

Ethnic Consideration and Managerial Decisions in Nigerian Public Universities: Emerging Issues and Implications

¹Ojonimi Ferdinand Edino, ²Abutu David Ogah, ³Abraham Daniel & ⁴Muhammed Shuaibu

^{1,2,3&4}Department of Public Administration
Federal University Lokoja

Article DOI: 10.48028/ijprds/ijargpgm.v6.i1.06

Abstract

This study examines the delicate but persistent effect of ethnicity on managerial decisions in Nigeria's public universities. While universities are considered to be widespread communities of scholarship, the Nigerian experience progressively replicates the weight of tribal and regional loyalties in management appointments, staff employment, and student admissions. Drawing from existing empirical studies, public archives, and commentaries, this study unveils how ethnic considerations crisscross with management practices and the obvious implications for institutional integrity, academic quality, and national unity. Thus, this study pinpoints four evolving trends: ethnic domination of leadership, narrow-mindedness of staff recruitment, ethnic dominance of student intake, and the erosion of meritocracy, and further argues that these practices, if unchecked, will not only threaten the founding standards of the university system but strongly negates the idea of unity in diversity in Nigeria as a nation. It concludes with recommendations for transparent governance, balanced recruitment, and stronger institutional oversight to protect merit and restore public confidence in the Nigerian university system.

Keywords: *Ethnicity; University Governance; Managerial Decisions; Public Universities; Meritocracy; National Integration*

Corresponding Author: **Ojonimi Ferdinand Edino**

Background to the Study

The Nigerian university systems play pivotal roles in the country's intellectual and human capacity development. Aside's promotion of learning, research, and national integration, the public university sector was intended to surpass ethnic, regional, and religious divisions. Nevertheless, in practice, the sector depicts Nigeria's broader socio-political environment, where ethnic identity often contends with merit and professionalism. The recurring pattern of appointments, promotions, and admissions in numerous public institutions suggests that ethnicity remains a decisive factor in managerial decision-making (Jacob, 2013; Ogu, 2022). Ethnicity, in its basic sense, connotes the common heritage and cultural identity of a group of people. In Nigeria's multi-ethnic setting, over 250 ethnic groups coexist. In Nigeria, ethnic identity is not only a sign of belonging but also a powerful political and social instrument that determines who gets what, when and how? This reality has certainly found expression in public institutions, including universities, where decisions that ought to be based on competence or merit sometimes become negotiated along ethnic lines.

It has been observed, for instance, that vice-chancellors and senior management staff are increasingly drawn from the immediate host communities of universities (Kukah, 2024). In principle, such appointments may appear justifiable under the guise of “local representation.” However, in practice, they often weaken diversity and foster sensitivities of exclusion and marginalization especially among staff and students from outside the dominant ethnic group. The fundamental question, therefore, is: To what extent do ethnic considerations shape managerial decisions in Nigerian public universities, and what are the wider implications for institutional performance and national unity? This study seeks to respond to that question by combining evidence from research, institutional reports, and public discussions.

Apparently, the significance of this investigation cannot be overemphasized. The university, by its composition, is an international and cosmopolitan community of scholars. It is meant to depict different 'universe' in a city, not tribal parochialism. Thus, when managerial decisions in universities are shaped by tribal or ethnic sentiment, the ideals of universality and meritocracy are thrown over-board. This, not only affects the internal functioning of universities but also exterminates their legality and global attractiveness. The study proceeds by clarifying relevant conceptions, identifying theoretical anchors, examining the manifestation of ethnic influence in management decisions-making, and arguing its implications for institutional administration and national development.

Ethnicity in the Nigerian Context

Ethnicity is a strongly rooted social reality in Nigeria. It encompasses a common sense of history, ancestry, language, and cultural norms among a group of people. In a setting where access to state resources is competitive, ethnic affiliation habitually becomes a form of social capital (Ogu, 2022). In Nigeria, it is easy to observe that political support, employment opportunities, and institutional management positions often reflect ethnic balancing rather than merit-based selection. Yet, some ethnic groups, unarguably, dominate leadership and other juicy positions. This practice is evident in how leadership appointments, staff recruitment, and even research collaborations are conducted. For example, in many state-

owned universities, key administrative positions are either occupied by persons from the host ethnic group or from the ethnic group of the Chief Executive of the State- the Governor, who appoints the Vice-chancellor. The assumption is that this promotes community trust and stability; however, such a pattern often sidelines proficient candidates from other backgrounds and weakens the national character of these institutions. Obviously, ethnicity does not merely represent cultural identity but functions as a social framework of inclusion and exclusion that somewhat regulates access to power and opportunity.

