

ACCOUNTABILITY: A HALLMARK FOR IMPROVEMENT IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY ADMINISTRATION

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Abstract

This paper is titled “Accountability A Hallmark for Improvement in Nigerian University Administration. Accountability has emerged as a central concern in education policy discussions surrounding university administration in Nigeria. As public universities continue to operate under financial pressure, regulatory uncertainty, and recurring industrial disputes, questions about how institutions are governed and held responsible for their decisions have become increasingly pertinent. This paper examines accountability as a policy instrument for strengthening university administration and improving system wide outcomes within Nigerian universities. It focuses on the alignment between national education policies and their implementation at the institutional level, particularly in areas such as resource allocation and decision-making processes. The paper argues that gaps between policy formulation and execution have weakened accountability, contributing to inefficiency and eroding public confidence in university administration. The study further assesses recent policy driven reforms, including performance monitoring mechanisms which serve as efforts to improve transparency and oversight. While these reforms signal progress, the paper observes that policy effectiveness is often limited by inconsistent enforcement and lack of shared responsibility among stakeholders. The paper discussed issues such as lack of transparency and weak oversight. The paper concludes that a more coherent education policy approach is required and that the ideal should embed accountability into institutional governance through clear standards, measurable outcomes, and participatory oversight. The paper suggests oversight systems and openness in administration as solutions to the issues identified. Thus, strengthening accountability within university administration is a critical step in improving Nigerian universities.

Keywords: Accountability, Hallmark, Nigerian Universities, University Administration

Introduction

Accountability has gained increasing prominence in discussions on university administration in Nigeria, particularly within the sphere of education policy. What was once regarded as an internal administrative matter has gradually evolved into a key indicator of institutional effectiveness and public credibility. Imolong, Adesola, and Nwakaego (2025) argued that accountability lies at the heart of effective governance, organizational practice, and the educational system. It ensures that both individuals and institutions are held responsible for their conduct, promoting openness, ethical standards, and operational effectiveness. These elements help to strengthen public confidence and enhance overall performance. Within the context of university education, accountability is especially important as it reflects the sector’s obligation to society. It requires stakeholders to clearly account for their actions and decisions, while taking ownership of the results—whether those outcomes involve success, error, or deserved acknowledgment. Nigerian universities presently operate in a challenging policy landscape characterized by limited financial resource, increasing student enrolment, frequent

industrial actions, and rising demands from both government authorities and the wider society (Ezewuzie, Udeogu, & Okoli, 2025).

In such conditions, accountability has become central to how administrative performance is judged and how institutions justify their use of public resources. National education policy positions universities as vital engines for socio-economic development, research advancement, and skilled manpower production (FRN, 2014). Despite this strategic importance, many universities struggle to translate policy objectives into measurable administrative outcomes. Regulatory frameworks exist to guide institutional governance in areas such as budgeting, academic regulation, and personnel management, yet implementation often falls short. Weak monitoring systems, overlapping administrative roles, and irregular policy enforcement have created accountability gaps that undermine effective university administration. This paper views accountability as more than just a managerial checklist; it frames it as a core policy idea that influences how institutions actually behave. From an education policy perspective, accountability shapes how authority is used, how decisions are judged, and how results are measured. When accountability systems are clear and applied consistently, they promote openness, limit the abuse of power, and strengthen trust among stakeholders. On the other hand, weak or poorly aligned accountability structures often leave universities dealing with inefficiency, internal tensions, and a loss of public confidence (Chaudhry, Dotson, & Heiss, 2025).

