



RE-ENGINEERING HIGHER EDUCATION LEADERSHIP IN NIGERIA THROUGH ETHICAL AND VALUES EDUCATION FOR GLOBAL COMPETITIVENESS



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Abstract

Globally, Leadership in higher education continues to be under intense pressure to respond to societal issues resulting from trends in economic and social forces that bring both possible disruption and/or opportunity. Thus, integration of ethical and values education into higher education leadership in Nigeria is pivotal to fostering transformative leadership that aligns with global standards. This is in realization of the fact that Nigeria's higher education system faces challenges such as corruption, lack of accountability, and ethical lapses that hinder its global competitiveness. The lack of proper moral insight may be one of the explanations for the social upheavals and crisis that are prevalent in the higher educational institutions today. This paper emphasized that a deliberate re-engineering of higher education leadership in Nigeria, grounded in a robust framework of ethical and values education, is crucial for achieving and sustaining global competitiveness. The paper examined the conceptual underpinnings of ethical and values education, analyzing the current state within Nigerian institutions, identifying key challenges exploring the concept of global competitiveness, and draws upon international best practices and the specific cultural context of Nigeria, and offer actionable recommendations for stakeholders committed to elevating Nigerian higher education on the global stage.

Keywords: Re-engineering, Ethics, Values, Higher Education Leadership, Global Competitiveness

Introduction

In an increasingly interconnected and competitive global landscape, the role of higher education leadership in shaping the trajectory of nations cannot be overstated. Higher education is now considered one of the most important social institutions in our society for many good reasons; It has helped lead the world in research, as evidenced by the number of its Nobel laureates; almost all professions require some form of higher education for certification; and, as indicated by employment statistics, a college education is almost mandatory to get and keep a high-paying job (Wilcox, & Susan, 1992). For Nigeria, a nation aspiring to greater socio-economic development and a prominent position on the world stage, the effectiveness and integrity of its higher education sector are paramount. This is because Nigerian Universities are tasked with producing graduates who are not only equipped with cutting-edge knowledge, skills and competence but also imbued with a strong sense of ethics and values, capable of leading with integrity and contributing to national progress (Ofor-Douglas, 2021). Higher education is essential for all round development of the child, the first and for most aim of the higher education is the formation of character of the child (Shah, 2018). Clearly, the moral and ethical vision of an institution of higher learning must be promulgated and protected by all its members. By virtue of their special position to articulate and disseminate that vision, however, college or university leaders must be particularly aware and committed to ethical concerns. Therefore, the role of leaders of tertiary institutions in transforming its human resource provides a major role in fostering the ability of people in recognizing and managing opportunities and resources. Higher education institutions are custodians of knowledge and since the possession of knowledge is the source of power, this means that these institutions are also the gateway to power, significantly affecting the quality of economic and social life throughout the world. Thus, insofar as higher education institutions create and disseminate knowledge within a particular society, they are institutions with moral responsibilities to maintain the

well-being of that society (Wilcox, & Susan, 1992). This is because work in academic life, like any other kind of work, is laden with values and has a moral dimension that emerges from the ethical reflection characteristic of institutional self-scrutiny (Wilcox & Susan (1992). Hence, leadership in higher education continues to be under intense pressure to respond to societal issues resulting from trends in economic and social forces that bring both possible disruption and/or opportunity coupled with the fact that higher education is faced with globalization and international competition, which means that some of these challenges and competition are no longer only from within the country, but also from overseas (Hendry, Satriyo, Engkos & Dyah, 2019).

Thus, the leadership can set the moral tone of the institution by ensuring that ethical issues are raised and discussed. These requirements are especially important in a learning community that, despite the often hierarchical distribution of power within which it must operate, seeks to recognize and value the multifarious voices of its diverse populations (Wilcox, & Susan, 1992)

John-nelson, Ihunwo, & Ohanyiri (2025) equally observed that, the Nigerian higher education system currently faces significant challenges in its leadership, hinting at the potential for ethical and values education to serve as a transformative force. Often ethical problems exist due to the competing needs of the various roles assumed by the leaders. Wilcox, & Susan (1992) pointed that to assist in dealing with these problems, the institution itself must take a leadership role by properly formulating mission statements based on ethical practices and concerns; fostering collaboration among all faculty, administrators, staff and students to work with the values necessary for institutional effectiveness and overall integrity; and by employing the use of models of ethical decision making.

Ideri (2015) noted that lack of proper moral insight may be one of the explanations for the social upheavals and crisis that are prevalent in our societies today. This means that although, Higher education institutions in Nigeria are at the forefront of moulding future leaders; however, their potential is often undermined by ethical deficits and inadequate values-based leadership. Addressing this gap through ethical and values education could be the key to achieving global competitiveness. Thus, this paper posits that a deliberate re-engineering of higher education leadership in Nigeria, grounded in a robust framework of ethical and values education, is crucial for achieving and sustaining global competitiveness.

