A systematic literature review of academic corruption (2005-2025) in the Nigerian higher education context

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Abstract

Corruption within the leadership and management of Nigerian higher education is a substantial impediment to the sector's capacity to foster social and economic advancement. This study aims to understand the various forms of academic corruption among leaders in Nigerian higher education institutions (HEIs) and identify potential remedies for corrupt practices. Employing a systematic literature review methodology across Web of Science, Scopus, ERIC, DOAJ, and Google Scholar, 33 papers were included in the analysis, all of which highlighted the prevalence and rising concern of corruption among Nigerian higher education leaders and management. Findings indicate the most common forms of corruption are bribery, misappropriation of funds, favouritism/nepotism, embezzlement, and selling of admission and appointments. The proposed solutions emphasise strengthening anti-corruption agencies, promoting accountability, implementing ethical re-engineering, and leveraging technology.

Practitioner Notes

1. Leaders should establish an independent, tech-enabled oversight body with tools like blockchain for fund tracking to conduct unannounced audits and ensure transparency.
2. HEIs should combine strict legal penalties for corruption with improved staff remuneration.
3. HEIs must mandate compulsory ethical leadership training and integrate anti-corruption modules into the core curriculum for students and staff.
4. HEIs should digitise and publish all key processes on open-access portals to enforce merit-based, transparent decision-making.
5. HEIs should create a confidential, externally managed whistle-blower channel with a strong legal protection policy to safely uncover malpractice and foster accountability.

Keywords: Corruption, Nigeria, Leadership, Higher education institutions, Systematic review

Introduction

Corruption, which encompasses unethical, inappropriate, and often illegal practices, represents a formidable global challenge, particularly in higher education (Glendinning et al., 2019). Defined by the exploitation of public office for personal gain through behaviours such as bribery, extortion, fraud, embezzlement, nepotism, cronyism, appropriation of public assets and property for private use, and influence peddling (Myint, 2000), corruption profoundly impedes national, social, economic, and political advancement. Its consequences are severe and contribute to poverty, inadequate social welfare, constrained human development, and institutional decay (UNODC et al., 2024).

Although the prevalence and types of corruption differ from location to location, the global cost of corruption surpasses five percent of the world's GDP, totalling approximately US $2.6 trillion each year (Johnson, 2018; Human et al., 2020; UN, 2018). In Nigeria, leaders squandered almost $400 billion between 1960 and 1999, with an average of nearly $5000 per Nigerian, as reported by Olasupo et al. (2020) and Ribadu (2009, 2010). A 2019 poll conducted by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2019) showed that 30.2% of Nigerians who had interacted with a public official in the previous 12 months admitted to either paying a bribe or soliciting a bribe from a public official. More alarmingly, the 2019 UNODC poll also revealed that Nigerians with higher education were almost twice as likely to engage in corrupt practices, raising significant concerns about the prevalence of corruption in Nigerian HEIs.

Nigerian higher education is a cornerstone of national development, charged with fostering highly qualified individuals, promoting innovation, and addressing societal issues such as illiteracy and unemployment (Idoniboye-Obu, 2015; Mosha, 1986). However, widespread corruption and ethical deficiencies within the sector have significantly eroded the integrity, quality, and prestige of these vital institutions (Akinniyi et al., 2020; Dimkpa, 2011). Corruption in academic administration directly undermines efficient governance, erodes trust, and compromises educational quality and outcomes (Amini-Philips, 2017). These ramifications extend to academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and the overall credibility of educational institutions (Akinniyi et al., 2020), including the quality of graduates, research output, and general social growth (Eneji et al., 2022). Therefore, corruption in higher education deserves high levels of research attention, particularly because of its negative impact on society (Rumyantseva, 2005). However, despite extensive efforts to tackle this issue through anti-corruption policies and programmes implemented by previous administrations in Nigeria (Jonathan, 2018; Obasanjo, 2019; Oji & Oji, 2010; Okonjo-Iweala, 2018) limited success has been achieved, underscoring the depth of the problem and the urgent need for a broader understanding, particularly concerning the role of education leaders and management. Additionally, despite the gravity of this issue, existing research on corruption in Nigerian higher education often focuses on specific geographic areas or on specific types of corruption.

Literature review

Academic Corruption in Higher Education

In this study, academic corruption is conceptualised as deliberate violations of academic ethics and standards by scholars or academic quarters, including the abuse of academic power, bribery, embezzlement, plagiarism, fraud, deception, money-power deals, and other unethical practices undertaken to secure improper personal benefits or the benefit of small groups of people (Yongning et al., 2007). Accordingly, academic corruption is treated as a multidimensional construct, encompassing: Bribery and financial misconduct; nepotism and favouritism in recruitment and promotion; academic fraud (grading manipulation, admissions malpractice, degree irregularities); misallocation or embezzlement of institutional resources; and abuse of power and lack of accountability in governance processes.

Bribery and financial misconduct involve the exchange of money or material benefits to influence admissions, grading, appointments, procurement, or accreditation decisions, thereby undermining merit-based governance. Nepotism and favouritism in recruitment and promotion refer to preferential treatment of relatives, friends, or political allies, which weakens institutional capacity and entrenches patronage networks. Academic fraud, including grading manipulation, admissions malpractice, and degree irregularities, compromises the integrity of academic processes and devalues higher education qualifications (Chapman & Lindner, 2016). Misallocation or embezzlement of institutional resources entails the diversion or misuse of funds and assets intended for teaching, research, and infrastructure, directly affecting educational quality (Transparency International, 2013). Abuse of power and lack of accountability in governance processes occur when leaders bypass regulations, suppress oversight, or protect perpetrators, fostering a culture of impunity in HEIs.