Recent efforts to improve accountability in Nigerian universities have led to the introduction of performance targets, stricter reporting rules, and digital administrative tools. These changes signal a growing recognition among policymakers that governance within the sector has long had weaknesses. Even so, the results have been uneven. In many universities, accountability is still treated as a box-ticking exercise rather than a shared institutional culture, leading to compliance-focused practices that fail to tackle the deeper problems in university governance (Khamzina, Buribayev, & Tileubergenov, 2025). Within this context, the paper examines accountability as a defining concept in university administration in Nigeria. It situates accountability within existing education policy frameworks and explores how policy design and implementation influence administrative responsibility. By doing so, the study highlights the importance of embedding accountability into everyday administrative processes as a means of strengthening governance and improving the overall performance of Nigerian universities. The aim of this study is to closely examine the role of accountability in the administration of Nigerian universities, particularly in a system that is often under pressure from limited funding, governance challenges, and frequent labour disputes.

The research is concerned with how accountability functions in practice, not just how it is described in policy documents or official statements. A key purpose of the study is to investigate how university administrators are held responsible for their actions and decisions, especially in areas such as financial control, staff management, and the implementation of institutional policies. It seeks to understand whether existing accountability structures are effective or merely symbolic. The paper also aims to identify the factors that weaken accountability in university governance. Issues such as external interference, unclear regulatory frameworks, and weak enforcement mechanisms are examined to explain why accountability often falls short within the Nigerian university system. In addition, the paper seeks to evaluate the consequences of accountability, or the lack of it, on university performance. Attention is given to how administrative transparency affects academic quality, industrial harmony, student welfare, and public confidence in university education. Ultimately, this study is intended to offer informed suggestions that can help improve accountability practices in Nigerian

universities. By doing so, it hopes to contribute to more responsible leadership, better governance outcomes, and a more stable and credible university system in Nigeria.

Even though accountability has been discussed severally in Nigerian university education, most study still tends to focus on problems like poor funding, crumbling infrastructure, or recurring strikes. There is not much that dives deep into how accountability actually works in practice—how university administrators are held responsible for daily decisions, policy implementation, or maintaining academic standards. Most studies discuss governance in broad strokes, but few examine the nuts and bolts of accountability and its influence on the way universities operate. This leaves a noticeable gap in understanding how accountability truly affects administration and institutional outcomes.

What is even more noticeable is the lack of research linking accountability directly to real improvements in universities. Discussions often highlight transparency, reporting systems, and oversight, but hardly any work measures whether these mechanisms genuinely lead to better management, efficient decision-making, or enhanced students' experiences. In short, while everyone acknowledges that accountability is important, there is little evidence showing its tangible effects in Nigerian universities, leaving a key piece of the puzzle unexplored.

Accountability in University Education

At its core, accountability in university education reflects the obligation of administrators and staff to act responsibly, justify their decisions, and manage resources with integrity. In this sense, it is both a moral and regulatory requirement, thereby serving as the foundation for effective governance in Nigerian universities. Consequently, accountability is widely regarded as an essential attribute for individuals entrusted with the management of financial resource. Those placed in such positions are expected to justify how these resources are handled and ensure that their use aligns with established objectives and standards (Ofor-Douglas, 2023). Similarly, Otuya and Okolo (2019) explained that accountability involves a deliberate obligation to give clear and acceptable explanations for one's stewardship. Specifically, this includes being answerable for decisions taken, actions carried out, and the results that follow, particularly within leadership and administrative roles. In line with this view, Candoli (2018) defined accountability as the duty to formally account for how organizational resources are utilized. Accordingly, this responsibility covers the management and reporting of funds, material assets, and human resource in order to ensure transparency and proper control within an institution.

Furthermore, Onah et al. (2021) described accountability as a statutory or regulatory duty that compels individuals and public officials to properly document and safeguard assets, records, and funds. Notably, this obligation applies whether or not such resources are in their immediate physical custody, thus emphasizing responsibility beyond direct possession. Beyond documentation, Bovens, as cited in Huisman (2019), explained that accountability goes beyond merely completing assigned tasks. Rather, it demands a high level of transparency, requiring decision-makers to act with openness and clarity in both their conduct and the choices they make. In the same vein, Eze and Onwudingo (2021), viewed accountability as the readiness of individuals to justify their conduct, including explanations for actions taken, actions omitted, intentions formed, and judgments made to those with legitimate interests in such decisions.

