

Centralized Versus Decentralized Governance Structures on Academic Decision Making Speed and Crisis Resolution in Public Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Governance structure significantly influences how public tertiary institutions in Nigeria make academic decisions and respond to crises. This conceptual review article synthesizes organizational theory literature to examine the relationship between centralized vs decentralized governance structures and two key academic decision processes: decision making speed and crisis resolution capacity. Drawing on contingency theory and organizational design principles, the article develops a conceptual framework that explains how centralized structures, characterized by bureaucratic complexity and vertical communication, tend to slow routine decisions and constrain crisis response due to top-level approval bottlenecks. In contrast, decentralized structures that devolve authority to faculties and departments reduce complexity and position decision rights closer to operational problems, thereby enhancing responsiveness. The review further identifies a conceptual gap: existing organizational studies are based largely on corporate or Western contexts, with limited synthesis on how NUC regulations, ASUU dynamics, and funding volatility uniquely shape governance outcomes in Nigeria's public tertiary institutions. Based on this synthesis, practice-oriented implications are proposed for Vice-Chancellors, Deans/Heads of Department, and the National Universities Commission to balance strategic centralization with operational decentralization. The article concludes that governance reforms must account for Nigeria's regulatory and socio-political realities to improve academic decision processes. Future empirical research is recommended to test the proposed framework.

Keywords: Governance structure; centralization; decentralization; academic decision processes; public tertiary institutions; Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Tertiary institutions function as complex highly professional bureaucracies that constantly battle the friction between centralized control and decentralized autonomy. In higher education this tension manifest as central administration made up of Vice Chancellors/ Provosts/ Rectors and Governing Councils managing institutional standards, funding, and legal compliance, while decentralized units (Faculties, Departments, Academic Boards/ Senates) demand autonomy over curriculum, research and internal grading.

Historically, the global shift toward ' New Public Management ' transformed universities from autonomous collegial spaces into corporate structures where central administrators retain power to ensure financial and regulatory compliance (Mok,2021). This top down authority ensures uniform policy enforcement and alignment with strategic goals, though it frequently reduces localized agility and slows administrative responsiveness (Lawrence &Lorsch, 2020) .

In developing countries like Nigeria, this dynamic is amplified by federal centralized regulatory bodies, such as the National Universities Commission (N U C) (NUC), 2022.

This external centralization often forces Universities to mirror the autocratic top heavy structural ecosystem of the broader political ecology (Jaja, 2012) . Internally, while academic departments require decentralized

authority and participatory decision making to foster innovation, they remain heavily reliant on centralized management for resource allocation and systemic enforcement (Sylvester, 2024).

This structural friction directly creates operational bottlenecks at lower management levels , making Dean and Heads of Departments holding immense operational responsibility for academic delivery to lack the decentralized authority to make swift decisions.

This conceptual review article therefore examines the relationship between centralization versus decentralization governance structures and academic decision making speed and crisis resolution capacity in public tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Specifically, the paper 1) synthesizes organizational theory to explain how each governance structure influences bureaucratic complexity and information flow, 2) develops a conceptual framework linking governance structure to decision making speed and crisis resolution, 3) identifies the conceptual gap regarding Nigeria-specific regulatory and socio-political factors such as NUC regulations and ASUU dynamics, and 4) derives practical implications for Vice-Chancellors, Deans/Heads of Department, and policymakers. By addressing this gap, the study contributes to theory by contextualizing organizational design principles within Nigerian higher education, and to practice by offering actionable insights for improving academic governance.

Research Problem

The core operational crisis in public tertiary institutions is the persistent breakdown of industrial harmony, heavily driven by staff grievances surrounding career stagnation.

While professional advancement is meant to be transparent and motivational administrative process, the structure of governance in higher institutions complicates the process. Public tertiary institutions feature a split administrative architecture with decentralized departmental and faculty committees evaluate staff performance while final approvals and ratifications are strictly controlled by centralized authorities, specifically the Provost/ Vice Chancellors office and the Governing council.

