

ADMINISTRATIVE COMPETENCIES AND EFFECTIVE GOVERNANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

Effective governance is fundamental to the quality, accountability, sustainability, and competitiveness of higher education institutions. However, the existence of governance structures and policies does not automatically guarantee effective institutional performance; the competence of administrators responsible for translating policies and institutional objectives into action is equally important. This conceptual paper, based on a desk-based review methodology, examines the relationship between administrative competencies and effective governance in higher education institutions, with particular attention to the Nigerian context. Drawing on Human Capital Theory, Competency Theory, and Transformational Leadership Theory, the paper synthesises twelve critical competencies required by higher education administrators, spanning strategic, financial, human-resource, communication, digital, ethical, interpersonal, and change-management domains. The paper argues that these competencies influence governance through improved decision quality, resource utilisation, accountability, and institutional responsiveness, and proposes a four-tier conceptual framework linking administrative competencies to governance processes, governance outcomes, and institutional effectiveness. Six research propositions are advanced to guide future empirical testing. The paper further identifies challenges affecting administrative competence in Nigerian higher education, including politicisation of appointments, inadequate professional development, bureaucratic rigidity, financial constraints, weak succession planning, digital skills gaps, and resistance to organisational change, and proposes corresponding strategies spanning competency-based appointment, continuous professional development, mentoring, succession planning, performance management, digital transformation, ethical governance, and evidence-based administration. The paper concludes that strengthening administrative competencies should be treated as a strategic requirement, rather than an incidental concern, for achieving effective and sustainable governance in higher education institutions.

Keywords: *administrative competencies, effective governance, higher education, educational administration, leadership, institutional effectiveness, accountability, Nigeria.*

1. Introduction

Higher education institutions are major instruments of national development, responsible for developing human capital, producing knowledge, supporting innovation, and contributing to social and economic transformation. The capacity of these institutions to fulfil their mandates depends not only on financial and physical resources but also on the quality of their governance. Governance in higher education refers to the structures, processes, relationships, and practices through which institutional authority is exercised, decisions are made, resources are allocated, policies are implemented, and accountability is maintained (Bush, 2020); effective governance promotes institutional direction, transparency, participation, responsiveness, quality assurance, and sustainability, and is closely tied to higher education's broader contribution to the common good (Marginson, 2016).

Contemporary higher education has become increasingly complex, as institutions respond to technological transformation, changing labour-market demands, rising enrolment, quality-assurance requirements, financial pressures, globalisation, and growing expectations from government and society (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2008). These developments have expanded the responsibilities of higher education administrators and increased

the competencies required for effective institutional leadership. Administrative competence extends beyond academic qualification or length of service: it involves the ability to apply relevant knowledge, technical skills, leadership capability, professional values, interpersonal ability, and sound judgement to institutional problems. Competent administrators are expected to plan strategically, manage resources, communicate effectively, resolve conflicts, implement policies, promote accountability, utilise technology, and lead organisational change.

This issue is particularly significant in Nigeria. Nigerian higher education institutions continue to operate within challenging conditions involving inadequate funding, infrastructural deficits, regulatory pressures, staff shortages, industrial disputes, technological gaps, political influence, and increasing demand for quality and relevance, notwithstanding the access and quality objectives articulated in the National Policy on Education (Republic of Nigeria, 2013). Under such conditions, administrative competence becomes an important institutional resource rather than an incidental attribute of individual office-holders. The central argument of this paper is that effective higher education governance is significantly influenced by the competencies of the administrators who design, interpret, implement, monitor, and evaluate institutional policies and programmes. The paper therefore examines the administrative competencies required for effective governance in higher education institutions, particularly within the Nigerian context, and develops a conceptual framework and set of propositions linking these competencies to governance outcomes and institutional effectiveness.

2. Methodology

This paper adopts a conceptual, desk-based review methodology appropriate for theory-building scholarship in educational management. Rather than generating primary empirical data, the study systematically synthesises literature on educational leadership and management theory (Bush, 2020; Northouse, 2022; Yukl, 2013), organisational leadership and change (Fullan, 2016; Schein & Schein, 2017), distributed and shared governance in higher education (Bolden, Petrov, & Gosling, 2009; Gronn, 2002; Kezar & Holcombe, 2017), and international and Nigerian policy literature on higher education quality and governance (OECD, 2008, 2019; Republic of Nigeria, 2013; UNESCO, 2021; World Bank, 2019). The reviewed material was thematically analysed to identify recurring administrative competency domains and governance challenges, which were then synthesised into an integrative conceptual framework and a corresponding set of research propositions intended to guide future empirical testing.