Corruption and ethical decline in education have been persistent challenges affecting educational systems worldwide (Denisova-Schmidt, 2025). Increasing concerns about the quality of educational services have prompted frequent reports of various types of misconduct, including bribery, fraud, cheating, plagiarism, diploma mills, and breach of contract, particularly in nations such as the US, the UK, and Russia (Osipian, 2020, 2008a). Corruption in education traces back to medieval universities, affecting finances, admissions, teaching, learning, and graduation (Osipian, 2008b). Recently, the impact of corruption on education has become a topic of significant research interest. Liu and Liu (2017) find that heightened corruption correlates with reduced government spending on education and healthcare, negatively affecting national welfare and living standards. Furthermore, corruption can hinder education's positive effects on political engagement and high corruption levels may cause educated individuals to feel disillusioned with formal political institutions (Agerberg, 2018). The repercussions of corruption in higher education extend globally, obstructing meritocratic national contributions in nations like Nigeria and Liberia (Udemba et al., 2020).

Political stability, democratic governance, and universal higher education serve as key institutional constraints against corruption (Beju, 2024). Moreover, while empirical evidence suggests that higher education can reduce corruption by fostering transparency, accountability, and ethical behaviour (Dong & Torgler, 2011), this effect is neither automatic nor universal. In

contexts characterised by weak governance, inadequate monitoring, institutionalised corruption, and compromised leadership, higher educational attainment may instead increase individuals' exposure to power, resources, and networks that facilitate corrupt practices. This helps explain findings such as those provided in the UNODC (2019) report, indicating that Nigerians with higher education were more likely to engage in corrupt behaviour than individuals in broader social contexts.

Corruption in Higher Education Leadership and Management

While corruption affects education systems broadly, its most damaging manifestations occur within higher education leadership and management, where decision-making authority and access to resources are highly concentrated. Globally, HEIs, regardless of their development status, size, or funding model (public/private), consistently face challenges related to academic integrity, fraud, and other unethical behaviours (Denisova-Schmidt, 2020). Corruption in higher education is often broad, organised, and can involve leaders or politicians, as seen in the Ukraine, Bosnia, Russia, and the United States (Sayfullooh et al., 2023). Corruption among higher education leaders critically undermines educational quality, access, equity, and student integrity, potentially normalising corrupt practices (Alsaad & Mohsen, 2017; Osipian, 2020, 2008a; Tomo et al., 2018). High corruption levels can decrease public higher education enrolment and hinder socioeconomic development (Duerrenberger & Warning, 2018; Mejerytė-Narkevičienė et al., 2019). Leadership failures directly fuel corruption proliferation (Adeoye, 2023), prompting calls for external quality assurance (Nabaho & Turyasingura, 2019).

Corruption patterns vary by region yet remain global. Eastern Europe (Bulgaria, Croatia, Macedonia, Moldova, Serbia) suffers widespread cheating, plagiarism, and bribery that erode university credibility (Foltýnek & Dlabolová, 2020; Kosturanova, 2015; Lancaster et al., 2019). According to UNESCO's International Institute for Educational Planning, Western and Central Europe (Czech Republic, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Romania, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom) experience corruption in admissions, grading, degree awards, and staff recruitment (Poisson, 2016). Former Soviet states (Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, Russia, Ukraine, Tajikistan) face entrenched bribery and academic dishonesty (Denisova-Schmidt, 2023; Hovannisyan, 2021; Karimli, 2022; Krawchenko, 2021; Nazkhanova et al., 2023). Similarly, in Asia, countries like Indonesia and Uzbekistan continue to face systemic corruption, leading to underqualified graduates and public distrust (Putri et al., 2024; Yun, 2016). In Africa, nations such as Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa experience corruption at all institutional levels, affecting students, staff, and management alike (Kirya, 2019; Ngcamu & Mantzaris, 2023; Taaliu, 2017). Scholars stress ethical codes (Mion & Bonfanti, 2019), anti-fraud measures (Harahap & Isgiyarta, 2023), and the dangers of normalising corruption (Zhang, 2024).

Against this backdrop, this study addresses this significant research gap by employing a systematic literature review to provide a comprehensive understanding of the forms, causes, and proposed solutions to corruption within the leadership and management of Nigerian HEIs. Specifically, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the key trends in research on corruption among leaders in Nigerian HEIs?
2. What forms of corruption are prevalent in Nigeria's higher education system?

3. What causes corruption among Nigerian higher education leaders?
4. What are the possible solutions to corruption in Nigeria's higher education system?

By informing the development of targeted anti-corruption strategies and policy reforms, this review aims to improve the quality and integrity of leadership in Nigeria's higher education system, thereby strengthening its vital role in national progress and contributing to global efforts towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) vision of ensuring equitable quality education. Note that, in the context of this study, higher education leaders refer to academic or administrative staff within HEIs who hold office, either by promotion, appointment, or election.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that underpins this investigation is founded on organisational theory and the sociology of education, mainly focusing on social capital and ethical leadership (Burns, 1978; Coleman, 1988). These theories provide a robust foundation for examining the complex interplay between leadership, organisational culture, and ethical behaviour within Nigerian HEIs. As Coleman (1988) proposed, social capital theory emphasises the importance of social relationships and networks in facilitating collective action and institutional effectiveness. In higher education leadership, social capital can be understood as the resources embedded in the relationships among leaders, faculty, students, and other stakeholders that enable the institution to function effectively and achieve its goals. Ethical leadership theory, as developed by Burns (1978) and expanded upon by subsequent scholars, posits that leaders who demonstrate high moral standards and integrity can positively influence the ethical climate of their organisations. Ethical leadership is a key factor in combating corruption within an organisation, influencing employees' attitudes towards corruption and willingness to report unethical behaviours (Hechanova & Manaois, 2020). Additionally, different leadership styles have been linked to organisational corruption, underscoring the importance of leadership in shaping ethical norms within institutions (Tang et al., 2018). Stakeholder pressures can also drive leaders to engage in corrupt practices, highlighting the need for solid ethical leadership to counteract such tendencies (DeCelles & Pfarrer, 2004). The cultural normalisation of corrupt practices and the lack of emphasis on ethics in education have been identified as contributing factors to the perpetuation of corruption. This theory is particularly relevant when examining corruption in Nigerian higher education leadership, as it suggests that institutional leaders' ethical behaviour (or lack thereof) can have far-reaching consequences for overall organisational culture and performance.

