



THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INSTITUTIONAL INTEGRITY AND PUBLIC TRUST AMONG UNIVERSITIES' ACADEMIC STAFF IN DELTA STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

The study investigated the relationship between institutional integrity and public trust among Academic Staff in Delta State University Educational System. The research adopted a correlational design. The population comprised 3,390 academic staff from Delta State University, Abraka; Dennis Osadebe University, Asaba; University of Science and Technology, Ozo; and Delta University, Agbor. A sample of 330 respondents was selected using a multi-stage sampling approach that combined purposive and simple random techniques. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire titled Institutional Integrity and Public Trust Questionnaire (IIPQTQ). The instrument's validity was confirmed through expert review and factor analysis, while its reliability was established using Cronbach's Alpha, which yielded a coefficient of 0.82, indicating strong internal consistency. Data were analysed using Pearson Product-Moment Correlation to answer research questions, and simple and multiple linear regression to test hypotheses at the 0.05 level of significance. The findings revealed a significant positive relationship between institutional integrity and public trust. This suggests that universities which demonstrate transparency, fairness, and ethical leadership are more likely to earn public trust. However, sex was found not to have a significant moderating effect on the relationship between institutional integrity and public trust. It is recommended that university management and regulatory bodies, such as the National Universities Commission (NUC), strengthen integrity frameworks through transparent recruitment, merit-based promotions, and strict anti-corruption measures. Additionally, while maintaining gender-sensitive policies, institutions should focus more on systemic reforms that benefit all staff equally to build trust and credibility within the system.

Keywords: Institutional Integrity, Public Trust, Academic Staff, Educational System

Introduction

Institutional integrity within Nigerian tertiary institutions pertains to the extent to which higher education upholds the values of honesty, accountability, transparency, fairness, and adherence to ethical standards in their administrative and academic practices and processes. According to Onuoha and Nwankwo (2022), institutional integrity is the moral backbone of any academic environment, forming the foundation upon which credible teaching, learning, and research are built. In the Nigerian context, this concept becomes even more vital given widespread reports of corruption, unethical practices, and administrative mismanagement in public universities.

Public trust is a fundamental pillar in the successful operation of any nation's education system, particularly at the tertiary level where institutions are expected to uphold the highest standards of teaching, research, and service to the wider society. The decline of integrity in Nigerian tertiary institutions has become a pressing concern in recent years. It manifests through multiple unethical practices such as examination malpractice, falsification of credentials, contract inflation and fraud, sexual harassment for grades, and nepotism in staff recruitment (Iroanya & Adebayo, 2021). These practices have gradually eroded the moral foundation of higher education, weakening the ethical standards that should underpin teaching, research, and administration. The issue of integrity in tertiary institutions is therefore not merely an internal challenge but a societal one, as the institutions are expected to serve as moral and intellectual beacons within the nation.

Ezeani and Ugwu (2020) opined that public trust in educational systems is largely sustained through consistent, transparent, and visible ethical conduct. When academic and administrative actors, including lecturers, non-academic staff, and governing councils, fail to uphold these principles, confidence in the system diminishes significantly. According to Akinyemi and Ogunlade (2023), visible adherence to anti-corruption standards, such as the open publication of financial records, enforcement of anti-sexual harassment policies, and transparency in recruitment and promotion, greatly enhances institutional credibility. These measures, when

genuinely implemented, serve to reaffirm the moral commitment of the institution to fairness and accountability.

Conversely, the failure to uphold integrity has far-reaching consequences. When corruption allegations are ignored or when disciplinary actions are applied selectively, the legitimacy of the institution is severely undermined. This erosion of trust affects multiple dimensions of university life, including student enrolment patterns, alumni engagement, donor participation, and even governmental willingness to provide financial support. Moreover, it creates a toxic academic culture where unethical conduct becomes normalised and merit-based advancement is compromised. Some institutions have recognised the gravity of this situation and have taken concrete steps to address it. For instance, Delta State University (DELSU) has established the Centre for Integrity and Anti-Corruption Studies (CIAS), which serves as a platform for promoting ethical conduct within the university system. According to CIAS reports (2024), the institution has introduced mechanisms such as ethical audits, whistle-blower protection frameworks, and ethics education workshops designed to build awareness and institutional accountability. These initiatives have contributed to an increased willingness among students and staff to report unethical practices, thereby improving transparency and strengthening stakeholder confidence in university processes.

