

Politics and Management of Institutional Leadership in University Education in Rivers State

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Abstract

This study investigated the relationship between politics and the management of institutional leadership in university education in Rivers State, guided by three research questions and hypotheses. A correlational research design was adopted to examine how political factors influence leadership management in universities. The population comprised principal officers, including Vice-Chancellors, Deputy Vice-Chancellors, Registrars, Bursars, University Librarians, Directors, Deans, and Heads of Departments across the three major universities: University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State University (RSU), and Ignatius Ajuru University of Education (IAUE). Given the small population and accessibility considerations, a purposive sample of 45 principal officers was drawn to ensure representation of key leadership perspectives. Data were collected using a researcher-developed questionnaire, the Politics and Management of Institutional Leadership in University Education Questionnaire (PMILUEQ). Experts in Educational Management and Planning validated the instrument, and reliability testing yielded a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.77, indicating strong internal consistency. The questionnaires were administered with assistance from two research assistants, and 38 (84.4%) were retrieved and deemed valid. Data analysis was conducted using the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient at a 0.05 significance level via SPSS version 27.0. The findings revealed that politics in leadership appointments, course allocation, and resource distribution negatively affect the management of university leadership. Conclusively, political influence plays a critical role in shaping university management in Rivers State. To mitigate its adverse effects, universities should implement merit-based leadership appointments, transparent academic course assignments, and equitable resource distribution, thereby strengthening governance, enhancing accountability, and promoting effective management in tertiary education.

Background to the Study

University education is a crucial instrument for national and state development. It provides skilled manpower, professional leaders, researchers, and innovators who drive economic growth, social progress, and good governance. Universities also serve as centres for knowledge creation, critical thinking, and problem-solving, which are essential for addressing societal challenges. In Rivers State, university education plays a significant role in human capital development by equipping graduates with the skills, knowledge, and competencies required to meet the demands of the modern workforce. The quality of university education, however, depends largely on the effectiveness of its management, which ensures that policies are implemented, academic programs are coordinated, and resources are utilised efficiently. Strong management fosters accountability, stability, and a conducive learning environment, which are all critical to achieving the objectives of higher education (Okoroma, 2006).

Effective management of university education requires competent leadership that can plan, organise, and implement academic and administrative activities. When leadership is strong, universities can maintain high academic standards, motivate staff, and promote research and innovation. Leaders are also responsible for mediating conflicts, ensuring fairness, and responding to societal and government expectations. However, in practice, the management of universities is not insulated from politics. Politics has become an inseparable and integral part of the university system, influencing decisions at every level. Government policies, funding mechanisms, and regulatory frameworks inevitably affect how universities operate. Muyiwa (2015) observes that while education and politics are interconnected, challenges arise when political interests dominate academic values and institutional priorities.

In Rivers State, political influence in university management can be seen most clearly in three areas: leadership appointment, academic course allocation, and resource allocation. The politics of leadership appointment affects who occupies critical positions such as vice-chancellors, registrars, and deans. Ideally, these positions should be filled based on competence and integrity, but political loyalty and connections often take precedence. Leaders appointed through political influence may prioritize satisfying external interests over institutional goals, weakening decision-making and accountability (Alimba, 2017). The politics of academic course allocation is another area where politics shapes management. Courses and teaching responsibilities should be assigned according to staff specialization, workload, and fairness. Yet favoritism, seniority disputes, ethnic considerations, and internal power dynamics sometimes influence allocation. This creates tension among staff, reduces morale, and compromises the quality of teaching (Okoroma, 2006).

Finally, the politics of resource allocation concerns the distribution of funds, facilities, and research materials within universities. Political considerations can determine which departments or units receive resources, often neglecting areas of greatest academic need. Obiajulu (2023) noted that this can weaken leadership effectiveness, reduce transparency, and limit institutional development. In essence, while university education is vital for societal progress and its management is key to achieving educational goals, politics has become deeply

intertwined with the system. Leadership appointments, course allocation, and resource distribution are all influenced by political interests, which can either support or hinder effective management. Understanding these dynamics is essential for designing strategies that strengthen institutional leadership and ensure that political involvement serves, rather than undermines, university objectives (Ogunode et al., 2023).

