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Power struggles between academic and administrative staff in selected Kenyan public universities: Implications for institutional governance and performance

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Abstract

Power struggles between academic and administrative staff in Kenyan public universities undermine institutional governance and operational effectiveness. Although governance frameworks define the roles and responsibilities of both groups, inconsistencies in their implementation often generate tensions, competing interests, and conflicts. Academic staff, whose core mandate includes teaching, research, and community engagement, may perceive interference when administrative personnel influence academic matters without adequate consultation. Similarly, leadership dynamics, particularly where senior university management is perceived to favour administrative perspectives, may intensify these tensions, thereby affecting decision-making, institutional cohesion, and performance. Guided by Agency Theory and Structural–Functionalism Theory, this study examined how governance structures and leadership dynamics shape power struggles between academic and administrative staff in selected Kenyan public universities and how these struggles influence institutional governance and performance. The study adopted a mixed-methods research design, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches. The target population comprised academic and administrative staff in senior management and other relevant institutional units from ten purposively selected public universities in Kenya. The universities were categorized as established, mid-aged, and emerging institutions based on their years of existence to ensure diversity in institutional contexts, governance structures, and

leadership dynamics. A total of 308 respondents participated in the study, comprising 189 academic staff members and 119 administrative staff members. Structured questionnaires and open-ended questions were used to collect quantitative and qualitative data. A pilot study conducted at Kibabii University confirmed the reliability of the research instrument, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.7. The findings indicate that centralized decision-making, role ambiguity, bureaucratic processes, perceived leadership bias, and favouritism by senior university management significantly contribute to tensions and power struggles between academic and administrative staff. These dynamics weaken trust, collaborative governance, institutional cohesion, and effective decision-making. The study recommends strengthening leadership capacity among senior university management, promoting participatory decision-making, clarifying institutional roles and responsibilities, and establishing structured conflict-resolution mechanisms to enhance governance effectiveness and institutional performance in Kenyan public universities.

Key terms: Power struggles, university governance, leadership dynamics, academic staff, administrative staff, institutional performance

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and context

Power struggles between academic and administrative staff in universities are a significant challenge that can hinder institutional effectiveness. Academic staff, including lecturers, researchers, and professors, are primarily responsible for teaching, research, consultancy, and community outreach, while administrative staff manage critical operational functions such as finance, human resources, and student affairs (Kebenei, 2023). The tension between these groups often arises from governance structures that fail to clearly define decision-making roles, leading to conflicts over authority and responsibilities. Such conflicts can negatively impact institutional performance, creating inefficiencies in policy implementation and decision-making processes (Mamuli, Mustosto, Namasaka, & Odhiambo, 2013).

In Kenyan public universities, power struggles are frequently fueled by competition for resources and organizational politics. Academic staff may perceive administrative personnel as having excessive control over academic matters, while administrators often view faculty members as resistant to institutional policies (Njuguna, 2005). The struggle for influence in areas such as promotions, workload distribution, and resource allocation creates an environment of mistrust, which undermines cooperation. Research has shown that perceptions of unfairness and lack of transparency in university governance negatively affect lecturers' job satisfaction and performance, further deepening these conflicts (Kiplangat, Kangethe, & Momanyi, 2016).

The consequences of these internal conflicts extend beyond interpersonal tensions, affecting overall institutional governance and efficiency. When disputes are not effectively managed, they can lead to low morale among academic staff, reducing motivation and productivity. In extreme cases, unresolved conflicts can escalate into institutional crises, disrupting teaching and research activities (Abiodun, Abutu, & Clement, 2023). Furthermore, an unstable work environment may deter qualified professionals from seeking employment in public universities, ultimately affecting the quality of education and research

outputs (Kebenei, 2023).

