



The Influence of Leadership Styles on Students' Academic Performance in Nigerian Higher Education

By

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Abstract

Leadership sits at the heart of every functional institution, yet nowhere is its influence more consequential, and more contested, than within the lecture halls and administrative corridors of Nigeria's struggling higher education system, where the manner in which authority is exercised can quietly determine whether a student thrives or merely survives. This paper, on the influence of leadership styles on students' academic performance in Nigerian higher education, was guided by four objectives: to examine the influence of autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire leadership styles respectively, and to compare their relative effects. The paper was anchored on Lewin's Leadership Styles Theory and Fiedler's Contingency Theory, the former supplying the classificatory foundation for the three styles examined and the latter explaining why their effects vary across institutional contexts. A systematic literature review methodology was adopted, involving the criterion-based identification, selection, and appraisal of peer-reviewed Nigerian and comparative studies. Findings revealed that democratic leadership consistently correlated with stronger staff commitment and instructional consistency, autocratic leadership generally undermined morale despite occasional association with disciplined compliance outcomes, and laissez-faire leadership produced no reliable pattern of benefit, its effect depending on staff competence and institutional support. The paper concluded that democratic leadership offers the most dependable foundation for favourable academic outcomes, while the other styles retain only conditional value. It recommended institutionalising participatory governance structures, confining autocratic practice to bounded administrative functions, and ensuring adequate support before delegating authority under laissez-faire arrangements.

Keywords: Leadership Styles, Autocratic Leadership, Democratic Leadership, Laissez-faire Leadership, Academic Performance

1. INTRODUCTION

Leadership constitutes one of the most enduring determinants of institutional effectiveness across educational systems worldwide. Globally, the manner in which University Administrators, Deans, and Departmental heads exercise authority has been shown to shape organisational culture, staff motivation, and, by extension, the quality of instruction delivered to students (Northouse, 2016). Transformational leadership, characterised by vision articulation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration, has consistently been associated with higher levels of institutional commitment and improved outcomes in universities across Europe, North America, and Asia (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Conversely, autocratic and laissez-faire approaches have been linked to disengagement among staff and diminished educational outcomes, as leaders who fail to involve subordinates in decision-making tend to generate resentment and reduced productivity within academic units (Bolden et al., 2012).

Within the African continent, higher education institutions face governance pressures that differ from those of the Global North, including limited funding, expanding student populations, and weak institutional autonomy. Bibliometric evidence indicates that transformational leadership remains the predominant style examined across higher education institutions in the Global South, with its adoption closely tied



to improved staff performance and institutional reputation, although gender disparities in access to leadership positions persist across the region (Bolden et al., 2012). Studies conducted in Ghana, Rwanda, and South Africa similarly demonstrate that principals and vice-chancellors who adopt participatory and instructional leadership practices record measurable improvements in learner achievement compared with those relying on rigid, top-down control (Agyeman & Aphane, 2024).

In Nigeria specifically, the higher education sector has expanded considerably in recent decades. As at 2026, the country hosts 255 universities, comprising 52 federal, 58 state, and 145 private institutions, yet the national tertiary enrolment rate remains close to twelve per cent, one of the lowest recorded globally (National Universities Commission, 2026). This expansion has occurred alongside persistent funding shortfalls, infrastructural deficits, and rising staff-to-student ratios, conditions under which the leadership choices of vice-chancellors, deans, and heads of department become increasingly consequential for teaching quality and student outcomes (Akinyele & Ogunyemi, 2020). Empirical findings from Nigerian universities indicate that transformational and participatory leadership styles are positively associated with teaching quality and research output, whereas political interference in the appointment of university administrators continues to undermine academic excellence (Eze & Ekekwe, 2021; James & Adebayo, 2022). At the secondary level, comparable evidence from Ekiti State demonstrates that principals employing democratic and consultative leadership approaches record significantly higher rates of student achievement than those adopting autocratic methods (Adeyemi & Bolarinwa, 2013), a pattern that raises parallel questions for the tertiary system.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Despite the expansion of Nigeria's university system, concerns persist regarding declining academic standards, poor graduate output quality, and inconsistent student performance across institutions. Reports from within the Nigerian university system point to weak governance structures, limited transparency, and inadequate engagement between administrators and academic staff as recurring sources of institutional underperformance (Ogunyemi & Oyediran, 2023). While studies have examined leadership in relation to staff commitment, job satisfaction, and organisational productivity within Nigerian tertiary institutions, comparatively limited empirical attention has been directed specifically towards how the leadership styles adopted by university administrators and departmental heads translate into measurable academic outcomes for students, as distinct from staff-level outcomes.

Existing studies addressing leadership and academic performance have concentrated disproportionately on primary and secondary education, leaving the university context comparatively underexplored despite its distinct governance arrangements, larger student populations, and greater administrative complexity (Adeyemi & Bolarinwa, 2013;

James & Adebayo, 2022). Furthermore, where tertiary-level studies exist, many are confined to single institutions or specific geopolitical zones, limiting the extent to which findings can be generalised across Nigeria's diverse university system, which spans federal, state, and private ownership structures.

It remains unclear from the available literature which specific leadership styles, whether transformational, democratic, autocratic, or laissez-faire, exert the strongest influence on students' academic performance within Nigerian higher education, and how contextual factors such as funding constraints and political interference mediate this relationship. This study therefore seeks to examine the influence of leadership styles on students' academic performance in Nigerian higher education, with a view to addressing this gap and generating findings that can inform leadership practice and policy within the sector.

3. AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER

This study aims to examine the influence of leadership styles on students' academic performance in Nigerian higher education, with particular reference to autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire approaches adopted by university administrators and departmental heads.