Despite various initiatives aimed at promoting transparency, the task of embedding integrity within the culture of Nigerian tertiary institutions remains profoundly challenging. Persistent structural and attitudinal obstacles, such as fear of victimisation, political interference, weak enforcement of disciplinary actions, and insufficient monitoring systems, continue to undermine meaningful progress. Additionally, the widespread acceptance of corrupt behaviour in the broader socio-political landscape hampers efforts to cultivate ethical practices within the academic environment. According to Obadare and Oloyede (2022), addressing corruption in education requires more than policy formulation; it demands moral reorientation, accountable leadership, and sustained institutional reform.

Empirical evidence from Okonkwo's (2022)

investigation of five federal universities in Nigeria revealed that institutions lacking established integrity units reported higher incidences of academic misconduct and lower student satisfaction levels. This finding underscores that institutional integrity is not merely a moral obligation but a strategic resource essential for maintaining public trust and legitimacy. To foster a culture of ethics and transparency, deliberate reforms are required. Leadership must serve as the foundation for institutional integrity. As emphasised by Bello and Salisu (2021), Vice-Chancellors and senior administrators should exemplify honesty through asset declarations, transparent decision-making, and accountability in office.

Moreover, the inclusion of anti-corruption education in general studies curricula across disciplines is crucial for nurturing ethical consciousness and moral reasoning among students. Such educational exposure enables learners to view integrity as a lifelong virtue rather than a formal academic requirement. Strengthening internal auditing mechanisms is equally vital. These units must operate independently of university management to ensure objectivity and fairness in oversight. Adebisi and Okafor (2023) observed that autonomous auditing systems are significantly associated with reduced corruption levels in public institutions, as they promote impartial assessment and early detection of irregularities.

Legal and institutional frameworks should also be established to provide effective whistleblower protection within the university environment. Such measures would encourage individuals to report unethical practices without fear of reprisal, thereby promoting transparency and accountability. The adoption of digital systems further complements these efforts. The digitalisation of academic and financial processes, such as online registration, electronic grade verification, and e-procurement, can substantially minimise human interference and reduce opportunities for manipulation.

As observed by Okojie and Musa (2022), universities that have adopted digitised administrative systems have recorded significant reductions in corruption and grade falsification. Moreover, strategic collaboration with external integrity bodies, including the Independent

Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) and relevant non-governmental organisations, can reinforce institutional reforms. These partnerships not only enhance technical capacity but also add credibility to internal anti-corruption initiatives. Nwachukwu (2023) posited that alliances with external integrity agencies promote accountability, discourage internal compromise, and help sustain a culture of ethical governance within the academic community.

The role of sex on the relationship between institutional integrity and public trust will also be examined by the researcher. The relationship between sex and public trust within tertiary education has generated increasing scholarly attention, particularly as gendered experiences are believed to influence individuals' perceptions of fairness, transparency, and institutional integrity. According to Eze (2025), gender plays a significant role in shaping levels of trust in academic institutions, with female respondents often expressing lower confidence in the fairness of academic processes and administrative accountability than their male counterparts. This disparity is frequently attributed to the prevalence of gender bias, unequal treatment, and limited representation of women in decision-making positions within the educational system (Aina & Okorie, 2023).

Public trust is intricately tied to perceptions of equity and justice, both of which are shaped by the social and institutional experiences of men and women. According to Johnson and Adetunji (2022), individuals who perceive systemic discrimination or unequal access to opportunities tend to lose confidence in institutional structures. Within many Nigerian universities, female students and staff have reported experiences of sexual harassment, exclusion from governance processes, and inconsistent enforcement of policies, all of which contribute to weakened trust in institutional fairness (Ibrahim & Hassan, 2021). These experiences often create a sense of alienation, leading to scepticism about the university's genuine commitment to ethical conduct and justice.

By contrast, male stakeholders generally report higher levels of trust in institutional systems, possibly due to their greater representation in leadership positions and

reduced exposure to discriminatory practices (Okafor & Bello, 2024). This disparity, however, does not suggest that men are unaffected by institutional misconduct; rather, it underscores how gendered experiences influence perceptions of transparency, accountability, and ethical behaviour within academic institutions. As noted by Nwosu and Ekanem (2023), public trust emerges not only from institutional performance but also from individuals' personal encounters with fairness, inclusiveness, and integrity.