Managerial Decision-Making in Universities

In the context of Nigerian public universities, managerial decision-making connotes the structured procedures by which university leaders plan, organize, and control institutional activities. This includes employee recruitment, promotion, appointment into leadership positions, student admissions, budgeting, and academic policy design. Preferably, these decisions should follow clearly articulated standards of merit, transparency, and fairness but the reverse is the case as studies indicate that informal considerations, including ethnic and regional affiliations, increasingly influence decision aftermaths (Jacob, 2013).

The Nigerian university administrative structure is made of the Governing Council, Senate, and Management. Each body exercises specific powers. For instance, the Council oversees appointments and finances; the Senate regulates academic matters; and the Management executes policies. When ethnicity penetrates these structures, through Council membership, political appointments, or management influence, decision-making becomes lop-sided. The outcomes can include selective employment, promotion favoritism, and weakened institutional integrity.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on two theoretical perspectives: Social identity theory and institutional legitimacy theory

Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory is propounded by Tajfel and Turner (1979), argues that individuals drive part of their self-concept and identity based on which they belong. In organizational environment, this often results in a tendency to favor members of a particular ethnic group (in group), and discriminate against another ethnic group (out group). In the context of Nigerian universities, social identity theory emphasizes and provides insight why managers and decision makers may unconsciously and consciously prefer candidates who share their ethnic background when making recruitment and promotion processes. Furthermore, social identity theory also explains why such discriminating tendency persists despite the existence of formal policies and strategies that promote merit and diversity in the workplace.

Institutional Legitimacy

Institutional legitimacy theory posits that organizations sustain their credibility by conforming to accepted social values and norms. When organizational practices act outside of this expectation, it loses legitimacy and moral authority. Within the university system, legitimacy

requires strict commitment such as merit, equity, transparency and academic excellence. Consequently, universities may risk trust, credibility and damaging academic reputation globally when managerial decisions-making are influenced by ethnic favoritism rather than achieving organizational goals together, social identity and Institutional legitimacy theory show that ethnicity is more than just a social identification but it is also a structural force that drives institutional practice and decision-making process

Ethnicity and Managerial Decision in Nigerian Public Universities

Ethnicity and managerial decisions in Nigerian public universities can be observed in the following ways:

Leadership Appointments and Ethnic Identity

In many Nigerian universities, Leadership and appointments are greatly shaped by ethnic considerations particularly in the domain of executive appointment. Evidence from journalistic and academic inquiries indicates that many institutions are headed by the vice-chancellor and principal officers are predominantly selected from the same ethnic group of the institution host community. This practice is common in state-owned universities, where indigenous status frequently takes key administrative position over professional competence. Kukah (2024) criticized this pattern, arguing that contemporary Nigerian universities are gradually turning into breeding ground for ethnic jingoism, with local population restricting leadership portfolios. This trend as an institutional bias, observing that many universities nationwide have increasingly assume the identity and interests of the locality's dominant ethnic group. This development undermines the universal and multicultural character of higher education while severely restricting opportunity for intellectual exchange and diversity. Furthermore, this pattern of leadership fosters system resentment, reduces collaboration, and depresses institutional morale. Ultimately, these outcomes may compromise organizational stability and escalate internal conflict

Recruitment, Promotion, and Ethnic Patronage

Ethnic considerations often influence recruitment and promotion pathway, which can undermine objectivity, fairness, and merit-based principles (Adebayo & Ojo, 2019). Recruitment and promotion decisions in numerous universities dominated by ethnic factors tend to compromise transparency and professionalism, limiting the effectiveness of the recruitment process and, by extension, organizational performance. This practice opposed the fundamental objective for the establishment of higher institution, which is to promote ethnic integration, unity and peaceful existence among people in different ethnic inclination. This outcome often leads to staff imbalance and dissatisfaction.