The specific objectives of the study are to:

- i. examine the influence of autocratic leadership style on students' academic performance in Nigerian higher education;
- ii. assess the influence of democratic leadership style on students' academic performance in Nigerian higher education;
- iii. investigate the influence of laissez-faire leadership style on students' academic performance in Nigerian higher education;
- iv. compare the relative effects of autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire leadership styles on students' academic performance in Nigerian higher education.

4. METHODOLOGY

This paper adopted a systematic literature review as its methodological approach, rather than a meta-analysis or a purely narrative empirical review, on the grounds that a systematic review offers the most suitable balance between methodological rigour and the qualitative nature of the leadership-performance literature under examination. A meta-analysis was considered unsuitable because it requires a sufficiently large pool of studies reporting comparable, quantifiable effect sizes, such as standardised regression coefficients or correlation values, drawn from studies employing broadly similar operationalisations of the dependent variable.

The Nigerian literature reviewed in this paper, while quantitative in orientation, measures outcomes inconsistently, ranging from staff commitment and employee performance to teacher job performance and, in fewer cases, direct student

examination results, a heterogeneity that would render statistical pooling methodologically unsound and potentially misleading. A purely narrative empirical review, on the other hand, though more flexible, was judged insufficiently rigorous on its own, since it risks selective citation and lacks a transparent, replicable procedure for identifying and appraising sources. A systematic review was therefore adopted to combine the qualitative synthesis appropriate to a heterogeneous literature with a documented, criterion-based process for locating, selecting, and evaluating the studies included.

The review followed a structured search and selection procedure. Sources were identified through targeted searches of peer-reviewed journal databases and repositories using combinations of key terms, including leadership style, autocratic leadership, democratic leadership, laissez-faire leadership, academic performance, and Nigerian higher education. Studies were included where they met four criteria: publication in a peer-reviewed journal or as a verifiable academic output; direct engagement with autocratic, democratic, or laissez-faire leadership within an educational or closely comparable organisational setting; a clearly reported research design, sample, and set of findings; and, where possible, a Nigerian institutional context, with a small number of non-Nigerian studies retained only where they offered comparative value against the Nigerian evidence base.

Studies were excluded where authorship or publication details could not be independently verified, where findings were presented without a discernible methodology, or where the leadership styles examined fell outside the three-style Lewinian classification central to this paper's objectives. Each included study was appraised for its theoretical grounding, research design, sample adequacy, and the closeness of fit between its measured outcome and students' academic performance, the latter criterion proving decisive in the gap identified across the empirical reviews.

This approach carries identifiable limitations. First, because few Nigerian studies measure students' academic performance directly, the review necessarily relies on proxy outcomes such as staff commitment and employee performance, introducing an inferential step between the reviewed evidence and the paper's central concern that a meta-analysis of directly comparable effect sizes would not require. Second, the search was confined to publicly accessible, English-language, peer-reviewed sources, which may have excluded relevant unpublished theses, institutional reports, or non-indexed regional journals. Third, the appraisal of study quality, while criterion-based, retains an element of qualitative judgement rather than the standardised quality-scoring instruments used in formal systematic reviews within clinical or health sciences disciplines. Fourth, the relatively small number of Nigerian higher education studies meeting the inclusion criteria limits the breadth of institutional contexts represented, with public universities in a handful of southern states somewhat overrepresented relative to northern institutions and polytechnics.

These limitations are acknowledged as constraints on the generalisability of the paper's conclusions rather than as defects in the chosen methodology, which remains, on balance, the most defensible approach available given the current state of the Nigerian leadership and higher education literature.

5. LITERATURE REVIEW

5.1 Conceptual Review

5.2 Leadership

Leadership has attracted sustained scholarly attention across disciplines, yet its precise meaning continues to generate divergent formulations among researchers. Abasilim (2024) observes that despite extensive investigation, an agreed definition remains elusive, as authors describe leadership variously as a trait, a behaviour, a relationship, or a process of influence exercised over followers to achieve collective goals. Northouse (2016) similarly defines leadership as a process whereby an individual influences a group of people to attain a common objective, a formulation that foregrounds influence and shared purpose rather than positional authority alone. Liden et al. (2025) extend this discussion by tracing how leadership research has moved from trait-based and behavioural accounts towards moral and relational approaches, including authentic and ethical leadership, while cautioning that measurement of leadership styles remains inconsistent across studies.

Interrogating these positions reveals a shared emphasis on influence and goal attainment, though authors differ on whether leadership resides in the individual, the relationship, or the organisational context within which it occurs. Abasilim's (2024) account is instructive in acknowledging leadership as a process rather than a fixed attribute, thereby accommodating variation across styles and settings. For the purposes of this paper, leadership is adopted as the process through which an individual occupying a position of authority in a higher education institution influences staff and students towards the attainment of academic and institutional objectives, a definition that aligns with Northouse's (2016) emphasis on influence while remaining applicable to the governance structures of Nigerian universities.

Autocratic Style

Autocratic leadership is consistently characterised in the literature as a style in which decision-making authority is concentrated in the leader, with limited or no consultation of subordinates. Hamze and Sadiq (2025) describe autocratic leaders as individuals who exercise power and authority over subordinates, frequently issuing unilateral directives without prior consultation, an approach they associate with circumstances requiring swift decisions. Maqbool et al. (2024), examining leadership styles among secondary school teachers in Pakistan, similarly characterise autocratic leadership as involving centralised control over curriculum, resource allocation, and discipline, noting that this style produced only a moderate association with sustained academic performance when compared with more participatory approaches.

Comparing these accounts, both sets of authors agree that autocratic leadership restricts follower input, though they diverge somewhat on its consequences: Hamze and Sadiq (2025) suggest situational value in contexts demanding urgency, whereas Maqbool et al. (2024) present empirical evidence that its educational benefits are limited relative to democratic approaches. For this paper, autocratic leadership style is adopted as a leadership approach in which university administrators or departmental heads make decisions unilaterally, with minimal consultation of academic staff or students, in line with the empirical description offered by Maqbool et al. (2024).