Methods

This study used a systematic review method to examine leaders' practices in the context of corruption in Nigerian higher education. An initial comprehensive search was conducted in August 2025 across Web of Science (WoS), Scopus, ERIC, DOAJ, and Google Scholar using terms related to higher education, leadership, Nigeria, and corruption. Table 1 shows how these terms were combined into queries tailored to each database, identifying 54 papers from WoS, 180 from Google Scholar, 112 from Scopus, 56 from ERIC, and 40 from DOAJ. WoS, Scopus, ERIC, and DOAJ were chosen for their comprehensive coverage of peer-reviewed literature, education-specific resources, and social science. The decision to include Google Scholar as a major source of studies was to allow us to capture a more comprehensive view of the available literature,

particularly studies from local and regional journals that may not be indexed in more selective databases.

Table 1.

Search terms

Database	Search queries	No. of papers
WoS*	corrupt* (All Fields) AND Nigeria (All Fields) AND higher education (Topic) OR tertiary education (All Fields) AND Universit* (Title) AND leader* (All Fields)	54
Google Scholar	allintitle: Nigeria higher OR education OR tertiary OR polytechnic OR college "corruption"	180
ERIC	abstract: "corruption" title: "Nigeria" topic: "education"	56
DOAJ	Corruption in Nigeria education	40
Scopus	(TITLE-ABS-KEY (corruption) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (Nigeria) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (education))	112

* WoS = Web of Science; ERIC = Eric Education Resources Information Center; DOAJ = Directory of Open Access Journals.

Studies were selected based on the inclusion criteria shown in Table 2: peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2005 and 2025 that specifically examine corruption in Nigerian higher education, including both empirical and theoretical works. This 20-year time frame captures evolving trends in the field.

Table 2.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion (33 studies)
Published in a peer-reviewed journal (including book chapters)
Data focuses only on corruption in Nigerian higher education
Includes empirical and secondary data
Published from 2005 (last 20 years)
Exclusion (409 studies)
Dissertations and editorials
Collected data outside corruption in education leadership
Studies outside Nigerian context
Studies not written in English
Non full text studies
Inadequate journal policy (No verifiable editorial board, no clear peer-review process, no authors affiliation, no verifiable ISSN)
No clear methodological rigor

Excluded were non-peer-reviewed sources (e.g. conference proceedings, dissertations, reports, editorials), studies conducted outside Nigeria or unrelated to corruption in higher education leadership, articles from journals without a clear editorial board or transparent peer-review process, and papers lacking a dedicated methods section or sufficient methodological detail for critical appraisal.

Screening Process

The screening process involved multiple stages to systematically narrow the large pool of retrieved studies to those most relevant to the research questions and objectives. The first search yielded 442 studies (Figure 1). Duplicate removal was necessary to avoid redundancy and ensure that unique contributions were assessed. Following the removal of 52 duplicates, titles and abstracts of the remaining 390 studies were reviewed, excluding 239 unrelated studies, and leaving 151 studies for full-text assessment. This step ensured that only studies that directly addressed corruption in Nigerian higher-education leadership were retained. During the full-text eligibility assessment, an additional 71 studies were excluded because they were not related to leadership, 16 were excluded because they fell outside the scope of the study, and the full text of 18 studies could not be accessed.

13 studies were further excluded due to critical methodological or publication quality concerns: 3 for being published in journals without an ISSN, 4 were published in a journal that lacked a clearly identifiable editorial board and transparent peer-review processes, and 6 for lacking a methodology section or sufficient methodological description necessary for appraisal. Finally, 33 studies met all inclusion criteria and were included in the review. All included studies were appraised using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT), version 2018 (Hong et al., 2018), according to the relevant categories for qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods designs. Review-type articles were appraised under the qualitative category, focusing on clarity of research focus, transparency of evidence synthesis, and coherence of interpretations. Overall, the studies met at least 4 out of 5 applicable criteria (aggregate 92.7% 'Yes' response rate), with clear objectives and findings aligned with the review's research questions, supporting their inclusion in the synthesis.
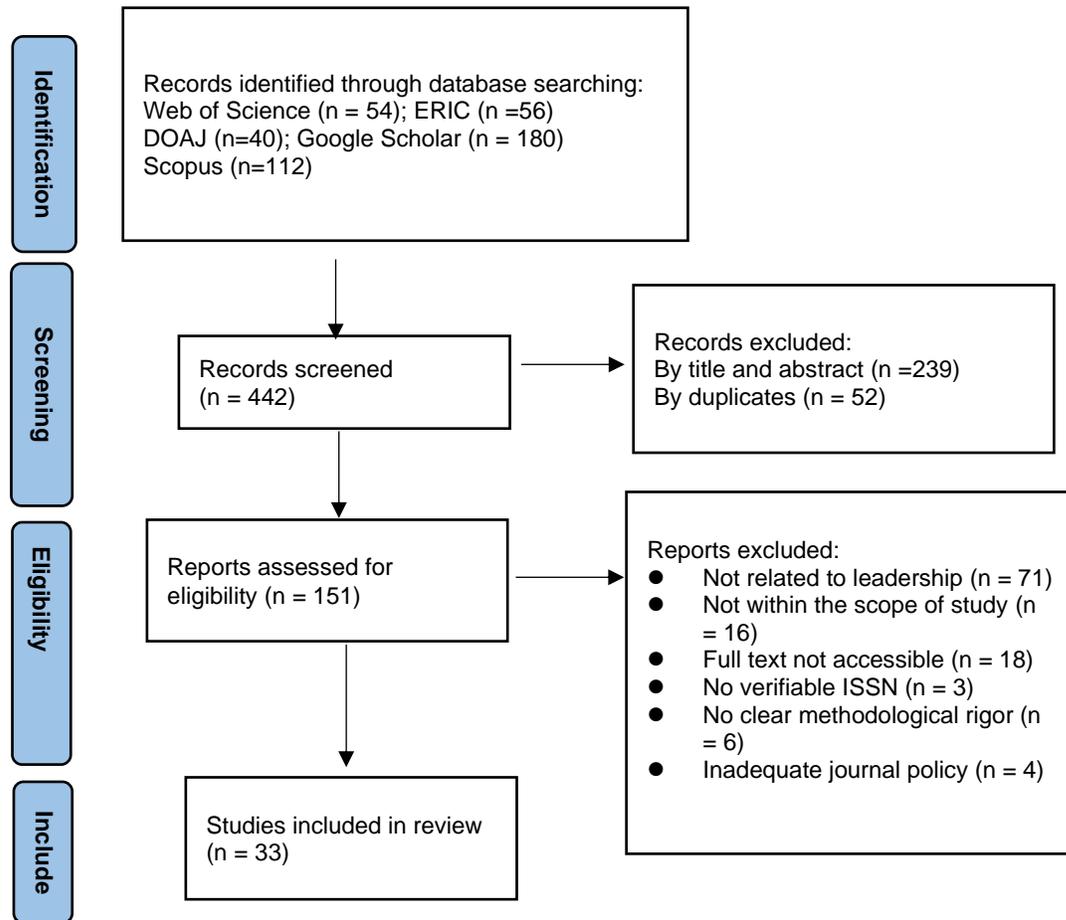
Data Extraction and Coding