Despite universities having in place clear governance structures, academic staff often feel profiled since the policies are either not consistently implemented or are not approved in time to address the grey areas regarding academic and administrative functions. This inconsistency creates loopholes that exacerbate conflicts and prevent smooth institutional operations. Additionally, when a Vice-Chancellor openly favors administrative staff over academic staff, failing to strike a balance, the power struggles worsen. Such bias in leadership leads to perceptions of marginalization among faculty members, further intensifying resistance to administrative decisions and policies (Mamuli et al., 2013). To mitigate power struggles, universities must establish clear governance structures that outline the distinct roles and responsibilities of academic and administrative staff. Well-defined decision-making protocols can reduce role ambiguity and prevent unnecessary conflicts. Moreover, fostering a culture of shared governance, where academic and administrative staff participate collaboratively in policy formulation, can enhance institutional efficiency (Njuguna, 2005). Implementing open and transparent processes in promotions, resource allocation, and decision-making will also help reduce tensions and build trust between the two groups.

Effective communication is critical in bridging the divide between academic and administrative staff. Universities should encourage structured dialogue forums, mediation committees, and digital communication platforms to facilitate information sharing and conflict resolution. Leadership training programs focused on teamwork, negotiation, and conflict management can equip both groups with the skills needed to navigate institutional challenges constructively (Kiplangat et al., 2016). By integrating these strategies, universities can promote a more cohesive and collaborative work environment, reducing unnecessary power struggles.

Ultimately, a well-functioning university relies on the seamless interaction between academic and administrative staff. Public universities in Kenya must recognize the importance of a balanced power dynamic that fosters mutual respect and cooperation. By addressing governance gaps, promoting transparency, and strengthening communication, institutions can create an environment conducive to academic excellence, operational efficiency, and overall institutional success (Abiodun et al., 2023).

1.2 Objectives of the Study

1. To examine how governance structures shape power struggles in Kenyan public universities.
2. To assess the role of leadership dynamics in conflicts between academic and administrative staff.

1.3 Research Questions

1. How do governance structures shape power struggles in Kenyan public universities?
2. What is the role of leadership dynamics in conflicts between academic and administrative staff?

1.4 Statement of the Problem

Power struggles between academic and administrative staff in Kenyan public universities have increasingly hindered institutional governance and operational effectiveness. While governance structures exist to define roles, inconsistencies in their implementation have led to frequent disputes (Kebenei, 2023). Academic staff, responsible for teaching, research, consultancy, and community outreach, often feel undermined when administrative staff exert influence over academic matters without proper consultation (Njuguna, 2005). Additionally, leadership biases, particularly when ViceChancellors favor administrative staff over academic staff, further escalate conflicts, creating a power imbalance that affects decision-making and institutional cohesion (Mamuli, Mustosto, Namasaka, & Odhiambo, 2013).

These tensions not only strain interdepartmental relationships but also reduce the efficiency of universities in fulfilling their academic and operational mandates (Abiodun, Abutu, & Clement, 2023).

The persistence of these conflicts has significant implications for staff morale, job satisfaction, and overall institutional performance. Studies have shown that when academic staff perceive governance structures as unfairly favoring administrators, resistance to policy implementation increases, leading to inefficiencies in university management (Kiplangat, Kangethe, & Momanyi, 2016). Furthermore, competition for limited resources, including funding and infrastructural support, intensifies the divide between the two groups, fostering an environment of mistrust (Kebenei, 2023). The absence of structured conflict resolution mechanisms exacerbates these tensions, ultimately affecting the quality of teaching, research output, and student support services (Njuguna, 2005). If these governance gaps remain unaddressed, Kenyan public universities risk continued disruptions, declining institutional performance, and diminished global competitiveness (Mamuli et al., 2013).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on **Agency Theory** and **the Structural-Functionalism Theory**, both of which provide insights into the power struggles between academic and administrative staff in Kenyan public universities.

2.1.1 Agency Theory

The Agency Theory, developed by Jensen and Meckling (1976), explains the relationship between principals (decision-makers) and agents (those tasked with implementation). In universities, academic staff (faculty) and administrative staff act as agents, while the university leadership, including vice chancellors and councils, serve as principals (Eisenhardt, 1989). Power struggles emerge when the interests of these agents conflict, particularly regarding governance roles, resource allocation, and decision-making authority (Kebenei, 2023). This theory supports the study's objective of examining how governance structures shape power struggles, as it highlights the need for transparent policies to align the interests of both groups and reduce friction (Mamuli, Mustosto, Namasaka, & Odhiambo, 2013). By applying Agency Theory, the study can propose mechanisms for minimizing conflicts, such as participatory decision-making and balanced leadership approaches.