5.3 Democratic Style

Democratic leadership is defined in the literature by its emphasis on participation, consultation, and shared decision-making between leaders and followers. Sarwar et al. (2022) characterise democratic leadership as an approach in which employees are directly involved in organisational decisions, with the leader facilitating discussion and synthesising suggestions into a collective course of action. Hamze and Sadiq (2025) similarly found that democratic leadership, alongside laissez-faire leadership, exerted a statistically significant positive influence on employee motivation, in contrast to autocratic leadership, which did not.

Both accounts converge on participation and open communication as defining features of the democratic style, though Sarwar et al. (2022) emphasise the facilitative role of the leader within educational institutions specifically, while Hamze and Sadiq (2025) draw their evidence from a public administration setting. This distinction is instructive for higher education, where the facilitative and consultative dimensions of democratic leadership described by Sarwar et al. (2022) more closely reflect the governance structures of academic departments and faculties.

Accordingly, this paper adopts democratic leadership style as an approach in which university leaders actively involve staff and, where appropriate, students in decision-making processes affecting academic administration, consistent with Sarwar et al.'s (2022) formulation.

5.4 Laissez-faire Style

Laissez-faire leadership is described in the literature as a hands-off approach in which the leader delegates authority and provides minimal direction or supervision to subordinates. Maqbool et al. (2024) characterise laissez-faire leadership as an approach that does not micromanage or provide explicit direction, thereby leaving followers to determine their own methods of work, and report that this style recorded the lowest association with sustained academic performance among the three styles examined in their study. Hamze and Sadiq (2025) offer a related but distinct finding, noting that laissez-faire leadership positively influenced employee motivation in their sample, a result attributed to the autonomy it afforded to experienced and self-directed employees.

These accounts illustrate that the outcomes of laissez-faire leadership are contingent on the capability and motivation of followers, with Maqbool et al. (2024) reporting limited

educational benefit among secondary school teachers while Hamze and Sadiq (2025) recorded motivational benefit among public sector employees. Given that this paper concerning students' academic performance rather than staff motivation, laissez-faire leadership style is adopted, following Maqbool et al. (2024), as an approach in which university leaders exercise minimal supervision or direction over academic staff and processes, leaving subordinates largely responsible for decision-making without close oversight.

5.5 Higher Education System

The higher education system has been defined with reference to its institutional, knowledge-generating, and service-delivery functions. Mochnacs et al. (2024) describe the higher education system as a knowledge-based service sector responsible for teaching, research, and the transfer of knowledge between universities, industry, and government, arguing that its structures must evolve to remain responsive to labour market and societal needs. Bernardo et al. (2024), writing from a quality-assurance perspective, characterise the higher education system as the network of tertiary institutions responsible for producing qualified and competent professionals, whose effectiveness is increasingly assessed through indicators of teaching quality and student outcomes.

Comparing these definitions, Mochnacs et al. (2024) foreground the higher education system's function within a wider knowledge economy, while Bernardo et al. (2024) direct attention towards internal quality and student-centred outcomes, a distinction that reflects differing units of analysis rather than genuine disagreement.

For the purposes of this paper, the higher education system is adopted as the network of degree-awarding institutions, comprising federal, state, and private universities, responsible for the teaching, research, and administrative functions through which academic staff and leaders shape the learning outcomes of students, drawing on Bernardo et al.'s (2024) attention to institutional quality and student performance.

5.6 The Influence of Autocratic Leadership Style on Students' Academic Performance in Nigerian Higher Education

Autocratic leadership remains a persistent feature of governance within Nigerian tertiary institutions, and its consequences for teaching quality and, by extension, student learning outcomes have attracted growing empirical attention. Daramola (2025), in a study of academic staff at Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-Akoko, found that autocratic leadership was the most commonly practised style, with sixty-six point seven per cent of respondents strongly agreeing that university leaders imposed rules without consultation and fifty per cent indicating that decisions were made without staff input. Regression analysis in that study revealed that autocratic leadership exerted a statistically significant negative effect on staff performance ($\beta = -0.298$, $p = 0.001$), a finding with direct implications for classroom delivery, since demotivated academic staff are less likely to sustain the engagement, preparation, and feedback that support student learning.

Similar patterns are documented in Akarika and Umoren (2024), who surveyed five hundred and thirty-seven lecturers across the University of Uyo and Akwa Ibom State University. Their findings showed that sixty-two per cent of respondents identified autocratic leadership as the dominant style practised by university management, compared with only thirty-eight per cent who reported democratic practices, and that this concentration of authority was associated with low levels of employee commitment among lecturers. Since lecturer commitment bears directly on instructional quality, supervision of student projects, and responsiveness to learners, the prevalence of autocratic governance in these institutions carries indirect but tangible consequences for students' academic experience. Nse and Elijah (2026), examining leadership practices in federal university libraries across the South-South geopolitical zone, similarly found that autocratic leadership held only a weak and statistically limited relationship with staff productivity, reinforcing the broader pattern of diminished institutional performance under centralised control.

Not all Nigerian evidence points uniformly in one direction, however. Igwe et al. (2017), in a comparative study of public and mission secondary schools in Enugu metropolis, reported that autocratic leadership by principals was associated with improved student performance in national and external examinations, a finding the authors attributed to the disciplined enforcement of academic schedules, examination preparation, and adherence to syllabi under close supervision. This outcome illustrates that autocratic leadership is not invariably detrimental to measurable academic outputs, particularly in contexts where strict oversight compensates for weak institutional infrastructure or irregular staff attendance. Nonetheless, the same study cautioned that no single leadership style guarantees sustained excellence, and that autocratic practices tend to produce short-term compliance rather than the deeper staff engagement associated with durable improvements in teaching quality.