Data from the final shortlisted studies were gathered using a uniform extraction template. This template collected details including the author, year of publication, significant findings, and possible solutions, while ensuring that the extracted data were relevant to issues of corruption in the leadership of higher education in Nigeria. This uniformity ensured consistency and comparability across studies.

To ensure the reliability of the coding process, a two-coder approach was employed. Initially, two researchers independently coded a subset of the studies, resulting in double coding of 30% of the data set. After completing the coding, they compared the results to assess their consistency. Any discrepancies in coding were discussed and resolved by consensus. This iterative process helped refine the coding framework and ensure that the extracted data accurately reflected the key themes related to corruption in Nigerian higher education. Inter-coder reliability was calculated using Cohen's Kappa coefficient, and coding was found to be 0.82, indicating a high level of agreement. This result supports the robustness of the coding process and the reliability of the extracted data.
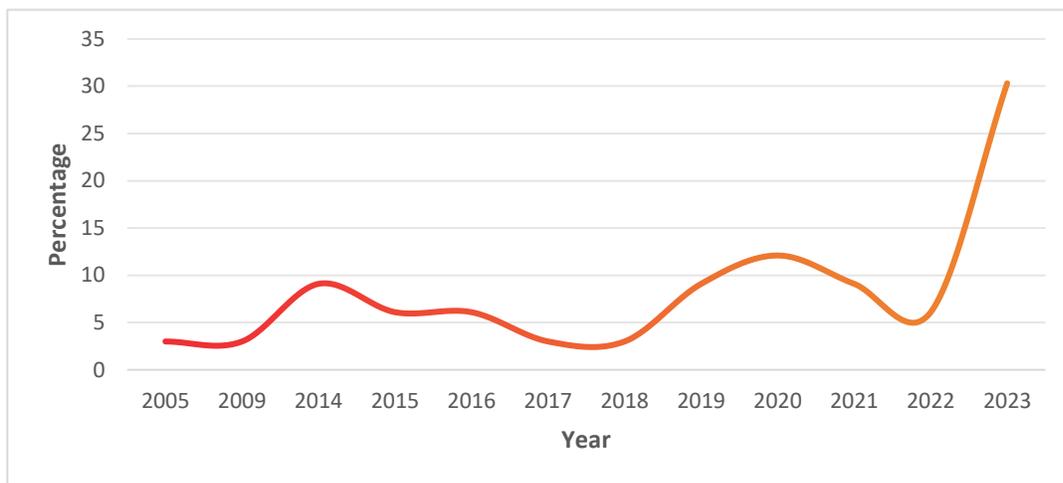
Figure 1

PRISMA flow chart

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┌───────────────┐   ┌──────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│               │   │ Records identified through database searching:│
│ Identification│   │ Web of Science (n = 54); ERIC (n =56)         │
│               │   │ DOAJ (n=40); Google Scholar (n = 180)         │
│               │   │ Scopus (n=112)                                │
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                                        │
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┌───────────────┐   ┌────────────────────┐      ┌──────────────────────────────┐
│               │   │ Records screened   │─────▶│ Records excluded:            │
│  Screening    │   │ (n = 442)          │      │ By title and abstract (n =239)│
│               │   │                    │      │ By duplicates (n = 52)       │
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┌───────────────┐   ┌────────────────────┐      ┌──────────────────────────────┐
│               │   │ Reports assessed   │─────▶│ Reports excluded:            │
│  Eligibility  │   │ for eligibility    │      │ ● Not related to leadership (n = 71)│
│               │   │ (n = 151)          │      │ ● Not within the scope of study (n│
│               │   │                    │      │   = 16)                      │
│               │   │                    │      │ ● Full text not accessible (n = 18)│
│               │   │                    │      │ ● No verifiable ISSN (n = 3) │
│               │   │                    │      │ ● No clear methodological rigor (n│
│               │   │                    │      │   = 6)                       │
│               │   │                    │      │ ● Inadequate journal policy (n = 4)│
└───────────────┘   └────────────────────┘      └──────────────────────────────┘
                                        │
                                        ▼
┌───────────────┐   ┌────────────────────┐
│  Include      │   │ Studies included   │
│               │   │ in review          │
│               │   │ (n = 33)           │
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Results

