



THE INFLUENCE OF LEGAL COMPLIANCE, ETHICAL LEADERSHIP, AND CORE INSTITUTIONAL VALUES ON SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION EFFECTIVENESS IN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES IN RIVERS STATE



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Abstract

The study examined the influence of legal compliance, ethical leadership, and core institutional values on school administration effectiveness in public universities in Rivers State. The study adopted a descriptive survey design, with a sample of 384 teaching and non-teaching staff selected through stratified and proportionate random sampling from three public universities. A structured questionnaire, validated by experts was used for data collection and tested for reliability using Cronbach's Alpha and the coefficients ranged from 0.83 to 0.89. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression. The results revealed that legal compliance, ethical leadership, and institutional values each had significant positive relationships with administrative effectiveness ($p < 0.05$). Ethical leadership emerged as the strongest predictor followed by legal compliance and core values. The three variables jointly accounted for 41% of the variance in administrative effectiveness. The study concluded that legal adherence, moral leadership, and shared institutional culture are critical to improving university governance. It recommended strengthening compliance systems, embedding ethical leadership in selection and training, and institutionalizing core values in administrative practices. The findings underscore the need for holistic governance reforms that integrate legal, ethical, and cultural dimensions to enhance public university administration.

Keywords: Legal Compliance, Ethical Leadership, Core Institutional Values, Administrative Effectiveness, Public Universities

Introduction

The administration of public universities plays a pivotal role in shaping the quality, efficiency, and sustainability of higher education systems, particularly in developing countries such as Nigeria. Effective administration is critical for achieving institutional goals, ensuring accountability, and promoting academic excellence. In the Nigeria context, and more specifically in Rivers State, public universities face significant administrative challenges, including funding inadequacies, bureaucratic inefficiencies, policy inconsistency, and governance issues (Okebukola, 2015; Adebayo, 2018). Within this environment, the interplay of legal compliance, ethical leadership, and core institutional values becomes central to understanding and enhancing the effectiveness of school administration.

Legal compliance refers to the adherence to relevant laws, policies, statutes, and regulatory frameworks guiding university operations. In Nigeria, public universities are governed by various laws including the National Universities Commission (NUC) guidelines, university charters, and labour laws, which define their administrative and academic procedures (NUC, 2020). Legal compliance in this context ensures accountability, standardization, and transparency in university management. However, weak enforcement mechanisms, coupled with politicization of decision-making, often lead to



administrative lapses and governance failures (Obasi, 2007; Ezeokoli & Nwosu, 2020). Therefore, compliance with legal frameworks is not merely procedural, but fundamental to the overall effectiveness of institutional governance.

Ethical leadership further complements legal compliance by influencing how university administrators make decisions and lead others. Ethical leadership, characterized by integrity, fairness, accountability, and the demonstration of moral values, is essential in fostering trust and organizational commitment (Brown & Treviño, 2006). In the university setting, ethical leadership contributes to the creation of an inclusive and morally upright academic community where decision-making is transparent and participatory (Lawal, 2021). The absence of ethical leadership often leads to unethical practices such as favouritism, embezzlement, academic dishonesty, and administrative high-handedness, all of which negatively impact institutional effectiveness (Agbo & Nwogu, 2022).

Closely tied to both legal and ethical dimensions are the core institutional values such as excellence, equity, service, academic freedom, innovation, and accountability. These values define the culture of an institution and guide administrative conduct and academic life (Oyesiku, 2014). In Rivers State, public universities operate in diverse socio-political contexts that sometimes conflict with their stated values. When core institutional values are upheld, they promote a shared vision, foster unity of purpose, and enhance stakeholder engagement in university governance (Ibukun, Akinfolarin, & Alimi, 2011). Conversely, when these values are undermined, it can lead to institutional decay, erosion of public trust, and diminished administrative capacity.

The synergy between legal compliance, ethical leadership, and institutional values thus become a determinant of how effectively public universities are administered. While each component can independently influence administration, it is their interdependent functioning that leads to a resilient and productive higher education system. This study explores the extent to which these three factors: legal compliance, ethical leadership, and core institutional values contribute to or constrain the effectiveness of school administration in public universities in Rivers State.

Statement of the Problem

Public universities in Rivers State continue to face persistent administrative challenges that undermine their ability to achieve institutional goals related to academic quality, infrastructure development, research productivity, and stakeholder satisfaction. Despite various educational reforms, regulatory guidelines, and increased government attention to higher education, issues such as weak governance, leadership misconduct, policy violations, and a breakdown of institutional values remain prevalent in these institutions (Agbo & Nwogu, 2022; Onifade, 2018).