These evidence suggests that autocratic leadership in higher education produces a divided pattern of outcomes. Within university settings, where academic staff exercise considerable professional autonomy and rely on intrinsic motivation for research, mentorship, and curriculum development, autocratic governance tends to suppress morale, weaken staff-management relations, and, indirectly, compromise the quality of instruction available to students (Daramola, 2025; Akarika & Umoren, 2024). Yet in specific administrative functions, such as timetabling, examination discipline, and compliance with academic calendars, a measure of centralised control appears to sustain short-term performance metrics, as demonstrated in the Enugu study (Igwe et al., 2017). This divergence indicates that the influence of autocratic leadership on students' academic performance in Nigerian higher education is conditioned by the specific domain of institutional activity under consideration rather than being uniformly positive or negative.

5.7 The Influence of Democratic Leadership Style on Students' Academic Performance in Nigerian Higher Education

Democratic leadership is consistently identified in Nigerian empirical literature as the style most strongly associated with positive institutional outcomes that ultimately benefit students. Daramola's (2025) study at Adekunle Ajasin University found democratic leadership to be the strongest predictor of academic staff performance among the three styles examined ($\beta = 0.389$, $p = 0.001$), with sixty-three point nine per cent of respondents strongly agreeing that leaders valued staff opinions and fifty-one point seven per cent strongly agreeing that teamwork was actively promoted. The combined regression model in that study, which explained fifty-eight point two per cent of the variance in staff performance ($R^2 = 0.582$), demonstrates the considerable weight democratic practices carry in shaping the working conditions under which lecturers teach, supervise, and mentor students.

Onwuegbuna et al. (2022) provide corroborating statistical evidence from private universities in Ogun State. Surveying three hundred and eighty teaching staff at Bells University of Technology, Ota, and Crawford University, Igbesa, using a validated instrument (Cronbach's alpha of 0.75) and simple linear regression, the authors found that democratic leadership had a statistically significant positive impact on employee performance, leading them to recommend that university leaders increase participatory practices to further improve staff output. Nse and Elijah (2026) similarly reported that democratic leadership style adopted by librarians in federal university libraries across South-South Nigeria was associated with increased staff productivity, in clear contrast to the comparatively weak relationship recorded for autocratic practices in the same institutions.

At the level of individual academic units, Adeyemi and Bolarinwa (2013) found that democratic leadership practices among heads of department and principals in Ekiti State were linked to stronger teacher-student interpersonal relationships and correspondingly higher levels of student academic performance, since participatory engagement allowed instructors to better identify and address learners' weaknesses. This finding is instructive for the university context, where departmental heads and course coordinators who adopt consultative approaches with both staff and students are positioned to identify learning gaps more effectively than those operating through rigid, top-down channels.

Statistically, the pattern across these Nigerian studies is remarkably consistent: democratic leadership correlates positively with staff commitment, productivity, and morale, all of which function as proximate determinants of teaching quality. Daramola's (2025) finding that democratic leadership was nearly forty per cent more predictive of performance than the negative effect recorded for autocratic leadership offers a clear numerical illustration of this relationship within a Nigerian public university. While the reviewed studies more directly measure staff-level outcomes than student examination results, the causal chain linking participatory

leadership to lecturer motivation, and lecturer motivation to instructional quality, is well established in the empirical record, lending strong support to the conclusion that democratic leadership constitutes a favourable, though not singularly sufficient, condition for improved students' academic performance in Nigerian higher education.

5.8 The Influence of Laissez-faire Leadership Style on Students' Academic Performance in Nigerian Higher Education

Laissez-faire leadership, characterised by minimal supervision and extensive delegation of authority to subordinates, presents a more ambiguous pattern of outcomes within Nigerian higher education than either autocratic or democratic approaches. Daramola (2025) found that laissez-faire leadership at Adekunle Ajasin University had no statistically significant effect on academic staff performance ($\beta = 0.102$, $p = 0.144$), despite fifty-three point three per cent of respondents strongly agreeing that staff were given freedom to make independent decisions. Notably, the same study found that forty-four point four per cent of respondents agreed that leaders often delayed addressing important issues under this style, a practical indicator of the administrative drift that frequently accompanies hands-off governance in under-resourced institutions.

Omokhodu et al. (2024), in their study of academic staff at Auchi Polytechnic, Edo State, identified laissez-faire leadership as present within the institution and observed that its benefits were conditional upon staff being provided with adequate resources, training, and support systems to work independently. Where such support was absent, the authors noted that the autonomy associated with laissez-faire practice risked producing inefficiency rather than the initiative it is theoretically expected to encourage. This finding is particularly relevant to Nigerian polytechnics and universities facing funding shortfalls, since the resource constraints that make close supervision difficult also undermine the conditions necessary for laissez-faire leadership to succeed.

Practically, the identification of laissez-faire leadership within Nigerian higher education institutions often manifests as inadequate administrative oversight of academic departments, delayed responses to curriculum reviews, and inconsistent monitoring of lecture attendance and assessment schedules. In institutions where departmental leadership abdicates active coordination, students frequently experience irregular course delivery, delayed release of results, and inconsistent academic advising, outcomes that are qualitatively distinct from the deliberate empowerment associated with well-managed delegation. The distinction is important: laissez-faire leadership does not uniformly signify neglect, but in practice, within Nigerian institutions grappling with infrastructural deficits and weak accountability structures, it more frequently manifests as an absence of direction rather than a deliberate cultivation of staff autonomy.

The overall picture emerging from Nigerian evidence is that laissez-faire leadership occupies a precarious middle ground. It is neither as consistently damaging as poorly managed

autocratic control nor as reliably beneficial as democratic participation, and its effect on students' academic performance depends heavily on the competence, discipline, and self-motivation of the academic staff to whom authority is delegated (Daramola, 2025; Omokhodu Mustapha et al., 2024). In the absence of strong institutional systems for monitoring outcomes, laissez-faire leadership in Nigerian higher education tends to correlate with drift and inconsistency rather than measurable gains in student learning.