This structural divide creates an administrative bottleneck that directly fosters career stagnation through the application of implicit promotion criteria. This implicit promotion criteria frequently manifest as: strategic delays in counting external assessment reports. Political patronage, systemic nepotism, praise singing, bootlicking and alignment with executive friendly factions.

Consequently meritorious academic and non academic staff find their career progression halted arbitrarily, resulting in widespread prolonged career stagnation, inflicting severe operational damage on public tertiary institutions through crippled academic decision speed and escalation of staff crisis, making public tertiary institutions remain trapped in a cycle of protracted industrial warfare and administrative paralysis.

Research Objectives

The main objective of the study is to analyze centralization versus decentralization governance structures on academic decision speed and crisis resolution in public tertiary institutions with a focus on career stagnation via implicit promotion criteria.

The specific objectives are analyze:

How centralized final approvals enable the use of implicit promotion criteria in public tertiary institutions.

How the concentration of grievance handling power at the central executive level influence the escalation of staff crisis into strikes or protests.

Research Questions

How does the concentration of final approval power at the centralized governance level enable the application of implicit promotion criteria. In what ways does staff centralized control over final grievance management contribute to the escalation of staff crisis.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Governance Structure: Centralization vs Decentralization in Universities

Governance structure refers to the distribution of decision authority across levels of an organization. In higher education literature, two ideal types dominate: centralization, where authority is concentrated at the apex, and decentralization, where authority is devolved to faculties and departments.

Studies on Nigerian universities note a long-standing trend toward “intensified centralization and autocracy of decision-making” driven by federal oversight and military-era administrative models. This centralism limits university autonomy in budgeting, recruitment, and partnerships, even as NUC regulates quality across institutions. Critics argue that such centralized control restricts innovation at the university level.

In contrast, decentralization scholarship emphasizes democratic and participatory decision-making. A decentralized structure in Nigeria typically includes academic departments with heads responsible for curriculum and resources, faculty boards for academic matters, and departmental heads for day-to-day administration. Proponents contend that devolving authority improves responsiveness because decisions are made closer to the operational problem.

Academic Decision Making Speed and Bureaucratic Complexity

Decision making speed is influenced by the number of approval layers and degree of formalization. Public institutions, especially in education, “struggle more with slow decision making processes due to bureaucratic constraints”. Evidence from West Africa shows that “excessive formalization and multilayered approval processes create decision bottlenecks”.

Within Nigerian universities, promotion processes illustrate this delay. ASUU has repeatedly cited “promotion arrears dating back to 2017” and delays in approval from the Minister of Finance as unresolved issues. The union also notes that “bureaucratic sabotage” and the failure to inaugurate monitoring committees contribute to implementation delays. Organizational theory supports this: centralized authority increases bureaucratic complexity and vertical communication, which slows routine decisions.

Fast decision-makers, by contrast, optimize information processing rather than skip analysis. Shared governance frameworks address this by using RACI models to clarify who is responsible, accountable, consulted, and informed, thereby avoiding delays.

Crisis Resolution Capacity and Centralized Grievance Management

Crisis in Nigerian public universities often stems from poor dialogue and exclusion from decision-making. Omodan found that “lack of modern communication, poor dialogue mechanisms, staff, non-involvement in decision-making were major propellers of staff-management dichotomies.” The result is escalation to strikes and institutional shutdowns. ASUU’s current dispute centers on withheld salaries, promotion arrears, and non-implementation of agreements signed in December 2025. The union argues that “government actions had continued to stall progress” and that partial payments are “confidence-boosting exercises rather than solutions”. This reflects a pattern where central control of grievance resolution keeps problems at the federal level rather than resolving them locally.

Contingency theory suggests turbulent environments require fast local response. Where authority is centralized, “reform processes are dominated by a closed group of top leaders” who control tightly. Where it is horizontal or decentralized, actors have operational autonomy and the system is more self-regulating.