Statement of the Problem

Politics has become an inseparable part of university education in Rivers State, influencing how institutions are managed and how decisions are made. While universities are meant to serve as centres of knowledge, innovation, and human capital development, political interference often undermines their core objectives. Leadership appointments, academic course allocation, and resource distribution are frequently guided by political considerations rather than merit, fairness, or institutional needs. This has created challenges for effective management, leading to weakened leadership, low staff morale, and inequitable access to resources. Consequently, the quality of teaching, research, and overall institutional performance is compromised. Despite the critical role of university education in societal and economic development, little attention has been given to understanding how these political dynamics affect leadership management in universities in Rivers State. This study aims to investigate the relationship between politics and the management of institutional leadership in university education in Rivers State.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

This study aims to examine the extent to which politics relates to the management of institutional leadership in university education in Rivers State. Specifically, the objectives are to:

1. To examine the extent to which the politics of leadership appointment relates to the management of institutional leadership in university education in Rivers State.
2. To examine the extent to which the politics of academic course allocation relates to the management of institutional leadership in university education in Rivers State.
3. To examine the extent to which the politics of resource allocation relates to the management of institutional leadership in university education in Rivers State.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the study:

1. To what extent does the politics of leadership appointment relates the management of institutional leadership in university education in Rivers State?
2. To what extent does the politics of academic course allocation relates the management of institutional leadership in university education in Rivers State?
3. To what extent does the politics of resource allocation relates the management of institutional leadership in university education in Rivers State?

Hypotheses

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

H₀₁: The politics of leadership appointment does not significantly relate the management of institutional leadership in university education in Rivers State.

H₀₂: The politics of academic course allocation does not significantly relate the management of institutional leadership in university education in Rivers State.

H₀₃: The politics of resource allocation does not significantly relate the management of institutional leadership in university education in Rivers State.

Theoretical Framework

Elite Theory

Elite Theory was developed primarily by late 19th and early 20th-century Italian thinkers such as Vilfredo Pareto, Gaetano Mosca, and Robert Michels, building on ideas from Max Weber. The theory asserts that ruling elites are inevitable in all societies, explaining their formation, function, and circulation. Pareto introduced the concept of the “circulation of elites,” distinguishing between “foxes” (innovative, strategic elites) and “lions” (forceful, conservative elites), while Michels formulated the “iron law of oligarchy,” emphasizing that all organizations, including democratic ones, eventually concentrate power in a small elite group (Damele & Campos, 2022).

In the context of university education in Nigeria, Elite Theory provides a useful framework for understanding how political and influential elites shape leadership appointments, course allocation, and resource distribution. These elites, often drawn from political, bureaucratic, or economic circles, exert disproportionate influence over institutional decisions, frequently prioritizing personal or group interests over meritocratic principles (Larreguy & Marshall, 2014). This dynamic explains why leadership management in universities can be constrained by political pressures, favoritism, and unequal resource allocation.

Further, Toscano and Stolz (2025) argue that elite-driven systems often reproduce social and institutional inequalities, limiting equitable participation and effective governance. In Nigerian universities, this manifests in politicized leadership structures, biased academic decision-making, and imbalanced resource distribution, which undermines institutional autonomy and effectiveness. Similarly, Karabushchenko et al. (2021) added that professional elites within educational institutions can consolidate power, further influencing policy implementation and institutional outcomes. Therefore, Elite Theory offers a robust lens for analyzing the interplay between politics and institutional leadership management, highlighting the persistent influence of powerful actors in shaping university governance in Nigeria.

Conceptual Clarification

Politics of Leadership Appointment and Management of Institutional Leadership

The management of institutional leadership in universities is closely linked to the process through which leaders are appointed. Ideally, leadership positions such as vice-chancellors, deans, and registrars should be filled based on competence, experience, and integrity to ensure effective administration. However, in many universities in Rivers State, political

considerations often overshadow merit, resulting in appointments driven by loyalty, connections, or influence from government and political elites (Alimba, 2017). Such politically influenced appointments can compromise the autonomy of institutional leadership, as leaders may feel obliged to prioritise political interests over institutional goals.