Within educational institutions, accountability manifests through systematic processes such as documenting operations, organizing and summarizing activities, and examining data to generate reports that accurately portray the condition of the education system at a particular point in time (Adams, 2024). In addition, this responsibility extends to ensuring openness in

financial practices, including budgeting, auditing, and reporting procedures, thereby satisfying public expectations and upholding trust in educational administration (Presthus in Dangara, 2016). From an ethical standpoint, accountability places a strong moral demand on educational managers and administrators to demonstrate integrity, openness, reliability, and sound judgment in their conduct. This expectation is particularly critical in the management of institutional resources, where trust and ethical responsibility must guide decision-making (Abraham et al., 2021). When effectively implemented, accountability has the potential to enhance the reputation and performance of Nigerian universities, thereby positioning them more competitively within the global university education landscape.

However, for accountability to be meaningfully established within any organization, its goals and objectives must be clearly defined and openly communicated. When this is done, institutional aims become visible and well-articulated, making it easier to assess performance and hold actors responsible for their roles (Genus & Stirling, 2017). Furthermore, Leveille (2006), as cited in Ogunode et al. (2024), argued that universities are under increasing pressure to demonstrate accountability because educational systems exist as social institutions created by society itself. Given that universities are funded through public resources such as taxpayers' money, contributions from parents and guidance and support from other stakeholders, they are expected to remain transparent and answerable to society, which in turn provides oversight and checks on their operations.

However, Trines (2017) identifies several drivers of corruption within academic institutions, including the concentration of power, weak accountability mechanisms, and excessive or intrusive regulatory frameworks. Taken together, these conditions create an environment in which corrupt practices are more likely to thrive.

University Education

Universities serve as pillars of national development, shaping intellectual, social, and economic progress. As such, accountability within these institutions ensures that their operations align with societal expectations, promote equity, and sustain public trust. In addition to these roles, universities possess significant capacity to shape and embed sustainability practices within broader societal systems (Guthrie et al., 2020; Pee & Vululleh, 2020; Purcell et al., 2019).

Within the university education sector, accountability frameworks are primarily centered on the systematic collection and evaluation of data relating to institutional inputs, operational processes, and educational outcomes. Subsequently, these findings are communicated to institutional leaders, policymakers, and other relevant stakeholders to support informed decision-making both within universities and across the wider higher education system. As accountability expectations continue to evolve, the relationship between accountability mechanisms and accreditation practices has come under renewed scrutiny, thereby encouraging the exploration of alternative accountability models. To reinforce public trust, policymakers and educators must maintain sustained attention to accountability systems, while simultaneously coordinating the complex relationships among actors, institutional goals, resources, performance standards, and associated consequences (Leveille, 2006).

Despite these expectations, the generally weak culture of accountability across many public institutions, including universities, has significantly contributed to persistent accountability challenges within Nigeria's university system. Although universities are formally structured to operate on foundational principles such as clearly defined objectives, academic freedom, transparency, and responsible resource management, in practice, these principles are not always effectively upheld. By virtue of their mandate, universities are expected to remain

accountable to all stakeholders, ensuring that authority and resources are exercised in a manner consistent with public trust and institutional responsibility (Ogunode, Obioma & Belloh, 2024). Empirical findings further suggest that universities which deliberately integrate accountability mechanisms into their governance frameworks are better positioned to embed sustainability across instructional practices, research activities, and administrative operations. Moreover, such institutions demonstrate greater resilience in responding to future disruptions. Nevertheless, the study highlights managerial discretion as a significant constraint, noting that unchecked autonomy, when not balanced by accountability, can undermine institutional effectiveness and weaken transparency within university education institutions (Johannsdottir, Gudmundsdottir & Sigurjonsson, 2025). Broadly speaking, accountability in university education encompasses governance structures, performance measurement systems, and compliance mechanisms that ensure universities not only meet institutional and regulatory standards but also support students' academic, personal, and professional development (Kantha & Turyahebwa, 2025).

