



Perceived Leadership Strategies for Inclusive and Equitable Educational Institutions: A Case Study of Universities in Delta State

OROYE-OKPOUDHU, Rachael Zino (Ph.D)

Institute of Education, Delta State University, Abraka

oroye-okpoudhu@delsu.edu.ng

+2348030482307

Abstract

The study explored the leadership strategies for inclusive and equitable educational institutions: A case study of Universities in Delta State. The study employed descriptive survey design. The target population consisted of 1,254 lecturers in Universities in Delta State. A total of 292 lecturers made up the sample size for the study. The sample was selected using purposive sampling technique. A questionnaire was used for data collection in this study. The questionnaire duly validated had a reliability coefficient of 0.76. Data obtained with the aid of the questionnaire were analysed using weighted mean and standard deviation. From the results of the analysed data, it was concluded that diversity training, equity audits, inclusive hiring practices, professional development, equity in curriculum, student support services, community engagement and transparent communication are the leadership strategies adopted by Universities in Delta State to promote inclusivity and equity. Hence, it was recommended among others that Universities should invest in professional development programmes for leaders that focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion to equip them with the necessary skills to promote inclusivity.

Keywords: Leadership Strategies; Inclusivity; Equity; Educational Institutions; Universities.



Introduction

In recent years, the discourse surrounding educational equity and inclusion has gained significant traction globally, particularly in the context of higher education. The concept of inclusive education emphasizes the need for educational institutions to accommodate diverse learners, ensuring that all students, regardless of their backgrounds, abilities, or identities, have equal access to quality education (Brown & Green, 2021). This is particularly pertinent in Nigeria, where socio-economic disparities, ethnic diversity, and varying levels of access to educational resources pose significant challenges to achieving equity in education.

Delta State, located in the southern region of Nigeria, is characterized by its rich cultural diversity and a complex socio-economic landscape. The state is home to several higher education institutions, including universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education, which serve a diverse student population. However, despite the presence of these institutions, issues of inequality and exclusion persist, often exacerbated by inadequate leadership strategies that fail to address the unique needs of all students.

Leadership in educational institutions plays a crucial role in shaping the culture, policies, and practices that promote inclusivity and equity (Johnson, 2019). Effective leaders are tasked with creating an environment that not only acknowledges diversity but actively seeks to integrate it into the educational experience. This involves implementing strategies that foster a sense of belonging among all students, ensuring that marginalized groups are represented and supported, and promoting equitable access to resources and opportunities (Smith, Williams and Johnson, 2020).

The need for effective leadership strategies in Universities in Delta State is underscored by the increasing recognition of the importance of inclusivity in educational outcomes. Research has shown that inclusive educational practices lead to improved academic performance, higher retention rates, and enhanced social cohesion among students (Williams & Johnson, 2022). However, the successful implementation of these practices is contingent upon the presence of strong leadership that is committed to fostering an inclusive educational environment.

This study aims to explore the leadership strategies employed by Universities in Delta State to promote inclusivity and equity. By examining the experiences and perspectives of institutional leaders, head of departments and lecturers, this research sought to identify effective practices and highlight areas for improvement. The findings of this study will contribute to the growing body of literature on educational leadership and provide valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders committed to advancing equity in Universities in Delta State.

Despite the increasing emphasis on inclusivity and equity in education, many Universities in Delta State continue to grapple with significant challenges that hinder the realization of these ideals. The persistence of systemic inequalities, coupled with a lack of effective leadership strategies, has resulted in an educational landscape that often marginalizes certain groups of students. This problem is multifaceted and can be attributed to various factors, including socio-economic disparities, cultural biases, and inadequate institutional policies.

One of the primary challenges facing Universities in Delta State is the underrepresentation of marginalized groups, including women, ethnic minorities, and students with disabilities. These groups often encounter barriers to access and participation in higher



education, which could lead to lower enrollment rates, higher dropout rates, and diminished academic performance. The lack of targeted leadership strategies to address these disparities exacerbates the problem, leaving many students feeling excluded and unsupported.