Conceptual Framework

The terms "ethical and values education" in the context of higher education encompass a multifaceted approach aimed at cultivating moral character, promoting responsible behavior, and fostering a commitment to ethical principles within the academic community. Academic literature offers various definitions, often converging on the development of individuals who not only possess knowledge and skills but also demonstrate integrity and a concern for the well-being of others and society. According to Ideri (2015) ethics are the universal values and standards of conduct that every rational person wants every other to follow, he asserts further that, the essence of ethics is to enable man to fully understand the reasons underlying the approval and disapproval of both his actions and that of his fellow men (Ideri, 2015). Therefore, ethics or values education is fundamentally concerned with developing good character, emphasizing core ethical values such as fairness, honesty, compassion, responsibility, and respect for oneself and others (Zohoor & Miller, 2003). These principles are not confined to specific cultures but are widely accepted as foundational for a functional and just society. The authors asserts further that these values are essential for the proper functioning of institutions of higher learning as engines of knowledge production, innovation, and societal progress.

Ethics education in higher education also involves understanding the principles of right and wrong across legal, social, and moral dimensions, striving for an integration of these aspects in decision-making (Shah, 2018). It can be viewed as the codification of morality within the rules and norms established by institutions and society (Pijanowski, 2022). A key component of this education is the development of moral reasoning skills through critical thinking, enabling students and leaders to analyze complex ethical dilemmas and make informed judgments (EuroSchool, 2023). Ethical and values education emphasizes integrity, accountability, and social responsibility. These principles are

essential for creating leaders who can navigate complex global challenges while upholding ethical standards. In the Nigerian context, embedding these values in higher education leadership is vital for:

1. Fostering Accountability: Encouraging transparency in decision-making processes.
2. Building Trust: Enhancing the credibility of institutions both locally and internationally.
3. Promoting Equity: Ensuring inclusivity and fairness in leadership practices.

Therefore, the purpose of ethical and values education in Universities extends beyond individual moral development to include the formation of ethical citizens and professionals who are equipped to contribute to a sense of social justice and engage in critical thinking about societal issues (Gallant, 2019). Academics, in particular, bear the responsibility of upholding these ethics and values through their integrity, social responsibility, and commitment to academic freedom, serving as role models for students (Teachers Institute, 2023).

Global competitiveness in higher education refers to the ability of Universities to effectively position themselves within the international academic landscape, attracting and retaining high-quality students, faculty, and resources while contributing significantly to research, innovation, and societal impact (Günay, 2021). This concept extends beyond mere institutional success, playing a vital role in a country's overall economic and social competitiveness.

Increasingly, ethical leadership is recognized as a fundamental contributor to the international standing and competitiveness of higher education institutions globally. Ethical leadership fosters trust, accountability, and a positive institutional reputation, which are essential for attracting international students, faculty, and partners (Peterson, Sandy, & Rideaux, 2025). It also positively impacts organizational performance, innovation, and employee engagement, creating a thriving academic environment.¹⁰³ Notably, ethical considerations are increasingly being incorporated into university ranking methodologies, with rankings like the WURI ranking specifically assessing ethical value and others, such as the Sub-Saharan Africa University Rankings and QS Stars, including pillars or metrics related to ethics and governance.⁸⁵

The Current State of Ethical and Values Education in Nigerian Higher Education Institutions

The current landscape of ethical and values education within Nigerian higher education institutions presents a complex picture marked by both stated intentions and persistent challenges. Nigeria, as a society, grapples with pervasive anti-social behaviours and a noticeable moral decadence that unfortunately reflects within its higher education sector (1john-nelson, Ihunwo, & Ohanyiri, 2025). Issues facing higher education, such as racism, sexism, homophobia, substance abuse, and academic dishonesty to mention but a few. All those issues argue for the pursuit of an ethical environment that consistently asserts the importance of human dignity, nourishes growth and achievement, and insists on respect in interpersonal communication and relations ((Wilcox, & Susan, 1992). Similarly, Ejeh (2022) equally observed that immoral activities and behaviours have permeated and adversely affected the Nigerian educational system, thereby violating and making mockery of the entire National Policy on Education. Looking at the philosophy of education in Nigerian as highlighted in the National Policy on Education as the building of;

“A free and democratic society

A just and egalitarian society,

A united strong and self-reliant nation,

A great and dynamic economy,

A land of bright and full opportunities for all citizens (FGN, 2013)”.

The second statement in the policy - a just and egalitarian society emphasizes the need for a society in which there is justice and equity and this can only be possible if morality forms the foundation of our educational system (Ejeh, 2022).