Trends in Scholarly Research on Corruption Among Leaders in Nigerian HEIs

The distribution of the studies by year indicates that corruption among Nigerian higher institution leaders and management is a prevalent issue and has recently become a more significant concern. This is evidenced by the sharp increase in research on the topic (Figure 2), whereby the largest percentage of studies were conducted in 2023 (30.3%), followed by 2020 (12.1%), 2021(9.1%) and 2019 (9.1%). The 2014 data also showed a substantial representation (9.1%). 2015, 2016, and 2022 each represented 6.1% of the studies. Studies conducted in 2005, 2009, 2017 and 2018 were minimal (3%).

Figure 2

Line plot of the distribution of research by year

Forms of Corruption Practised by Leaders in Nigeria's Higher Education

A review of findings from the screened articles showed various forms of corruption that are prevalent among higher education leaders (Figure 3). These include misappropriation of funds (30.3%), embezzlement of funds/materials (27.3%), bribery (24.2%), favouritism/nepotism (15.2%), academic dishonesty (21.2%), selling appointments/promotions/admissions (12.1%), selling of grades (15.2%), abuse of office (9.1%), purchasing substandard materials (3%), and overall moral decline, which includes immoral and unethical practices (36.4%).

The provision of quality infrastructure and resources is hampered by the embezzlement and misuse of funds, which has a direct impact on the quality of education and services offered (Jacob et al., 2022; Todowede, 2016; Wordu, 2023). This financial malfeasance extends to the awards of contracts, where bribery and kickbacks are standard practices, often resulting in substandard work or abandoned projects (Todowede, 2016). Bribery distorts meritocratic processes, allowing undeserving individuals to benefit at the expense of more qualified candidates (Wordu, 2023). Several studies report instances of funds being diverted into private accounts, the use of personal accounts for institutional transactions, and the misuse of resources intended for infrastructure and programme implementation (Jacob et al., 2022), which further obscure financial transparency and accountability and facilitate personal enrichment. Favouritism in decision-making erodes institutional efficiency and morale, as competent individuals are often overlooked in favour of those with personal connections (Ofojebe, 2019).

Academic corruption among leadership and management in Nigerian higher education is not limited to financial matters but permeates various aspects of academic life. The selling of admission, grades, and other forms of academic dishonesty is widespread (Onyishi et al., 2020; Ufuoma & Omekwu, 2022; Yunusa & Usman, 2023), devaluing academic integrity and qualifications and undermining the overall standard of education (Manga, 2020). Studies highlight the abuse of academics due to failed ethical leadership, which leads to hazardous power

dynamics (Fasanmi & Seyama, 2023). This administrative misconduct erodes the meritocratic principles governing academic institutions and contributes to declining educational standards.

Figure 3

Forms of corruption in Nigerian higher education
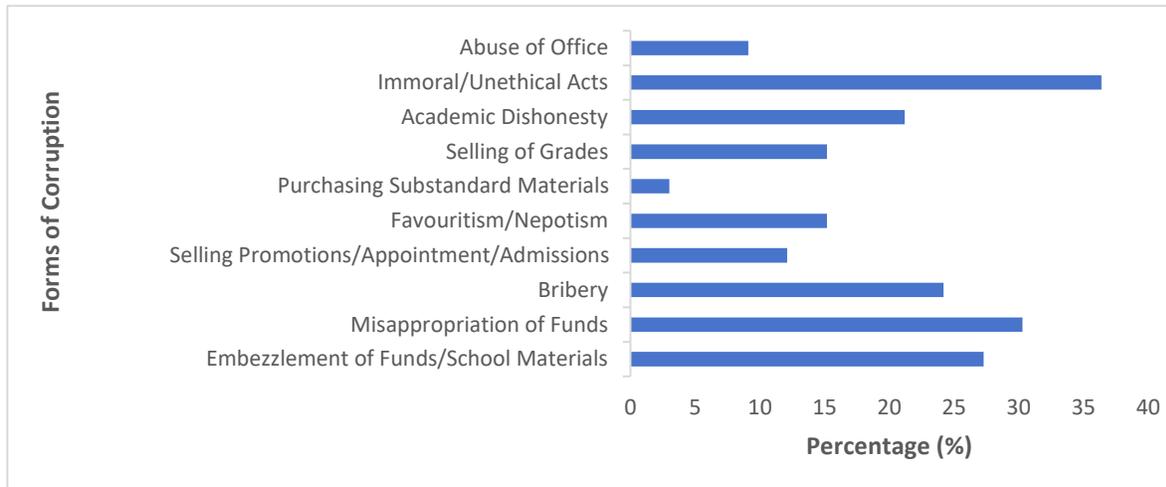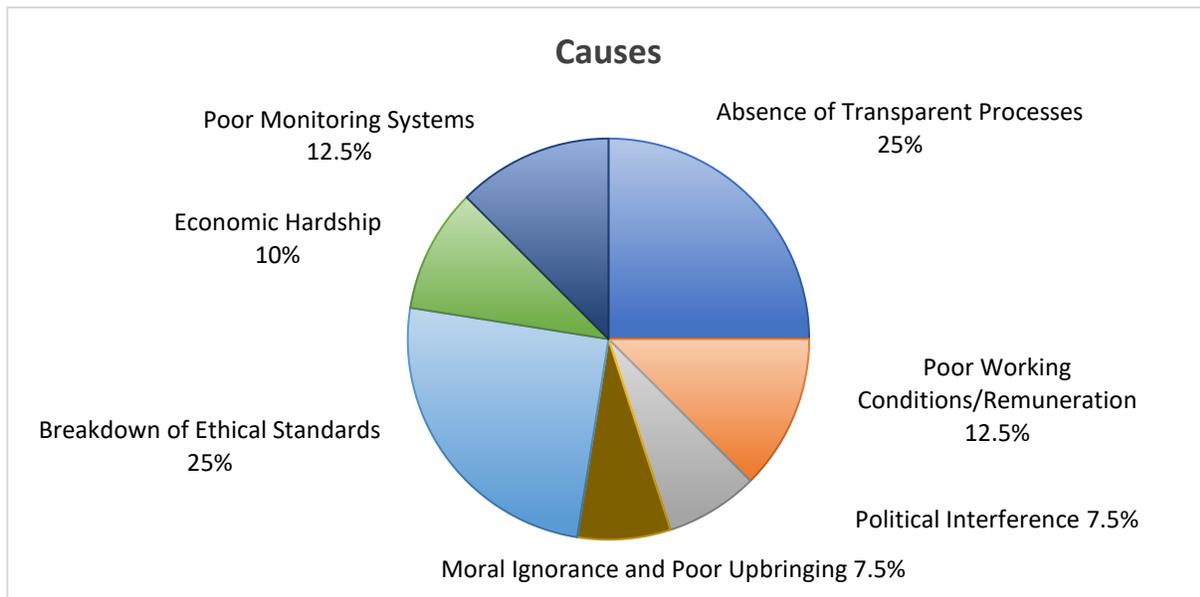