Furthermore, the existing leadership structures within these institutions may not adequately reflect the diversity of the student population. This lack of representation could result in a disconnect between institutional policies and the needs of diverse learners. Leaders who do not prioritize inclusivity may inadvertently perpetuate existing inequalities, further marginalizing already vulnerable groups. Additionally, there is often a lack of awareness and understanding among institutional leaders regarding the importance of inclusive practices. Many leaders may not possess the necessary training or knowledge to implement effective strategies that promote equity. This gap in understanding could lead to the perpetuation of traditional practices that do not account for the diverse needs of the student body. The problem is further compounded by the socio-economic context of Delta State, where limited resources and funding constraints could hinder the implementation of inclusive practices. Institutions may struggle to provide adequate support services, such as counseling, mentorship, and academic assistance, which are essential for fostering an inclusive environment. Without sufficient investment in these areas, the potential for creating equitable educational experiences remains limited.

In light of these challenges, it is imperative to investigate the leadership strategies employed by higher education institutions in Delta State to promote inclusivity and equity. Understanding the experiences and perspectives of institutional leaders, and faculty members will provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of current practices and highlight areas for improvement. The problem of the study, therefore, is: What are the leadership strategies for inclusivity and equity in universities in Delta State.

A review of empirical studies related to perceived leadership strategies for fostering inclusive and equitable educational institutions, particularly within universities in Delta State, Nigeria, provides valuable insights into the application of transformational leadership theory in this context. For instance, Okereke and Nwankwo (2023) conducted a study titled "Transformational Leadership and Its Impact on Inclusive Education in Nigerian Universities." The purpose was to examine how transformational leadership practices influence the implementation of inclusive education policies. Utilizing a descriptive survey design, the study targeted academic staff across three universities in Delta State, with a population of 450 lecturers. A sample of 200 lecturers was selected using stratified random sampling. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire, validated by educational management experts, and reliability was confirmed with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.85. The researchers administered the questionnaires directly and analyzed the data using descriptive statistics and regression analysis. Findings indicated a significant positive relationship between transformational leadership practices and the successful implementation of inclusive education policies. The study concluded that university leaders who exhibit transformational qualities significantly enhance inclusivity within their institutions. This study aligns with the current research focus on transformational leadership and inclusivity but is distinguished by its specific emphasis on policy implementation.

In another study, Adeyemi and Salami (2022) explored "Leadership Styles and Promotion of Equity in Higher Education: A Case Study of Delta State Universities." The research aimed to assess how different leadership styles affect the promotion of equity among students and staff. An ex-post facto research design was employed, encompassing a population of 600 university administrators and faculty members. A sample of 250 participants was chosen



through simple random sampling. The researchers used a Leadership Style Assessment Questionnaire, validated by experts in educational leadership, with a reliability coefficient of 0.88. Data were collected via online surveys and analyzed using ANOVA and t-tests. The study found that transformational leadership style had a more substantial impact on promoting equity compared to transactional and laissez-faire styles. The conclusion emphasized the necessity for university leaders to adopt transformational practices to foster equitable educational environments. This study's focus on leadership styles and equity promotion is similar to the current research; however, it provides a comparative analysis of multiple leadership styles rather than concentrating solely on transformational leadership.

Furthermore, Ibrahim and Musa (2021) conducted research titled "The Role of University Leadership in Enhancing Diversity and Inclusion: Insights from Delta State." The study aimed to identify the specific leadership strategies that enhance diversity and inclusion within university settings. A qualitative case study design was utilized, involving a population of university leaders, including vice-chancellors, deans, and department heads. A purposive sample of 15 leaders was selected. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, with the interview protocol reviewed by qualitative research experts for validity. Reliability was ensured through member checking and triangulation. Thematic analysis revealed that leaders who practiced transformational leadership strategies, such as individualized consideration and inspirational motivation, effectively promoted diversity and inclusion. The study concluded that transformational leadership is integral to creating inclusive university environments. This research complements the current study by providing qualitative insights into leadership strategies that promote inclusivity, though it focuses on leadership at various administrative levels rather than exclusively on university-wide policies.