These internal administrative dynamics reflect a broader reality within the Nigerian public sectors. Imoni (2018) establish that ethnic bias as one of most persistent factors influencing managerial decision making in public institutions. Within the university ecosystem, such tendencies entrenched culture in which allegiance to ethnic group and network consistently supersede over commitment of the institutional goals, thereby restricting efficiency and organizational development. When ethnic dominant influence promotional decisions in an

organization, capable staff from minority backgrounds may be discouraged from contributing fully. Over time, this stifles innovation and diminishes the university's reputation for fairness. The outcome of the above discrimination and mistreatment could result in losing your best to other institutions or nations where they will be treated fairly enough. This will in turn encourage innovation and creativity. Take a cue from the mass exodus of our professionals and best breeds to Europe, America and Asia on daily basis, mostly because of the maltreatment meted on them by the indigenous universities, thereby seeking better placement abroad. On the other hand, it is disadvantageous to the indigenous universities as it will lead to brain drain and lack of interest by upcoming ones.

Ethnicity and Student Admissions

Although less frequently discussed, student admissions also exhibit ethnic patterns. The federal quota and catchment area policies, initially designed to promote national balance, have sometimes been exploited to entrench local dominance. The absence of federal quota and catchment policies due to ethnical bias have made many universities give privilege to applicants from the host state, thereby reducing cross-regional representation. While the catchment area principle is not fundamentally problematic, it compromises merit-based selection criteria. When merit is sacrificed for favoritism of ethnic consideration, it deprives students from having inter-ethnic interaction which will lead to students' isolation. According to Ogbonna and Ukpere (2015), argues that favoritism and ethnic bias weaken institutional integrity and hinder productivity in public administration.

Emerging Issues in Ethnic Considerations and University Governance

Ethnic influence in the governance of Nigerian universities as extended from individual act of bias into a deep structural problem that now affect every part the university administrations. This notable trend operates through four channels: localization of leadership position, favoritism in staff recruitment, ethnic-driven student admission and resulting to denial of merit-based principle within the university.

Localization of University Leadership

The most noticeable outcome of ethnic consideration in the university is systematic localization of leadership in executive appointment. Key positions such as vice-chancellor, registrar and bursars are occupied by selected individual from the same state or ethnic group of the university's host community. Advocated of this tendency often justify it on the ground of community peace or "ownership," but the consequence is a narrowing of the leadership talent pool. According to Adeyemi and Akinbode (2018), who noted that when leadership style is influenced by socio-cultural factors, including ethnicity for locality, often contribute to inefficiencies in service operations and institution may lose their worldwide reputation. The idea of localizing weakens academic leadership based on ethnic considerations may prioritize political loyalty over institutional modernization (Jacob 2013)

Insularity of staff Recruitment and Promotion

Staff recruitment and promotion are key component of university administration, as they determine the effectiveness of academic and non- academic staff personnel. When the

administrative style becomes insular, it undermines institution vitality. Ogu (2022) noted that informal ethnic networks in many universities play an important role in recruitment decisions. Consequently, applicants from other background will be discouraged when department favors cultural identity of dominant ethnic group.

In many Nigeria universities, recruitment is based on ethnic consideration where individual from the host community or the predominant ethnic group within the location are considered over other ethnic group. According to Adeyemi and Akinbode (2018), such practices in personnel recruitment and promotion process undermine fairness and discourage competent individuals from other ethnic group seeking employment opportunities in affected institutions which thereby limit diversity of workforce. The lack of ethnic diversity can hinder exchange of ideas of inter-ethnic understanding that are important to academic environment. Furthermore, such practice leads to a close recruitment culture in which employment opportunities are focused within a limited ethnic network. This outcome deprived merit, competence and may receive less attention in staffing decision leading to decline in professional ethics and also contribute to an uneven distribution of skilled personnel in the university, some institutions find it difficult to attract and retain skilled staff due to ethnic consideration

Ethnicization of Student Admissions and Resource Allocation

Ethnic consideration also influences student admission process in Nigeria universities. The policies guiding admission process such as Quota system and catchment meant to promote inclusiveness and equitable access have been manipulated in favor of applicants from ethnic dominant group and thereby reducing the level of diversity that should characterized Nigerian universities. This ethnic bias has often generated concern about fairness, equal opportunity and the effective realization of national cohesion whether it has been implemented in some university's admission policy (Obi and Obi 2020).