Nigeria-Specific Structural Challenges: NUC, ASUU, and Funding

Nigeria’s governance context is distinct because of regulatory and labor dynamics. The NUC provides standardization but has been criticized for “centralized control” that limits institutional flexibility. Funding volatility also matters: universities rely heavily on government sources, making them “vulnerable to policy

and priority swings”. Political interference in appointments further undermines autonomy. ASUU has documented repeated cycles of “negotiations, strikes, and half-hearted interventions” since 2017, with multiple renegotiation committees producing unsigned drafts. Scholars argue that the crisis requires “deliberate, structural solutions” such as university autonomy and stable indexed funding, not temporary fixes. Recommended reforms include strengthening “institutional autonomy in budgeting, recruitment, and partnerships” while holding universities accountable. 5. Conceptual Gap

While organizational design literature is extensive globally, few studies synthesize how centralization vs decentralization specifically affects academic decision speed and crisis resolution within Nigeria’s NUC-ASUU-funding ecology. Most empirical work focuses on corporate firms or Western universities. This review addresses that gap by linking governance structure to two measurable academic outcomes: decision making speed and crisis resolution capacity.

Conceptual framework linking governance structure to academic decision processes in public tertiary institutions. Source: Author’s synthesis, 2026. Adapted from Daft (2021) and Mintzberg (1979).

Figure 1 Conceptual Framework: Governance Structure and Academic Decision Processes

