



ETHICAL LEADERSHIP PRACTICES AS CORRELATES OF UNIVERSITIES' REPUTATION IN BENUE STATE, NIGERIA



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Abstract

This study investigated ethical leadership practices as correlates of universities' reputation in Benue State, Nigeria. The purpose of the study was to investigate how ethical leadership practices correlate with universities' reputation. The study was guided by two research questions, while two hypotheses were formulated and tested for the study. The design adopted for the study was correlational research design. The population was 6,930 staff in four public universities in Benue State, Nigeria. The sample size was 346 or 5% staff selected using simple random sampling technique. "Ethical Leadership Practices Questionnaire (ELPQ)" and "Universities' reputation Questionnaire (URQ)" were used for data collection. The questionnaires were structured on a four-point scale with response modes of Strongly Agree (SD)=4; Agree (D)=3; Disagree (A)=2 and Strongly Disagree (SA)=1. The instruments were validated by two experts in the Department of Educational Foundations, Faculty of Education Rev. Fr. Moses Orshio Adasu University, Makurdi. A reliability test was conducted on 20 staff in one public university using Cronbach Alpha and yielded reliability coefficients of 0.87. The data collected for the study were analyzed using Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) to answer research questions and test the hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance. The findings of the study showed that ethical leadership practices such as integrity and responsibility have significant strong positive correlation with universities' reputation in Benue State, Nigeria. It was concluded that ethical leadership practices particularly integrity and responsibility play a critical role in shaping the reputation of universities in Nigeria. Therefore, the study recommends among others that in order to uphold integrity and responsibility to promote universities' reputation, Nigerian universities should adopt and enforce clear codes of conduct that promote transparency, honesty and fairness in all administrative and academic processes.

Keywords: *Ethical leadership practices, integrity, responsibility, universities' reputation*

Introduction

Universities are regarded as vital institutions that foster critical thinking, innovation and societal development by providing advanced education, conducting impactful research and cultivating skilled professionals for national and global advancement. Therefore, universities across the world are supposed to maintain good reputation so that national and global advancement would be achieved (Eze, 2020). Despite the significance of university reputation, universities in many parts of the world including those in Nigeria and specifically in Benue State seem to increasingly grapple with the challenge of maintaining and enhancing their reputation. Universities' reputation is the perceived quality, prestige and credibility of universities as judged by stakeholders such as students, faculty, employers and the general public (Ogbogu, 2020). It is often shaped by factors including academic excellence, research output, employability of graduates, quality of faculty, international partnerships and historical legacy (Eze, 2020). A strong reputation can enhance student enrollment, attract funding and improve global rankings, while a poor reputation may limit institutional growth and stakeholder trust (Hazelkorn, 2015).

Globally, the challenge of universities' reputation has been linked to several factors one of which may be deeply tied to ethical leadership practices. Shapira-Lishchinsky (2022) describes ethical leadership practices as to the behaviours, actions and decision-making approaches of leaders that are guided by a strong sense of ethics, integrity, fairness and responsibility. Brown and Trevino (2019) maintain that ethical leaders model honesty, uphold moral standards, treat others with respect and prioritize the well-being of their followers and organization. However, Ogbogu (2020) notes that ethical lapses such as corruption, nepotism, mismanagement of funds and academic dishonesty have eroded public trust and institutional credibility, thereby undermining universities' global standing. According to Eze (2020), in Nigeria, where universities are pivotal to national development, the absence of ethical leadership practices such as integrity and responsibility often result in poor universities' reputation.