Although Ethnic consideration may provide opportunities for local candidates, it also hinders students' exposure to different cultures and view about life at large. Such limited interaction restricts developmental ideas and weaken the role of universities as agent of national integration and intellectual exchange. Local candidates often enjoy disproportionate admission advantage in some institution but such practice undermines the notion of Nigerian universities as one of the instruments that promote intellectual exchange among people from another ethnic group. This pattern is also seen in resource allocation where success to funding, staff appointment posting and scholarship opportunities tend to follow regional consideration rather.

This ethnic bias has often generated concern about fairness, equal opportunity and the effective realization of national cohesion whether it as been implemented in some university's admission policy. When the ethnic factor determines access, diversity declines and mediocrity gains ground. As the Journal of Commerce, Management and Tourism Studies (Ogu, 2022) explains, the absence of fairness in resource sharing fuels grievance and weakens governance legitimacy.

Decline of Meritocracy and Institutional Reputation

The most damaging effect of ethnic influence is the steady erosion of meritocracy in the sense that public institutions and any nation that is striving for development should focus more on merit and a giving little or opportunity for mediocrity. This is seen in most public higher institution when in an attempt to carry every ethnic groups along, the university in Nigeria try to replace merit with mediocrity and once merit is sacrificed for identity, institutional credibility deteriorates. Altbach (2021) argued that universities can maintained their academic quality and reputation by upholding excellence, fairness, and academic standards in all institutional processes. Meritocracy is the lifeblood of scholarship. Without it, academic standards drop, staff motivation wanes, and graduates lose competitiveness. Also, when Nigerian Universities is constituted with excessive ethnic consideration, opportunities for foreign collaboration shrinks and will not only affect the domestic reputations but isolate institutions globally.

Implications of Ethnic Considerations and University Governance on Institutional Development and National Integration

Effects on Institutional Governance and Quality

Ethnic consideration in administrative decision-making can hinder important principles of governance such as accountability, transparency, equity and fairness. For example, Governing council, often influenced by political interests which pressure university management to give attention or preference to candidates from particular ethnic group. Consequently, the administrative decision-making is guided by ethnic sentiment thereby compromising institutional needs, merit and the general need of the university. This sty of governance hinders effective decision-making and deprived the achievement of organizational goals.

Poor governance cascades into quality decline. Aina (2010) observed that ineffective governance structures, political interference, staff inefficiency, absence of result accreditation and poor academic performance constitute major challenges confronting higher education in Nigeria. When key decisions ignore competence, the university's mission—to create and disseminate knowledge—becomes secondary to ethnic accommodation. As seen in most public institutions of learning today where quacks are hired or favored over qualified passionate individuals all in the name of ethnic consideration which is the reason for the degeneration in our education system.

Human Resource Development and Organizational Culture

A university's culture shapes the behavior of its members. Where ethnic bias dominates, an atmosphere of suspicion replaces collaboration. Most institution of higher learning in Nigeria are losing their best as a result of this menace in which they seek where they will be treated with equity, fairness and rewarded based on merit and contribution rather ethnicization as staff from minority backgrounds may perceive evaluation and promotion exercises as predetermined, leading to apathy or exit. This “brain drain within” compounds the external migration of academics seeking fairness abroad.

The Social Identity Theory helps explain these patterns: when individuals classify themselves as “in-group” or “out-group,” their behavior follows predictable lines of loyalty and resistance. Over time, ethnic clustering within faculties can fragment institutional unity, making joint research and inter-departmental cooperation difficult. Furthermore, Mor barak (2017) argued that employee commitment, collaboration and productivity can be achieved through inclusive organizational culture, whereas the idea of exclusion and unfair treatment due to ethnic consideration undermines organization effectiveness and long-term development.

