Institutional Leadership in Sierra Leonean Higher Education: Governance, Administration, and Threats to Stability

Mohamed Suffian Kamara[1], Emmanuel Dumbuya[2*], James Saysay Kanu[3]

[1]M.Ed., B.Ed., H.T.C(Sec),T.C, Ernest Bai Koroma University of Science and Technology Sierra Leone

[2]M.Ed., B.Ed., Njala University

[3]M.Ed., B.Ed., DAE, CAE, H.T.C(Primary), T.C Ernest Bai Koroma University of Science and Technology Sierra Leone

[*]Corresponding Author

ABSTRACT

Universities in Sierra Leone play a pivotal role in national development, yet their operations are often hampered by fragile governance environments, administrative inefficiencies, and political interference. This study investigates the systemic pressures confronting these higher education institutions, focusing on leadership vulnerabilities, corruption, and union dynamics. Using documentary analysis of policy reports, institutional records, and media accounts (2010–2024), and applying principles of good governance and institutional theory, findings reveal that institutional leadership is precariously situated, with unresolved tensions often escalating into crises. This situation, though reflecting observable patterns across Sub-Saharan Africa, is exacerbated by Sierra Leone's post-conflict context and chronic underinvestment. The study confirms that failures of **good governance** (transparency, accountability) create **institutional instability**. Key recommendations include strengthening governance frameworks, depoliticizing leadership appointments, implementing digital administrative systems, and empowering staff and student unions as independent accountability actors. Addressing these systemic issues is crucial for enhancing institutional resilience and sustaining higher education's contribution to national transformation.

Keywords: Higher education, governance, leadership, administration, Sierra Leone, institutional reform

INTRODUCTION

Leadership in higher education is critical for institutional stability, academic quality, and public trust (Altbach, Reisberg, & de Wit, 2019). In Sierra Leone, higher education is vital for post-conflict reconstruction and human capital development. However, universities face persistent challenges stemming from weak governance systems, severe administrative inefficiencies, and pervasive political interference (Jones & Osei, 2024; World Bank, 2023). These pressures undermine institutional credibility and heighten vulnerability to crises, creating a fragile reality where even minor disputes can ignite institutional instability.

This paper seeks to answer the following research questions:

- What governance and administrative challenges confront universities in Sierra Leone?
- How do corruption and political interference affect institutional leadership and credibility?
- What role do staff and student unions play in shaping institutional stability?
- What reforms are needed to enhance governance, leadership, and accountability in Sierra Leonean higher education?

By addressing these questions, the study contributes empirically grounded insights to the broader discourse on higher education leadership in fragile and developing contexts.

Conceptual Lens

This study employs **good governance theory** and **institutional theory** to analyze the challenges facing university leadership.

Good Governance Theory provides the normative framework for assessing institutional effectiveness. We define good governance in this context by the presence of accountability, transparency, adherence to the rule of law, and efficiency. The analysis seeks to interpret *governance gaps* as measurable failures to meet these principles, linking the absence of transparency directly to the escalation of conflict and instability described in the findings.

Institutional Theory helps interpret the environmental pressures on universities. It explains how higher education institutions (HEIs) in Sierra Leone struggle to adapt to political and social environments that prioritize patronage over meritocracy. This lens highlights that the observed administrative inefficiencies are not merely operational failures but often *strategic* adaptations—or malpractices—that allow institutions to conform to external political demands, thereby weakening their internal integrity and autonomy (isomorphism). This combined theoretical approach allows us to move beyond simply describing challenges to explaining *why* they persist and *how* they compromise institutional legitimacy.

METHODOLOGY

This research employs documentary analysis, focusing on policy documents, institutional records, government reports (e.g., World Bank), peer-reviewed studies, and credible media accounts (2010–2024). Data were subjected to thematic analysis, identifying recurrent patterns in governance gaps, administrative inefficiencies, corruption, and union dynamics. Contextual narratives from media were used to illustrate lived realities.

Limitation and Future Research: While documentary analysis provides a broad, contextual overview, its exclusive reliance on secondary sources limits the richness and validity of the findings regarding specific leadership behaviors. **The study strongly recommends that future research employ a qualitative or mixed-methods approach, utilizing primary data (interviews and surveys) with institutional actors (leaders, staff, and students) to triangulate these findings and provide a deeper, more robust understanding of lived experiences and decision-making processes.**

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. Governance Failures and Accountability Deficit

Decision-making in Sierra Leonean universities is frequently opaque and disproportionately influenced by external political actors. Oversight bodies often lack the necessary independence and enforcement power, directly contravening the principles of **good governance**. This institutional weakness allows mismanagement, such as prolonged tenure of unqualified officials or non-compliance with statutory regulations, to persist unchecked. The absence of clear, enforceable accountability structures fuels the volatility that characterizes the sector.