Integrity in leadership refers to a leader's consistent adherence to strong moral and ethical principles (Nguyen & Walker, 2021). A leader with integrity is honest, transparent, and trustworthy and acts in ways that are fair and aligned with the values they promote (Brown & Trevino, 2019). Brown and Trevino also add that such a leader does not compromise their values for personal gain and takes responsibility for their actions, even in difficult situations. A study by Okoye (2021) found that effective ethical leadership, grounded in integrity and accountability has significant relationship with rebuilding trust, fostering institutional excellence, and enhancing the international reputation of universities. Okunola and Akinola (2020) also found that universities with leaders who uphold strong moral values are more likely to enjoy public confidence, attract quality staff and students and secure funding from both government and private sectors. Similarly, Oboh and Ajibola (2019) found that the absence of integrity in university leadership often results in corruption, mismanagement and a decline in institutional prestige. Adebayo and Okolie (2018) establish that integrity enhances decision-making, promotes organizational justice and fosters a positive internal culture, all of which contribute to building a strong institutional image. However, Okoye (2021) posits that this can also be achieved when leaders in the discharge of leadership roles exhibit a strong leadership responsibility.

Responsibility in leadership connotes the leader's obligation to act ethically, make sound decisions and be accountable for the outcomes of their actions and those of their team (Northouse, 2013). A responsible leader demonstrates integrity, transparency and a commitment to the common good, fostering trust and motivation among followers (Adebayo & Okolie, 2018). Responsibility involves setting clear goals, allocating resources effectively, and ensuring that team members are empowered and held accountable within a supportive environment (Northouse, 2013). A study by Akpan and Etor (2013) found that leadership responsibility, which includes transparency, accountability and ethical decision-making has significant relationship with shaping the public image and reputation of Nigerian universities. Similarly, Ogbondah (2016) found that university leaders who demonstrate a strong sense of responsibility are more likely to foster positive staff-student relations and promote institutional integrity, thereby enhancing the university's standing both locally and internationally. Furthermore, Adebayo and Akanbi (2017) highlight that responsible leadership practices directly affect

the perception of quality education, which is a key determinant of a university's reputation. This finding by Adebayo and Akanbi (2017) suggests that responsible leadership is not only essential for effective university governance but also for sustaining a favourable institutional reputation in Nigeria's higher education sector. It is based on the above background that the present study investigated ethical leadership practices as correlates of universities' reputation in Benue State, Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

A good university reputation enhances graduates' employability, attracts quality staff and students and boosts access to research funding and global partnerships. However, in recent years, the reputation of universities in Benue State, Nigeria, has come under scrutiny due to growing concerns about the erosion of ethical standards among university leaders. Ethical leadership, which is central to the promotion of values such as integrity and responsibility, appears to be declining in practice in these universities. Reports of favouritism, academic dishonesty, mismanagement of funds and lack of accountability among some university administrators seem to have raised public doubt about the credibility and trustworthiness of these universities. These leadership lapses may not only undermine the moral fabric of university governance but also diminish the institutions' ability to uphold academic excellence, foster innovation and attract reputable partnerships. As the public continues to question the legitimacy of university processes, the overall reputation of these universities may also suffer both locally and internationally.

The absence of strong ethical leadership characterized by integrity and responsibility may negatively affect staff morale, student discipline, research credibility and stakeholder confidence in university outputs. When leaders fail to act with transparency and ethical conviction, they may create an environment in which unethical practices are tolerated or even normalized. This could deteriorate institutional trust and weaken efforts to promote a culture of merit, fairness and professionalism. Consequently, universities in Benue State may face challenges in securing accreditation, attracting qualified staff and producing graduates who are seen as employable or competent. Thus, there is a pressing need to investigate the extent to which ethical leadership practices or the lack thereof may be contributing to the reputational challenges of universities in the state.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to investigate ethical leadership practices as correlates of universities' reputation in Benue State, Nigeria. The study specifically sought to examine:

1. the correlation of integrity practice and universities' reputation in Benue State, Nigeria.
2. the correlation of responsibility practice and universities' reputation in Benue State, Nigeria.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What is the correlation of integrity practice and universities' reputation in Benue State, Nigeria?
2. What is the correlation of responsibility practice and universities' reputation in Benue State, Nigeria?