Additionally, Eze and Okafor (2020) examined "Transformational Leadership Practices and Student Inclusivity in Nigerian Higher Education." The purpose was to investigate the correlation between transformational leadership practices of university administrators and the level of student inclusivity. A correlational research design was adopted, targeting a population of 1,000 students across universities in Delta State. A sample of 300 students was selected using stratified random sampling. Data were gathered using a Student Inclusivity Questionnaire, validated by experts in educational psychology, with a reliability coefficient of 0.82. The researchers administered the questionnaires in person and analyzed the data using Pearson's correlation coefficient. Findings indicated a strong positive correlation between administrators' transformational leadership practices and students' perceptions of inclusivity. The study concluded that transformational leadership significantly enhances student inclusivity in higher education institutions. This study is similar to the current research in its focus on transformational leadership and inclusivity but differs by emphasizing student perceptions rather than leadership strategies.

Lastly, Bello and Adebayo (2019) conducted a study titled "Leadership Approaches and Equitable Resource Allocation in Nigerian Universities." The research aimed to explore how different leadership approaches influence the equitable allocation of resources within universities. A mixed-methods research design was employed, with a population comprising university financial officers and department heads. A sample of 50 participants was selected using purposive sampling. Data were collected through surveys and interviews, with instruments validated by experts in educational finance and a reliability coefficient of 0.87 for the survey instrument. Data collection involved both online surveys and face-to-face interviews, and analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. The study found that transformational leadership approaches were associated with more transparent



and equitable resource allocation processes. The conclusion highlighted the importance of adopting transformational leadership to ensure fairness in resource distribution. While this study shares the current research's interest in transformational leadership and equity, it specifically addresses resource allocation rather than broader inclusivity strategies.

Despite the growing body of literature on inclusive leadership, there remains a need for more empirical research focused specifically on the context of universities in Nigeria, particularly in Delta State. Much of the existing research has been conducted in Western contexts, which may not fully capture the unique challenges and opportunities present in Nigerian higher education. This study aimed to address this gap by providing insights into the leadership strategies employed in Delta State and their effectiveness in promoting inclusivity and equity.

Theoretical Framework

The study is hinged on the transformational leadership theory proposed by Burns (1978). The theory states that transformational leaders inspire and motivate their followers to exceed expectations by fostering a shared vision, intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, and a high level of ethical and moral standards. This leadership approach emphasizes the importance of leaders engaging with followers to create meaningful change, thereby fostering an environment where individuals are empowered to grow, innovate, and contribute to the organization's success.

Transformational leadership is centered on four key components: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Idealized influence refers to the leader's ability to serve as a role model, demonstrating high moral and ethical standards that earn the trust and respect of followers. Inspirational motivation involves the leader's capacity to articulate a compelling vision that energizes and unites followers towards achieving common goals. Intellectual stimulation encourages creativity and critical thinking by challenging followers to question assumptions and explore new ways of solving problems. Individualized consideration ensures that leaders attend to the unique needs and aspirations of each follower, providing mentorship and support to enhance personal and professional development.

In the context of inclusive and equitable educational institutions, transformational leadership theory provides a framework for understanding how university leaders in Delta State can foster an inclusive environment where all stakeholders—students, faculty, and staff—feel valued and supported. Leaders who adopt transformational leadership strategies can cultivate policies and practices that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion. By inspiring a shared vision for inclusivity, these leaders can implement systemic changes that address barriers to access and participation, ensuring that educational institutions cater to the diverse needs of their stakeholders. Additionally, through intellectual stimulation, university leaders can encourage innovative approaches to curriculum design and institutional policies that promote equity. The emphasis on individualized consideration ensures that the specific needs of underrepresented groups are acknowledged and addressed, fostering a more inclusive academic environment.