Threat to National Integration

Public universities were designed partly to promote national integration by bringing Nigerians from diverse backgrounds together. The growth of any nation is tied to unity and tolerance for others irrespective of tribe, ethnicity or religion which the university is anchored partly to promote but when managerial decisions restrict representation to local groups, that integrative function collapses. Students and staff lose daily opportunities to learn across cultures, languages, and religions. Taking a cue from the biblical example in Genesis 11:6 "And the LORD said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do" Instead of acting as melting pots of national identity, universities risk becoming ethnic fortresses. This transformation poses a significant problem to Nigeria's broader development aspirations making higher education losing their role as agent for national integration and instead becoming arena for ethnic division. Universities operating with excessive ethnic loyalty, the implication may affect national cohesion and undermines efforts towards building a unified and progressive institution (Osaghae 2018).

Global Competitiveness and Reputation

In global ranking era of international academics and university collaboration, institutional reputation is very important and a critical factor that determines success and competitiveness. Universities seeking for global ranking must promote honest, inclusive governance and internationalization strategies that encourage diversity, academic excellence and institutional openness (de Wit and Altbach 2021). Conversely, institutions that are tagged as being dominated by ethnic consideration may also be considered as less competitive and less attractive to international stakeholders and academics opportunities. As a result, development partners and international organizations increasingly consider ethnic standard in governance when selecting institutions for collaboration. Consequently, institutions with ethnic bias may reduce access to research grants and suitable academics opportunities. Additionally, institutions operating with ethnic-based decision-making limit diversity, thereby restricting innovation and intellectual growth. Accommodating diverse ethnic groups in academic communities bring together individuals with different perspectives and experience which is often needed in academics and research outcomes. In contrast, universities may experience limited intellectual output and global recognition when they are characterized with homogeneous environment.

Ethical and Legitimacy Concerns

From an ethical perspective, foundational values of fairness and equality are violated due to ethnic discrimination. The institutional legitimacy reminds us that organizational authority

are derived from adherence to shared norms values and expectation. In university, when administrative style favors a particular ethnic or social group, it forfeits moral legitimacy and public confidence. Suddaby, Bitektine and Haack (2017), argued that the legitimacy of institutions can be maintained when administrative actions is perceived as fair, appropriate and consistently in line with social values. Conversely, practice that are viewed as discriminatory or exclusionary weaken management trust and credibility. Loss of legitimacy may manifest in different ways, including reducing of public trust, declining support from alumni and external support. Over time, institutions find it difficult to seek for public funding due to ethnical issues. Consequently, ethnic consideration is not just a moral issue; it also affects financial reputation of institutions.

Conclusion

In Nigeria's social-political environment, ethnicity continues to play a significant role by influencing the management and decision-making of public universities and making it obvious. Ethnic consideration has become one of the major problems in Nigerian high education which have existed to an extent growing integration into university governance framework. The review of literatures emphasizes that ethnic bias affect recruitment process, appointment of leadership and admission process. Ethnic consideration in public universities have generated negative outcomes including, diminishing meritocracy, declining academic standard, reduced institutional trust, staff dissatisfaction, brain drain and weaken national integration. Ethnic bias has promoted or reinforced ethnic divisions in public universities meanwhile institutions were established to promote knowledge, diversity and national unity. Nevertheless, the problem of meritocracy, transparency, accountability and inclusiveness can be addressed through strengthening reforms guiding the university administration. Instead of ethnic affliction, Nigeria universities can improve their credibility, institutional performance and achieve their role as center for learning and national development by prioritizing fairness, competence and excellence. Deliberate reforms and effective leadership to ethnic governance serves as instrument for national development

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusion of the study, the following recommendations were made;

1. The national universities commission (NUC) and university governing council should strengthen merit-based by ensuring appointment and promotion and are conducted transparently and also ensure that selection requirement should outlined in job advertisement.
2. Advertising vacancies for key leadership position such as vice-chancellor, registrar and bursar should be opened to nationwide through radio, television, newspapers and other media platform to attract suitable and qualified candidates. This method will promote merit, competition and ensure that most competent individuals are selected from within or different region to enhance objectivity in recruitment process.
3. Universities should publish annual diversity report providing staff and students composition based on factor by region, gender and academic discipline. Such transparency and inclusiveness would discourage ethnic domination or imbalance.