Causes of Corruption

Analysis of the reviewed studies indicated several factors that contribute to leaders engaging in corruption in Nigeria's higher education. As Figure 4 shows, breakdown of ethical standards (25%), and absence of transparent processes (25%) are significant causes. Other substantial causes include political interference (7.5%), poor working conditions/remuneration (12.5%), and poor monitoring systems (12.5%). Economic hardship (10%), moral ignorance, and poor moral upbringing (7.5%) also represent notable contributions to the overall causes. Analysis of the studies also shows a lack of policy compliance and poor monitoring systems, creating an unchecked environment in which corrupt practices can thrive (Isife, 2021; Jacob et al., 2022; Yunusa & Usman, 2023). Economic hardship and low-income levels drive staff to seek alternative, often unethical, means to supplement their incomes (Akinniyi et al., 2021; Fasanmi & Seyama, 2023; Manga, 2020; Ofojebe, 2019; Ukata & Okeke, 2023;). The breakdown of ethical standards and societal norms further exacerbates the situation and is cited as a significant factor contributing to this issue, as integrity and honesty are no longer upheld as societal values (Ajayi & Adeniji, 2009; Ekechukwu, 2021).

Furthermore, studies indicate that moral ignorance and a lack of moral upbringing affect the will to adhere to ethical principles (Akinniyi et al., 2021; Ofojebe, 2019; Udo & Udoh, 2023). Inadequate funding and resources force institutions to resort to unethical practices to secure necessary resources (Isife, 2021). Political interference in academic affairs undermines educational institutions' autonomy, leading to decisions based on political favouritism rather than academic merit (Ajayi & Adeniji, 2009; Idiong et al., 2023; Jacob et al., 2022; Todowede, 2016). The absence of transparent processes and accountability mechanisms further facilitates corrupt practices, as opaque operations make it easier for individuals to engage in unethical behaviours without detection (Ekechukwu, 2021; Idiong et al., 2023; Jacob et al., 2022; Njoku, 2016; Udo &

Udoh, 2023; Whawo, 2015). Finally, ineffective leadership contributes to unethical practices such as bribery and embezzlement, diminishing the integrity of educational institutions (Adeoye et al., 2023).

Figure 4

Causes of corruption among Nigerian higher education leaders


Potential Solutions

As shown in Figure 5, studies suggested strengthening anti-corruption agencies (15.8%), improving socioeconomic conditions and funding (10.5%), continuous education and awareness programmes (5.3%), and well-defined codes of conduct and robust monitoring systems (7.9%). A large number of studies highlighted the need for transparency and accountability (23.7%), curriculum reviews and policy updates (18.4%), encouraging and protecting whistle-blowers (2.6%), merit-based appointments (2.6%), implementing severe punishments (13.2%), ethical re-engineering (5.3%), and making use of technology such as CCTV cameras (2.6%).

It was reported that strengthening anti-corruption agencies and enforcing anti-corruption laws are crucial to deter corrupt practices, with enhanced capabilities and authority provided to these agencies (Todowede, 2016). Many studies emphasise that exemplary leadership, transparency, accountability, regular audits, and severe punishment for offenders are essential to foster an ethical culture (Ekechukwu, 2021; Whawo, 2015). Implementing severe punishment for convicted individuals is a strong deterrent that underscores the seriousness of corruption (Whawo, 2015). Repackaging the educational system through curriculum reviews, policy updates, and increased funding can address many root causes of corruption, ensuring that institutions are better equipped to fulfil their educational mandates ethically (Ekechukwu, 2021). Studies also highlighted the role of curriculum reform in combating corruption. Incorporating an anti-corruption course into a higher education curriculum can instil ethical values in leaders and students, equipping them to withstand corrupt practices in their future careers (Atanda, 2019; Isife, 2021). Clear codes of conduct, robust

monitoring, merit-based appointments, and whistle-blower protection further prevent and detect corruption (Ajayi & Adeniji, 2009; Whawo, 2015). Finally, ensuring competent leadership through merit-based appointments enhances the competence and integrity of institutional management by ensuring that the most qualified individuals are in positions of authority (Ajayi & Adeniji, 2009). Technology such as CCTV cameras has also been identified as a potential tool for combating corruption and a factor that can facilitate new forms of academic dishonesty (Yunusa & Usman, 2023).