This is because while the National Policy on Education outlines core values such as respect for dignity, faith in rational decisions, and moral and spiritual principles (1john-nelson, Ihunwo, & Ohanyiri, 2025), the practical integration of robust values-based curricula, particularly those deeply

rooted in indigenous or religious moral philosophies, appears to be insufficient and often, the emphasis remains on policies and pronouncements rather than on the tangible implementation of ethical values in the daily lives of students and leaders (Amechi, n.d). Also, the government's dual role as both the proprietor and regulator of many institutions can lead to a conflict of interest, potentially undermining ethical oversight and enforcement (jehe.globethics.net,' n.d). Akintayo (2008) equally observed that several specific ethical lapses continue to plague Nigerian higher education, including examination malpractices, sexual harassment, diverse forms of corruption etc. Ideri (2015) also lamented that “many of the educated Nigerians with various classes of degree, found in private and public lives are involved in corruption, embezzlement of public funds, greed, selfishness, cheating, injustice, indiscipline, ritual killings, stealing, deviant behaviour in educational institutions, kidnapping, armed robbery, suicide bombing, rigging of elections etc”. These issues indicate systemic weaknesses in the ethical environment and highlight the urgent need for more effective interventions. It has as well raised doubts on the phrase “found worthy in character” which is one of the criteria in the awarding of certificates and degrees to the graduates of Nigerian higher institutions (Ideri, 2015).

Indeed, several ethical lapses continue to plague higher education institutions in Nigeria. Thus, issues such as indiscipline, corruption, and inadequate resources further complicate the landscape (Paulinus, 2022). Moreover, changing societal values and a shift away from traditional ethical norms pose a significant hurdle to instilling strong ethical principles within the academic community (Obijekwu & Obiesili, 2022). However, Ideri (2015) in his opined that, the problem is not that there is lack of morality in our tertiary institutions currently; rather the problem is that even the leaders seem helpless and confused about how to tackle the hydra-headed problem of immorality that has dominated almost every facet of the contemporary society.

Therefore, the increased incidents of ethical misconducts and numerous other issues had exerts increasing pressure on the leadership in higher education to deal decisively with the ethical implications of these issues. More disturbing is the fact that although, a range of values including honesty, kindness, responsibility, courage, and solidarity, are often mentioned within the higher education setting the challenge remains in ensuring their effective inculcation and practical application in the lives of students and leaders (Bette & Esu (2011),

Challenges Facing Higher Education Leadership in Nigeria

Higher education leadership in Nigeria operates within a complex environment characterized by a multitude of interconnected challenges.

1. **Corruption and Ethical Lapses:** These undermine the credibility and effectiveness of higher education institutions.
2. **Lack of Visionary Leadership:** Many leaders fail to prioritize long-term strategic goals over short-term gains.
3. **Inadequate Policy Implementation:** Policies promoting ethics and values are often poorly enforced.
4. **Global Disconnect:** Nigerian institutions struggle to meet international standards, diminishing their competitiveness.
5. **Governance challenges:** Governance challenges, including weak administration, corruption, and a lack of accountability, further undermine the integrity and effectiveness of university leadership.⁴
6. **Lack of Adequate Training and Development Opportunities:** Notably, there is often a lack of adequate formal leadership development and training opportunities, particularly for middle-level academics who play crucial roles within Universities.

Best Practices for Re-engineering Higher Education Leadership through Ethical and Values Education in Other Countries

Several best practices in ethical leadership training for tertiary institutions have emerged internationally. These include the use of case studies and real-world scenarios to facilitate the analysis of ethical challenges and the application of ethical frameworks. Thus, developing ethical frameworks and decision-making skills is a key focus, providing leaders with tools for navigating complex situations. Values-based leadership models are also prominent, emphasizing the integration of ethics into leadership curricula and the alignment of personal and organizational values (Clements, 2025). Open communication, transparency, and the importance of leaders modelling ethical behaviour and setting clear standards are consistently highlighted as crucial elements (Kirk, 2025).

Successful ethical leadership development programs can be found at Universities worldwide. Institutions like Harvard, Yale, and Duke offer programs that emphasize ethical leadership and social responsibility and also the case studies from various universities, including those focusing on business ethics competitions and real-world ethical challenges, provide valuable learning opportunities (Kirk, 2025).

Examples are:

Singapore's Education Model: Emphasizing ethics in leadership development has propelled Singapore's universities to global recognition.

Finland's Inclusivity Policies: Promoting values of equality and social justice in education has enhanced Finland's global standing.

These case studies provide valuable insights for Nigerian higher education institutions aiming to reform their leadership framework.

Models of values-based leadership development emphasize the alignment of individual and institutional values, with approaches like the Social Change Model of Leadership and virtue-based models gaining traction (Nulty, Owens & Brooman-Jones, 2025).