2.1.2 Structural-Functionalism Theory

The Structural-Functionalism Theory, introduced by Parsons (1951), emphasizes that institutions function efficiently when all components work harmoniously within clearly defined roles. In the university setting, academic and administrative staff represent different subsystems, each with distinct responsibilities that contribute to the overall stability of the institution (Durkheim, 1997). However, when these roles overlap or are inconsistently applied, dysfunction arises, leading to power struggles (Kiplangat, Kangethe, & Momanyi, 2016). This theory aligns with the study’s objective of assessing the role of leadership dynamics in conflicts, as it underscores the importance of balanced governance and equitable resource distribution (Abiodun, Abutu, & Clement, 2023). Applying this theory helps in understanding how leadership biases, particularly those favoring administrative staff over academic staff, disrupt university governance and affect institutional performance.

By integrating these two theories, the study will provide a comprehensive understanding of power struggles in public universities, offering theoretical grounding for governance reforms and leadership strategies to enhance institutional harmony.

2.2 Empirical Literature Review

2.2.1 Governance Structure and Power Struggles in Kenyan Public Universities

Governance structures in universities refer to the policies, frameworks, and decision-making processes that define the roles, responsibilities, and relationships among different stakeholders, including academic and administrative staff (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017). Effective governance ensures institutional stability, accountability, and efficiency in resource allocation, fostering a conducive academic environment. However, when governance structures are unclear, inconsistently implemented, or biased, conflicts emerge, leading to power struggles that disrupt university operations. In Kenyan public universities, tensions between academic and administrative staff often arise due to governance gaps, competition for resources, and leadership biases, making it essential to assess how governance structures influence these struggles.

Globally, governance arrangements in higher education have increasingly emphasized the importance of staff participation, shared responsibility, and clearly defined institutional authority. Models that provide academic staff with opportunities to participate in decision-making may reduce perceptions of exclusion and enhance institutional effectiveness (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017). However, where decision-making becomes highly centralized and academic staff perceive that managerial interests dominate institutional governance, tensions may emerge between academic and administrative personnel. These dynamics suggest that governance structures that exclude relevant stakeholders from strategic decision-making may contribute to power struggles and reduce institutional efficiency.

In Kenya, studies have shown that governance structures significantly influence power struggles in public universities. Mamuli, Mustosto, Namasaka, and Odhiambo (2013) found that governance inconsistencies and unclear role definitions contribute to conflicts between academic and administrative staff, undermining institutional effectiveness. Similarly, Kebenei (2023) revealed that organizational politics and leadership preferences may exacerbate tensions when administrative staff are perceived to receive preferential treatment in policy implementation and resource allocation. Kiplangat, Kangethe, and Momanyi (2016) further observed that governance gaps, including challenges in decision-making and performance management, may fuel dissatisfaction and conflict among university staff. These studies highlight the need for well-structured and inclusive governance frameworks to minimize power struggles and enhance operational efficiency in Kenyan public universities.

2.2.2 The Role of Leadership Dynamics in conflicts between academic and administrative staff.

Leadership dynamics refer to the interactions, decision-making approaches, and power relations between leaders and institutional stakeholders, shaping how organizations function (Northouse, 2021). In universities, leadership plays a critical role in balancing the interests of academic and administrative staff, ensuring efficiency and institutional harmony. However, when leadership is perceived as biased, lacks inclusivity, or fails to address conflicts effectively, tensions may emerge, leading to power struggles that undermine university governance. In Kenyan public universities, leadership dynamics significantly influence the relationship between academic and administrative staff, affecting resource allocation, decision-making, and institutional performance.

Leadership approaches that emphasize participation and consultation may enhance cooperation between faculty and administrators by promoting a sense of institutional ownership. Conversely, highly centralized

leadership approaches may create perceptions of exclusion, particularly where academic and administrative staff feel that their interests are not adequately represented in institutional decision-making. The manner in which university leaders communicate decisions, allocate resources, manage staff relations, and resolve disputes therefore has important implications for institutional harmony.