3. Conceptual and Theoretical Review

3.1 Administrative Competencies and Effective Governance

Administrative competencies refer to the knowledge, skills, abilities, behaviours, attitudes, values, and professional attributes that enable an administrator to perform organisational responsibilities effectively. Competence is different from qualification: academic qualifications demonstrate educational attainment, whereas competence is demonstrated through effective performance, and an administrator may possess advanced academic credentials while still experiencing difficulty in decision-making, communication, or strategic leadership. In higher education, administrative competence encompasses the ability to plan, organise, coordinate, supervise, communicate, make decisions, manage resources, resolve conflicts, implement policies, monitor performance, and achieve institutional objectives, and can be grouped into strategic, technical, financial, human-resource, interpersonal, ethical, digital, analytical, leadership, and change-management categories. Effective governance, correspondingly, involves the processes through which institutional authority is exercised in a manner that promotes institutional goals, accountability, transparency, participation, efficiency, responsiveness, and sustainability, and should produce clear institutional direction, transparent decision-making, efficient resource utilisation, ethical administration, quality assurance, and continuous improvement. Governance should not be reduced to compliance with rules: an institution can comply with administrative procedures and still experience poor governance

if decisions are ineffective, resources are poorly utilised, stakeholders are excluded, or leadership lacks strategic direction (Bolden, Petrov, & Gosling, 2009).

3.2 Theoretical Framework

This paper draws on three complementary theories. Human Capital Theory, associated with Becker (1964), explains how investments in knowledge, education, and skills improve individual and organisational productivity; applied to higher education administration, this implies that professional development in strategic planning, financial management, digital administration, and policy implementation should be treated as an institutional investment rather than merely an expenditure. Competency Theory focuses on the knowledge, skills, behaviours, and attributes required for effective performance, and its application to higher education governance suggests that administrators should be appointed and evaluated according to competencies relevant to their specific responsibilities — for example, a senior financial administrator requires strong financial and analytical competencies, while a senior academic administrator requires competencies in academic planning, quality assurance, and stakeholder management — thereby supporting competency-based recruitment, training, promotion, and performance management.

Transformational Leadership Theory, associated with Burns (1978) and Bass (1985), emphasises vision, inspiration, intellectual stimulation, individual consideration, and organisational transformation. Higher education institutions require leaders who can inspire staff, promote innovation, build shared vision, and manage institutional change (Northouse, 2022); the theory is relevant because administrative competence involves not only managing existing structures but also creating the capacity to improve them, consistent with the broader literature on leading educational change (Fullan, 2016) and on shaping institutional culture (Schein & Schein, 2017).

4. Results: Competencies and Conceptual Framework

Synthesising the literature reviewed above, twelve interconnected administrative competencies can be identified as critical to effective higher education governance, summarised in Table 1.

Competency	Core Focus
Strategic planning	Identifying institutional priorities, analysing environmental change, and allocating resources so that institutions become proactive rather than continually reacting to crises.
Decision-making and problem-solving	Identifying problems, gathering information, evaluating alternatives, assessing risk, and making timely, evidence-based decisions with significant financial and academic consequences.
Financial management	Budgeting, expenditure control, forecasting, procurement, auditing, and financial accountability, promoting efficient use of limited institutional resources.
Human-resource management	Recruitment, staff development, performance appraisal, promotion, welfare, discipline, and succession planning, encouraging merit, fairness, and motivation.
Communication	Conveying policies, decisions, strategic priorities, and crisis responses clearly, since poor communication generates rumour, distrust, resistance, and conflict.
Emotional intelligence and interpersonal skill	Understanding and managing emotions, building relationships, negotiating differences, and managing difficult conversations to sustain institutional harmony.

Competency	Core Focus
Ethical competence	Integrity, fairness, transparency, and accountability in recruitment, procurement, admissions, promotion, and financial management, protecting institutional trust.
Digital competence	Skills in institutional information systems, data analysis, electronic communication, and cybersecurity awareness, improving efficiency and evidence-based decision-making.
Change management	Communicating the rationale for change, engaging stakeholders, anticipating resistance, and evaluating outcomes, essential for digital transformation and reform (Fullan, 2016).
Conflict management	Applying negotiation, mediation, dialogue, and active listening to resolve disagreements between staff, students, unions, and institutional units.
Quality assurance	Understanding accreditation, institutional evaluation, quality standards, and performance indicators, enabling accountability to regulators, students, and employers (OECD, 2019).
Stakeholder engagement	Building trust and managing expectations among staff, students, councils, government, alumni, and communities, improving participation and policy acceptance (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017).

