

INTENT-FOCUSED MANAGEMENT AS A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR GOVERNANCE REFORM IN NIGERIAN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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ARTICLE INFO

Article No.: 0211

Accepted Date: 11/02/2026

Published Date: 11/03/2026

Type: Research

ABSTRACT

Nigerian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) continue to experience governance inefficiencies rooted in bureaucratic rigidity and centralized control structures. Despite extensive critique of classical management models within the sector, there remains limited development of alternative governance frameworks suited to knowledge-intensive institutions. This paper adopts a conceptual-theoretical methodology to develop Intent-Focused Management (IFM) as a governance framework for Nigerian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Drawing from strategic intent theory and mission-command logic, IFM is structured around three core constructs: institutional intent clarity, decentralized autonomy within boundary conditions, and adaptive feedback systems. A formal conceptual model is proposed, and these mechanisms are theoretically expected to enhance institutional performance through improved organizational agility, innovation capacity, and faculty engagement. The study contributes to higher education governance scholarship by conceptualizing institutional intent as a primary coordination mechanism and outlines pathways for empirical validation.

Keywords: Intent-Focused Management; Higher Education Governance; Institutional Agility; Strategic Intent; Nigerian Higher Education

Introduction

Governance challenges in Nigerian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) remain persistent despite recurring reforms. Universities worldwide increasingly operate in competitive and rapidly evolving knowledge environments, requiring governance systems capable of strategic adaptation and institutional entrepreneurship (Clark, 1998). Industrial actions, policy instability, procedural bottlenecks, and weak institutional responsiveness continue to undermine the sector (Ogbondah & Ogbondah, 2022; Tijani & Adeyemi, 2021). While external factors like funding are critical, the underlying managerial philosophies significantly dictate institutional outcomes.

Most Nigerian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) operate under hierarchical administrative systems rooted in colonial bureaucratic traditions and classical management (Adeyemi & Ekundayo, 2021). These systems prioritize procedural compliance over innovation, leading to institutional inertia. There is a significant theoretical gap in the literature: while existing research critiques these inefficiencies, there is a lack of robust alternative frameworks that reconcile institutional control with academic autonomy and adaptability.

Existing governance models in Nigerian HEIs tend to privilege either centralized control or participatory autonomy, but rarely integrate both within a coherent coordination logic. Classical bureaucracy ensures compliance yet suppresses initiative, while participatory and distributed models enhance inclusion but may dilute strategic coherence. There remains limited theoretical development of integrative frameworks capable of reconciling institutional alignment with decentralized professional autonomy. This paper addresses that gap.

This paper introduces Intent-Focused Management (IFM) to fill this gap. IFM is adapted from the concept of *Auftragstaktik* (mission-command), which emphasizes shared purpose and subordinate autonomy. Existing scholarship on Nigerian higher education governance has largely focused on critiquing bureaucratic inefficiencies rather than proposing integrative governance alternatives that reconcile institutional alignment with professional autonomy. Consequently, a theoretical gap remains concerning how higher education institutions can maintain accountability while enabling decentralized innovation.

Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to develop Intent-Focused Management (IFM) as a conceptual governance framework for Nigerian higher education institutions. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. Position IFM within existing higher education governance literature,
2. Develop a formal conceptual model linking institutional intent, decentralized autonomy, and adaptive feedback, and
3. Propose theoretically derived propositions that can guide future empirical research.

Literature Review

Governance Traditions and Their Limits

Governance structures within higher education institutions Nigerian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have long been influenced by broader management theories developed primarily in industrial and bureaucratic contexts. Classical management theories including scientific management, administrative theory, and bureaucratic organization provided foundational principles for organizational control, coordination, and efficiency. However, the unique characteristics of universities as knowledge-intensive institutions have generated ongoing debates about the suitability of these models for academic governance.

Universities differ from traditional organizations because they operate as professional bureaucracies, where authority is distributed among highly trained experts rather than concentrated exclusively in administrative hierarchies. As a result, governance models that rely heavily on centralized decision-making and procedural control often struggle to accommodate the autonomy and creativity required in academic environments. Consequently, scholars have

increasingly questioned whether traditional management approaches adequately address the governance challenges faced by contemporary higher education systems.

Within the Nigerian higher education context, governance challenges such as bureaucratic rigidity, policy volatility, funding instability, and limited institutional responsiveness have intensified the need for more adaptive management frameworks. While existing research frequently critiques the limitations of bureaucratic administration in universities, there remains relatively limited theoretical development of alternative governance models capable of reconciling institutional alignment with professional autonomy.