Figure 5

Possible solutions to corruption and moral decline among leaders in Nigeria higher education.
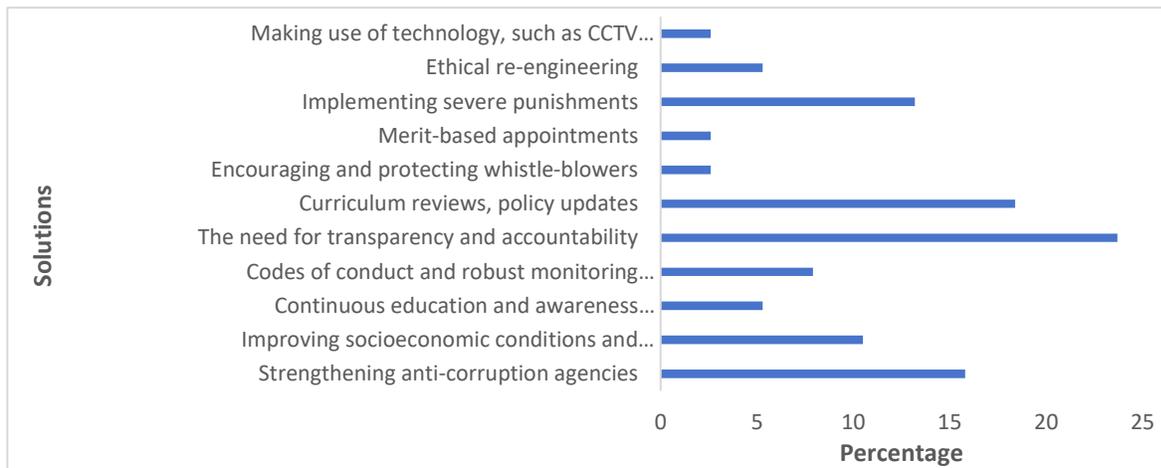
Discussion

The findings of this systematic review indicate that a substantial number of Nigeria's higher education leaders have been identified as engaging in corrupt practices. This is irrespective of their level of expertise, experience, professionalism, or comprehension of the adverse impacts of corruption on the academic community. This suggests that leaders in HEIs are actively involved in corruption despite their awareness of the detrimental repercussions of this behaviour (Figure 2), raising the key question of whether educational elites with full awareness are involved in corruption, and who else in society will make an effort to prevent it.

The findings of this review resonate with the work of Liu and Liu (2017), who argued that increased corruption correlates with reduced government investment in education, further exacerbating the challenges that HEIs face. The consistent acknowledgement of the complex nature of corruption in higher education is demonstrated by the convergence of these findings with existing literature. Financial misappropriation, bribery, embezzlement, favouritism, nepotism, and unethical admissions practices, among other forms of corruption, are not isolated phenomena but are consistently documented across diverse contexts. This is notably evident in the striking alignment between the forms of corruption identified in Figure 3 for Nigerian higher education leaders and the comprehensive characterisation presented by Persson et al. (2024) in the EU context. The normalisation of these corrupt behaviours, as noted by Zhang (2024), is particularly relevant in the Nigerian context, where the erosion of ethical standards has led to a culture that often tolerates or even encourages such practices. This cultural aspect is crucial as it highlights the need for a

comprehensive approach to addressing corruption that goes beyond punitive measures to include cultural and ethical reforms. However, although there is significant convergence in the literature regarding the forms and impacts of corruption, there are divergences in the proposed solutions and the underlying causes of these issues. For example, it may be that economic hardship and low-income levels are significant drivers of corruption among staff, which is a perspective supported by Ofojebe (2019). However, other scholars emphasise the role of political interference and inadequate governance structures as primary contributors to corruption in higher education (Jacob et al., 2022). This divergence indicates that while the symptoms of corruption may be universally recognised, the root causes can vary significantly depending on the socio-political context.

The theoretical framework guiding this study, which integrates social capital and ethical leadership theories, provides a clear lens for further examining these findings. As Coleman (1988) articulates, social capital theory, networks, and relationships are crucial in promoting institutional efficacy. However, in Nigerian higher education, the identified forms of corruption, including the misappropriation of funds, embezzlement, bribery, favouritism/nepotism, and academic dishonesty (Figure 3), directly reflect a breakdown in social capital and a pervasive lack of ethical leadership. Bribery, favouritism and nepotism directly undermine the trust and reciprocal norms that are essential for positive social capital. When appointments or admissions are sold, meritocracy is abandoned, and legitimate social networks are replaced by self-serving ones. This exploits Coleman's (1988) concept of social capital for personal gain, which leads to institutional decay. Concurrently, the alarming prevalence of the breakdown of ethical standards and the absence of transparent processes as root causes of corruption (Figure 4) underscores a significant deficit in ethical leadership. This aligns with Burns' (1978) theory, which posits that leaders with high moral standards are crucial in shaping an organisation's ethical climate. The widespread immoral/unethical acts observed empirically reflect this lack of ethical guidance from the top, indicating that leaders, despite their awareness of the detrimental effects of corruption, fail to model or enforce ethical conduct, thereby exacerbating problems and normalising corrupt behaviours within the academic community. The findings of this review point to a substantial deficit in ethical leadership across most Nigerian education institutions, which has profound implications for their overall organisational culture. The frequent link between ineffective leadership and corruption underscores the need to cultivate ethical leadership practices (Hechanova & Manaois, 2020). This urgent need is exemplified by nations such as Singapore and Malaysia, celebrated for their robust ethical infrastructure and transparent leadership, which have enabled strong anti-corruption efforts (Putri et al., 2024). This aligns seamlessly with Mejerytė-Narkevičienė et al.'s (2019) advocacy for external quality assurance as a means to foster ethical governance in higher education.

