

ETHICS AND VALUES IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN NIGERIA: A STRATEGIC APPROACH TO LEADERSHIP AND GLOBAL COMPETITIVENESS

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of ethics and values in higher education leadership in Nigeria and their influence on global competitiveness. It highlights the importance of integrating ethical principles into leadership, curriculum, and community engagement. The paper argues that institutions that prioritize ethics and values are better positioned to develop responsible leaders, drive innovation, and enhance their global reputation by examining best practices and challenges, this paper provides insights into the strategic integration of ethics and values in higher education, ultimately contributing to the development of globally competitive and socially responsible institutions. By adopting a strategic approach to ethics and values, institutions can produce responsible leaders and enhance their global competitiveness, this paper recommended that Nigerian universities should develop and enforce comprehensive codes of ethics addressing academic misconduct, corruption, and harassment. Also government agencies such as the National Universities Commission (NUC) should ensure strict monitoring and sanctions against institutions that fail to uphold ethical standards, among others.

Keywords: Ethics, Values, Higher Education, Strategic Approach, Leadership and Global Competitiveness.

Introduction

In today's globalized world, higher educational institutions face numerous challenges in producing graduates who are not only academically excellent but also ethically and morally sound. This paper explores the strategic importance of integrating ethics and values in higher

educational leadership in Nigeria and its impact on global competitiveness. Institute higher learning play a crucial role in shaping the future of individuals and societies. As such, it is essential that these institutions prioritize ethics and values in their leadership and operations. This discussion will explore the importance of ethics and values in tertiary institution, and how a strategic approach can enhance leadership and global competitiveness Heyneman, (2013).

The problem of unethical behavior continues to be a concern in the workplace, inclusive of higher learning institutions. There is an increasing interest in problems related to academic integrity in higher institution and it has become a topic that is being discussed continuously by various parties. Unethical scandals can be in the form of corruption, bribery and fraud. These three prevalent malpractices can occur in any industry, although the degree may differ from industry to industry. Previous studies have shown that the educational system can be as corrupt as other components of government and the economy. The universal characteristics that can be found in the university systems are now being distorted by the interest of specific individuals in the institutions.

Previous studies have examined many forms of academic dishonesty and cheating in education. Academic dishonesty or unethical behaviour in academics has also been part of the problems faced by higher educational institution in various parts of the world. It can include problems such as cheating and plagiarism, bias, false research, abuse of power and many more. As of now, the level of integrity practiced in the academic community is still declining and not improving Sabli, (2016). Educational institutions need to investigate academic dishonesty proactively and develop solutions to counter this trend, or the problems will exist on an ongoing basis.

Literature Review

It is necessary to cast a cursory glance at the major concept that are pivotal to this study

The Concept of Value

In ethics and social sciences, value denotes the degree of importance of something or action, with the aim of determining which actions are best to do or what way is best to live (normative ethics), or to describe the significance of different actions. Value systems are proscriptive and prescriptive beliefs; they affect the ethical behavior of a person or are the basis of their intentional activities. Often primary values are strong and secondary values are suitable for changes. What makes an action valuable may in turn depend on the ethical values of the objects it increases, decreases, or alters. An object with “ethic value” may be termed an “ethic or philosophic good” (noun sense) Brown & Treviño, (2016).

Values can be defined as broad preferences concerning appropriate courses of actions or outcomes. As such, values reflect a person’s sense of right and wrong or what “ought” to be. “Equal rights for all”, “Excellence deserves admiration”, and “People should be treated with respect and dignity” are representatives of values. Values tend to influence attitudes and behavior and these types include moral values, doctrinal or ideological values, social values,

and aesthetic values. It is debated whether some values that are not clearly physiologically determined, such as altruism, are intrinsic, and whether some, such as acquisitiveness, should be classified as vices or virtues (Middlehurst, 2013).