1 Classical and Bureaucratic Foundations

Classical management theories have historically shaped the administrative architecture of many higher education institutions. Scientific Management, introduced by Frederick Taylor, emphasized efficiency through task specialization and standardized procedures. Administrative Theory, developed by Henri Fayol, highlighted principles such as hierarchy, authority, and formal planning. Similarly, Max Weber's bureaucratic theory emphasized rule-based governance, formal authority structures, and procedural accountability.

These frameworks have influenced the organizational structures of many public institutions, including universities in developing countries. Nigerian higher education institutions, in particular, inherited many bureaucratic governance practices from colonial administrative systems, resulting in highly centralized decision-making structures and procedural compliance mechanisms (Adeyemi & Ekundayo, 2021).

Although these classical approaches provide stability and administrative order, they often conflict with the operational realities of universities. According to Mintzberg (1980), universities function as professional bureaucracies, in which authority is distributed among highly trained specialists rather than concentrated within administrative hierarchies. In such organizational systems, coordination depends largely on professional expertise and shared norms rather than strict hierarchical control. Consequently, excessive reliance on centralized administrative procedures may undermine flexibility, interdisciplinary collaboration, and institutional responsiveness (Birnbaum, 1988). Universities differ from traditional organizations because they operate as professional bureaucracies and loosely coupled systems in which authority and expertise are widely distributed among academic units rather than centralized in administrative hierarchies (Birnbaum, 1988). Excessive reliance on hierarchical controls can therefore lead to slow decision-making, reduced interdisciplinary collaboration, and limited institutional adaptability during periods of crisis or environmental change (Ogunode & Jegede, 2021).

2 Contemporary Governance Models in Higher Education

In response to the limitations of classical bureaucracy, several contemporary governance models have emerged within higher education management literature. Among the most prominent are Participatory Governance, Distributed Leadership, and New Public Management (NPM). Contemporary higher education systems are increasingly governed through hybrid steering arrangements that combine state regulation, institutional autonomy, and managerial coordination (Gornitzka & Maassen, 2000).

Participatory governance emphasizes shared decision-making and collegial engagement among faculty, administrators, and other stakeholders. This model reflects the collegial traditions of universities and aims to strengthen institutional legitimacy and collective ownership of decisions. However, participatory systems may also introduce coordination challenges and dilute strategic coherence when decision authority becomes excessively dispersed.

Distributed leadership similarly recognizes the importance of decentralized expertise in complex organizations. By encouraging leadership roles across multiple levels of the institution, distributed leadership seeks to leverage professional knowledge and improve

institutional responsiveness. Nevertheless, without clear strategic direction, distributed leadership structures may struggle to maintain alignment between local initiatives and institutional priorities.

New Public Management represents another influential governance paradigm that has reshaped public sector administration globally (Hood, 1991). In higher education, NPM emphasizes performance measurement, accountability mechanisms, and managerial efficiency. While these reforms have improved transparency and performance monitoring in many public institutions, critics argue that excessive reliance on quantitative metrics may undermine collegial trust and academic freedom within universities (Oyewole, 2021).

Despite these diverse approaches, a fundamental tension remains unresolved within higher education governance: the need to balance institutional coherence with professional autonomy. Classical bureaucracy prioritizes control but suppresses initiative, while participatory models enhance inclusion but may weaken strategic alignment. Contemporary governance literature therefore highlights the absence of integrative frameworks capable of simultaneously maintaining institutional direction and enabling decentralized innovation.

Intent-Focused Management (IFM) is proposed as a conceptual response to this governance dilemma. By positioning shared institutional intent as the primary coordination mechanism, IFM seeks to reconcile organizational alignment with decentralized professional autonomy. In doing so, the framework extends existing governance theories by emphasizing purpose-driven coordination rather than reliance on hierarchical control or performance metrics alone.

Theoretical Framework: Intent-Focused Management (IFM)

1 Core Constructs

Intent-Focused Management (IFM) is defined as a governance theory in which institutional leaders articulate a clearly defined strategic intent and delegate decision-making authority within explicitly bounded structural and regulatory conditions.

Institutional Intent: In Nigerian HEIs, where policy shifts and funding volatility frequently disrupt planning cycles, strategic intent serves as a stabilizing anchor. Rather than relying solely on procedural compliance, institutional leaders articulate a clear end-state that guides faculty-level decision-making even amid external uncertainty.