When leadership is shaped by politics rather than merit, management effectiveness is weakened. Decisions may become reactive, accountability is reduced, and long-term planning suffers, ultimately affecting staff motivation and institutional performance (Obiajulu, 2023). Moreover, leaders appointed through political influence may struggle to implement policies effectively, leading to conflicts and inefficiencies within the university system (Muyiwa, 2015). Therefore, understanding the interplay between political interference in leadership appointment and the management of institutional leadership is critical. It highlights how external political forces can undermine the quality, stability, and effectiveness of university administration, emphasising the need for merit-based appointment systems to strengthen governance and institutional development.

Politics of Academic Course Allocation and Management of Institutional Leadership

Academic course allocation is a crucial function of institutional leadership, ensuring teaching responsibilities align with staff expertise and workload balance. Effective allocation supports efficiency, fairness, and staff morale. However, in Rivers State universities, politics frequently determines course distribution. Factors such as favoritism, seniority disputes, ethnic considerations, and informal power dynamics often influence who teaches which courses (Okoroma, 2006). This undermines the authority and effectiveness of institutional leaders, forcing them to manage internal conflicts while maintaining academic standards (Ijov, Alye & Sar, 2015).

Political influence in course allocation can reduce management effectiveness by creating tension among staff and lowering motivation. Leaders may assign courses to appease certain groups rather than optimizing educational quality (Obiajulu, 2023). This imbalance can result in unequal workloads, poor academic delivery, and difficulty implementing institutional policies. Muyiwa (2015) argued that when political considerations dominate academic decisions, leadership management suffers, impacting staff performance and student outcomes. Understanding how politics affects course allocation is therefore vital for enhancing administrative efficiency and fairness in universities.

Politics of Resource Allocation and Management of Institutional Leadership

Resource allocation is a critical aspect of institutional leadership in universities, as it determines how funds, facilities, and materials are distributed to support teaching, research, and administrative functions. Effective management requires that resources be allocated based on institutional priorities, academic needs, and fairness. However, in universities in Rivers State, the distribution of resources is often influenced by politics rather than merit. Political connections, favoritism, and external pressures frequently shape which departments or units receive funding and infrastructural support (Obiajulu, 2023). This politicization

undermines the autonomy of institutional leaders and complicates the management of university operations.

When resource allocation is driven by political considerations, leaders may struggle to implement development projects or maintain equitable access to facilities. Departments with limited political influence may be neglected, while favoured units receive disproportionate support, creating tension among staff and reducing morale (Alimba, 2017). Such imbalances weaken institutional cohesion and reduce the effectiveness of leadership in planning, decision-making, and policy implementation. Muyiwa (2015) argues that political interference in resource management compromises accountability and transparency, ultimately affecting the overall performance and quality of university education. Understanding the politics of resource allocation is therefore essential for improving institutional leadership, ensuring fairness, and promoting effective university management in Rivers State.

Review of Related Empirical Studies

Alimba (2017) conducted a mixed-method study on political interference in leadership appointments in Nigerian universities. The research included 250 questionnaires administered to academic and administrative staff across ten universities, along with 15 in-depth interviews with vice-chancellors and council members. Using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis, the study found that political connections significantly influence appointments, often overshadowing merit. Leaders appointed through political considerations showed reduced autonomy, weak decision-making, and poor administrative coordination. The study concluded that political interference undermines the stability and effectiveness of institutional leadership. It recommended adopting merit-based appointment systems with clear criteria and reduced external political influence. For this study, the findings highlight the need to examine how the politics of leadership appointments affects the management effectiveness of institutional leadership in Rivers State universities, emphasizing autonomy and meritocracy as critical factors for strong governance.