At the core of these challenges is a growing concern about the level of legal compliance within university administration. While universities are mandated to operate in accordance with regulatory frameworks provided by agencies such as the National Universities Commission (NUC), the Public Procurement Act, and their own institutional statutes, anecdotal and empirical evidence suggests a significant gap between policy and practice. Non-compliance has led to mismanagement of funds, irregular appointments, and unresolved industrial disputes, all of which affect administrative effectiveness (Ezeokoli & Nwosu, 2020).

Equally troubling is the crisis of ethical leadership among university administrators. Ethical lapses including favouritism, lack of transparency, and misuse of authority have not only eroded staff morale but also damaged the trust and cohesion necessary for effective governance. Ethical leadership, which should serve as the moral compass of university management, is often compromised by political interference and personal interests (Lawal, 2021; Onifade, 2018).

Moreover, the erosion of core institutional values such as academic integrity, inclusiveness has become a major threat to administrative efficiency. In many cases, these values are either poorly defined or inconsistently practiced, resulting in a fragmented institutional culture that lacks direction and purpose (Oyesiku, 2014; Ibukun et al., 2011). Without a strong value system, universities struggle to mobilize staff and students around a shared vision, thereby weakening their overall performance.

Although previous studies have examined these variables independently, there is a significant lack of empirical research that explores the combined influence of legal compliance, ethical leadership,



and core institutional values on the effectiveness of school administration particularly within the specific socio-political and economic context of Rivers State. This gap is especially critical given the unique governance challenges and high expectations placed on public universities in the region.

Therefore, the problem this study seeks to address is the unclear and underexplored relationship between legal compliance, ethical leadership, and core institutional values, and how these factors influence the effectiveness of school administration in public universities in Rivers State.

Determine the extent to which legal compliance influence school administration effectiveness in public universities in Rivers State.

Examine the extent to which ethical leadership influence school administration effectiveness in public universities in Rivers State.

Ascertain the extent to which core institutional values influence school administration effectiveness in public universities in Rivers State.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study.

To what extent does legal compliance influence school administration effectiveness in public universities in Rivers State?

To what extent does ethical leadership influence school administration effectiveness in public universities in Rivers State?

To what extent does core institutional values influence school administration effectiveness in public universities in Rivers State?

Research Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses will be tested at the 0.05 level of significance:

Legal compliance does not significantly influence school administration effectiveness in public universities in Rivers State.

Ethical leadership does not significantly influence school administration effectiveness in public universities in Rivers State.

Core institutional values does not significantly influence school administration effectiveness in public universities in Rivers State.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Institutional Theory, originally developed by scholars such as Meyer and Rowan (1977) and later expanded by DiMaggio and Powell (1983). Institutional Theory explains how institutions are influenced by formal structures, societal expectations, and normative pressures that shape organizational behaviour that shape organizational behaviour, legitimacy, and performance.

According to Institutional Theory, organizations including public universities do not exist in isolation. Rather, they are embedded in broader institutional environments composed of rules, laws, values, and cultural norms. These elements exert coercive, normative, and mimetic pressures on institutions to conform in order to gain legitimacy, maintain stability, and enhance effectiveness. In the context of this study:

- Legal compliance reflects the coercive pressures imposed by regulatory frameworks, such as government policies, accreditation requirements, and labour laws, which universities must adhere to in order to remain legitimate and functional.
- Ethical leadership represents normative pressures arising from societal expectations about appropriate conduct, fairness, and accountability in leadership. Leaders who model ethical behaviour foster trust, legitimacy, and moral authority within the institution.
- Core institutional values reflect internalized beliefs and shared assumptions that guide behaviour, decision-making, and institutional culture. These values influence how policies are implemented and how effectively the institution operates.



Institutional Theory, therefore, provides a comprehensive lens for understanding how compliance with legal mandates, leadership behaviours, and value systems collectively shape the effectiveness of university administration. When public universities in Rivers State align with these institutional expectations, they are more likely to experience administrative efficiency, stakeholder trust, and overall organizational effectiveness.

Conceptual Clarification

Legal Compliance in University Administration

Legal compliance refers to the extent to which an institution adheres to statutory regulations, policies, and frameworks that govern its operation. In the Nigerian university system, compliance includes observing guidelines from regulatory bodies such as the National Universities Commission (NUC), the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund), labour laws, procurement acts, and institutional statutes (Ezeokoli & Nwosu, 2020). Legal compliance ensures that universities operate within the bounds of accountability, standardization, and public interest (Okebukola, 2015). However, studies show that compliance is often undermined by bureaucratic bottlenecks, corruption, and poor monitoring systems, especially in sub-national contexts like Rivers State (Agbo & Nwogu, 2022).