University Administration

University administrators are competent men or women assigned with the authority to pilot the daily affairs of the university and to achieve the universities set goals in a smooth sailing manner, with the support of their subordinates who also have administrative skills such as development, organizing, directing, monitoring, recruitment, communicating, accounting and overseeing for the actualization of the university vision and purposes (Ofor-Douglas, 2024). Meanwhile, Unachuku and Okorji (2016) see an administrator as one who takes charge of the running of programmes, events and day to day tasks in such a manner that those responsibilities allotted to people will be completed swiftly and competently.

University leaders play a central role in shaping institutional culture, enforcing policies, and ensuring operational efficiency. In this regard, their ability to combine strategic planning, ethical governance, and effective resource management largely determines how well universities can meet both national and global expectations. Accordingly, university administration requires the capacity to take well-reasoned and, at times, challenging decisions, while simultaneously developing and clearly communicating an institutional vision. Moreover, it involves setting realistic and attainable objectives and equipping staff and stakeholders with the necessary knowledge and resources to successfully realize these goals (Green, 2015). In furtherance of this role, university administrators act as the central drivers of institutional progress, playing a key role in sustaining organizational effectiveness. Through coordinated strategic leadership, they help ensure that high-quality education is delivered efficiently and consistently across the institution (Bamiro, 2023).

Beyond internal coordination, administrators are also responsible for ensuring that institutional policies and practices conform to both national and international educational benchmarks. Such alignment, in turn, enhances institutional credibility, strengthens quality assurance mechanisms, and improves competitiveness within the global university education environment (Okojie, 2022). Conceptually, university administration can be understood as the process through which an institution plans, coordinates, and utilizes its available resources to deliver academic and operational activities. Specifically, it involves the deliberate organization of personnel, facilities, and other resources in ways that support the university's mission and ensure that its intended goals are achieved (Ogunode & Abubakar, 2020).

Similarly, university administration refers to the management and coordination of staff, resources, and operations to achieve effective institutional performance. Empirical evidence from a study conducted at the University of Cape Coast, Ghana, indicates that the effectiveness of senior staff administrators is influenced by both pay and motivation. Although salaries were generally moderate, motivation levels were high, and overall performance was mostly average. Notably, motivation emerged as the most significant factor influencing performance, thereby underscoring the need for universities to provide fair compensation, recognize staff contributions, foster supportive leadership, encourage participatory decision-making, and create opportunities for professional growth (Anderson et al., 2026). In light of these findings, strong and effective educational leadership becomes essential for addressing institutional challenges and sustaining high standards within universities (Bush, 2011).

Education Policy

Obsolete legislation, overlapping responsibilities, and low digital skills among staff create significant obstacles to achieving uniform results, thereby underscoring the importance of robust accountability mechanisms. Akor (2022) asserts that a policy is an inclusive guide that provides the wide-ranging restrictions and routes through which administrative exploits will occur. At the time policies are executed, there should be stances for positive deviations in the current system that warrant the need for said policies (Joel, Ogi & Ikpe, 2019). Within the context of education policy, this implies that the effective running of schools and the management of staff require well-defined rules, responsible data handling, continuous staff training, and institutional processes that promote transparency and systematically track performance.

When these strategies are applied, accountability is strengthened, and policies are better positioned to support long-term, sustainable improvements in educational institutions (Harun, 2026). On the other hand, Thomas, Enuile and Wayne (2018) viewed educational policy as the academic revision of educational policy which pursues responding to inquiries surrounding the rationale of education, the purposes that are considered to be achieved, the means for reaching them and the apparatuses for gauging their attainment or botch. Building on this perspective, Wu (2026) examined the influence of accountability systems and policy structures on the conduct and effectiveness of administrators in public organizations. In the Chinese context, efforts to tighten oversight and enforce compliance produced unintended consequences. Rather than encouraging innovation, bureaucrats increasingly focused on avoiding criticism, which in turn led to subtle neglect of duties and a growing reluctance to take initiative.