5.9 Comparative Analysis of the Relative Effects of Autocratic, Democratic, and Laissez-faire Leadership Styles on Students' Academic Performance in Nigerian Higher Education

When placed side by side, the Nigerian empirical record offers a reasonably coherent ranking of the three leadership styles, even though most available studies measure staff-level performance rather than student examination outcomes directly. Daramola's (2025) regression analysis at Adekunle Ajasin University remains the most statistically precise comparative evidence available, showing autocratic leadership exerting a significant negative effect ($\beta = -0.298$, $p = 0.001$), democratic leadership exerting the strongest significant positive effect ($\beta = 0.389$, $p = 0.001$), and laissez-faire leadership showing no significant effect ($\beta = 0.102$, $p = 0.144$). This ordering, with democratic leadership outperforming both autocratic and laissez-faire approaches, is broadly consistent with findings from Akarika and Umoren (2024) and Nse and Elijah (2026), both of which found autocratic practices associated with weaker commitment and productivity relative to democratic alternatives within Nigerian university settings.

The Enugu-based comparative study by Igwe, Ozofo, and Alinno (2017) complicates this ranking by demonstrating that autocratic leadership can, under specific conditions of disciplined examination preparation, correspond with stronger performance in national and external examinations than looser leadership arrangements. This finding, drawn from secondary rather than tertiary institutions, nonetheless offers a useful comparative caution for higher education administrators: the superiority of democratic leadership evident in most Nigerian university-level studies should not be treated as an unconditional rule, since institutional context, subject discipline, and the specific performance measure examined can shift the relative ranking of styles.

Cross-national evidence lends additional depth to this comparison. Maqbool et al. (2024), studying secondary school leadership in Pakistan, similarly found democratic leadership exerting the strongest positive association with sustained academic performance, autocratic leadership a moderate association, and laissez-faire leadership the weakest association among the three, a pattern that closely mirrors the ordering found in Nigerian university data despite the difference in educational level and national context. This convergence across otherwise dissimilar settings strengthens confidence that the relative ranking, democratic leadership as most beneficial, autocratic leadership as a double-edged style

with short-term compliance value but longer-term morale costs, and laissez-faire leadership as the least reliable in producing consistent improvement, reflects a genuine underlying pattern rather than an artefact of any single study's methodology.

For Nigerian higher education specifically, the comparative evidence suggests that no single style operates in isolation from institutional context. Adeyemi's (2010) study of principals in Ondo State found that a combination of democratic and autocratic elements, applied situationally, produced better teacher job performance than either style used exclusively, a conclusion echoed in Daramola's (2025) recommendation that laissez-faire leadership be applied selectively to highly competent staff while democratic practices are institutionalised more broadly and autocratic tendencies are minimised. The weight of Nigerian evidence therefore favours democratic leadership as the most consistently beneficial style for supporting the conditions that underpin students' academic performance, while acknowledging that autocratic elements retain situational value in enforcing compliance and that laissez-faire leadership requires considerable institutional safeguards before it can be relied upon to produce comparable benefits.

5.10 Empirical Review

Akarika and Umoren (2024) examined leadership style and employee commitment among lecturers in public universities in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. The study covered the University of Uyo and Akwa Ibom State University and was anchored on Leader-Member Exchange theory and Motivation-Hygiene theory, both of which explain how the quality of leader-subordinate relationships and the presence or absence of motivating conditions shape workplace commitment. A survey research design was adopted, drawing from a population of five hundred and thirty-seven lecturers, from which two hundred and seventy-eight respondents were selected through proportionate stratified random sampling to reflect the relative staff strength of the two institutions. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire administered directly to lecturers. The major finding was that sixty-two per cent of respondents identified autocratic leadership as the dominant style practised by university management, compared with thirty-eight per cent who reported democratic practices, and that this concentration of autocratic authority was significantly associated with low levels of employee commitment. The study concluded that the leadership style adopted by university managers in Akwa Ibom State had a considerable bearing on staff commitment and recommended a deliberate shift towards more democratic practices. This study is commendable for its use of two theoretical lenses that jointly capture relational and motivational dimensions of leadership, and for drawing comparative data from two public universities within the same state.

However, its focus remained restricted to lecturer commitment rather than any direct measure of students' academic outcomes, leaving open the question of how the reported dominance of autocratic leadership ultimately translates into classroom delivery and learning outcomes, a

gap the present study addressed by extending the enquiry to students' academic performance.

Onwuegbuna et al. (2022) investigated the impact of democratic leadership style on employees' performance in the Nigerian educational sector, using Bells University of Technology, Ota, and Crawford University, Igbesa, both in Ogun State, as study areas. Although the study did not explicitly name a single theoretical framework, its treatment of leadership as a participative and relational process situates it broadly within participative leadership thought. A descriptive survey design was employed, with primary data gathered from a sample of three hundred and eighty teaching staff selected through proportionate stratified random sampling from the two private universities. A structured questionnaire, whose reliability was confirmed through a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.75, served as the instrument of data collection, and the resulting data were analysed using simple linear regression. The major finding was that democratic leadership style exerted a statistically significant positive impact on employees' performance in the two private universities studied. The study concluded that university leaders should increase the level of democratic practice in order to further improve staff performance and recommended greater institutionalisation of participatory decision-making. This study offers useful quantitative confirmation of the benefits of democratic leadership within the private university sub-sector, an area less frequently examined than public institutions in the Nigerian leadership literature.

A limitation, however, is that the outcome variable was confined to general employee performance rather than any measure connected to student learning or academic achievement, and the study was restricted to two private universities within a single state, which limits the extent to which its findings can be generalised to the wider Nigerian higher education system, a gap the present study addressed by examining public universities across a broader context.