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were formulated and tested at 0.05 level of significance:

1. There is no significant correlation of integrity practice and universities' reputation in Benue State, Nigeria.
2. There is no significant correlation of responsibility practice and universities' reputation in Benue State, Nigeria.

Methodology

The design adopted for the study was correlational research design. The population of the study was 6,930 staff in four public universities in Benue State, Nigeria (Registry Departments of Universities

in Benue State, 2024). The sample size was 346 or 5% staff selected using simple random sampling technique. “Ethical Leadership Practices Questionnaire (ELPQ)” and “Universities’ reputation Questionnaire (URQ)” were used for data collection. ELPQ contained 10 items, while URQ contained five items. The questionnaires were structured on a four-point scale with response modes of Strongly Agree (SD)=4; Agree (D)=3; Disagree (A)=2 and Strongly Disagree (SA)=1. The instruments were validated by two experts in the Department of Educational Foundations, Faculty of Education Rev. Fr. Moses Orshio Adasu University, Makurdi. A reliability test was conducted on 20 staff in one public university using Cronbach Alpha. The results of the test yielded reliability coefficients of 0.83 for ELPQ and 0.90 for URQ with a grand index of 0.87. The data collected for the study were analyzed using Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) to answer research questions and test the hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance. The decision rule for answering research questions according to Emaikwu (2021) was 0.1 to 0.29 (or -0.1 to -0.29) = Weak correlation, 0.3 to 0.49 (or -0.3 to -0.49) = Moderate correlation and 0.5 to 1.0 (or -0.5 to -1.0) = Strong correlation. The decision rule for rejecting or not rejecting the null hypothesis was based on the comparison between the p-value (the probability that the observed correlation occurred by chance) and the level of significance (α). Where the p-value is $\leq \alpha$, the null hypothesis (H_0) was rejected. Meaning there was enough evidence to conclude that a significant correlation existed between the two variables. Where the p-value is $> \alpha$, the null hypothesis (H_0) was not rejected. Meaning there was not enough evidence to conclude that a significant correlation existed between the two variables.

Results

Research Question 1: What is the correlation of integrity practice and universities’ reputation in Benue State, Nigeria?

Table 1: *Correlation of Integrity Practice and Universities’ reputation in Benue State, Nigeria*

Variables	N	$\bar{X}$	SD	r	Decision
Integrity Practice	346	2.76	0.65	0.86	Strong Positive Correlation
Universities’ reputation	346	2.84	0.81		

Source: Field Survey Results 2025

The result in Table 1 shows that $r=0.86$ which indicates a strong positive correlation. This implies that there is a strong positive correlation of integrity practice and universities’ reputation in Benue State, Nigeria.

Research Question 2:

What is the correlation of responsibility practice and universities’ reputation in Benue State, Nigeria?

Table 2: *Correlation of Responsibility Practice and Universities’ reputation in Benue State, Nigeria*

Variables	N	$\bar{X}$	SD	r	Decision
Responsibility Practice	132	2.89	0.72	0.85	Strong Positive Correlation
Universities’ reputation	132	2.84	0.41		

Source: Field Survey Results 2025

The result in Table 2 shows that $r=0.85$ which indicates a strong positive correlation. This implies that there is a strong positive correlation of responsibility practice and universities' reputation in Benue State, Nigeria.

Test of Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1:

There is no significant correlation of integrity practice universities in reputation in Benue State, Nigeria.

Table 3: Significant Correlation of Integrity Universities' reputation in Benue State, Nigeria

Variables	N	$\bar{X}$	SD	r	P	Decision
Integrity Practice	346	2.76	0.65	0.86	0.000	Significant Strong Positive Correlation
Universities' reputation	346	2.84	0.81			

* Correlation coefficient is significant at $p < 0.05$; level (2-tailed).