Decentralized Autonomy: Delegation of authority to faculties and departments to determine the "how" of execution.

Boundary Conditions: Institutional, regulatory, financial, and ethical parameters within which decentralized actors exercise autonomy. These conditions ensure that flexibility does not compromise accountability or compliance with national higher education regulations.

Adaptive Feedback: Monitoring focused on outcomes rather than procedural audits.

The relationships depicted in Figure 1 form the basis for the theoretical propositions advanced in this study. Institutional intent clarity is expected to reduce goal ambiguity within higher education institutions. When intent is clearly communicated, decentralized autonomy allows academic units to exercise professional expertise while maintaining alignment with institutional priorities. Environmental dynamism further influences the strength of these relationships, particularly in contexts characterized by policy volatility, funding instability, and technological transformation.

Conceptual Model

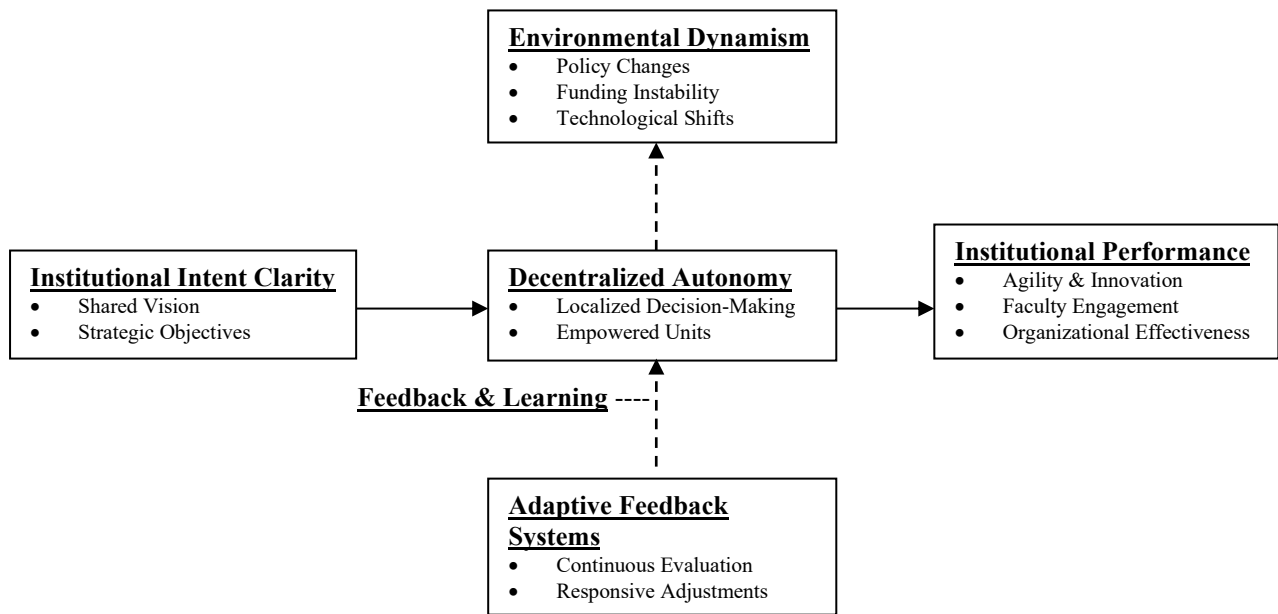


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Intent-Focused Management in Higher Education Institutions.

Source: Developed by the authors based on Henry Mintzberg (1980) professional bureaucracy framework and Stephen Bungay (2011) mission-command strategy model.

Conceptual Model Explanation

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual architecture of the Intent-Focused Management (IFM) framework. The model positions institutional intent clarity as the central coordinating mechanism that guides organizational decision-making within higher education institutions. When institutional intent is clearly articulated, academic units and administrative actors are better able to align their actions with institutional priorities while retaining operational flexibility.

Within the model, decentralized autonomy functions as a key enabling mechanism through which departments, faculties, and academic units interpret and implement institutional intent in context-specific ways. Rather than relying solely on hierarchical directives, IFM assumes that professional actors in universities possess the expertise necessary to make informed operational decisions when strategic intent is clearly communicated.

