

Ethical and transformative higher education leadership: Catalyst for sustainable quality education in Kenya

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ABSTRACT

In Kenyan universities, sustainable quality education is not only enabled by resources and policy formulation but also by leadership morality and institutional change abilities. This theoretical article is a synthesis of the current scientific literature and a chosen resource in policy to investigate the integration of ethical leadership (integrity, fairness, accountability) and transformative/transformational leadership (vision, empowerment, innovation in quality improvement beyond compliance). The study utilized secondary data exclusively and followed a PRISMA-inspired process of source recognition, screening, eligibility criteria checking, and inclusion, along with narrative thematic synthesis. The review reveals that leadership has an impact on (i) quality assurance culture and internal assessment, (ii) academic integrity and stakeholder trust, (iii) innovation of teaching–learning processes and digital readiness, and (iv) the use of universities as a public good and the involvement of the university in the community. Ethical leadership boosts institutional trust and reduces motivation to engage in rule-breaking, whereas transformative leadership helps to foster innovation, joint work in the form of problem-solving, and quality work that is sustainable. However, the evidence also reflects the continuing constraints, including politicization of governance, inadequate funding, and weak leadership development, that are not conducive to a sustained rate of quality improvement. The article suggests a combined Ethical-Transformative Leadership to Sustainable Quality Education framework and gives recommendations on leadership training, quality assurance redesign, and integrity regulation.

Keywords: Academic Honesty; Academic Integrity; Ethical Leadership; Higher Education; Quality Assurance; Transformational Leadership

I. INTRODUCTION

Higher education systems are now being evaluated based on their ability to produce quality results, graduate profiles, research outputs, and social contribution, and positively respond to the equity and sustainability promise. Massification has increased access, but has added strains on academic staffing, infrastructure, and governance systems across the Global South, making compliance-based accountability an option at the expense of educational intent (McCowan, 2018; Oketch, 2022). An example of these tensions can be seen in Kenya: the university sector has grown despite funding pressures, institutional mission differentiation, and increased expectations of universities to contribute to national growth and Sustainable Development Goal 4 (quality education). Kenyan and similar African cases show that endemic quality problems are correlated with complex resource deprivation, governance schemes, and practice-constrained pedagogical cultures (McCowan, 2018; Oketch, 2022; Nason, 2023).

In such a landscape, the concept of leadership cannot be treated as a peripheral variable; it is a constitutive force according to which the quality assurance (QA) systems are introduced, the academic cultures are created, and the trust of stakeholders is achieved. Research on internal QA and quality improvement processes reveals that quality enhancement requires a lasting involvement of academic employees, open evaluative procedures, and learning in the institution, which is hard to sustain once the latter makes QA more compliance-focused or externally enforced (Lucander & Christersson, 2020; Noda et al., 2021). Examples of African governance-oriented QA analyses also highlight that good-governance principles, capable leadership, and higher education values form the basis of quality improvement, especially where the conditions of high state influence and regulations are in place (Nabaho et al., 2020). Desk-reviewed evidence in Kenya indicates that the effectiveness and sustainability of QA systems are disproportionately low among institutions, in part because there is poor alignment between official standards and the real-world organizational activities (Nason, 2023).

Beyond the formal existence of quality standards, sustainable quality education depends on whether universities can maintain credible teaching, assessment, research, and student-support practices while responding to financial,

technological, and social change. In Kenya, these demands are exacerbated by limited funding, differential institutional capacities, digitalization, and plagiarism (Kerubo & Oliver, 2025; Mauti & Nyambane, 2025; Oketch, 2022). McCowan (2018) demonstrated how resources, governance, and pedagogy contribute to the quality. These concerns suggest they are in need of a leader who can prescribe adaptive direction and defend the integrity.

However, the relevant bodies of literature do not always provide an integrated explanation of this leadership requirement. Ethical leadership research highlights moral role modelling, fairness, accountability, and the resulting trust (Brown et al., 2005; Ng & Feldman, 2015), while transformational leadership research highlights vision, empowerment, and mobilisation of staff for change (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978). In the context of higher education, quality-assurance studies are mainly about participatory review, staff engagement, and embedding quality processes in current academic activities (Lucander & Christersson, 2020; Noda et al., 2021). However, these strands are often found separately in the literature reviewed, and there is a dearth of information on how moral legitimacy and institutional change capacity can function together in Kenyan universities.

This gap is critical as politicisation, limited resources, imperfect leadership ability, and compliance-based quality assurance still limit institutional improvement. Atibuni and Olema (2021) demonstrated that political interests can undermine quality processes and their independence and credibility, while Nason (2023) and Nyandiwa (2024) indicated the constraints of reactive or narrowly transformative leadership. The present study is thus needed since it brings together the polymorphisms of literature in formulating an integrated approach of how ethical leadership, transformational leadership, social capital, and distributed leadership can contribute to the attainment of sustainable quality education in Kenya. It links leadership morality to trust, participation, innovation, and resource stewardship, explaining how universities can translate standards into enduring educational practice.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Kenyan higher education still faces a practical dilemma: policy frameworks and quality assurance norms might be in place, but day-to-day leadership choices may still replicate governance deficiencies, integrity threats, and short-termism that destroy sustainable quality. It was found that political interference and vested interests are the source of threats to quality assurance procedures in institutions of higher education, especially in the areas where the leadership positions and checks and balances in authority are disputed (Atibuni & Olema, 2021). Concurrently, staffing, learning material, and student support are under-invested and pressure to cost-share, making it difficult to maintain quality as a social good (Oketch, 2022). The central issue of the current paper is then the lack of a well-defined leadership track that could demonstrate how ethical and transformational leadership may be implemented in unison to contribute to sustainable good education within Kenyan universities.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

- i. To synthesize current evidence of leadership processes influencing sustainable quality education outcomes in Kenyan universities.
- ii. To determine constraints that limit the implementation of ethical and transformative leadership.
- iii. To formulate a conceptual framework that incorporates ethical leadership, transformational leadership, social capital, and distributed leadership to elucidate ways to achieve sustainable quality.