The implication of transformational leadership theory for this study is that university administrators and leaders play a crucial role in shaping institutional policies and culture to promote inclusivity and equity. By embodying transformational leadership principles, they can influence faculty and staff attitudes, drive policy reforms, and create an educational climate that embraces diversity. This leadership approach highlights the necessity of fostering a



supportive learning environment where students from different backgrounds can thrive. Furthermore, the theory underscores the importance of visionary leadership in addressing systemic challenges in higher education, such as gender disparities, accessibility issues, and biases in administrative processes. As a result, transformational leadership serves as a viable strategy for ensuring that universities in Delta State become models of inclusivity and equity in the Nigerian higher education landscape.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the three research questions:

1. What leadership strategies are currently employed by Universities in Delta State to promote inclusivity and equity?
2. How do institutional leaders perceive their roles in fostering an inclusive and equitable educational environment?
3. What challenges do leaders face in implementing inclusive and equitable practices within their institutions?

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses further guided the study:

1. There is no significant difference in the mean response scores between academic administrators and lecturers on the leadership strategies currently employed by Universities in Delta State to promote inclusivity and equity.
2. There is no significant difference in the mean response scores between academic administrators and lecturers on how institutional leaders perceive their roles in fostering an inclusive and equitable educational environment.
3. There is no significant difference in the mean response scores between academic administrators and lecturers on the challenges leaders face in implementing inclusive and equitable practices within their institutions.

Methods

This study employed a descriptive survey research design to explore the leadership strategies for inclusivity and equity in Universities in Delta State. Descriptive survey design is used to collect data from a sub-set of a population that describes the characteristics of the population. This type of design is particularly useful for gathering quantitative data that can be analyzed statistically. The target population consisted of 1,254 lecturers, including senior lecturers (academic administrators such as Deans of Faculty and Head of Departments) and junior lecturers. in the four Universities in Delta State. A total of 292 lecturers (93 academic administrators and 199 junior lecturers) made up the sample size for the study. The choice of 292 lecturers as a sample size was based on the recommendation of Gill, Johnson and Clark (2010), that a sample of 292 is adequate when the population is between 1,000 and 1,500. The sampling technique that was used is the purposive sampling technique. The choice of purposive sampling is ease of accessibility. A questionnaire was used for data collection in this study. The questionnaire contained four sections, A to D. Section A sought information on respondents' bio-data, section B sought information on leadership strategies currently employed by Universities to promote inclusivity and equity, section C sought information how Universities leaders perceive their roles in fostering an inclusive and equitable educational environment, while section D sought information on the challenges Universities leaders face in implementing

inclusive and equitable practices within their institutions. The total number of items in the questionnaire were 30. All the items were framed on a four point Likert scale of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD), that was weighed 4, 3, 2 and 1 respectively. The validity and reliability of the questionnaire were duly established. The questionnaire was validated by three experts from the Department of Educational Management and Foundations, Delta State University, Abraka. As for the reliability, it was done through a pilot study in an area outside the study coverage. Specifically, the questionnaire was administered to 15 lecturers (5 academic administrators and 10 junior lecturers) in University of Benin, Benin City, in Edo State. The responses of these lecturers were scored and analysed using Cronbach Alpha through SPSS version 23. On analysis, a reliability coefficient of 0.76 was obtained. The obtained reliability met the standard recommended by Gill et al. (2010) that any instrument with a reliability coefficient of 0.70 and above is reliable. Hence, the questionnaire was used for the actual study. In the actual study, the questionnaire was administered to the sampled lecturers in Universities in Delta State with help of three research assistance. All completed questionnaire was promptly collected on each day of the administration to ensure high return rate. The data obtained were analysed using mean, standard deviation and t-test at 0.05 level of significance.

Results

The results of statistical data analysis are presented in table 1 to 6.

Research Question 1: What leadership strategies are currently employed by Universities in Delta State to promote inclusivity and equity?