The model further incorporates adaptive feedback systems, which provide continuous information regarding institutional performance, environmental changes, and operational outcomes. These feedback mechanisms allow institutions to refine strategies and adjust operational practices dynamically. Finally, the framework recognizes environmental dynamism as a contextual factor influencing governance effectiveness. Rapid changes in policy environments, funding structures, technological innovation, and societal expectations require governance models capable of maintaining strategic coherence while enabling flexible responses. Through the interaction of these constructs, IFM explains how universities can maintain coordinated institutional direction while empowering decentralized academic initiative.

Theoretical Propositions

Drawing on the conceptual framework presented in Figure 1, the following propositions articulate the expected relationships between institutional intent, decentralized

autonomy, environmental dynamism, and institutional outcomes in Nigerian higher education institutions.

P1: Higher levels of institutional intent clarity are negatively associated with goal ambiguity within higher education institutions.

P2: Institutional intent clarity is positively associated with decentralized autonomy in academic units.

P3: Decentralized autonomy is positively associated with institutional performance outcomes, including innovation, agility, and faculty engagement.

P4: Environmental dynamism positively moderates the relationship between decentralized autonomy and academic innovation.

P5: Adaptive feedback systems strengthen the alignment between decentralized autonomy and institutional performance by enabling continuous learning and strategic adjustment.

Environmental Dynamism in the Nigerian Context

Environmental dynamism has been widely recognized as a driver of organizational agility in complex institutions (Hassan, 2023). Environmental dynamism in the Nigerian context manifests in abrupt regulatory reforms, funding instability, and technological disruption. Under such conditions, centralized bureaucratic systems tend to slow institutional response. IFM theorizes that bounded autonomy enhances responsiveness while preserving strategic coherence.

Nigerian HEIs operate under conditions characterized by:

- I. Policy volatility
- II. Funding unpredictability
- III. Technological transformation
- IV. Changing labor market demands

In such environments, centralized control may delay responsiveness. IFM posits that clarity of intent combined with bounded autonomy enhances adaptive capacity while maintaining coherence.

Operationalizing Intent-Focused Management: The UD-AIR Heuristic

The UD-AIR operationalized IFM but does not replace its theoretical structure. This study proposes the UD-AIR heuristic. UD-AIR is developed by the authors as an operational guide derived from strategic alignment theory and adaptive governance principles (Bungay, 2011; Sull, Sull, & Yoder, 2022). It does not constitute a standalone management theory; rather, it provides a structured implementation pathway consistent with IFM's core constructs.

1 The heuristic comprises five interrelated stages:

These stages translate the abstract principles of IFM into a practical governance workflow for higher education institutions.

1. **Understand:** Institutional leaders and academic units must develop a shared understanding of the institution's articulated intent and the external operating environment. This stage ensures that autonomy is exercised within a clearly internalized strategic direction.
2. **Determine:** Based on shared understanding, faculties and departments determine strategic priorities and action pathways aligned with institutional intent. This stage operationalizes decentralized decision-making within boundary conditions.
3. **Allocate:** Resources, authority, and responsibilities are distributed according to strategic priorities rather than procedural tradition. Allocation is guided by mission relevance rather than administrative routine.
4. **Implement:** Academic and administrative units execute their plans autonomously while remaining aligned with institutional intent. Implementation emphasizes initiative and professional expertise rather than compliance with excessive centralized approvals.

5. **Review:** Adaptive feedback mechanisms evaluate outcomes relative to intended objectives. Monitoring focuses on strategic results rather than procedural conformity, allowing recalibration where necessary.

Theoretical Justification of UD-AIR

The UD-AIR heuristic reflects three underlying principles consistent with IFM:

- I. **Purpose precedes process:** Institutional intent anchors decision-making.
- II. **Autonomy operates within boundaries:** Decentralization does not eliminate accountability.
- III. **Feedback enables adaptation:** Governance systems must remain responsive in dynamic environments.

By structuring implementation around these stages, UD-AIR strengthens the practical applicability of IFM while maintaining theoretical coherence.

Application and Implications of Intent-Focused Management

Application Across Nigerian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)

Universities: Faculty-level autonomy in curriculum innovation aligned with national development goals.

Polytechnics: Industry-responsive program development within intent-defined skill priorities.

Colleges of Education: Localized pedagogical reforms consistent with teacher development goals.

Implementation strategies may include simplifying approval processes. Similar decentralization reforms have been observed in universities adopting agile governance systems (Hassan, 2023). Embedding intent into departmental planning cycles, and shifting from procedural audits to performance dialogues. For example, under IFM, a university senate would approve a broad institutional intent such as digital transformation leadership. Faculties would then independently redesign curricula, pursue industry collaborations, or develop online programs within defined budgetary and regulatory boundaries. Oversight would shift from procedural approval to outcome-based review of enrollment growth, research output, and student employability.