Omokhodu et al. (2024) examined leadership style and employees' performance among academic staff of Auchi Polytechnic, Edo State, Nigeria. The study did not explicitly anchor itself to a single named leadership theory but was framed within the broader literature comparing autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire approaches to organisational leadership. A survey research design was adopted, with a population of nine hundred and seventy-eight academic staff, from which a sample of two hundred and seventy-four was drawn using simple random sampling guided by the Krejcie and Morgan table for sample size determination. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire, and multiple regression analysis was performed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences, version 22. The major finding was that all three leadership styles bore a positive and statistically significant relationship with employees' performance, with autocratic leadership recording a t-value of 29.480, democratic leadership a t-value of 13.518, and laissez-faire leadership a t-value of 24.820, all at a p-value of 0.000. The study concluded that each style could enhance staff performance under particular circumstances and

recommended that autocratic leadership be reserved for urgent or crisis situations, that collaborative work environments be cultivated to support democratic practice, and that adequate resources and training be provided to staff operating under laissez-faire arrangements. This study is notable for demonstrating that, contrary to much of the wider literature, all three styles can coexist with positive staff outcomes in a Nigerian polytechnic setting, which introduces a useful point of contrast for comparative analysis.

Nonetheless, the exclusive focus on a single polytechnic and on staff performance, rather than students' academic outcomes, means that its findings cannot be directly extended to university undergraduates, a gap the present paper closed by examining leadership effects specifically on student academic performance within university settings.

Daramola (2025) examined the effect of leadership styles on employee performance in higher education, drawing evidence from Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-Akoko, in Ondo State, Nigeria. The study was anchored on Contingency Theory and Transformational-Transactional Leadership Theory, combining a situational perspective on leadership effectiveness with a behavioural and motivational account of how leaders influence performance. A descriptive survey research design was adopted, with a population of five hundred and forty academic staff, from which a sample of two hundred and thirty was determined using Yamane's formula, yielding one hundred and eighty valid responses and a response rate of seventy-eight point three per cent. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire and analysed using both descriptive statistics and inferential techniques, including regression and correlation analysis, with the aid of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences. The major finding was that autocratic leadership exerted a significant negative effect on staff performance, democratic leadership exerted the strongest significant positive effect, and laissez-faire leadership showed no statistically significant effect, with the combined model explaining fifty-eight point two per cent of the variance in performance. The study concluded that democratic leadership offered the strongest foundation for enhancing staff performance in higher education, while autocratic tendencies should be minimised and laissez-faire leadership applied selectively to highly competent staff. This study stands out for its direct statistical comparison of all three leadership styles within a single Nigerian public university, offering the clearest numerical basis for ranking their relative effects found in the reviewed literature.

Its principal limitation, as with the preceding studies, is that the dependent variable remained staff performance rather than students' academic performance, leaving unexamined the extent to which these leadership-driven differences in staff outcomes translate into measurable gains or losses in student learning, a gap that the present study specifically designed to investigate.

5.11 Theoretical Framework

This paper was anchored on three theories, namely; Lewin's Leadership Styles Theory and Contingency Theory of Leadership as reviewed below:

i. Lewin's Leadership Styles Theory

Lewin's Leadership Styles Theory was propounded by Kurt Lewin, alongside Ronald Lippitt and Ralph White, in 1939, following a series of experiments conducted with groups of schoolboys engaged in craft activities under adult leaders who were deliberately trained to behave in autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire manners. The theory rests on the assumption that leadership can be classified into three distinct behavioural patterns based on the degree of authority a leader retains and the extent to which followers are permitted to participate in decision-making. Under the autocratic pattern, the leader dictates policies, procedures, and tasks with little or no consultation of group members.

Under the democratic pattern, the leader guides discussion, encourages group participation, and allows members a voice in decisions affecting them. Under the laissez-faire pattern, the leader withdraws from active direction, leaving group members largely to their own devices with minimal guidance or feedback. Lewin and his colleagues further assumed that these behavioural patterns produce measurably different group climates, with democratic leadership generally associated with higher group cohesion, originality, and sustained motivation, autocratic leadership associated with either high output under close supervision or resentment and aggression once supervision is withdrawn, and laissez-faire leadership associated with low productivity and a lack of coordinated effort.

The strength of Lewin's theory lies in its clarity and enduring conceptual precision, since it isolated three behavioural patterns that remain the standard vocabulary for classifying leadership style across organisational and educational research to the present day, as reflected in the persistent use of these three categories in recent Nigerian empirical studies on leadership in higher education. Its experimental origin also gives it a degree of empirical grounding that many later, more abstract leadership theories lack. A further strength is its direct applicability to institutional settings such as universities, where leaders visibly range from tightly controlling administrators to consultative, team-oriented heads of department and, at times, disengaged supervisors.

The theory nonetheless carries notable weaknesses. It was derived from small groups of children engaged in short-term craft tasks, a context considerably removed from the complexity, size, and professional autonomy characteristic of university systems, which raises questions about the direct transferability of its findings. The theory also treats leadership style as a relatively fixed behavioural category, offering limited account of how situational pressures, follower competence, or institutional culture might cause a single leader to shift between styles depending on circumstance. Additionally, its original formulation did not anticipate hybrid or blended approaches, which later Nigerian studies, such as

that of Omokhodu Mustapha, Audu Dangana, and Mustapha (2024), have shown to coexist meaningfully within a single institution.

Applied to the present study, Lewin's theory provides the foundational conceptual structure upon which the entire investigation is built, since the three independent variables examined, namely autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire leadership styles, are precisely the categories Lewin, Lippitt, and White (1939) first identified. The theory allows the study to classify the behaviour of vice-chancellors, deans, and departmental heads within Nigerian higher education according to an established and widely recognised typology, thereby lending conceptual legitimacy to the objectives guiding this research.