4. Training programmes on diversity, inclusion, ethnic leadership and unconscious bias into management development programmes should be mandatory. such programs will promote learning, unlearning and relearning which will also help senior administrators to better understanding the impact of biases on decision making.
5. Inter-institutional mobility should be encouraged by universities through initiative such as joint appointment, staff exchange, sabbatical and secondment programmes to expose academic and administrative staff to different organizational culture and reduce institutional isolation. It gives participant opportunity to learn best practice and replicate it on their return.
6. Catchment and quota policies should be periodically reviewed by relevant government agencies and education authorities to ensure it foster equal access and inclusiveness without undermining merit standard. A hybrid model that integrates merit, equity and needed-based consideration would offer academic excellence.
7. Professional bodies and academic union such as Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) should advocate and promote awareness campaign to younger generation on the danger of ethnic bias in education and it effect on national unity. Through sustain public enlightenment, societal attitude, polices and practice can gradually change to support merit, national unity and sustainable development.

References

- Adebayo, A., & Ojo, T. (2019). Ethnicity and public sector employment in Nigeria: Implications for organisational efficiency, *Journal of Public Administration and Policy Research*, 11(3), 45–58.
- Adewole, I. (2024). *Ethnicity, political considerations bane of leadership selection in higher institutions*, New Telegraph. <https://newtelegraphng.com/politics-undermine-leadership-selection-in-nigerian-institutions-adewole/>
- Adeyemi, S., & Akinbode, F. (2018). Ethnicity and recruitment practices in Nigerian public service: Implications for efficiency and fairness, *Journal of Public Administration and Policy Research*, 10(3), 45–55.
- Aina, T. A. (2010). Beyond reforms: The politics of higher education transformation in Nigeria, *African Studies Review*, 53(1), 21–40.
- Altbach, P. G. (2021). *Global perspectives on higher education*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- De-Wit, H., & Altbach, P. G. (2021). Internationalization in higher education: Global trends and recommendations for its future, *Policy Reviews in Higher Education*, 5(1), 28–46. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322969.2020.1820898>
- Imoni, H. O. (2018). *Exploring ethnic diversity on managerial choices in Nigeria* (Doctoral dissertation, Walden University). Walden University ScholarWorks. <https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/dissertations/6048>

- Jacob, I. (2013). Ethnicity and management of tertiary institutions in Nigeria: The experience of College of Education, Oju, Benue State, *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences*, 3(4). <https://iiste.org/Journals/index.php/RHSS/article/view/11894>
- Kukah, M. (2024). *Nigerian universities promoting ethnic, religious biases—Bishop Kukah*, Daily Post Nigeria. <https://dailypost.ng/2024/04/25/nigerian-varsities-promoting-ethnic-religious-biases-bishop-kukah/>
- Lagos Local News. (2024). *Our universities promote ethnic bias—Bishop Kukah*. <https://www.lagoslocalnews.com/education/our-universities-promote-ethnic-bias-bishop-kukah/>
- Mor-Barak, M. E. (2017). *Managing diversity: Toward a globally inclusive workplace* (4th ed.), Sage Publications.
- Obi, Z. C., & Obi, C. O. (2020). *Influence of teachers' perception on implementation of federal character principle in Nigerian universities: A study of Nnamdi Azikiwe University*, [Publication details incomplete].
- Ogbonna, E., & Ukpere, W. (2015). Recruitment practices and public service performance in Africa: The role of ethnicity and favoritism, *African Journal of Business Management*, 9(8), 345–356.
- Ogu, S. (2022). Ethnicity and resource allocation management: Practical consideration, *Journal of Management and Tourism Studies*, 2(3). <https://doi.org/10.58881/jcmts.v2i3.107>
- Osaghae, E. E. (2018). *Nigeria: The challenge of diversity and national integration*. John Archers Publishers.
- Suddaby, R., Bitektine, A., & Haack, P. (2017). Legitimacy, *Academy of Management Annals*, 11(1), 451–478. <https://doi.org/10.5465/annals.2015.0101>
- Ufuoma, E., & Omekwu, C. (2022). Recruitment challenges in Nigeria's public higher education system, *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice*. <https://www.erudit.org/fr/revues/eblip/2024-v19-n4-eblip09831/1116050ar.pdf>