Similarly, Barnes, Finefter-Rosenbluh, and Brown (2026) highlight the critical role lecturers' play in the implementation of assessment policies, particularly within universities school settings. They note that educators interpret and apply accountability-driven policies differently depending on school type, grade level, and personal professional beliefs. As a result, lecturers' capacity to exercise professional judgment and create environments that support meaningful assessment directly shapes how accountability is enacted. This demonstrates that educational accountability extends beyond mere compliance with rules; instead, it depends on how educators are empowered, positioned, and supported to implement policies effectively.

Management

Effective management in universities involves the coordination of human, financial, and physical resources to achieve institutional goals. In practice, this requires strategic planning, teamwork, and continuous performance monitoring, all of which are underpinned by

transparent and accountable practices. Management can be seen as the strategic coordination of resources to maximize productivity (Ofor-Douglas, 2026). Similarly, management in the school context entails the deliberate integration and coordination of material assets, financial resource, and human capabilities in order to ensure that institutional objectives are achieved in the most effective and efficient manner possible (Curic, Lazarevin & Bizakove, 2018). Beyond resource coordination, management can also be understood as a purposeful and systematic process through which organizational resources are planned, organized, and directed to enhance productivity. This process, as noted by Ofor-Douglas (2025), relies heavily on teamwork and collective effort, supported by sound planning, structured organization, and strong leadership, thereby enabling institutions to successfully attain shared goals.

From a public administration perspective, Enaifoghe (2025) observed that university administration is rooted in core public administration principles, including integrated governance across institutional units, effective policy execution, and decision-making guided by credible data. Within this framework, accountability is sustained through fair access to services, regular performance reviews, and conscientious supervision, all aimed at meeting public expectations and fulfilling government mandates. In addition, Harun (2026) argued that the efficient functioning of universities and other public organizations increasingly depends on contemporary regulatory and performance frameworks that support digital processes, ensure transparent and impartial evaluations, encourage ethical data governance, and align supervisory mechanisms. Conversely, when regulations are obsolete, oversight mechanisms are weak, or policies operate in isolation, accountability deteriorates, public confidence declines, and institutional stability is undermined. Furthermore, Sanches, Gago, and Fernandez-Feijoo (2026) contended that effective university governance is significantly enhanced when credible and influential stakeholders are actively involved in shaping reforms and ensuring compliance with regulatory standards. This approach, rather than reliance on solely top-down control or punitive enforcement measures, promotes shared responsibility and strengthens accountability within university education.

Issues

Understanding the challenges facing Nigerian universities is essential for improving accountability. These issues have created barriers to institutional efficiency and academic excellence. Exploring these issues this provides insight into why accountability remains a pressing concern. These issues are as follows:

1. Lack of Transparency in Decision Making

A lot of administrative decisions—like budget approvals, promotions, and policy rollouts—happen behind closed doors. Staff and students often feel left out, which can create mistrust and a sense of exclusion. Adinoyi (2017), as cited by Ofor-Douglas (2019), observed that financial mismanagement has become a persistent and almost normalized problem in Nigerian universities. This is evident in various forms, including diversion of funds, misuse of resources, outright embezzlement, and dysfunctional accountability systems. Furthermore, many officially sanctioned projects are executed without adherence to established procedures. Together, these issues make the effective administration of public universities highly challenging and have contributed significantly to the gradual decline in academic standards nationwide. Similarly, Ogunode, Obioma, and Belloh (2024) argued that public universities frequently operate amid administrative ambiguity, largely due to a weak accountability culture and the poor enforcement of existing policies.

2. Weak Monitoring and Oversight

Many universities do not have strong systems to keep track of administrative actions. Without regular checks or audits, mistakes or misconduct can continue unchecked, and corrective measures are often slow or ineffective.

Algazo and Ibrahim (2024) emphasized that fragile governance frameworks within universities—characterized by unclear role definitions, limited transparency, and weak accountability systems—frequently lead to ineffective oversight of institutional operations. They noted that when accountability mechanisms are inconsistent or poorly defined, staff may become uncertain about their responsibilities, while governing authorities face difficulties in enforcing policies effectively. As a result, universities struggle to monitor administrative decisions and evaluate institutional performance accurately.