The Concept of Ethics

Ethics is the philosophical study of moral phenomena. Also called moral philosophy, it investigates normative questions about what people ought to do or which behavior is morally right. Its main branches include normative ethics, applied ethics, and metaethics. Normative ethics aims to find general principles that govern how people should act. According to Balbuena and Lamela (2015) applied ethics examines concrete ethical problems in real-life situations, such as abortion, treatment of animals, and business practices. Metaethics explores the underlying assumptions and concepts of ethics. It asks whether there are objective moral facts, how moral knowledge is possible, and how moral judgments motivate people. Influential normative theories are consequentialism, deontology, and virtue ethics. According to consequentialists, an act is right if it leads to the best consequences. Deontologists focus on acts themselves, saying that they must adhere to duties, like telling the truth and keeping promises. Virtue ethics sees the manifestation of virtues, like courage and compassion, as the fundamental principle of morality (Bolden, Gosling & O'Brien, 2014).

Ethics is closely connected to value theory, which studies the nature and types of value, like the contrast between intrinsic and instrumental value. Moral psychology is a related empirical field and investigates psychological processes involved in morality, such as reasoning and the formation of character. Descriptive ethics describes the dominant moral codes and beliefs in different societies and considers their historical dimension (Mayer, Nurmohamed, Treviño, Shapiro & Schminke, 2013).

Strategic Approach to Leadership

According to Feldman (2015) strategic leadership as the ability of an experienced, senior leader who has the wisdom and vision to create and execute plans and make consequential decisions in the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous strategic environment. A strategic approach to leadership involves planning, analyzing, and executing plans to achieve organizational goals. This approach requires leaders to be proactive, adaptable, and visionary. Some key components to a strategic approach to leadership includes developing a clear vision for the organization and communicating it effectively to stakeholders; analyzing internal and external factors, setting goals, and developing plans to achieve them; being responsive to changing circumstances and adjusting plans accordingly and building strong relationships with stakeholders, including employees, customers, and partners.

Strategic leadership enables informed decision-making, aligning with organizational goals; it helps optimize resources, reducing waste and improving productivity; it enables organizations to stay ahead of competitors and adapt to changing market conditions; strategic leaders can anticipate and mitigate risks, minimizing their impact on the organization. According to Porter (2019) strategic approach to leadership is not without challenges. Some of which are: strategic

leadership requires navigating complex internal and external factors; leaders must make decisions with complete information, adapting to changing circumstances; balancing the needs and expectations of diverse stakeholders can be challenging. The best practices to a strategic approach to leadership are to establish a compelling vision that inspires and motivates stakeholders; encourage experimentation, learning, and innovation; develop trust-based relationships with stakeholders, including employees, customers, and partners; and regularly assess progress, adjusting plans and strategies as needed (Bass, 1985).

Ethical Leadership

Leaders are considered as “tone at the top” that shapes the direction and ethical culture of an organization. Leaders are responsible for the conduct of the organization. Brown & Treviño (2016) explained the relationship between ethical leadership and employee unethical behavior. The ethical leadership is known as a moral manager who considers ethics as important. They will ensure the importance of ethics is communicated well to their subordinates. Thus ethical leader shows a good example and modeling ethical behavior; and at the same time using the reward system to ensure the followers be responsible for their ethical conduct. Leaders are responsible for the conduct of the organization (Wan, 2017).

Kanungo (2011) definition of ethical leadership as unethical leaders who engage in acts and behaviours that benefit others, and at the same time, control their own behaviour. In Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, (2015) paper, they mentioned that ethical leadership always promote ethical conduct by practicing and managing, and at the same time making sure that everybody is accountable for their conduct. Furthermore, it is important for the leaders to ensure that the combination of integrity, ethical standards, and fair treatment becomes their main priorities.

As for Suar & Khuntia (2024), ethical leaders are those leaders who can incorporate moral principles in their beliefs, values, and behaviours. Leaders who have high integrity, they can be the trustworthy and source of information as well guidance to the followers. Feldman, 2015 opined that Leaders who have high moral character and consistently uphold ethical principles are more likely to be followed by subordinates.

Global Competitiveness

Global competitiveness is the ability of a country, organization, educational institution or individual to compete effectively in the international arena, considering factors such as economic productivity, innovation, and the quality of goods and services. One of any country's primary goals is to increase its people's real income in a free market economy and in the long run. Global competitiveness is also related to the ability to produce goods and services following the standards of international markets. According to Sala-i-Martin and Schwab (2018) global competitiveness refers to a country's or organization's ability to compete effectively in the global marketplace, creating economic growth, prosperity, and employment opportunities.