Okoroma (2006) explored the influence of politics on academic course allocation in Nigerian tertiary institutions using a survey research design. The study administered questionnaires to 180 lecturers across six universities and analyzed the data with descriptive statistics. Results showed that favoritism, seniority disputes, and ethnic or political considerations often determined course assignments. This created uneven workloads, staff dissatisfaction, and tension among lecturers, negatively affecting teaching quality and administrative efficiency. The study concluded that political manipulation of course allocation weakens institutional leadership and academic performance. It recommended that universities implement transparent, merit-based allocation systems to ensure assignments reflect staff expertise and workload balance. The implication for this study is that the politics of academic course allocation can directly affect the management of institutional leadership in Rivers State, particularly in maintaining staff morale, fairness, and operational efficiency.

Obiajulu (2023) examined political influence on resource allocation in 12 public universities in Nigeria using a cross-sectional survey. Structured questionnaires were administered to 300 staff, with correlation and regression analyses applied to the data. Findings indicated that politically connected departments received disproportionately more resources, while less influential units were neglected. This imbalance compromised leadership effectiveness, reduced transparency, and weakened institutional cohesion, affecting policy implementation and academic performance. The study concluded that political interference in resource allocation undermines effective university leadership and recommended needs-based, transparent allocation policies to mitigate political manipulation. For the current study, these findings revealed the importance of investigating how the politics of resource distribution impacts leadership management in Rivers State universities, highlighting fairness and accountability as essential for effective institutional administration.

Methods

The study utilized a correlational research design to evaluate the relationship between politics and the management of institutional leadership in university education in Rivers State. The population comprised principal officers, including Vice-Chancellors, Deputy Vice-Chancellors, Registrars, Bursars, University Librarians, Directors of units, Deans of Faculties, and Heads of Departments (HODs) across the three major universities in Rivers State: University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State University (RSU), and Ignatius Ajuru University of Education (IAUE). Given the relatively small population, accessibility, and proximity issues, a sample of 45 principal officers was purposively recruited from these universities to assure representation of critical leadership views. Data were obtained using a researcher-developed questionnaire, termed Politics and Management of Institutional Leadership in University Education Questionnaire (PMILUEQ). The instrument included two sections: Section A recorded demographic information, while Section B concentrated on subjects relevant to politics and leadership management. Section B uses a 4-point Likert scale (Very High Extent to Very Low Extent) to allow respondents to score their perceptions objectively. The questionnaire was evaluated by specialists in Educational Management and Planning, guaranteeing clarity, relevance, and alignment with the study objectives. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, which returned a coefficient of 0.77, suggesting high internal consistency. The instrument was administered by the researcher with the assistance of two trained research assistants. Out of the 45 questionnaires distributed, 38 (84.4%) were successfully retrieved and considered valid for analysis, while 7 (15.6%) were not returned or deemed invalid. To address the study questions and assess the hypotheses, the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient was applied at a 0.05 level of significance, using SPSS version 27.0 for the analysis.

Results (Answers to Research Questions and Test of Hypotheses)

Research Question 1: To what extent does the politics of leadership appointment relate the management of institutional leadership in university education in Rivers State?

Table 1.

		Politics of leadership appointment	Management of institutional leadership
Politics of leadership appointment	Pearson	1	-0.781**
	Correlation		
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
	N	38	38
Management of institutional leadership	Pearson	-0.781**	1
	Correlation		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
	N	38	38

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2 -tailed).

The Pearson correlation analysis revealed $r = -0.781$, $p = 0.000$, indicating a strong, negative, and statistically significant relationship. This suggests that political interference in leadership appointments, such as those influenced by loyalty, political connections, or favouritism, negatively impacts the management of institutional leadership. Leaders may face reduced autonomy, weakened decision-making, and administrative inefficiency. The result highlights that as politics increasingly dictates leadership appointments, the overall effectiveness, stability, and accountability of university management are undermined, creating challenges for planning, policy implementation, and staff motivation in Rivers State universities.