In practice, IFM would require a shift in governance culture from rule enforcement to strategic dialogue. University senates and governing councils would focus on articulating institutional priorities and monitoring outcomes rather than approving routine operational decisions. Departments would therefore gain greater operational flexibility while remaining accountable to clearly defined strategic objectives.

Under IFM, governing councils would retain oversight responsibility through boundary-setting and strategic review rather than routine procedural intervention. Departments would exercise autonomy within clearly articulated financial and regulatory parameters, thereby reducing administrative congestion while maintaining accountability.

Discussion

IFM differs structurally from classical bureaucratic governance by shifting coordination from procedural control to shared purpose. Debates surrounding the evolution of shared governance in universities further illustrate the challenge of balancing administrative coordination with faculty autonomy (Birnbaum, 2004). This perspective aligns with the broader transformation toward the “enterprise university,” where institutions increasingly rely on strategic coordination and managerial alignment to remain competitive in knowledge economies (Marginson & Considine, 2000). Unlike participatory governance, IFM prioritizes strategic coherence while preserving inclusive engagement. Compared to distributed leadership, IFM emphasizes alignment with intent as the central guiding mechanism. In contrast to NPM, IFM places purpose before metrics, using performance measurement as adaptive feedback rather than surveillance. These outcomes emerge theoretically because

shared intent reduces coordination costs, while bounded autonomy allows professional expertise within academic units to drive innovation.

The theoretical contribution lies in conceptualizing institutional intent as a primary coordination mechanism within professional bureaucracies. The model reframes autonomy and control not as opposites but as complementary when mediated by shared purpose.

Comparative matrix-style contrast:

Conceptually, governance models differ in their dominant coordination mechanisms. Classical bureaucracy coordinates through rules and hierarchy; New Public Management emphasizes metrics and performance controls; participatory governance relies on inclusion and deliberation. IFM, by contrast, coordinates primarily through shared institutional intent, using autonomy and feedback as enabling mechanisms rather than substitutes for purpose. This distinction clarifies IFM's structural positioning within governance theory.

By explicitly linking institutional intent, decentralized autonomy, adaptive feedback systems, and environmental dynamism, the IFM framework advances a theoretically integrated governance model capable of explaining how higher education institutions can maintain strategic coherence while enabling decentralized professional initiative and institutional adaptability.

Conclusion

Governance challenges in Nigerian higher education extend beyond funding constraints to underlying managerial paradigms. Intent-Focused Management offers a theoretically grounded framework that centers institutional purpose, empowers professional autonomy within boundaries, and coordinates through adaptive feedback. The primary theoretical contribution of this study lies in conceptualizing institutional intent as a central coordination mechanism capable of reconciling professional autonomy with institutional alignment in higher education governance. As a conceptual study, this paper does not provide empirical validation, which limits causal inference. Future empirical testing across institutional types is necessary to evaluate the robustness of the IFM framework. Notwithstanding its conceptual strengths, IFM remains theoretically derived and requires systematic empirical validation across institutional contexts.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study develops a theoretically grounded framework for governance reform in higher education institutions, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study is conceptual in nature and does not provide empirical validation of the proposed relationships among institutional intent clarity, decentralized autonomy, adaptive feedback systems, and institutional performance. Consequently, the propositions advanced in this study require systematic empirical testing across diverse higher education contexts.

Second, the framework is primarily developed within the context of Nigerian higher education institutions, which are characterized by specific governance structures, policy volatility, and funding constraints. Although the principles of Intent-Focused Management may be applicable to other higher education systems, further comparative research is necessary to determine the extent to which the framework generalizes across different national and institutional contexts.

Future research can build upon this conceptual foundation by conducting empirical investigations that examine the proposed relationships within the IFM model. Quantitative studies using survey instruments could measure constructs such as institutional intent clarity, perceived autonomy, adaptive feedback mechanisms, and institutional agility. Structural equation modeling may be particularly useful for testing the mediating role of decentralized autonomy and the moderating effect of environmental dynamism.

In addition, qualitative case studies of universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education could provide deeper insights into how intent-focused governance practices operate

in real institutional settings. Longitudinal research designs may also help examine how shifts toward intent-focused governance influence institutional adaptability and innovation over time. Such studies would contribute to refining the IFM framework and strengthening its empirical and theoretical foundations.

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