational leadership is key to QA, but many administrators still adopt transactional or authoritarian leadership styles that hinder participatory decision-making and innovation.

4. Infrastructure Deficits: Quality assurance requires adequate physical facilities such as classrooms, laboratories, libraries, and ICT centers. While the University of Ilorin has made significant progress in infrastructure development, other institutions like KWASU and newly established private universities still face deficits in modern facilities (Ajayi & Ige, 2020).

5. Limited ICT Integration and E-Learning: The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of ICT integration in higher education. However, many Kwara State universities still struggle with e-learning adoption due to poor internet connectivity, limited digital resources, and inadequate staff training (World Bank, 2020).

The Nexus Between Transformational Leadership and Quality Assurance in Higher Education

The concept of quality assurance (QA) in higher education emphasizes maintaining and improving academic standards, effective governance, and the production of employable graduates (Okebukola, 2021). However, achieving these goals requires leadership that goes beyond routine management. Transformational leadership a style that inspires, motivates, and engages staff and students toward a shared vision has emerged as a key driver of quality outcomes in universities. The nexus between transformational leadership and QA lies in the ability of leaders to foster innovation, accountability, and continuous improvement, which are essential for sustaining academic excellence in Nigerian and global contexts.

1. Visionary Leadership and Institutional Quality: Transformational leaders articulate clear institutional visions that align with QA benchmarks. For example, a Vice-Chancellor who

inspires staff toward innovative teaching ensures that quality academic programs are implemented effectively (Yusuf & Bello, 2024). Vision-driven leadership thus sustains continuous quality improvement.

2. Motivation and Staff Productivity: Transformational leaders motivate lecturers and administrators through recognition, professional development, and mentorship. This leads to increased teaching effectiveness, research engagement, and improved student outcomes (Adebayo & Ogunode, 2021). Motivated staff contribute to QA by maintaining high academic standards and innovative practices.

3. Intellectual Stimulation and Innovation: QA requires institutions to embrace change, including ICT-driven pedagogy, modern research methods, and international collaborations. Transformational leaders challenge staff and students to think critically and adopt innovative practices, which strengthens QA systems (Eze & Okebukola, 2023).

4. Individualized Consideration and Human Capacity Building: By supporting staff development through training, conferences, and workshops, transformational leaders build human capacity that directly enhances QA outcomes. This fosters a culture of continuous improvement and excellence in teaching, research, and service delivery (Nwankwo, 2022).

5. Ethical Governance and Accountability: Quality assurance thrives in environments where ethical practices, transparency, and accountability are upheld. Transformational leaders provide role models in ethical governance, thereby promoting trust and credibility in QA processes (Ofojebe & Chukwuma, 2022).

Conclusion

Transformational leadership remains a critical driver of sustainable quality assurance in Nigerian universities, particularly in Kwara State where challenges such as inadequate funding, staff shortages, and infrastructural deficits hinder institutional performance. By emphasizing idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration, transformational leaders foster accountability, innovation, and professional commitment among academic and non-academic staff. Moreover, they cultivate a participatory culture where decision-making is inclusive, transparent, and aligned with institutional goals. Such leadership approaches also strengthen systems of monitoring, evaluation, and continuous improvement across teaching, research, and community service the three pillars of higher education. Ultimately, transformational leadership provides a framework for overcoming systemic barriers and advancing the mandates of quality assurance, ensuring universities remain competitive locally and globally.

Suggestion

Based on the review of transformational leadership and its nexus with quality assurance in Nigerian universities, several recommendations are necessary to strengthen university governance, enhance academic standards, and ensure sustainable institutional development.

1. University administrators in Kwara State should undergo leadership training tailored to transformational practices to drive quality assurance systems effectively.
2. Institutions should empower internal quality assurance directorates with resources and autonomy to function optimally under transformational leadership.
3. Continuous professional development for staff, coupled with recognition and incentives, should be promoted to sustain commitment to institutional goals.
4. Decision-making structures should be inclusive, allowing inputs from faculty, students, and stakeholders to enrich quality processes.
5. The National Universities Commission should reinforce its benchmarks by encouraging leadership practices that align with global best standards in quality assurance.
6. Digital tools should be adopted for monitoring, evaluation, and feedback mechanisms to enhance transparency and efficiency.
7. Universities should create enabling environments for research funding, collaborations, and innovative teaching methods inspired by transformational leadership.

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