Hypothesis One: The politics of leadership appointment does not significantly relate the management of institutional leadership in university education in Rivers State

The hypothesis tests yielded $r = -0.781$, $p = 0.000 < 0.05$, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis. This confirms that political interference in leadership appointments significantly influences management outcomes. The negative correlation indicates that higher political involvement generally reduces leadership effectiveness, limits institutional autonomy, and creates inefficiencies in decision-making. The finding implies that mitigating political influence in leadership selection is critical to enhancing governance, accountability, and the overall performance of universities in Rivers State. Merit-based appointment systems are necessary to strengthen administrative capacity and institutional stability.

Research Question 2: To what extent does the politics of academic course allocation relate the management of institutional leadership in university education in Rivers State?

Table 2.

		Politics of leadership appointment	Management of institutional leadership
Politics of leadership appointment	Pearson Correlation	1	-0.782**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
	N	38	38
Management of institutional leadership	Pearson Correlation	-0.782**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
	N	38	38

The Pearson correlation showed $r = -0.782$, $p = 0.000$, indicating a strong, negative, and statistically significant relationship. This demonstrates that political interference in course allocation through favouritism, ethnic bias, or seniority disputes negatively affects the management of institutional leadership. Leaders face challenges in maintaining fairness, distributing workloads equitably, and ensuring academic efficiency. As political considerations increasingly influence who teaches specific courses, staff tensions rise, morale declines, and administrative effectiveness suffers. This result underscores the importance of transparent, merit-based course allocation in sustaining strong leadership and effective university management in Rivers State.

Hypothesis Two: The politics of academic course allocation does not significantly relate the management of institutional leadership in university education in Rivers State.

The test of the hypothesis revealed $r = -0.782$, $p = 0.000 < 0.05$, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis. The result confirms that political interference in course allocation significantly affects institutional leadership management. The negative correlation indicates that increased politics in academic distribution reduces staff morale, creates tension, and undermines leadership authority, thereby decreasing administrative efficiency. The implication is that universities must implement transparent and merit-based course allocation systems to enhance fairness, improve workload balance, and strengthen the effectiveness of leadership management in Rivers State universities.

Research Question 3: To what extent does the politics of resource allocation relate the management of institutional leadership in university education in Rivers State?

Table 3.

		Politics of leadership appointment	Management of institutional leadership
Politics of leadership appointment	Pearson Correlation	1	-0.804**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
	N	38	38
Management of institutional leadership	Pearson Correlation	-0.804**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
	N	38	38

To what extent does the politics of resource allocation relate to the management of institutional leadership in university education in Rivers State?

The correlation analysis showed $r = -0.804$, $p = 0.000$, indicating a strong, negative, and statistically significant relationship. Political interference in resource allocation, preferring certain departments or units over others undermines leadership effectiveness, fairness, and institutional cohesion. Leaders face difficulty implementing policies equitably, maintaining accountability, and ensuring all units receive appropriate resources. As political influence in resource distribution increases, institutional management suffers, creating inefficiencies, dissatisfaction, and distrust among staff. This result highlights the critical role of transparent, needs-based resource allocation in maintaining effective leadership and promoting the overall stability of university administration in Rivers State.

Hypothesis Three: The politics of resource allocation does not significantly relate the management of institutional leadership in university education in Rivers State.

The hypothesis test revealed $r = -0.804$, $p = 0.000 < 0.05$, leading to rejection of the null hypothesis. This confirms that political interference in resource allocation significantly affects the management of institutional leadership. The negative correlation suggests that increased politics reduces fairness, transparency, and accountability, creating inefficiencies in administrative processes and undermining leadership authority. The finding implies that universities should adopt impartial, needs-based resource distribution strategies to strengthen institutional governance, enhance operational efficiency, and maintain staff trust. Proper management of resources is essential for promoting effective leadership and achieving sustainable university administration in Rivers State.