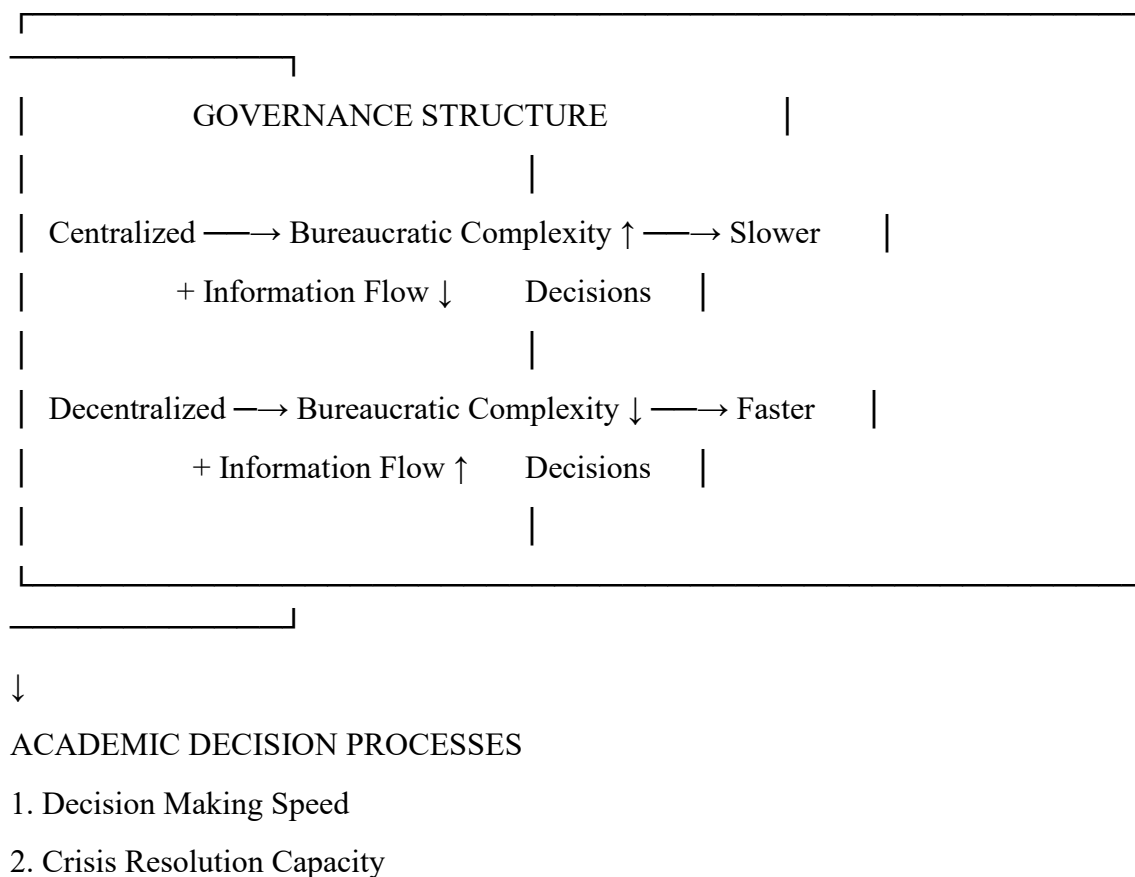


Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework linking governance structure to academic decision processes in public tertiary institutions in Nigeria. The framework is grounded in contingency theory, which posits that organizational effectiveness depends on aligning structure with environmental demands.

Centralized governance structures are characterized by high bureaucratic complexity, vertical information flow, and concentration of approval authority at the apex, such as Senate, Council, or the Vice-Chancellor’s office. Empirical evidence from Nigeria shows a trend toward “intensified centralization and autocracy of decision-making” driven by federal oversight and historical military administrative models. This structure limits institutional autonomy and creates approval bottlenecks in routine academic decisions. Oyewole argues that centralized control restricts university autonomy in budgeting, recruitment, and partnerships, even as the National Universities Commission regulates quality across institutions. In practice, this

manifests as delays in promotion processing and the application of “implicit promotion criteria” when only top management can grant final approval.

Decentralized governance structures devolve decision rights to faculties, departments, and HODs, reducing the distance between authority and the point of problem occurrence. Decentralized management in Nigerian universities includes departmental heads responsible for curriculum, resources, and day-to-day administration, as well as faculty boards for academic quality. Proponents note that decentralization promotes democratic and participatory decision-making, which enables faster local response to academic and administrative issues.

Crisis resolution capacity is also shaped by this structural design. Omodan’s study of Nigerian universities found that “lack of modern communication, poor dialogue mechanisms, and students’ non-involvement in decision-making were major propellers of student-management dichotomies” that escalate into institutional crises. Similarly, ASUU’s repeated industrial actions stem from centralized grievance control at the federal level, where unresolved promotion arrears and salary issues remain stalled due to “bureaucratic sabotage”. When grievance management is centralized, problems that could be contained at departmental level escalate to university-wide or national strikes.

Therefore, the framework proposes two relationships: 1) Centralized governance increases bureaucratic complexity and vertical communication, which reduces decision making speed and weakens crisis resolution capacity; and 2) Decentralized governance reduces complexity and positions authority closer to operational problems, thereby improving both decision speed and crisis response. The framework is contextualized within Nigeria’s regulatory environment, including NUC guidelines, ASUU dynamics, and funding volatility, which moderate how governance structures operate in practice.

METHODOLOGY

This article adopts a conceptual review design following Webster and Watson’s guidelines for theory-building reviews. The methodology involves systematic identification and synthesis of peer-reviewed literature on organizational design, governance structures, and higher education administration. Relevant sources were selected from Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar using keywords such as “centralization,” “decentralization,” “academic decision making,” and “crisis management in universities.”

Analytical Approach

A thematic synthesis was conducted on the research questions to extract recurring patterns related to power concentration, decision delays, and crisis escalation. Extracted themes were mapped onto contingency theory and organizational design principles to develop the conceptual framework and propositions.

Thematic Analysis

A thematic synthesis of the research questions revealed three recurring themes: 1, power concentration and opacity in centralized approval systems, 2, delays in academic career progression due to bureaucratic complexity, and 3, escalation of staff crises from centralized grievance management. These themes were mapped onto the conceptual framework to explain how governance structure influences decision making speed and crisis resolution capacity in Nigeria’s public tertiary institutions.

Propositions

Based on the conceptual framework and thematic analysis, three propositions are advanced for future empirical testing:

P1: The higher the concentration of final approval power for academic staff promotion at the centralized governance level, the greater the likelihood of implicit promotion criteria being applied, and the slower the decision making speed in public tertiary institutions.