2. Institutional Response to Political Environments (Administrative Inefficiencies)

Administrative operations are severely hindered by bureaucratic delays and outdated systems. The reliance on manual processes for human resource management and financial tracking perpetuates inefficiency, a direct consequence of institutions failing to modernize and adapt to contemporary administrative standards. From an **institutional theory** perspective, the persistent *lack* of modern e-governance systems suggests that there are powerful, non-rational pressures (often political or cultural) preventing the adoption of more efficient systems that would increase transparency. This inertia frustrates stakeholders and serves as a major contributing factor to institutional unrest.

3. Corruption and the Erosion of Legitimacy

Financial irregularities, favoritism in recruitment, and procurement mismanagement are widespread issues. These acts of corruption represent profound breaches of ethical leadership and the fundamental principles of **good**

governance (specifically accountability and transparency). High-profile cases of misused funds spark staff strikes and student protests, immediately disrupting academic calendars. *Comparatively*, while corruption is an acknowledged issue across Sub-Saharan Africa (Teferra, 2021), Sierra Leone's context—marked by high dependence on post-conflict donor funding and weak internal controls—renders the HEI system uniquely vulnerable, severely compromising institutional integrity and public confidence.

4. The Complex Role of Union Dynamics

Staff and student unions, while formally intended as accountability actors, often struggle to maintain independence. Political co-optation and limited capacity (Maganga & Nkhoma, 2020) can compromise their role as legitimate checks on power. When unions are co-opted or politicized, they cease to function as participatory mechanisms of **good governance**. Consequently, instead of serving as constructive mediators in disputes, they sometimes become vehicles for partisan interests, leading to prolonged institutional crises that further destabilize the university environment.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings confirm that leadership in Sierra Leonean universities operates in a volatile environment akin to "a keg of gunpowder." The root cause of this volatility is the systemic failure of **good governance**, which creates structural vulnerabilities that political and corrupt forces exploit. As suggested by Salmi (2022), institutional resilience requires a deliberate shift toward ethical leadership, fortified governance structures, and the empowerment of genuinely independent accountability actors to successfully navigate external pressures and build public trust.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Sierra Leone's higher education institutions are critically constrained by fragile governance, administrative inefficiencies, and corruption, all compounded by weak accountability structures. Without urgent, targeted reforms that address the theoretical failures identified by good governance and institutional theory, stability will remain elusive and educational quality will continue to decline.

Recommendation Summary:

Reform Priority	Action	Good Governance Principle Addressed
Strengthen Governance	Establish independent oversight bodies with robust enforcement power; institutionalize transparent decision-making processes.	Accountability, Transparency
Depoliticize Leadership	Ensure merit-based recruitment and promotion for all senior academic and administrative roles; limit political interference through clear policy reforms.	Rule of Law, Efficiency
Digitalize Administration	Introduce integrated e-governance systems to streamline HR, finance, and communication functions.	Efficiency, Transparency
Empower Unions	Provide comprehensive training in negotiation and mediation; safeguard union independence from external political manipulation.	Participation, Accountability
Enhance Capacity	Train administrators in governance ethics, resource management, and conflict resolution.	Efficiency, Accountability
Increase Investment	Allocate sustainable funding for infrastructure, research, and capacity-building.	Sustainability

By prioritizing these reforms, Sierra Leonean universities can reduce instability, restore public trust, and strengthen their essential role as resilient engines of national transformation.

REFERENCES

1. Altbach, P. G., Reisberg, L., & de Wit, H. (2019). Trends in global higher education: Tracking an academic revolution. Brill.
2. Jones, S., & Osei, M. (2024). Academic leadership and institutional credibility in West Africa. Journal of Higher Education in Africa, 22(1), 45–62.
3. Maganga, F., & Nkhoma, B. (2020). Governance challenges in African universities. Higher Education Policy, 33(4), 567–583. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41307-020-00189-7
4. Salmi, J. (2022). Leadership and governance in developing world universities. Studies in Higher Education, 47(12), 2471–2486. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2021.1948523
5. Teferra, D. (2021). Corruption in African higher education: Patterns and consequences. International Journal of Educational Development, 82, 102371. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2021.102371
6. World Bank. (2023). Tertiary education governance and accountability in Sub-Saharan Africa. Washington, DC: World Bank.