Furthermore, education plays a crucial role in promoting civic engagement and reducing corruption, suggesting that educational institutions can serve as critical agents of change. The findings of this review advocate integrating anti-corruption education into the curriculum, which aligns with Isife (2021) on the transformative potential of education in fostering ethical behaviour. While the proposed solutions converge with existing literature, the effectiveness of these measures may vary based on the context of Nigerian higher education. The complexity of the socio-political landscape in Nigeria, characterised by economic challenges and political instability,

necessitates a careful and tailored approach to implementing these solutions. For example, while strengthening anti-corruption agencies is crucial, efforts must be made to improve the socioeconomic conditions of staff to reduce incentives for corrupt behaviour.

While this study focuses specifically on Nigeria, the patterns of corruption identified reflect broader challenges faced by HEIs worldwide, particularly in developing economies and rapidly expanding higher education systems (Duerrenberger & Warning, 2018). Research demonstrates striking parallels between Nigerian cases and corruption manifestations in other African nations, such as Kenya (Kirya, 2019; Taaliu, 2017), and South Africa's corruption practices in universities by university officials. These corrupt manifestations that are evident in other African nations include: corrupt affiliations and arrangements among unscrupulous individuals, with no repercussions enacted; a distinct corrupt nexus between internal and external entities, encompassing bribery by financiers, service providers, and suppliers; and political meddling from management and council members perpetuated the corruption agenda (Ngcamu & Mantzaris, 2023). South Asian contexts include India's corruption in admissions, recruitment, qualifications, and credentials (Jha, 2023; Orim & Glendinning，2023) and Bangladesh's credential fraud (Hossan, et al, 2024), as well as Eastern European cases, such as Romania's academic dishonesty, bribery, cronyism, and administrative malfeasance (Ghiațău, 2021; Mungiu-Pippidi & Dusu, 2011). These global commonalities emerge from shared structural conditions and weak quality assurance mechanisms (Boswell et al., 2024). The typology of corruption forms (financial misappropriation, academic dishonesty, abuse of power, etc.) generated in this study aligns closely with UNESCO's global taxonomy of education corruption (Hallak & Poisson, 2007), OECD's Integrity of Education Systems (INTES) typology of corruption in education and higher education of corruption (OECD, 2018; Milovanovitch, 2025), and the World Bank's framework for classifying institutional misconduct (Heyneman, 2015).

Effective anti-corruption measures restore institutional reputations and renew trust among students, faculty, employers, and society. Reduced corruption fosters a sense of fairness and reliability, which are essential for the credibility of the teaching and learning processes. An environment perceived as honest encourages greater student engagement and investment in genuine learning, while faculty morale improves, as educators can focus on teaching rather than navigating academic corruption and malpractice (Denisova-Schmidt, 2020). The positive feedback loop created by restored trust contributes substantially to institutional resilience (Mugala et al., 2022). Such environments also instil lifelong values of integrity and social responsibility, preparing students not only for examinations, but also for responsible citizenship and professional conduct (Jimnez et al., 2018).

Implications

The findings of this study have significant implications for enhancing the integrity of Nigerian higher education. The identified widespread corruption, from financial malpractices to academic dishonesty and abuse of office, demands urgent and actionable reform. The most critical and feasible step is establishing an independent, robust, and technologically driven oversight body with a mandate to conduct regular, unannounced financial and operational audits across all HEIs. This body, perhaps a reformed and empowered National Universities Commission (NUC) or a completely new, autonomous anti-corruption unit specifically for education, must be equipped with

digital tools for transparent financial tracking (e.g., blockchain for fund disbursement and expenditure). Its feasibility requires strong political will and sufficient funding (potentially from the recovered corrupt assets). Concurrently, immediate and severe legal penalties for proven corrupt acts are essential deterrents that necessitate close judicial collaboration.

Therefore, an interdisciplinary approach is necessary. From a legal perspective, a comprehensive review of the existing laws is needed, including stronger whistle-blower protection and merit-based hiring regulations. The economic implications highlight the need for improved staff welfare and equitable remuneration to reduce corruption incentives, potentially funded by strategic budget reallocation or private partnerships. Sociologically, there is a need for ethical re-orientation programmes, integrating anti-corruption curricula, and publicly celebrating ethical role models to reshape societal norms and foster a culture of integrity.

Globally, these findings offer valuable insights for developing economies that face similar challenges in academic corruption. The identified parallels with other nations underscore the potential for cross-country learning and collaboration, making this research a blueprint for international efforts to strengthen academic integrity and contribute to sustainable global development.

Conclusion

This systematic review examines corruption among leaders in Nigerian higher education, identifying prevalent forms, underlying causes, and potential solutions to this critical issue. The findings highlight leaders' engagement in corrupt practices, a topic that has garnered increasing research attention recently. For example, they are documented as engaging in corrupt practices of embezzlement and bribery, abuse of office, selling appointments and promotion, favouritism and nepotism, all of which run contrary to the ethical leadership theory developed by Burns (1978). Corruption in education has far-reaching effects on infrastructure, resources available to staff and students, and quality of education itself. This study emphasises the urgent need to combat academic corruption in Nigerian higher education through transparent recruitment, independent oversight, ethical enforcement, and technology integration. These reforms are vital to restore integrity, boost national productivity, and enhance global competitiveness. Addressing root causes such as greed, weak leadership, and materialism requires moral reorientation, ethics training for leaders, and a reward system for integrity. Future research should empirically validate anti-corruption interventions in Nigerian higher education, compare corruption patterns across developing nations, investigate unreported corruption through mixed-methods approaches, examine the generational and gender dimensions of corrupt practices, and explore systemic political-economic drivers through longitudinal studies.

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