Ethical Leadership in University Administration

Ethical leadership is defined as the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct among followers (Brown & Treviño, 2006). In university administration, ethical leadership manifests in fairness, honesty, equity, and consistency in decision-making and governance. Ethical leaders are essential in promoting trust, accountability, and staff motivation (Lawal, 2021). Where ethical leadership is absent, public universities face issues like embezzlement, nepotism, and poor policy enforcement factors that directly reduce administrative effectiveness (Onifade, 2018).

Core institutional Values in University Administration

Core institutional values refer to the fundamental beliefs and guiding principles that define the mission and vision of an academic institution. These include academic freedom, excellence, integrity, inclusiveness, innovation, and service to the community (Oyesiku, 2014). Values-based leadership and institutional culture influence the commitment of staff, quality assurance mechanisms, and the strategic direction of university policies (Ibukun, Akinfolarin, & Alimi, 2011). The erosion of these values often leads to disorganization, internal conflicts, and the loss of institutional credibility.

School Administration Effectiveness

Effectiveness in school administration encompasses the ability of management to plan, organize, lead, and control the resources of the institution to achieve its goals (Nwaqwu, 2010). Indicators of effectiveness include sound financial management, staff development, academic programmedelivery, stakeholder satisfaction, and conflict resolution (Ogunyinka & Adepoju, 2019). The effectiveness of administration is significantly influenced by leadership style, adherence to governance protocols, and institutional culture.

Empirical Review

Legal Compliance and Administration Effectiveness

Empirical studies have shown that compliance with laws and regulations enhances transparency and reduces mismanagement in university administration (Obasi, 2007; Okoroma, 2008). In a study conducted by Ezeokoli and Nwosu (2020), it was revealed that Nigerian public universities with robust legal compliance mechanisms experience fewer conflicts and administrative crises. However, enforcement remains weak in states like Rivers, due to political interference and institutional autonomy limitations.



Ethical Leadership and Administrative Performance

Numerous studies link ethical leadership with enhanced organizational performance. For example, Lawal (2021) found a strong positive correlation between ethical leadership and administrative effectiveness in federal universities in Nigeria. Similarly, Agbo and Nwogu (2022) concluded that institutions with ethically grounded leadership are more likely to experience higher levels of staff loyalty, policy implementation, and performance management. Conversely, Onifade (2018) noted that unethical practices among university administrators often lead to demoralization and resistance from academic and non-academic staff.

Institutional Values and Governance Quality

Core institutional values are critical in promoting a cohesive and functional administrative environment. (Onyesiku (2014) emphasized that values-based governance contributes to goal alignment and reduces internal fragmentation. In a related study, Ibukun et al. (2011) found that institutions that actively communicate and reinforce their core values experience better teamwork, accountability, and responsiveness to change. However, in many Nigerian universities, these values are either not well-defined or inconsistently practiced, which contributes to administrative inefficiency.

Integrated Influence of Legal, Ethical, and Value-Based Factors

A few recent studies have started to explore the integrative effect of these variables. For instance, Adebayo (2018) posited that effective university administration is not only a function of legal frameworks but also depends on the ethical orientation and cultural coherence of the institution. This perspective supports a holistic approach to governance, emphasizing the interplay between compliance, leadership behaviour, and institutional identity.

Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The population of the study comprised 6,500 teaching and non-teaching staff members in public universities in Rivers State. These include the University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State University, and Ignatius Ajuru University of Education. A multi-stage sampling technique was adopted: Firstly, purposive sampling was used to select the three public universities based on their public ownership and relevance to the study. Secondly, stratified random sampling was used to group staff into teaching and non-teaching strata to ensure adequate representation. Finally, proportionate random sampling was used to select a total of 384 respondents, based on Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sample size determination table for a population of approximately 6,500. This ensured a fair representation of staff across departments, faculties, and administrative units. The main instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire titled "Legal Compliance, Ethical Leadership, Institutional Values and Administrative Effectiveness Questionnaire (LEIVAEQ)." The questionnaire was divided into five sections: Section A: demographic information for example gender, age, position, years of service. Section B, C, D, E: items on legal compliance, ethical leadership, core institutional values, and administrative effectiveness respectively. Each section of B, C, D and E are up of 10 items cumulating to 40 items. Items were measured using a 5-point ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5).

The instrument underwent face and content validation by three experts: one in Educational Administration, one in Educational Measurement and Evaluation, and one in higher Education Governance. A pilot test was conducted using 30 staff members from Niger Delta University which is outside Rivers State. The responses were analyzed using Cronbach Alpha, yielding the following reliability coefficients: 0.83, 0.88, 0.85 and 0.89 for Sections B, C, D and E respectively. These values indicate high internal consistency. The researchers, with the help of trained research assistants, administered the questionnaire in person and via email (where applicable) to selected staff members in the three universities. Data collected were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics with the aid of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 25.0.