The major drivers of global competitiveness are: a stable, transparent, and efficient institutional framework was essential for global competitiveness; quality infrastructure, including transportation, communication, and energy, supports economic growth and competitiveness; a stable macroeconomic environment, characterized by low inflation, stable exchange rates, and manageable debt levels, is crucial for competitiveness; a skilled, educated, and adaptable workforce is vital for driving innovation and competitiveness; and the ability to adopt and utilize new technologies is essential for staying competitive in the global marketplace.

Some of the benefits of global competitiveness are: global competitiveness can lead to increased economic growth, job creation, and improved living standards; competing globally drives innovation, as organizations strive to develop new products, services, and processes; globally competitive countries and organizations attract foreign investment, stimulating economic growth; global competitiveness requires efficient use of resources, leading to improved productivity (World Economic Forum, 2019).

However, global competitiveness is not without challenges. Some of such challenges include: the increasing interconnectedness of the global economy creates opportunities and challenges for competitiveness; rapid technological changes can disrupt industries and require organizations to adapt quickly; attracting and retaining top talent is crucial for global competitiveness, but can be challenging.

Leadership in Higher Education in Nigeria

Leadership in higher education is critical for shaping the future of individuals, institutions, and society. Effective leadership enables institutions to adapt to changing circumstances, innovate, and achieve their goals. Leadership in higher education in Nigeria is characterized by developing a clear vision for the institution and communicating it effectively to stakeholders; building strong relationships with faculty, staff, students, and external partners; encouraging experimentation, learning, and innovation; demonstrating integrity, transparency, and accountability.

According to Kotter (2021) leadership in higher education is not without challenges. Some of the challenges are: that higher education institutions are complex organizations with multiple stakeholders and competing priorities; institutions must adapt to changing circumstances, including technological advancements, demographic shifts, and funding constraints; promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion is essential for creating a welcoming and supportive learning environment; higher educational institutions must navigate global trends, partnerships, and competition.

However, the best practices of leadership in higher institutions in Nigeria is to engage stakeholders in developing a compelling vision for the society; encourage experimentation, learning, and innovation; develop trust-based relationships with stakeholders, including faculty, staff, students, and external partners; and to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion in all aspects of institutional life (Bolden, Gosling, & O'Brien, 2014).

Ethics in Higher Education in Nigeria

According to Kanungo (2011) higher educational institution should be regarded as an inherently valuable activity that sets out to benefit society. The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education in 1997 stated “we believe that the aim of higher education should be to sustain a learning society”. In addition, the Nolan Committee’s First Report on Standards in Public Life sets out seven principles that “apply to all aspects of public life”. These are selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership. Maintaining high ethical standards is made explicit, or at least implicit, in the aims and objectives of most institutions. But Higher Education Institutions still need to ensure that these aims are put into practice in the day to day running of the institution. Ethical issues arise in a wide range of stations, including those relating to how an institution treats its employees, students and other groups.

According to Trevino and Harrison (2015) the relationships between the organization and its funders and commercial partners provide scope for conflicts of interest and other ethical dilemmas. Marketing practices and admissions procedures may raise questions about honesty and fairness, while upholding academic freedom can have both legal and ethical consequences. Ethical issues range from plagiarism to public interest disclosure and from race equality to confidentiality of information. While legislation may dictate how to approach some institutions, this will not always be the case nor should legislation drive an institution’s approach to ethical issues. It is up to individual institutions to determine what is and is not acceptable behavior for their organizations.

Ethical Issues in Higher Educational Institution in Nigeria

Ethical dilemmas occur when there is no straightforward answer about the “right” or “wrong” course of action in a particular situation. Dilemmas arise everywhere - at the governance level when developing policies, for management teams when putting policy into practice and for individuals in terms of day-to-day questions about behavior. Complex dilemmas can arise when the values of an educational institution clash with those of society or with an individual’s personal or professional values. Dilemmas are a useful tool for helping educational institutions to think about their own approach to ethical matters.