Discussion of Findings

Politics of Leadership Appointment and Management of Institutional Leadership

The study revealed a strong, negative relationship between politics of leadership appointment and management of institutional leadership. This suggests that political interference in appointments significantly undermines leadership effectiveness, autonomy, and institutional stability in Rivers State universities. The finding aligns with Alimba (2017), who reported that political influence in university leadership appointments reduces accountability and weakens administrative efficiency. Similarly, Obiajulu (2023) observed that leaders appointed through political favoritism often prioritize external political interests over institutional goals, leading to poor decision-making and internal conflict. Muyiwa (2015) also emphasized that politicized leadership appointments compromise meritocracy, creating environments where management strategies are inconsistently applied and institutional objectives are not fully achieved. These studies reinforce the finding that political interference is a barrier to effective leadership. In practical terms, the result underscores the necessity of merit-based appointment systems, transparent selection procedures, and reduced external political influence. By mitigating the negative effects of politics, universities can enhance leadership performance, improve decision-making, and ensure institutional stability, which is critical for the sustainable management of tertiary education in Rivers State.

Politics of Academic Course Allocation and Management of Institutional Leadership

The analysis indicated a strong, negative correlation between politics in academic course allocation and management of institutional leadership, suggesting that favoritism, ethnic bias, or seniority disputes negatively affect administrative effectiveness. This supports Okoroma (2006), who found that political interference in course assignment disrupts workload balance, lowers staff morale, and reduces efficiency in Nigerian tertiary institutions. Similarly, Lenshie (2013) observed that politicized course allocation creates tension among academic staff, undermining leadership authority and the equitable delivery of educational programs. Obiajulu (2023) further highlighted that when leaders must navigate political pressures in assigning courses, management priorities are compromised, and academic objectives may be sidelined. Collectively, these studies show that political involvement in course allocation hinders effective management by creating internal conflicts and inequities. The implication is that universities need transparent, merit-based allocation systems to promote fairness, boost staff morale, and enhance administrative efficiency. By reducing political interference in academic decisions, leaders can maintain a more harmonious, productive, and professionally guided university environment in Rivers State.

Politics of Resource Allocation and Management of Institutional Leadership

The study revealed a strong, negative relationship between politics of resource allocation and management of institutional leadership, indicating that political favoritism in distributing resources undermines institutional effectiveness. Alimba (2017) found that resource allocation driven by political considerations compromises departmental equity and leadership authority in Nigerian universities. Obiajulu (2023) similarly reported that politically favored units receive disproportionate funding, while less influential departments

are neglected, weakening cohesion and administrative efficiency. Lenshie (2013) also emphasized that politicized resource distribution erodes transparency, accountability, and trust in leadership, ultimately reducing the effectiveness of policy implementation. These studies collectively support the finding that politics in resource management diminishes leadership capacity to ensure fair, efficient, and strategic allocation of university resources. The implication is that Rivers State universities should adopt needs-based, transparent resource allocation policies that limit political interference. Doing so enhances leadership effectiveness, strengthens governance, and ensures equitable support for all departments, promoting institutional stability and the quality of tertiary education.

Conclusion

Conclusively, the politics surrounding leadership, course allocation, and resource distribution plays a critical role in shaping the management of university education in Rivers State. Political influences, whether from government, internal stakeholders, or external actors, are an inseparable part of the higher education system and significantly affect decision-making, efficiency, and governance. Effective management requires that institutional leaders navigate these political dynamics while maintaining autonomy, transparency, and accountability. Strong leadership practices, merit-based appointments, and fair administrative procedures are essential for ensuring institutional stability, equitable resource distribution, and the efficient delivery of academic programs. Universities that actively manage political pressures, implement clear policies, and uphold professional standards are better positioned to sustain quality education and foster trust among staff and students. Therefore, addressing the interplay between politics and institutional leadership is vital for strengthening governance, promoting ethical management, and building resilient, high-performing universities in Rivers State.

Recommendations

Based on the finding the following recommendations were made:

1. Universities should implement transparent, merit-based leadership selection systems, minimising political interference to enhance autonomy, accountability, and effectiveness in the management of institutional leadership across Rivers State universities.
2. Academic departments should adopt fair, merit-driven course allocation procedures to reduce favouritism, ensure balanced workloads, maintain staff morale, and strengthen the efficiency and effectiveness of institutional leadership in university education.
3. Universities should establish needs-based, transparent resource distribution policies that limit political favoritism, promote equity, support departmental development, and enhance effective leadership and governance within tertiary institutions in Rivers State.

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