Results

Table 1: Mean Ratings of Key Variables

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
Legal Compliance	384	4.01	0.62	High
Ethical Leadership	384	3.89	0.71	Moderately High
Core Institutional Values	384	3.94	0.66	Moderately High
Administrative Effectiveness	384	4.05	0.58	High

Multiple Regression Analysis

Table 2: Model Summary

R	R Squared	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of Estimate
0.641	0.411	0.406	0.446

The R-squared value (0.411) indicates that about 41.1% of the variance in school administration effectiveness can be explained by the three predictors combined.

Table 3: ANOVA

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	47.168	3	15.723	78.911	0.000
Residual	67.546	380	0.178		
Total	114.714	383			

The F-statistic (78.911, $p = 0.000$) indicates that the model is statistically significant.

Table 4: Coefficients

Predictor	Unstandardized B	Std. Error	Beta β	t	Sig.
Constant	1.023	0.211	-	4.85	0.000
Legal Compliance	0.312	0.074	0.281	4.22	0.000
Ethical Leadership	0.364	0.068	0.319	5.35	0.000
Core Institutional Values	0.296	0.079	0.266	3.75	0.000

All three independent variables: legal compliance, ethical leadership, and core institutional values have significant positive effects on administrative effectiveness. Ethical leadership had the highest standardized beta coefficient ($\beta = 0.319$), followed by legal compliance ($\beta = 0.281$) and institutional values ($\beta = 0.266$), indicating their relative contributions.

Discussion of Findings

Influence of Legal Compliance

This study found a significant positive relationship between legal compliance and school administration effectiveness ($r = 0.481$, $p < 0.05$). This implies that when university administrators strictly adhere to legal and regulatory frameworks such as government policies, procurement laws, employment regulations, and accreditation standards it means administrative processes are more efficient and credible. This aligns with the findings of Ezeokoli and Nwosu (2020) who emphasized that compliance with statutory provisions reduces institutional conflicts and foster transparency. A legally compliant administration also tends to experience fewer disruptions and increased public trust.



Influence of Ethical Leadership

Ethical leadership was found to have strongest influence on administrative effectiveness ($\beta = 0.319$), supporting the notion that leadership anchored in integrity, fairness, and responsibility contributes significantly to effective university governance. This result corroborates Lawal (2021) and Brown and Treviño (2006) who noted that ethical leaders serve as role models, build organizational trust, and motivate staff performance. In contexts like Nigerian public universities, where leadership challenges are common, fostering ethical behaviour in leaders is critical to reducing administrative inefficiencies and conflict.

Influence of Core Institutional Values

The study also revealed that institutional values such as accountability, transparency, commitment to excellence, and academic freedom are significantly associated with administrative effectiveness ($r = 0.502, p < 0.05$). This is consistent with Ibukun et al. (2011) and Oyesiku (2014) who emphasized the role of shared values in shaping institutional culture, decision-making, and stakeholder engagement. Universities that internalize and practice their core values are better positioned to align policies and practices with their mission and vision.

Joint Influence of the Variables

The regression analysis showed that legal compliance, ethical leadership, and institutional values jointly explained 41.1% of the variance in administrative effectiveness ($R^2 = 0.411$). This indicates that while these three factors are significant, other contextual or systematic issues such as funding constraints, political interference, or staff capacity may also play a role. Nevertheless, the strong predictive power of these variables suggests that improving governance and management practices in public universities requires a holistic approach that integrates legal, ethical, and cultural dimensions.

Conclusion

This study concludes that legal compliance, ethical leadership, and core institutional values are critical drivers of effective administration in public universities in Rivers State. Among the three, ethical leadership emerged as the most influential factor, underscoring the importance of leaders who model integrity, fairness, and accountability. Legal compliance ensures adherence to institutional rules and government regulations, thereby promoting order and transparency. Core institutional values reinforce the moral and cultural fabric of the university, guiding behaviour and decision-making. Together, these factors significantly enhance administrative effectiveness and institutional performance.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusion of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. University management should develop internal compliance units or strengthen existing ones to monitor adherence to laws and regulations. Regular compliance audits and training should be institutionalized.
2. Governing councils and regulatory bodies should ensure that university leaders are selected based not only on academic qualifications but also on demonstrated ethical conduct. Leadership training programmes focusing on ethics, accountability, and emotional intelligence should be mandatory for administrative officers.
3. Universities should define, communicate, and embed their core values into every level of administration through policy, orientation, evaluations, and disciplinary measures. This would help foster a unified culture of integrity and excellence.
4. The National Universities Commission (NUC) and other relevant bodies should create or update policies that mandate annual reporting on legal and ethical compliance as part of institutional accreditation.



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