In Kenya, studies have shown that leadership dynamics significantly influence power struggles between academic and administrative staff in public universities. Mamuli, Mustosto, Namasaka, and Odhiambo (2013) found that communication constraints and weaknesses in institutional interaction may contribute to tensions between staff members. Similarly, Kebenei (2023) reported that organizational politics and leadership preferences may create tensions where staff perceive that institutional decisions are influenced by competing interests. Kiplangat, Kangethe, and Momanyi (2016) further observed that challenges in performance management and job satisfaction may contribute to strained relations within universities. These findings highlight the need for leadership models that promote equity, inclusivity, effective communication, and participatory governance to enhance institutional harmony in Kenyan public universities.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design, combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of power struggles between academic and administrative staff in Kenyan public universities. The study employed a cross-sectional survey design, which allowed for the collection of data at a single point in time from various respondents (Creswell & Creswell, 2022).

3.2 Target Population and Sampling

The target population for this study comprised administrative staff in senior management and academic staff members from ten (10) purposively sampled public universities in Kenya. The universities were categorized based on their years of existence, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Categorization of Public Universities Based on Age of Existence

Category	Description	Universities
Established Universities	Universities that have existed for over 30 years	· University of Nairobi · Moi University
Mid – aged Universities	Universities that have existed for 15-30 years	· Kenyatta University · Egerton University · Maseno University · JKUAT
Emerging Universities	Universities that have existed for less than 15 years	· University of Eldoret · Kaimosi Friends University · Mama Ngina University · Karatina University

Source: *Respective HR for the above Universities,2025*

Purposive sampling was used to select universities that provided a diverse representation of governance

structures, leadership dynamics, and institutional policies. The respondents were drawn from both administrative and academic units, ensuring a balanced perspective on the research problem.

3.3 Sample Size

The study's sample size was determined to ensure adequate representation of both academic and administrative staff in the selected universities. A total of 308 respondents participated, including 189 academic staff members and 119 administrative staff members. This sample size was chosen to facilitate meaningful statistical analysis and enhance the generalizability of the findings. Further details on the distribution of respondents across the selected universities are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Sample Size distribution

University	Academic Staff	Administrative Staff	Total
University of Nairobi	30	20	50
Moi University	25	15	40
Kenyatta University	22	13	35
Egerton University	20	12	32
Maseno University	18	12	30
Jomo Kenyatta University of Science and Technology	15	10	25
University of Eldoret	14	9	23
Kaimosi Friends University	16	11	27
Mama Ngina University	14	9	23
Karatina University	13	10	23
Total	**189**	**119**	**308**

3.3 Research Instruments

A structured questionnaire was used as the primary data collection instrument. The questionnaire was designed to capture respondents' views on governance structures, leadership dynamics, and power struggles between academic and administrative staff.

3.4 Pilot Testing and Reliability Analysis

A pilot test was conducted at Kibabii University, which was not included in the main study, to determine the reliability and validity of the questionnaire. A total of 10% of the sample population participated in the pilot test. The Cronbach’s Alpha reliability coefficient for the instrument was 0.81, which is within the acceptable threshold of 0.7 and above, indicating a high level of internal consistency (Taber, 2018).

4. Data Analysis

Data collected from the questionnaires were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics.

Descriptive analysis included frequencies, means, and standard deviations to summarize the respondents' perspectives. Inferential statistical analysis was conducted using regression analysis to examine the relationship between governance structures, leadership dynamics, and power struggles in universities. The analysis was carried out using SPSS software version 25.0.

The study adhered to ethical considerations, including obtaining informed consent from participants, ensuring confidentiality, and seeking approval from relevant university ethics review committees before data collection commenced.

5. Findings and Discussions

5.1 Response Rate

The study targeted a total of 308 respondents across ten public universities in Kenya. Out of this, 285 responses were received, representing a **92.5% response rate**. According to Mugenda and Mugenda (2003), a response rate above 70% is considered excellent for academic research, ensuring reliable and valid findings. The high response rate in this study enhances the credibility of the results and minimizes non-response bias.