3. Frequent Staff Strikes

Strikes by academic and non-academic staff are almost routine, mainly because grievances are not addressed early or properly. These disruptions affect the academic calendar and damage the reputation of universities. Nwala and Okere (2024) argued that the recurring ASUU strikes in Nigeria are largely the result of unresolved conflicts between university staff and government or administrative authorities. These repeated work stoppages interrupt lectures and examinations, negatively affect students' academic progress, and often lead to extended academic calendars. The authors contend that the persistence of such strikes highlights shortcomings in grievance resolution mechanisms and the inefficiency of negotiations between universities and the government.

4. Uneven Policy Enforcement

Policies are sometimes applied inconsistently across different departments. This creates confusion, frustration, and a perception of unfairness, making it difficult to hold anyone accountable. Algazo and Ibrahim (2024) further observed that when governance within universities is inconsistent or poorly defined, individual departments often interpret and implement policies differently. This results in uneven application, undermining accountability, as staff and units are held to varying standards, which fosters confusion and a perception of inequity throughout the institution.

5. Insufficient Training for Administrators

Many university leaders have not received adequate training in modern management or accountability practices. Without this knowledge, it's challenging for them to manage resources well or maintain integrity in decision-making. Sophie (2025) observed that many university administrators lack adequate training and professional development in key areas such as financial management, policy implementation, and strategic planning. Because training opportunities are often limited or poorly funded, administrators frequently face challenges in managing the complex demands of running a university effectively, which hampers accountability and the ability to make informed decisions.

Conclusion

Accountability in Nigerian universities is not just a trendy phrase. It is a cornerstone for effective administration and public trust. These institutions face a range of challenges: decisions are often made behind closed doors, oversight systems are weak, strikes disrupt academic activities, policies are applied inconsistently, and many leaders lack adequate

training. Each of these problems, in its own way, hampers progress and can undermine the university's primary mission of fostering knowledge, innovation, and societal development.

Tackling these issues requires more than just administrative goodwill. It calls for the active participation of everyone involved like staff, students, governing councils, and regulatory agencies alike. Promoting transparency can make decision-making processes more visible and understandable, helping to build trust among all stakeholders. Strengthening monitoring and oversight ensures inefficiencies are spotted early and addressed before they escalate. Meaningful engagement with staff unions and other groups can help prevent strikes and minimize disruptions, while applying policies consistently across all departments reinforces fairness and accountability. Equally important is investing in leadership development, giving administrators the tools and skills, they need to manage resources responsibly, make sound decisions, and cultivate a culture of accountability.

Accountability is not a one-off effort; it is a continual process that requires vigilance, reflection, and a willingness to improve. Despite the difficult operating environment, Nigerian universities can achieve higher efficiency, fairness, and overall excellence if accountability is embedded at every level. When administrators lead with transparency and responsibility, students benefit from a stable learning environment, staff feel respected and empowered, and the institutions themselves gain credibility and strength. In this sense, making accountability the guiding principle of university administration is not just about governance it is about creating a solid foundation for a more sustainable and successful future for university education in Nigeria.

Recommendations

1. Universities should make decisions more visible to staff and students. Open forums, published reports, and regular updates can foster trust and make the decision-making process more inclusive.
2. Internal audit offices and external regulators should regularly review administrative practices. Routine assessments can help detect problems early and ensure timely corrective action.
3. Administrators should engage staff unions proactively to address concerns before they escalate. Regular communication, fair negotiations, and timely grievance handling can reduce industrial disputes.
4. Universities must enforce policies uniformly across all departments. Clear guidelines and monitoring systems can help maintain fairness and make accountability more effective.
5. Providing administrators with workshops, mentorship, and training in management and accountability can improve their efficiency and decision-making. A well-trained leadership can better uphold standards and enforce rules.

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