Source: Field Survey Results 2025

The result in Table 3 shows that $r = 0.86$; $p\text{-value} = 0.000 < 0.05$. Since $p\text{-value}$ was less than 0.05, the null hypothesis which states that there is no significant correlation of integrity practice and universities' reputation in Benue State, Nigeria was rejected. This implies that there is a significant strong positive correlation of integrity practice and universities' reputation in Benue State, Nigeria.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant correlation of responsibility practice and universities' reputation in Benue State, Nigeria.

Table 4: Significant Correlation of Responsibility Practice and Universities' reputation in Benue State, Nigeria

Variables	N	$\bar{X}$	SD	r	P	Decision
Responsibility Practice	346	2.89	0.72	0.85	0.000	Significant Strong Positive Correlation
Universities' reputation	346	2.84	0.41			

* Correlation coefficient is significant at $p < 0.05$; level (2-tailed).

Source: Field Survey Results 2025

The result in Table 4 shows that $r = 0.85$; $p\text{-value} = 0.000 < 0.05$. Since $p\text{-value}$ was less than 0.05, the null hypothesis which states that there is no significant correlation of responsibility practice and universities' reputation in Benue State, Nigeria was rejected. This implies that there is significant strong positive correlation of responsibility practice and universities' reputation in Benue State, Nigeria.

Discussion of Findings

The first finding of the study shows that there is significant strong positive correlation of integrity practice and universities' reputation in Benue State, Nigeria. This finding agrees Okoye (2021) who found that effective ethical leadership, grounded in integrity and accountability has significant relationship with rebuilding trust, fostering institutional excellence and enhancing the international

reputation of universities. The finding also agrees with Okunola and Akinola (2020) who also found that universities with leaders who uphold strong moral values are more likely to enjoy public confidence, attract quality staff and students and secure funding from both government and private sectors. The finding further conforms with Oboh and Ajibola (2019) who also found that the absence of integrity in university leadership often results in corruption, mismanagement and a decline in institutional prestige. Adebayo and Okolie (2018) in support of this finding establish that integrity enhances decision-making, promotes organizational justice and fosters a positive internal culture, all of which contribute to building a strong institutional image.

The second finding of the study shows that there is significant strong positive correlation of responsibility practice and universities' reputation in Benue State, Nigeria. This finding agrees with Akpan and Etor (2013) who found that leadership responsibility, which includes transparency, accountability and ethical decision-making has significant relationship with shaping the public image and reputation of Nigerian universities. The finding also agrees with Ogbondah (2016) who found that university leaders who demonstrate a strong sense of responsibility are more likely to foster positive staff-student relations and promote institutional integrity, thereby enhancing the university's standing both locally and internationally. Furthermore, this agrees with Adebayo and Akanbi (2017) whose finding shows that responsible leadership practices directly affect the perception of quality education, which is a key determinant of a university's reputation suggesting that responsible leadership is not only essential for effective university governance but also for sustaining a favourable institutional reputation in Nigeria's higher education sector.

Conclusion

The study concludes that ethical leadership practices have significant strong positive correlation with universities' reputation in Benue State, Nigeria. This implies that ethical leadership practices particularly integrity and responsibility play a critical role in shaping the reputation of universities in Nigeria. Leaders who consistently demonstrate integrity and responsibility not only foster trust among stakeholders but also create a culture of ethical behaviour that enhances institutional credibility. Such leadership strengthens public confidence, attracts quality staff and students and contributes to academic excellence, all of which are essential for building and sustaining a positive universities image.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

1. In order to uphold integrity and promote universities' reputation, Nigerian universities should adopt and enforce clear codes of conduct that promote transparency, honesty, and fairness in all administrative and academic processes. This will reduce corruption, favouritism, and academic dishonesty, thereby enhancing institutional credibility and public trust in the university system.
2. University leaders should practice responsible leadership by involving key stakeholders like staff, students and external partners in decision-making processes. This inclusive approach may enhance accountability and responsiveness, demonstrating responsible stewardship of resources and institutional mandates.

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