Empirical evidence further demonstrates that institutional integrity serves as a cornerstone for building and sustaining public trust in higher education. Collins (2025) found that visible adherence to anti-corruption policies significantly enhances confidence in academic institutions, while Van der Merwe (2025) established that transparent operations and ethical governance frameworks directly strengthen stakeholder trust. Similarly, Kim (2025) revealed a strong positive correlation between institutional integrity and public confidence, particularly where ethical leadership and digital anti-fraud systems are effectively implemented. Eze (2025) added a gendered perspective, showing that equitable and fair practices enhance trust among both male and female stakeholders, provided integrity principles are consistently upheld.

The relationship between integrity and public trust in Nigeria's tertiary education system is both direct and profound. Integrity, manifested through transparency, ethical leadership, accountability, and fairness, serves as the moral and operational foundation upon which public confidence is built. When institutions institutionalise integrity through equitable policies, gender sensitivity, and consistent enforcement of ethical standards, they not only enhance stakeholder trust but also reaffirm their legitimacy as credible agents of national development.

Statement of the Problem

In Nigeria, there is growing concern over the steady erosion of public trust in the tertiary education sector. This declining trust seems to be driven by recurring issues such as academic corruption, examination malpractice, nepotism in staff appointments and promotions, inadequate infrastructure, frequent industrial actions, and the

perceived poor quality of graduates. The significance of public trust in Nigeria's tertiary education system cannot be overstated. Low integrity could underpin stakeholder confidence, student enrolment, employer validation of academic qualifications, and the willingness of international bodies to collaborate or invest. A trustworthy system enhances the credibility of academic credentials, fosters productive research partnerships, and contributes meaningfully to national development. In contrast, the absence of trust breeds public scepticism, reduces funding opportunities, accelerates brain drain, and compels many Nigerians to seek education abroad.

Several initiatives have been undertaken by individuals and professional organisations to improve the work productivity of academic staff. These efforts include capacity-building programmes, performance-based reward systems, mentorship schemes, and the adoption of digital technologies to enhance teaching and learning outcomes. Despite these interventions, progress has remained limited due to deep-rooted systemic challenges such as weak institutional structures, poor accountability, and inadequate transparency. Institutional integrity, characterised by ethical behaviour, transparent governance, and merit-driven processes, remains fundamental to restoring public confidence. When tertiary institutions demonstrate integrity through fairness, academic honesty, and responsible leadership, they are more likely to gain and sustain the trust of the public.

The problem, therefore, is the deteriorating public trust in Nigeria's tertiary education system, largely stemming from the real and perceived lack of institutional integrity. This loss of trust has far-reaching implications for the quality of education, the productivity of academic staff, and the overall credibility of higher education in the country. This raises a critical question: What is the relationship between institutional integrity and public trust in Nigeria's tertiary education system?. Also, the moderating impact of gender will also be studied.

Objectives of the Study

The study investigated the relationship between institutional integrity and public trust among Universities' Academic Staff in Delta State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study seeks:

1. to examine the relationship between institutional integrity and public trust among Universities' Academic Staff in Delta State, Nigeria
2. to investigate the role of sex in the relationship between the implementation of anti-corruption policies and institutional integrity among Universities Academic Staff in Delta State, Nigeria

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What is the relationship between institutional integrity and public trust among Universities' Academic Staff in Delta State, Nigeria?
2. What is the moderating role of sex in the relationship between the implementation of anti-corruption policies and institutional integrity among Universities Academic Staff in Delta State, Nigeria?

Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance:

1. There is no significant relationship between institutional integrity and public trust among Universities' Academic Staff in Delta State, Nigeria.
2. There is no significant role of sex in the relationship between the implementation of anti-corruption policies and institutional integrity among Universities' Academic Staff in Delta State, Nigeria

Methods and Procedures

The study utilised a correlational research design to investigate the relationship between institutional integrity and public trust in Nigeria's tertiary education system. The population consisted of 3,390 academic staff members across four public universities in Delta State. The breakdown of staff is as follows: Delta State University in Abraka has 1,200 staff; Dennis Osadebe University in Asaba has 750; the University of Science and Technology in Ozoro has 640; and Delta University in Agbor has 800. This information is sourced from the academic staff records of the universities.. The study adopted a multi-stage sampling procedure that combined purposive, stratified, and simple

random sampling techniques to select a total of 330 academic staff from a population of 3,390 across four public universities in Delta State. At the first stage, all four public universities, Delta State University, Abraka; Dennis Osadebe University, Asaba; Delta State University of Science and Technology, Ozoro; and Delta University, Agbor, were purposively included in the study because the research focused specifically on public universities within the state.

At the second stage, the population was stratified based on the four institutions, and proportional allocation was used to determine the number of participants from each university to ensure fair representation. Accordingly, 117 academic staff were selected from Delta State University, Abraka; 73 from Dennis Osadebe University, Asaba; 62 from Delta State University of Science and Technology, Ozoro; and 78 from Delta University, Agbor, bringing the total to 330.

At the third stage, major faculties and departments within each university were purposively chosen to ensure that key academic disciplines such as Arts, Social Sciences, Education, Sciences, and Engineering were represented. Finally, at the fourth stage, individual academic staff were selected from the chosen faculties using simple random sampling techniques. This approach ensured that every eligible academic had an equal chance of being selected, thereby minimising bias and enhancing the representativeness of the sample.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire called the Institutional Integrity and Public Trust Questionnaire (IIPTQ), which consists of twenty items. The questionnaire is divided into two sections: Section A, which captures the demographic variable of sex, and Section B, which includes the Institutional Rating Scale and the Public Trust Rating Scale. In total, there are 20 items in the questionnaire. The validity of the instrument was established by experts in educational measurement and evaluation, who assessed its appropriateness and suitability. Suggestions provided during the validation process were incorporated into the final version of the instrument. To determine the reliability of the instrument, the Cronbach's Alpha technique was employed, yielding a general reliability coefficient of 0.82, indicating a high level of internal consistency. The

questionnaire was administered by the researcher with the assistance of two trained research assistants across the selected universities. Research questions were analysed using Pearson

Product-Moment Correlation and coefficient of determination, while the hypotheses was tested using regression analysis, all conducted at the 0.05 level of significance.

Result and Discussion

Research Question 1: What is the relationship between institutional integrity and public trust among Academic Staff in Delta State University's Educational System?

Table 1: Correlation and coefficient of determination of the relationship between institutional integrity and public trust among Academic Staff in Delta State Universities Educational System

Variable	<i>n</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>r</i> ²	<i>r</i> ² %	Decision
Institutional integrity	330	0.498	0.248	24.8	Positive Relationship
Public trust					

Table 1 presents the correlation and coefficient of determination between institutional integrity and public trust among academic staff in Delta State universities. The result shows a correlation coefficient (*r*) of 0.498, indicating a moderate positive relationship between institutional integrity and public trust. The coefficient of

determination (*r*²) is 0.248, meaning that approximately 24.8% of the variation in public trust can be explained by institutional integrity. This suggests that as institutional integrity improves, public trust also tends to increase among academic staff in the university system.

Research Question 2: What is the moderating role of sex in the relationship between institutional integrity and public trust among Academic Staff in Delta State Universities Educational System?

Table 2: Multiple correlation and coefficient of determination of the role of sex in the relationship between institutional integrity and public trust among Academic Staff in Delta State Universities Educational System.

Variable	Sex	<i>n</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>r</i> ²	<i>r</i> ² %	Decision
Institutional integrity	Male	157	0.517	0.267	26.4	Positive Relationship
Public trust	Female	173				

Table 2 shows the result of the multiple correlation analysis assessing the moderating impact of sex on the relationship between institutional integrity and public trust among academic staff in Delta State universities. The multiple correlation coefficient (*r*) is 0.517, indicating a moderate positive relationship when sex is considered as a moderating variable. The

coefficient of determination (*r*²) is 0.267, which implies that 26.7% of the variation in public trust can be explained by institutional integrity in combination with sex. This suggests that sex has a slight moderating effect on the relationship, slightly increasing the strength of the association between institutional integrity and public trust.

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant relationship between institutional integrity and public trust among Academic Staff in Delta State Universities Educational System.