It further offers a ready explanation for why democratic leadership has repeatedly been found in Nigerian university studies to correlate with stronger staff commitment and, by extension, more favourable conditions for student learning, since Lewin's original experiments already demonstrated that group members under democratic leadership sustained motivation and originality even in the leader's absence, a quality directly relevant to the consistency of teaching and mentorship that students require throughout an academic session.

ii. Contingency Theory of Leadership

Contingency Theory of Leadership was propounded by Fred Fiedler in 1967, building on research he had conducted from the late 1950s onward. The theory departs from the assumption, implicit in earlier trait and style-based accounts, that a single leadership approach can be universally effective, arguing instead that the effectiveness of any leadership style is contingent upon the fit between the leader's orientation and the favourableness of the situation in which they operate. Fiedler classified leaders along a task-oriented to relationship-oriented continuum, measured through the Least Preferred Co-worker scale, and proposed that situational favourableness is determined by three factors, namely the quality of leader-member relations, the degree of task structure, and the extent of the leader's positional power.

The theory assumes that task-oriented leaders perform best in situations that are either highly favourable or highly unfavourable, while relationship-oriented leaders perform best under conditions of moderate favourability, and that because a leader's basic orientation is relatively stable, organisational effectiveness is better achieved by matching leaders to suitable situations than by expecting leaders to change their fundamental style.

The principal strength of Contingency Theory is its explicit rejection of a one-style-fits-all assumption, which allows it to account for the genuinely mixed findings reported across Nigerian higher education studies, where autocratic leadership has in some instances been associated with improved examination discipline while in others it has correlated with diminished staff morale. This situational sensitivity gives the theory considerable explanatory power when reconciling apparently contradictory empirical results, such as those found

when comparing Daramola's (2025) university-level findings with the secondary school evidence reported by Igwe et al. (2017).

A further strength lies in its early recognition that leadership effectiveness cannot be assessed independently of institutional context, a proposition well suited to Nigerian universities, which vary considerably in funding levels, governance structures, and staff-management relations. The theory's weaknesses include the practical difficulty of measuring situational favourableness with precision, the rigidity of its assumption that a leader's orientation is essentially fixed and therefore difficult to develop or train, and its limited attention to follower characteristics, communication processes, and the emotional or motivational dimensions of leadership that later theories, including transformational leadership, sought to address.

Applied to the present study, Contingency Theory supplies the explanatory framework needed to interpret why the influence of autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire leadership styles on students' academic performance is unlikely to be uniform across the varied institutional contexts that constitute Nigerian higher education. It allows the study to situate its comparative objective within a framework that expects, rather than treats as anomalous, the finding that a given style may prove beneficial in one university department or institution and detrimental in another, depending on factors such as funding adequacy, staff experience, and the structure of academic tasks.

The theory further supports the practical recommendations that typically emerge from Nigerian empirical studies in this field, including the call for a blended or situationally adapted approach to leadership, since it provides the theoretical justification for arguing that university administrators should calibrate their leadership behaviour to the specific demands of their institutional environment rather than adhere rigidly to a single style, in the interest of sustaining conditions favourable to students' academic performance.

6. DISCUSSIONS

The findings assembled across the empirical and theoretical reviews of this paper permit a structured discussion organised around the four objectives that guided the enquiry, namely the influence of autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire leadership styles on students' academic performance in Nigerian higher education, and the comparative weight of these three styles relative to one another.

On the influence of autocratic leadership, the evidence interrogated in this paper reveals a genuine divide among Nigerian authors rather than a settled consensus. Akarika and Umoren (2024) found that autocratic leadership was the dominant style in sixty-two per cent of the public universities they studied in Akwa Ibom State, and that this dominance correlated with markedly low levels of lecturer commitment, a relationship consistent with the view that centralised, non-consultative control erodes the goodwill upon which sustained instructional effort depends. Daramola (2025) reinforced this

position with firmer statistical grounding, reporting a significant negative regression coefficient for autocratic leadership on staff performance at Adekunle Ajasin University.

Yet Omokhudu et al. (2024), examining Auchi Polytechnic, found autocratic leadership positively and significantly associated with staff performance, while Igwe et al. (2017) reported that autocratic principals in Enugu secondary schools presided over stronger examination outcomes than their more permissive counterparts. Interrogating these divergent positions suggests that the outcome measured matters as much as the style itself: where the dependent variable concerns staff morale, commitment, and willingness to innovate, as in Akarika and Umoren (2024) and Daramola (2025), autocratic leadership performs poorly; where the dependent variable concerns compliance with schedules, examination discipline, and short-term task completion, as in the Auchi Polytechnic and Enugu studies, autocratic leadership can appear beneficial. This distinction indicates that authors have, in effect, been measuring different dimensions of institutional life under a shared label, and that any confident claim about the influence of autocratic leadership on students' academic performance must specify whether it concerns the disciplined delivery of a fixed curriculum or the deeper motivational climate in which teaching and mentorship occur.

On the influence of democratic leadership, the reviewed authors display far greater convergence. Onwuegbuna et al. (2022) found a statistically significant positive impact of democratic leadership on staff performance in two private Ogun State universities, a finding corroborated by Daramola (2025), whose regression analysis identified democratic leadership as the strongest predictor of staff performance among the three styles examined, and by Adeyemi and Bolarinwa (2013), who linked democratic practice among heads of department to stronger teacher-student relationships and, consequently, improved student outcomes at the secondary level.

Even Omokhudu et al. (2024), whose findings on autocratic leadership departed from the wider pattern, nonetheless reported a significant positive relationship for democratic leadership, indicating that its benefits appear more robust across institutional contexts than those of the other two styles. Interrogated together, these authors converge on the proposition that participatory engagement, whether expressed as consultation, shared decision-making, or open communication, cultivates the kind of staff commitment that sustains consistent teaching quality, a mechanism through which democratic leadership plausibly benefits students even where the cited studies measured staff rather than student outcomes directly.