P2: The greater the extent of staff centralized control over final grievance management, the higher the likelihood of staff crises escalating from departmental level to institutional level in public tertiary institutions.

P3: Decentralization of academic decision authority to faculties and departments moderates the relationship between governance structure and crisis resolution capacity, such that higher decentralization improves crisis resolution speed in public tertiary institutions.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The conceptual synthesis suggests that governance structure directly shapes how quickly public tertiary institutions in Nigeria make academic decisions and resolve crises. To improve these processes, institutional leaders and regulators must balance control with flexibility. Three practice-oriented implications emerge from the review:

For Vice-Chancellors and Top Management. VCs should adopt a “strategic centralization with operational decentralization” model. Central authority should be retained for strategic decisions such as policy formulation, NUC accreditation compliance, and budget allocation to maintain institutional coherence and regulatory alignment. However, operational academic decisions including departmental timetabling, minor curriculum revisions, and routine staff matters should be devolved to faculties and departments. This hybrid approach reduces approval bottlenecks at the center while preserving strategic oversight, allowing VCs to focus managerial attention on crisis containment rather than transactional approvals (Daft, 2021; Mintzberg, 1979).

For Deans and Heads of Department. The effectiveness of decentralized governance is contingent on managerial capacity at the departmental level. Therefore, Deans and HODs must strengthen competencies in academic administration, conflict resolution, and data-informed decision making. Institutions should invest in targeted training and ICT-based academic management systems that enable real-time reporting and faster information flow. When HODs possess the authority and skills to resolve issues such as student appeals or exam malpractice locally, problems are addressed at source before escalating to institutional crises, thereby enhancing overall crisis resolution capacity (Robbins & Coulter, 2019).

For the National Universities Commission and Policymakers. NUC should reform approval processes to minimize bureaucratic red tape without compromising academic standards. A shift from “approval before implementation” to “report after implementation” for low-risk academic decisions, such as minor curriculum adjustments, can significantly reduce decision cycles from months to weeks. This regulatory flexibility recognizes that decentralized decision rights improve decision making speed and crisis responsiveness in turbulent environments, while NUC maintains quality assurance through post-implementation monitoring and periodic audits rather than pre-approval of all academic actions (Hage, 1980; Saint et al., 2003).

CONCLUSION

The thematic analysis of this conceptual review reveals that governance structure is a critical determinant of academic decision processes in Nigeria’s public tertiary institutions. Two recurring themes emerged: 1) concentration of approval power at centralized levels creates opacity through implicit promotion criteria, and 2) centralized control of grievance management removes decision rights from the operational level, leading to escalation of staff crises. Both themes point to the distance between decision authority and problem location. Centralized governance increases bureaucratic complexity, which slows routine decisions and weakens crisis response. Conversely, decentralization positions authority closer to faculties and departments, enabling transparency and faster containment. Given Nigeria’s volatile higher education environment shaped by NUC regulations, funding volatility, and ASUU dynamics, institutions that over-rely on centralization risk chronic delays and recurring crises. This review concludes that effective academic governance requires a deliberate balance: strategic centralization for policy uniformity and accountability, combined with operational decentralization for speed and responsiveness.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For Vice-Chancellors and University Management

Adopt a contingency-based hybrid governance model. Retain centralized control for strategic decisions such as budget approval and statutory appointments. Devolve operational academic decisions including routine promotions below Professorial level and initial grievance mediation to faculties and departments.

For Deans and Heads of Department

Develop transparent, documented promotion and grievance handling guidelines at departmental level. Empower HODs with first-response authority and clear escalation timelines to prevent minor conflicts from becoming institutional crises.

For the National Universities Commission

Revise governance benchmarks to recognize differential authority levels. NUC guidelines should encourage functional decentralization mechanisms that improve decision making speed and crisis response.

For Future Research

The three propositions advanced should be empirically tested using quantitative surveys or qualitative case studies across universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education in Nigeria.

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