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation Analysis on Strategies Employed by Universities to Promote Inclusivity and Equity

S/N	Strategies currently employed to promote inclusivity and equity	Academic Administrators			Lecturers		
		Mean	SD	Remark	Mean	SD	Remark
1	Diversity training	3.10	0.72	Agreed	3.28	0.49	Agreed
2	Equity audits	2.82	0.66	Agreed	3.20	0.50	Agreed
3	Inclusive hiring practices	2.80	0.90	Agreed	2.98	0.80	Agreed
4	Professional development	3.00	0.55	Agreed	2.88	0.59	Agreed
5	Equity in curriculum	2.95	0.81	Agreed	3.10	0.72	Agreed
6	Student support services	2.90	0.88	Agreed	3.30	0.42	Agreed
7	Community engagement	2.94	0.82	Agreed	2.70	0.55	Agreed
8	Transparent communication	2.80	1.00	Agreed	3.00	0.61	Agreed

Source: Field Work, 2024, N = 292 (Administrators = 93, Lecturers = 199)

From the data in Table 1 academic administrators and lecturers responded positively by agreeing with each of the items as strategies employed by universities to promote inclusivity and equity. The mean score for each of the items exceeded 2.50, the cut-off points for accepting an item as agreed. The weighted mean score is 2.91 for academic administrators and 3.05 for lecturers and hence all the items in table are some of the leadership strategies currently employed by Universities in Delta State to promote inclusivity and equity.

Research Question 2: How do institutional leaders perceive their roles in fostering an inclusive and equitable educational environment?



Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation Analysis on how Institutional Leaders Perceive their Roles in Fostering an Inclusive and Equitable Educational Environment

S/N	Perceived roles institutional leaders in fostering inclusive and equitable educational environment;	Academic Administrators			Lecturers		
		Mean	SD	Remark	Mean	SD	Remark
1	Responsibility to promote diversity and inclusion with the institution.	2.80	0.92	Agreed	3.00	0.56	Agreed
2	Seek opportunities to engage with underrepresented groups.	2.88	0.77	Agreed	3.12	0.49	Agreed
3	Equipped to lead initiatives that foster an inclusive educational environment.	2.79	0.69	Agreed	2.94	0.58	Agreed
4	Regularly assess the effectiveness of the institution' inclusivity efforts.	3.08	0.58	Agreed	3.12	0.67	Agreed
5	Fostering an inclusive environment enhances the overall educational experience for all students.	3.30	0.69	Agreed	3.22	0.84	Agreed
6	Encourage staff to incorporate inclusive practices in their teaching and interactions with students.	2.92	0.90	Agreed	3.04	0.60	Agreed
7	Committed to providing resources and training for staff to better understand inclusivity and equity.	3.33	0.74	Agreed	2.95	0.72	Agreed
8	Leadership style positively influences the inclusivity of educational environment.	3.10	0.61	Agreed	3.20	0.69	Agreed
9	Advocating for policies that support diversity and inclusion at the institutional level.	2.95	0.63	Agreed	2.87	0.66	Agreed

Source: Field Work, 2024, N = 292 (Administrators = 93, Lecturers = 199)

From the results in Table 2, the mean score of items 1-9 for both academic administrators and lecturers exceed the cut-off point of 2.50. Therefore, both academic administrators and lecturers responded positively by agreeing with each of the items that they are how institutional leaders perceive their roles in fostering an inclusive and equitable educational environment.

Research Question 3: What challenges do leaders face in implementing inclusive and equitable practices within their institutions?

Table 3: Mean and Standard Deviation Analysis on Challenges face in Implementing Inclusive and Equitable Practices Within Institutions