Table 1: Major Administrative Competencies Required for Effective Governance

These competencies influence governance through four interconnected mechanisms. First, administrators with strong analytical, technical, and strategic competencies produce improved decision quality, being more likely to decide on the basis of evidence rather than assumption. Second, financial and managerial competence enables improved resource utilisation, allowing resources to be allocated according to strategic priorities. Third, ethical, financial, and communication competencies generate stronger accountability and transparency. Fourth, digital, strategic, interpersonal, and change-management competencies produce improved institutional responsiveness to emerging challenges. This relationship can be expressed as a cascade running from Administrative Competencies, through Governance Processes, to Governance Outcomes, and ultimately Institutional Effectiveness, as presented in Figure 1.

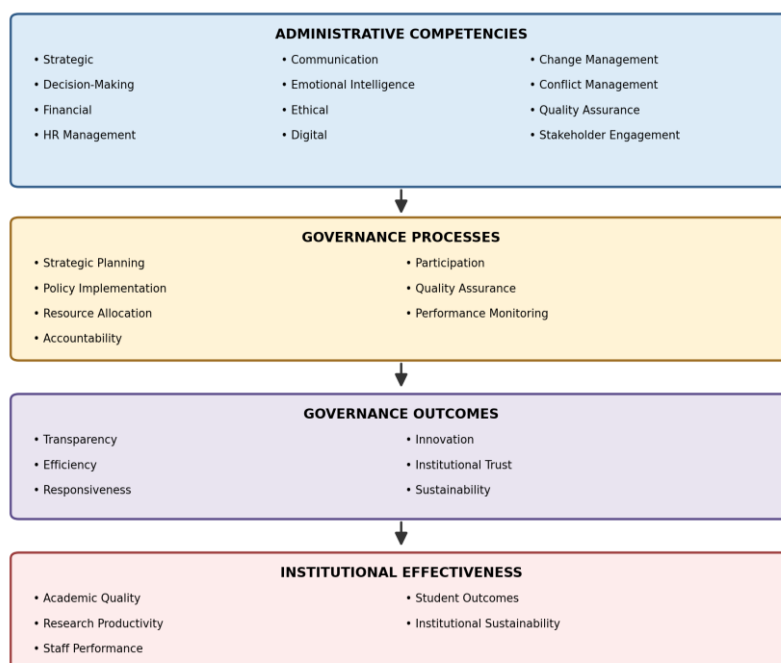


Figure 1: Administrative Competency–Governance Framework

The framework proposes that administrative competencies influence institutional effectiveness indirectly through governance processes and governance outcomes, rather than through any single direct effect: competencies constitute the capacity of institutional leaders, governance processes represent the mechanisms through which this capacity is applied, and governance outcomes such as transparency, efficiency, and institutional trust ultimately determine academic quality, research productivity, staff performance, and institutional sustainability. On this basis, the following six research propositions are advanced to guide future empirical testing:

1. Strategic administrative competence positively influences effective governance in higher education institutions.
2. Ethical administrative competence positively influences transparency and accountability in higher education governance.
3. Digital administrative competence positively influences institutional efficiency and responsiveness.
4. Communication, emotional intelligence, and interpersonal competence positively influence stakeholder participation and institutional stability.
5. Continuous professional development strengthens the relationship between administrative competencies and effective governance.
6. Competency-based appointment and performance-management systems positively influence administrative effectiveness.

5. Discussion

5.1 Challenges to Administrative Competence in Nigerian Higher Education

Table 2 summarises seven interconnected challenges likely to constrain administrative competence in Nigerian higher education institutions.

Challenge	Description
Politicisation of appointments	Where appointments are influenced excessively by political or personal considerations rather than demonstrated competence, institutional effectiveness may be compromised.