Table 3: Regression analysis of the relationship between institutional integrity and public trust among Academic Staff in Delta State Universities Educational System

Model	Sum of Square	df	Mean Square	F	Sig	Decision
Regression	26866.386	1	26866.386	3.997	.000	Hypothesis rejected
Residual	81498.190	328	81.662			
Total	108364.576	329				

a. Dependent Variable: Publictrust

c.

b. Predictor (Constant) Institutional Integrity

Table 3 presents the regression analysis of the relationship between institutional integrity and public trust among academic staff in Delta State universities. The analysis shows an F-value of 3.997 with a significance level (Sig.) of .000, which is less than the 0.05 threshold. This indicates that the model is statistically significant.

Consequently, the null hypothesis stating that there is no significant relationship between institutional integrity and public trust is rejected. This means that institutional integrity is a significant predictor of public trust among academic staff in the university system.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant moderating role of sex in the relationship between institutional integrity and public trust among Academic Staff in Delta State Universities Educational System.

Table 4: MultipleRegression analysis of the moderating role of sex in the relationship between institutional integrity and public trust among Academic Staff in Delta State Universities Educational System

Model	B	SeB	Beta	t	Sig	Decision
Constant	38.667	2.362		16.372	.000	Hypothesis accepted
Institutional Integrity	.487	.051	.366	9.595	.000	
Sex	.057	.571	.003	.100	.920	

Table 4 presents the multiple regression analysis examining the moderating role of sex in the relationship between institutional integrity and public trust among academic staff in Delta State universities. The results show that institutional integrity significantly correlates with public trust, with a Beta value of 0.366, a t-value of **9.595** and a significance level of .000, which is below the 0.05 threshold. This indicates a strong, positive, and statistically significant relationship. However, the variable **sex** has a Beta value of 0.003, a t-value of 0.100, and a significance level of .920, which is well above 0.05. This means that sex does not significantly moderate the relationship between institutional integrity and public trust.

Discussion of Findings

The first finding shows that there is a significant relationship between institutional integrity and public trust among academic staff in Delta State universities, suggests that when institutions operate with transparency, fairness, and ethical standards, stakeholders are more likely to place confidence in them. Institutional integrity, which includes practices such as merit-based recruitment, accountability in leadership, fairness in grading, and adherence to due process, builds trust among staff, students, and the broader public. This trust is essential for institutional credibility, cooperation, and sustained support. When integrity is compromised, through corruption, favouritism, or mismanagement,

public confidence erodes, leading to disengagement, suspicion, and loss of respect for the institution. In contrast, universities perceived as just and transparent earn the trust and loyalty of their communities, enhancing their reputations and effectiveness. This finding aligns with the works of Collins (2025), Van der Merwe (2025), and Kim (2025), who also reported that institutional integrity is a strong predictor of public trust in higher education systems.

The second finding indicates that sex does not significantly moderate the relationship between institutional integrity and public trust among academic staff in Delta State universities. This suggests that both male and female staff perceive institutional integrity in a similar manner, and their level of trust in the system is influenced more by institutional practices than by gender differences. A plausible reason for this outcome is that academic staff, regardless of sex, are equally affected by issues such as transparency in promotion, fairness in leadership, and accountability in university governance. These institutional factors likely overshadow individual demographic differences when it comes to forming trust. Additionally, the professional expectations and shared experiences within the university environment may foster a uniform outlook on integrity-related matters across sexes. This finding did not align with the study by Eze (2025), who also reported that sex had a significant moderating effect on the relationship between institutional integrity and public trust in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

Conclusion

From the findings, it is therefore concluded that "There is a significant positive relationship between institutional integrity and public trust, indicating that when universities uphold ethical standards, transparency, and fairness, they are more likely to gain the confidence of academic staff and the wider public. However, the study also found that sex does not significantly moderate this relationship, suggesting that male and female staff respond similarly to issues of institutional integrity.

Recommendations

From the findings, it is therefore recommended that:

1. University management and regulatory bodies, such as the National Universities

Commission (NUC), should develop and enforce stronger integrity frameworks that include transparent recruitment processes, merit-based promotions, and strict anti-corruption policies.

2. Universities should continue to implement gender-sensitive policies but focus more on systemic reforms that affect all staff equally.

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