5.2 Respondents' Biodata

To provide contextual insights into the study, respondents' demographic details were analyzed based on their **position, gender, and duration of service**. Table 3 presents a summary of the respondents' biodata across the selected universities.

Table 3: Respondents' Biodata by University

University	Position	Male (n)	Female (n)	Total (n)	Duration of Service (Years)
University of Nairobi	Academic Staff	15	10	25	10+
	Administrative	12	8	20	8-10
Moi University	Academic Staff	13	7	20	10+
	Administrative	10	10	20	6-9
Kenyatta University	Academic Staff	12	8	20	5-8
	Administrative	11	9	20	4-7
Egerton University	Academic Staff	10	7	17	6-9
	Administrative	9	8	17	4-6
Maseno University	Academic Staff	10	7	17	10+
	Administrative	8	7	15	5-8
JKUAT	Academic Staff	9	6	15	6-9
	Administrative	8	7	15	5-7

University of Eldoret	Academic Staff	8	6	14	4-6
	Administrative	7	7	14	3-5
Kaimosi Friends University	Academic Staff	8	5	13	3-6
	Administrative	7	6	13	2-4
Mama Ngina University	Academic Staff	7	5	12	2-4
	Administrative	6	6	12	2-4
Karatina University	Academic Staff	7	5	12	3-5
	Administrative	6	6	12	3-5
Total	Academic Staff	**99**	**66**	**165**	-
	Administrative	**84**	**36**	**120**	-
	Overall Total	**183**	**102**	**285**	-

Source: Survey Data (2025)

The study analysed respondents' biodata based on staff category, gender, and years of service. The final sample comprised 285 respondents: 165 academic staff and 120 administrative staff. The respondents included 183 males and 102 females.

The academic staff comprised 99 males and 66 females, while the administrative staff comprised 84 males and 36 females. The distribution provided perspectives from both academic and administrative staff categories. Most academic respondents had substantial institutional experience, while administrative respondents represented varying levels of service. This variation enabled the study to capture perceptions of governance and leadership across different career stages.

5.3 Governance Structures and Power Struggles in Kenyan Public Universities

5.3.1 Centralized vs. Decentralized Decision-Making

The findings indicated that centralized governance structures contributed to power struggles by concentrating decision-making authority among a limited number of senior administrators. A substantial proportion of academic staff reported feeling excluded from key policy decisions, while some administrative staff expressed concerns about limited recognition in institutional management. Such exclusion may generate tensions regarding promotions, budget allocation, workload distribution, and policy implementation.

The findings suggest that governance systems that provide meaningful participation to relevant institutional stakeholders may reduce perceptions of exclusion and strengthen institutional legitimacy. However, decentralization should be accompanied by clear accountability structures to prevent overlapping authority and institutional fragmentation.

5.3.2 Role Ambiguity and Overlapping Responsibilities

The findings further indicated that unclear governance frameworks contributed to overlapping responsibilities between academic and administrative staff. Role ambiguity may generate conflict over decision-making authority, performance evaluation, accountability, and institutional responsibilities. Clear job descriptions and well-defined governance procedures are therefore necessary to reduce unnecessary

overlap while allowing sufficient flexibility for institutions to adapt to changing operational requirements.

5.3.3 Policy Implementation and Bureaucracy

Bureaucratic procedures were identified as a significant source of frustration among respondents. Lengthy approval processes for operational budgets, research activities, procurement, and other institutional decisions were perceived to delay service delivery and create tensions between academic and administrative units.

The findings suggest that universities should streamline administrative procedures while retaining appropriate checks and balances. Digital approval systems, clear timelines, delegated authority, and transparent accountability mechanisms may reduce unnecessary delays and improve institutional efficiency.

5.4 Leadership Dynamics and Conflicts Between Academic and Administrative Staff

5.4.1 Leadership Styles and Workplace Relations

The findings indicated that leadership styles significantly influenced workplace relations. Authoritarian leadership approaches were associated with perceptions of exclusion and increased workplace tension. Conversely, participatory leadership approaches were associated with improved staff engagement and collaboration.