They can also play a valuable role in ethics training, to encourage staff and other individuals to debate issues and deal with difficult circumstances that may arise in the course of their work. Ethics and values are essential in higher educational institutions for several reasons: higher institutions have a responsibility to shape the next generation of leaders, and ethics and values play a critical role in this process; ethics and values promote academic integrity, which is essential for maintaining the credibility and reputation of higher education institutions; ethics and values can foster a positive learning environment that promotes social responsibility, respect, and empathy (Kotter, 2021).

According to McCabe, Butterfield & Treviño (2016) ethics and values play a crucial role in shaping the culture and direction of higher educational institutions. By integrating ethics and values into their leadership, educational institutions can:

- Foster a culture of integrity: Promote academic honesty, transparency, and accountability.
- Develop responsible leaders: Equip students with the skills and values necessary to become responsible leaders.
- Enhance global competitiveness: Prepare graduates who are not only academically excellent but also ethically and morally sound in a globalized world.

Ethics and values are fundamental to the mission and purpose of higher educational institutions. They guide decision-making, shape institutional culture, and influence the development of students. Key aspects include trustworthiness and responsibility in academic work; preparing students to contribute positively to society and address global challenges and fostering an inclusive environment that respects diversity and promotes equity.

Methodology

This article adopts a conceptual and analytical approach, drawing from secondary data such as peer-reviewed journal articles, policy documents, and scholarly works on ethics, leadership, and higher education. The methodology involves a critical review of literature within the Nigerian context while integrating global perspectives. This strategic approach provides a framework for identifying challenges, proposing solutions, and aligning Nigerian higher education with global competitiveness standards.

Results

The review indicates that:

- Nigerian higher education faces a decline in ethical standards, evident in examination malpractice, plagiarism, and administrative corruption.
- Lack of strong institutional values undermines quality assurance and public trust.
- Institutions with clearly defined ethical frameworks demonstrate better leadership, accountability, and international collaboration.
- Embedding ethics and values into curricula and leadership practices significantly enhances global competitiveness by producing graduates with integrity, innovation, and leadership qualities.

Discussion of Findings

The findings reveal that ethics and values are not only moral imperatives but also strategic tools for institutional survival and global recognition. Universities in Nigeria that prioritize integrity, transparency, and fairness tend to attract international partnerships and research funding also likely to attract top talented students and faculty staff drawn to institutions with a strong reputation for ethics and values; enhance their reputation, and produce responsible leaders. Conversely, institutions plagued by corruption face reputational damage and reduced global competitiveness.

Ethical leadership defined by accountability, vision, and value-based decision-making is central to repositioning Nigerian higher education. Leaders must act as role models, enforcing codes of conduct, promoting meritocracy, and integrating ethics across teaching, learning, and research. Furthermore, global competitiveness requires aligning Nigerian institutions with international ethical benchmarks, accreditation standards, and research ethics.

Conclusion

Integrating ethics and values into higher educational system in Nigeria leadership is crucial for producing graduates who are not only academically excellent but also ethically and morally sound. Ethics and values are indispensable for strengthening leadership and ensuring Nigerian higher education competes globally. Without a strong ethical foundation, higher institutions risk producing graduates who lack credibility and the moral compass required for nation-building. By embedding ethical principles into policies, leadership practices, and academic culture Nigerian higher education can strategically position itself as a hub of innovation, integrity, and global relevance. Prioritizing ethics and values in higher educational system is essential for promoting leadership and global competitiveness. While there are challenges and opportunities to consider, the benefits of prioritizing ethics and values in higher educational sector are clear. Ethics and values are integral to the success and sustainability of higher educational institutions. Ultimately, this approach prepares students to become responsible leaders who can navigate complex global challenges with integrity and purpose.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made:

- **Institutional Reforms:** Nigerian universities should develop and enforce comprehensive codes of ethics addressing academic misconduct, corruption, and harassment.
- **Curriculum Integration:** Ethics and values education should be incorporated into all programs, not limited to philosophy or religious studies.
- **Leadership Training:** University administrators and leaders should undergo regular training on ethical leadership and value-driven management.

- Policy Enforcement: Government agencies such as the National Universities Commission (NUC) should ensure strict monitoring and sanctions against institutions that fail to uphold ethical standards.
- Global Partnerships: Institutions should collaborate with international universities to benchmark ethical practices and enhance global competitiveness.

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