Challenge	Description
Inadequate professional development	Rapid changes in technology, policy, and governance require continuous development, but administrators may lack access to structured leadership programmes.
Bureaucratic rigidity	Excessive bureaucracy can delay decision-making and discourage innovation, even though procedures remain necessary for accountability.
Financial constraints	Limited institutional resources can restrict recruitment, training, and digital transformation, requiring institutions to prioritise investments with long-term returns.
Weak succession planning	Institutions without systematic leadership-development systems may experience administrative instability when senior leaders leave office.
Digital skills gaps	Insufficient competence in institutional information systems, data interpretation, and electronic records can limit institutional efficiency.
Resistance to change	Organisational reforms may generate resistance among employees, which administrators without change-management skill may inadvertently worsen (Fullan, 2016).

Table 2: Challenges to Administrative Competence in Nigerian Higher Education

5.2 Strategies for Strengthening Administrative Competencies

Table 3 summarises eight strategies through which Nigerian higher education institutions may strengthen administrative competence.

Strategy	Key Actions
Competency-based appointment	Develop competency profiles for major administrative positions; base selection on demonstrated leadership, technical knowledge, ethics, and problem-solving ability.
Continuous professional development	Provide regular training in strategic leadership, financial management, digital governance, quality assurance, and change management.
Leadership mentoring	Pair experienced administrators with emerging leaders to facilitate knowledge transfer and institutional continuity.
Succession planning	Identify potential future leaders and systematically prepare them for greater responsibility ahead of vacancies.
Performance management	Assess administrators using measurable indicators such as policy implementation, resource utilisation, stakeholder satisfaction, and institutional outcomes.
Digital transformation	Invest in digital systems while simultaneously developing the competencies required to use them effectively.
Ethical governance	Strengthen codes of conduct, internal controls, auditing, procurement procedures, and transparent reporting.

Strategy	Key Actions
Evidence-based administration	Systematically use institutional data in planning, policy formulation, monitoring, evaluation, and resource allocation.

Table 3: Strategies for Strengthening Administrative Competencies

5.3 Implications for Higher Education Governance

This analysis carries several implications for higher education policy and practice. First, administrative competence should be recognised as a component of institutional quality in its own right: governance reforms that focus exclusively on structures without developing the people operating those structures are unlikely to produce sustainable results (World Bank, 2019). Second, governing councils and relevant authorities should ensure that administrative appointments are based substantially on demonstrated competence and institutional need, consistent with shared-governance scholarship emphasising legitimacy and participation (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017; Gronn, 2002). Third, institutions should institutionalise professional-development programmes rather than relying exclusively on administrators acquiring competence informally through experience. Fourth, quality-assurance systems should pay greater attention to administrative capacity, since effective academic delivery ultimately requires effective organisational management (UNESCO, 2021). Finally, administrative competence should be integrated into institutional strategic plans and performance-management systems, rather than treated as a matter left to individual initiative.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Effective governance is essential to the performance, credibility, sustainability, and social relevance of higher education institutions, but governance structures alone cannot guarantee effective institutional outcomes; the competence of the administrators who operate these structures is equally important. This paper has established conceptually that strategic, financial, human-resource, communication, ethical, digital, quality-assurance, stakeholder-engagement, conflict-management, and change-management competencies are critical to effective higher education governance, and that this competence translates into institutional effectiveness through the governance processes and outcomes it shapes. The Nigerian higher education environment makes administrative competence particularly important, given the complex resource, technological, and accountability challenges institutions face. The paper therefore advocates a shift from predominantly qualification- and seniority-based administrative systems toward competency-based governance, ultimately arguing that effective governance depends not only on what institutions have, but on the competence of those entrusted to manage what they have.

Arising from this conceptual analysis, the paper recommends that:

1. Higher education institutions should develop and apply competency profiles for administrative appointments, rather than relying predominantly on seniority or academic qualification alone.
2. Institutions and regulatory bodies should institutionalise continuous professional-development programmes covering strategic leadership, financial management, digital governance, and change management.
3. Institutions should establish structured mentoring relationships between experienced and emerging administrators to preserve institutional knowledge.
4. Institutions should implement deliberate succession-planning systems that identify and prepare future leaders ahead of vacancies.
5. Administrators should be evaluated through measurable performance-management systems tied to policy implementation, resource utilisation, and institutional outcomes.
6. Institutions should pursue digital transformation alongside corresponding investment in staff digital competence.
7. Institutions should strengthen ethical governance mechanisms, including codes of conduct, internal controls, and transparent procurement and reporting.

8. Future empirical research should test the six propositions advanced in this paper across a representative sample of Nigerian higher education institutions.

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