S/N	Challenges face by leaders in implementing inclusive and equitable practices;	Academic Administrators			Lecturers		
		Mean	SD	Remark	Mean	SD	Remark
1	Lack of resources.	2.96	0.80	Agreed	2.83	0.72	Agreed
2	Resistance from staff.	3.16	0.36	Agreed	3.20	0.55	Agreed
3	Insufficient training available to staff.	2.86	0.77	Agreed	2.78	0.61	Agreed
4	Challenges in measuring the impact of inclusivity initiatives.	2.82	0.52	Agreed	3.00	0.51	Agreed
5	Institutional policies do not adequately support inclusive practices.	2.72	0.63	Agreed	2.90	0.71	Agreed
6	Lack of engagement from the broader community.	3.00	0.44	Agreed	2.90	0.81	Agreed
7	Struggle to balance inclusivity initiatives with other institutional practices.	2.80	1.00	Agreed	2.96	1.06	Agreed
8	Limited understanding by staff on what constitutes inclusive practices.	2.40	1.21	Disagreed	2.26	1.00	Disagreed
9	Challenges in communicating the importance of inclusivity to all stakeholders.	2.84	0.60	Agreed	2.68	0.70	Agreed
10	Perception that inclusivity efforts may compromise academic standards.	2.78	0.63	Agreed	2.82	0.88	Agreed

Source: Field Work, 2024, N = 292 (Administrators = 93, Lecturers = 199)

Data in Table 3 shows that academic administrators and lecturers the mean scores of items 1-10 are above the cut-off point of 2.50. Hence items 1-10 represent the challenges do leaders face in implementing inclusive and equitable practices within their institutions.

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant difference in the mean response scores between academic administrators and lecturers on the leadership strategies currently employed by Universities in Delta State to promote inclusivity and equity.

Table 4: Independent Samples t-test Analysis of Mean ($\bar{x}$) Responses of Academic Administrators and Lecturers on the Leadership Strategies Currently Employed by Universities in Delta State to Promote Inclusivity and Equity

State	N	$\bar{x}$	SD	df	t _{cri}	t _{cal}	Sig. (2-tailed)	Remark
Administrators	93	2.9138	0.03756	290	0.677	1.802	0.115	HO ₁ is accepted
Lecturers	199	3.0550	0.07307					

Source: Field Work, 2024

Table 4 indicates a non-significant difference in the mean ($\bar{x}$) response scores of academic administrators and lecturers on the leadership strategies currently employed by Universities in Delta State to promote inclusivity and equity, ($t = 1.802$, $P(0.115) > 0.05$). Therefore, HO₁ is accepted. Hence, there is no significant difference in the mean response scores between academic administrators and lecturers on the leadership strategies currently employed by Universities in Delta State to promote inclusivity and equity. This implies that the

perception of academic administrators and lecturers with regards to the leadership strategies currently employed by Universities in Delta State to promote inclusivity and equity did not differ.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant difference in the mean response scores between academic administrators and lecturers on how institutional leaders perceive their roles in fostering an inclusive and equitable educational environment.

Table 5: Independent Samples t-test Analysis of Mean ($\bar{x}$) Responses of Academic Administrators and Lecturers on how Institutional Leaders Perceive Their Roles in Fostering an Inclusive and Equitable Educational Environment

State	N	$\bar{x}$	SD	df	t _{cri}	t _{cal}	Sig. (2-tailed)	Remark
Administrators	93	3.0167	0.20006	290	0.677	0.540	0.604	HO ₂ is accepted
Lecturers	199	3.0511	0.12160					

Source: Field Work, 2024

Table 5 indicates a non-significant difference in the mean ($\bar{x}$) response scores of academic administrators and lecturers on how institutional leaders perceive their roles in fostering an inclusive and equitable educational environment, ($t = 0.540$, $P(0.604) > 0.05$). Therefore, HO₂ is accepted. Hence, there is no significant difference in the mean response scores between academic administrators and lecturers on how institutional leaders perceive their roles in fostering an inclusive and equitable educational environment. This implies that the perception of academic administrators and lecturers with regards to how institutional leaders perceive their roles in fostering an inclusive and equitable educational environment did not differ.

Hypothesis 3: There is no significant difference in the mean response scores between academic administrators and lecturers on the challenges leaders face in implementing inclusive and equitable practices within their institutions.