The findings suggest that inclusive leadership can enhance institutional ownership and reduce resistance to institutional decisions. However, participatory governance should be structured to ensure that consultation does not create unnecessary delays in decision-making.

5.4.2 Favoritism in Staff Appointments and Promotions

Perceived favouritism in recruitment, appointments, promotions, and leadership selection was identified as an important source of workplace conflict. Where staff perceive career advancement processes as biased, trust in institutional leadership may decline and resentment may increase.

Universities should therefore strengthen transparent, merit-based, and accountable recruitment and promotion systems. Independent selection panels, clear criteria, documented decisions, and effective appeal mechanisms may enhance confidence in institutional processes.

5.4.3 Communication Gaps and Conflict Escalation

Communication gaps were also identified as a major contributor to conflict escalation. Inadequate communication channels, delayed information, and unclear policy messages may create misunderstandings and mistrust between academic and administrative staff.

Universities should therefore strengthen formal communication structures, staff engagement forums, digital information platforms, and feedback mechanisms. Effective communication requires not only the availability of communication channels but also institutional leadership commitment to transparency and responsiveness.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the study findings, the following conclusions and recommendations are drawn in relation to the study objectives.

6.1 Conclusion

The study concludes that governance structures and leadership dynamics significantly shape power struggles between academic and administrative staff in Kenyan public universities.

First, centralized decision-making structures may limit staff participation and create perceptions of exclusion. Although decentralization can enhance participation, it requires clear accountability mechanisms to prevent governance ambiguity.

Second, unclear roles and overlapping responsibilities contribute to conflict over authority, accountability, and institutional decision-making. Clear governance frameworks and job descriptions are therefore necessary.

Third, excessive bureaucracy delays policy implementation and frustrates both academic and administrative staff. Universities should streamline processes while maintaining transparency and accountability.

Fourth, leadership styles influence workplace relations. Autocratic leadership may intensify conflict, whereas inclusive and participatory leadership may enhance collaboration and institutional cohesion.

Fifth, perceived favouritism in appointments and promotions undermines trust and contributes to power struggles. Transparent and merit-based processes are essential for institutional legitimacy.

Finally, communication gaps contribute to misunderstandings and conflict escalation. Strengthened institutional communication systems are therefore necessary for improving cooperation between academic and administrative staff.

6.2 Recommendations

6.2.1 Strengthening Participatory Decision-Making

Universities should adopt governance arrangements that provide meaningful participation to both academic and administrative staff while maintaining clear lines of institutional accountability.

6.2.2 Clarifying Roles and Responsibilities

Universities should develop clear job descriptions and governance frameworks defining the responsibilities and authority of academic and administrative staff. These frameworks should be periodically reviewed to respond to institutional changes.

6.2.3 Streamlining Bureaucratic Processes

Universities should reduce unnecessary bureaucratic procedures through delegated authority, digital approval systems, clear decision-making timelines, and efficient administrative workflows.

6.2.4 Promoting Inclusive Leadership

Senior university leaders should be trained in participatory leadership, conflict management, negotiation, communication, and collaborative governance. Leadership performance should also be assessed in relation to inclusivity, fairness, and staff engagement.

6.2.5 Ensuring Transparency in Appointments and Promotions

Universities should strengthen merit-based recruitment, appointment, and promotion systems. Clear criteria, independent panels, documented decisions, and appropriate appeal mechanisms should be

implemented to reduce perceptions of favouritism.

6.2.6 Enhancing Institutional Communication

Universities should establish structured communication frameworks that provide timely and accurate information to academic and administrative staff. Regular staff meetings, digital platforms, policy briefings, and feedback mechanisms should be strengthened.

6.3 Recommendations for Further Research

Future research should examine the long-term relationship between governance structures, leadership dynamics, staff relations, and institutional performance in Kenyan public universities. Comparative studies involving public and private universities could provide further insight into the influence of different governance models on academic-administrative relations. Future studies could also examine how digital transformation influences university decision-making, communication, accountability, and staff relations. In addition, longitudinal research could assess the effectiveness of participatory leadership and structured conflict-resolution mechanisms in reducing power struggles within higher education institutions.

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