On the influence of laissez-faire leadership, the discussion again reveals an unresolved tension. Daramola (2025) found no statistically significant relationship between laissez-faire leadership and staff performance, a result the study attributed to the decision-making delays and lack of direction that frequently accompany minimal supervision in resource-

constrained Nigerian institutions. By contrast, Omokhudu et al. (2024) reported a significant positive relationship for laissez-faire leadership at Auchi Polytechnic, provided staff were adequately resourced and trained to work independently. Reading these two positions against one another suggests that laissez-faire leadership is not intrinsically beneficial or harmful, but is instead conditional upon staff capability and institutional support systems, a qualification both sets of authors implicitly acknowledge even where their headline findings differ.

On the comparative analysis, the weight of evidence interrogated in this paper, particularly the precise regression comparison offered by Daramola (2025) alongside the broadly convergent findings of Akarika and Umoren (2024) and Adeyemi and Bolarinwa (2013), favours democratic leadership as the most consistently beneficial style for cultivating the institutional conditions that support students' academic performance, while treating autocratic and laissez-faire leadership as styles whose effects are more heavily conditioned by context, task type, and follower competence.

The theoretical framework adopted in this paper offers a coherent account of these findings. Lewin's Leadership Styles Theory (Lewin et al. 1939) supplies the classificatory foundation that makes comparison across the reviewed studies possible in the first instance, since every author examined, from Akarika and Umoren (2024) to Omokhudu et al. (2024), organised their enquiry around the same three categories Lewin's original experiments identified. More substantively, Lewin's finding that democratic leadership sustains group motivation and originality even in the leader's absence, while autocratic leadership produces either compliance under supervision or disengagement once supervision lapses, offers a direct explanatory bridge to the consistent Nigerian finding that democratic practice correlates with stronger staff commitment. Where a Nigerian vice-chancellor or dean consults staff on curriculum revision or workload distribution, in the manner Onwuegbuna et al. (2022) describe among Ogun State private universities, the resulting sense of ownership mirrors precisely the group cohesion Lewin observed among boys working under adult leaders trained to solicit their input, lending contemporary Nigerian empirical weight to an eighty-year-old laboratory finding.

Contingency Theory (Fiedler, 1967) accounts for what Lewin's theory alone cannot, namely the genuine divergence in findings on autocratic and laissez-faire leadership across institutional settings. Fiedler's central proposition, that leadership effectiveness depends on the fit between a leader's orientation and the favourableness of the situation, explains why autocratic leadership appeared detrimental at Adekunle Ajasin University and among Akwa Ibom State public universities, both large, unionised public institutions where leader-member relations and staff expectations of consultation are well established, yet appeared beneficial at Auchi Polytechnic and among Enugu secondary schools, settings where task structure around examinations and administrative compliance may be comparatively higher and where positional power may be exercised with less resistance.

Similarly, Fiedler's framework clarifies why laissez-faire leadership produced contrasting results in Daramola (2025) and Omokhudu Mustapha, Audu Dangana, and Mustapha (2024): the favourability of delegating authority depends on whether staff possess the structure, training, and resources to exercise it productively, a contingency the Auchu Polytechnic study made explicit and the Adekunle Ajasin University study found largely absent.

In sum, Lewin's theory establishes what is being observed when Nigerian scholars classify university leadership as autocratic, democratic, or laissez-faire, while Contingency Theory explains why the same style produces different outcomes across the varied institutional terrain of Nigerian higher education. This dual theoretical grounding supports the paper's overall position that democratic leadership offers the most reliable foundation for sustaining the staff commitment and instructional consistency upon which students' academic performance ultimately depends, while cautioning, in line with Fiedler's situational logic, against treating autocratic or laissez-faire leadership as uniformly detrimental, since their effects remain contingent upon the specific structural and relational conditions prevailing within any given Nigerian institution.

7. CONCLUSION

This paper examined the influence of autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire leadership styles on students' academic performance in Nigerian higher education, and to compare their relative effects. The evidence interrogated across Nigerian empirical studies indicates that democratic leadership consistently supports the staff commitment, collaboration, and instructional consistency upon which students' academic performance depends, whereas autocratic leadership tends to erode morale and engagement in most university settings, notwithstanding isolated evidence that disciplined oversight can improve compliance-based outcomes such as examination preparation. Laissez-faire leadership, for its part, produces no reliable pattern of benefit, its effect being contingent upon the competence and resourcing of the staff to whom authority is delegated. Read through the combined lens of Lewin's Leadership Styles Theory and Fiedler's Contingency Theory, these findings confirm that while the three styles remain a valid and enduring classification of leadership behaviour, their consequences for students' academic performance are shaped as much by institutional context as by the inherent character of the style itself. On balance, the paper concludes that democratic leadership offers the most dependable foundation for sustaining favourable academic outcomes in Nigerian higher education, while autocratic and laissez-faire approaches retain only conditional value.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

- i. University administrators, including vice-chancellors, deans, and heads of department, should institutionalise participatory decision-making structures, such as regular departmental consultations and staff representation in academic

policy committees, so that democratic practice becomes embedded in routine governance rather than dependent on individual leadership temperament.

- ii. Where autocratic tendencies persist, particularly in relation to examination scheduling, curriculum compliance, and academic calendar enforcement, institutions should confine such firmness to clearly bounded administrative functions while avoiding its extension into matters of staff welfare, research direction, and pedagogical autonomy, where evidence indicates it is most damaging to morale and, by extension, teaching quality.
- iii. Institutions considering delegation of authority under a laissez-faire approach should first ensure that academic staff are furnished with adequate training, resources, and monitoring frameworks, since the available evidence shows that autonomy without institutional support tends to produce administrative drift rather than the initiative it is intended to encourage.

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