Table 6: Independent Samples t-test Analysis of Mean ($\bar{x}$) Responses of Academic Administrators and Lecturers on the Challenges Leaders Face in Implementing Inclusive and Equitable Practices Within Their Institutions

State	N	$\bar{x}$	SD	df	t _{cri}	t _{cal}	Sig. (2-tailed)	Remark
Administrators	93	2.8340	0.19890	290	0.677	0.023	0.982	HO ₃ is accepted
Lecturers	199	2.8330	0.24549					

Source: Field Work, 2024

Table 6 indicates a non-significant difference in the mean ($\bar{x}$) response scores of academic administrators and lecturers on the challenges leaders face in implementing inclusive and equitable practices within their institutions, ($t = 0.023$, $P(0.982) > 0.05$). Therefore, HO₃ is accepted. Hence, there is no significant difference in the mean response scores between academic administrators and lecturers on the challenges leaders face in implementing inclusive and equitable practices within their institutions. This implies that the perception of academic administrators and lecturers with regards to the challenges leaders face in implementing inclusive and equitable practices within their institutions did not differ.

Discussions

The findings for the first research question revealed that the leadership strategies currently employed by Universities in Delta State to promote inclusivity and equity are:



diversity training, equity audits, inclusive hiring practices, professional development, equity in curriculum, student support services, community engagement and transparent communication. This finding supports that of Bensimon (2015) who introduced the concept of equity-minded leadership, emphasizing the need for leaders to recognize and address systemic inequities within their institutions. The study provided evidence that leaders who actively engage in equity-minded practices, such as data-driven decision-making and inclusive policy development, can significantly impact student success rates among marginalized populations. The finding is further supported by Ladson-Billings (2014) who reported that leaders who incorporate culturally relevant pedagogy and practices into their leadership strategies can create more inclusive environments that respect and celebrate diversity, ultimately leading to improved educational outcomes for all students.

The study also revealed that: responsibility to promote diversity and inclusion with the institution, seek opportunities to engage with underrepresented groups, equipped to lead initiatives that foster an inclusive educational environment, regular assessment of the effectiveness of institutions inclusivity efforts, fostering an inclusive environment, encouraging staff to incorporate inclusive practices, committed to providing training for staff to better understand inclusivity and equity, effective leadership styles and advocating for policies that support diversity and inclusion at the institutional level, are how Universities leaders perceive their roles in fostering an inclusive and equitable educational environment. This finding corroborates that of Baker and Mckenzzie (2021) who reported that leaders viewed their roles as essential in creating policies that support diverse student populations and fostering a culture of belonging. They emphasized the importance of training faculty and staff to understand and implement inclusive practices. The finding further lends credence to that of Miller and Smith (2022) who reported that leaders perceive their role as not only administrative but also as facilitators of dialogue among diverse stakeholders, which is crucial for creating an inclusive environment.

The study again revealed that some of the challenges leaders face in implementing inclusive and equitable practices withing their institutions are: lack of resources, resistance from staff, insufficient training, lack of engagement from broader community, and limited understanding by staff. This finding supports the views of Johnson and Lee (2023) who reported that budget constraints and lack of resources often hinder the implementation of inclusive programmes. Leaders expressed frustration over the limited funding available for training and support services. The finding also aligns with that of Garcia and Patel (2022) who reported that leaders often struggle with balancing the needs of various student populations while navigating institutional policies that may not support inclusivity.

Conclusion

The study concluded that diversity training, equity audits, inclusive hiring practices, professional development, equity in curriculum, student support services, community engagement and transparent communication are the leadership strategies adopted by Universities in Delta State to promote inclusivity and equity. However, Universities administrators face challenges such as lack of resources, resistance from staff, insufficient training, lack of engagement from broader community, and limited understanding by staff, in implementing inclusive and equitable practices in universities.



Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Institutions should invest in professional development programmes for leaders that focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion to equip them with the necessary skills to promote inclusivity.
2. Universities administrators should encourage collaborative decision-making processes that involve various stakeholders, including students, faculty, and community members, to enhance the effectiveness of inclusive practices.
3. Institutions should prioritize the allocation of resources to support services that cater to the needs of marginalized groups, ensuring that all students have access to the necessary support for their academic success.



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