Strategies for Re-engineering Education Leadership for Positive Change and Global Competitiveness.

In order to drive positive change and global competitiveness a comprehensive approach to re-engineering leadership in higher education is necessary. To achieve this, the following suggestions are proposed:

1. **Curriculum Reform:** Develop and implement comprehensive curricula for leadership development programs that explicitly integrate ethical theories, values clarification exercises, and case studies relevant to the Nigerian context. These curricula should draw upon both universal ethical principles and core Nigerian cultural and societal values. Values-based leadership development in Nigeria should therefore focus on empowering leaders to understand and articulate their own values, align them with the values of their institutions and the broader Nigerian society, and use these values as a guiding compass for ethical decision-making and the cultivation of a culture of integrity within their universities (Copeland, 2014).
2. **Experiential Learning:** Emphasize experiential learning methodologies, such as simulations, role-playing exercises, and community engagement projects, to provide leaders with practical opportunities to apply ethical principles in real-world scenarios.
3. **Faculty Development:** Invest in training and development for faculty and administrators to equip them with the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively teach and model ethical leadership. This should include workshops on ethical pedagogy and the integration of ethics across disciplines.
4. **Strengthening Governance:** Implement and enforce robust codes of conduct and ethical guidelines for higher education leaders, faculty, staff, and students. Establish independent ethics and disciplinary committees within Universities to provide confidential channels for reporting and addressing ethical concerns. Also, members of committees on ethics and



disciplinary matters must be people of high repute and integrity.

5. **Promoting Transparency and Accountability:** Foster a culture of transparency and accountability in all aspects of higher education institutions operations, including financial management, admissions, examinations, and research. Also, implement mechanisms for regular internal and external audits to ensure adherence to ethical standards.
6. **Ethical Leadership Training and Development Programs:** Integrate mandatory ethical leadership training into all leadership development programs. Develop and widely disseminate clear codes of conduct for all the staff, emphasizing integrity, accountability, and professional responsibility. Also, promote a culture of continuous learning among leaders through workshops, seminars, conferences, and access to online learning resources on contemporary leadership theories and practices. These programs should incorporate mentorship, coaching, and opportunities for reflection on personal and professional values. Such integration can foster trust, accountability, and ethical decision-making among leaders, creating a more transparent and reliable academic environment (Kirk, 2025).
This, integration can also lead to improved organizational performance, enhanced innovation, and higher staff morale within Nigerian Universities (Ayorinde, n.d). Similarly, Stein (2024) noted that Ethics training within these programs can equip leaders with the necessary skills to recognize and navigate complex ethical dilemmas, providing them with frameworks for principled decision-making.
7. **Partnerships and Collaborations:** Encourage collaborations and partnerships between Nigerian institutions and international institutions or organizations with expertise in ethical leadership development. This can facilitate the exchange of best practices and access to global resources.
8. **Values-Based Culture:** Promote a values-based culture within the institutions by explicitly articulating and communicating core institutional values. Recognize and reward individuals and initiatives that exemplify ethical behaviour and promote the university's values.
9. **Strengthening Anti-Corruption Policies and Committees within the Institutions:** Review and strengthen existing institutional laws and regulations to ensure they are explicit about ethical conduct and provide for severe penalties for breaches.
10. **Policy Advocacy:** Advocate for policy changes at the governmental level that prioritize ethical leadership and good governance within the higher education sector. This includes ensuring adequate funding for ethics education initiatives and protecting university autonomy from undue political interference.
11. **Promoting Meritocracy in Appointments and Promotions:** Implement strict merit-based systems for all appointments and promotions, from faculty to administrative positions and leadership roles. This involves clear, objective criteria, rigorous selection processes, and independent oversight committees. Actively discourage and penalize nepotism, favouritism, and political interference in human resource management.
12. **Enforcing Strict Academic Integrity Policies:** Develop and rigorously enforce zero-tolerance policies for academic malpractice, including plagiarism, exam malpractices, and "sex-for-grades." This requires strong disciplinary committees, swift investigations, and appropriate sanctions for both students and staff. Technologies for plagiarism detection should be widely deployed.
13. **Whistle-blower Protection:** Establish secure and confidential channels for reporting corrupt practices and ethical breaches, along with robust protection mechanisms for whistle-blowers to safeguard them from retaliation.

Conclusion

Re-engineering higher education leadership in Nigeria through a concerted focus on ethical and values education is not merely an aspirational goal but a fundamental necessity for achieving global competitiveness. Therefore, embracing a holistic approach that integrates universal ethical principles



with Nigeria's rich cultural heritage, fosters ethical decision-making skills, and cultivates a culture of integrity within the higher education sector, Nigeria can empower its higher education leaders to navigate challenges, promote excellence, and ultimately position its institutions as key contributors to national development and respected players on the global academic stage

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