1.3 Research Questions

- i. What do Kenyan universities have in common in terms of their leadership practices and sustainable quality education?
- ii. How do these practices affect quality assurance cultures, integrity, innovation, and community engagement?
- iii. What are contextual constraints and enabling conditions between these relationships?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

The research is framed on four lenses of theory, which are complementary. The theories of transformational leadership (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978) explain why leaders drive change and innovation; the ethical leadership theory explains why leaders generate trust and set an example (Brown et al., 2005); the social capital theory places trust, networks, and common norms as facilitation resources in the context of collaboration and problem (Ng & Feldman, 2015). These lenses collectively facilitate a combined perspective: when ethical governance provides the basis of trust and legitimacy and transformational leadership enables the distribution of capacity to work, innovate, and engage in work beneficial to the common good, sustainable quality education will be created.

2.2 Empirical Review

To address alignment with the study objectives, this empirical review is organized around the three objectives and the principal variables in the article. Ethical leadership and transformative/transformational leadership are treated as the main independent leadership variables; sustainable quality education is treated as the dependent outcome; and quality assurance culture, academic integrity, innovation, distributed leadership, trust/social capital, resource stewardship, and governance conditions operate as mediating or contextual variables.

2.2.1 Leadership Processes Influencing Sustainable Quality Education Outcomes

Objective 1 needs to synthesise evidence of processes in which leadership shapes sustainable quality education outcomes for Kenyan universities. The literature specific to Kenya reveals that quality issues are more than technical deficiencies in standards but are linked to resource allocation, governance, urban university pedagogies, and how internal quality assurance systems are translated within the university (McCowan, 2018; Nason, 2023; Oketch, 2022). This research makes leadership a key explanatory factor as leaders decide whether quality assurance is a compliance exercise or a process for institutional learning and improvement. Research into quality development in higher education supports this and shows that worthwhile quality assurance is dependent on staff involvement, transparent assessment, and the reflective principle rather than inspection (Lucander & Christersson, 2020; Noda et al., 2021). African studies of quality assurance also emphasise that governance, management, and institutional leadership are crucial for quality improvements (Nabaho et al., 2020).

Ethical leadership scholars add to this goal by detailing the role of fairness, accountability, transparency, and managerial moral role modelling, which serves to legitimise quality assurance processes. Brown et al. (2005) conceptualised ethical leadership via social-learning mechanisms when leaders exemplify ethical behaviour as normative. Ng and Feldman (2015) demonstrated that ethical leadership is related to trust, attitudes, performance, and citizenship behaviour; in universities, this is important because the accreditation, moderation, review, and peer evaluation of curricula and assessment, and the provision of academic advice, demand trust and legitimacy from colleagues. Higher education evidence also shows an association between ethical leadership and staff organisational citizenship behaviours (Taamneh et al., 2024). In Africa, Kenya-based Kerubo and Oliver (2025) demonstrated that issues with academic integrity are related to institutional culture and incentives, implying that quality for sustainability require mechanisms for quality assurance and academic integrity.

The goal is achieved through transformative and transformational leadership that helps leaders mobilise capacity for innovative change. Foundational leadership theory points to the use of vision, intellectual stimulation, individualised consideration, and inspirational motivation to enhance organisational performance (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978). Saif et al. (2024) showed that transformational leadership fosters knowledge sharing, creative work and task performance. Transformational leadership has also been linked to implementing sustainability in teaching and to sustainable productivity in higher education (Etomes et al., 2025; Eustachio et al., 2024). Overall, these studies support the study's dependent variable as sustainable quality education does not only concern meeting the minimum standards but also involves teaching-learning innovation, research integrity, and public good contributions.

2.2.2 Constraints Limiting Ethical And Transformative Leadership

Objective 2 focuses on the constraints that inhibit the practice of ethical and transformative leadership. The review of the literature shows three interrelated constraints. One is the politicisation of university governance and quality assurance systems, which can compromise the legitimacy of institutional appointments, autonomy, and evaluation processes (Atibuni & Olema, 2021). The second is resource scarcity. In Kenya, for example, resource scarcity and cost-sharing can weaken the capacity needed to maintain satisfactory teaching, online infrastructure, student and staff support, and training (McCowan, 2018; Oketch, 2022). The third is variable leadership capacity and a lack of institutionalisation of leadership development. Nason (2023) and Nyandiwa (2024) demonstrated that quality assurance can be precarious when institutional leadership is reactive or compliance-focused, or when leadership is not spread through the departments and faculties. Focusing on ethical climate in universities, Din et al. (2025) also showed that ethical leadership is shaped by group moral efficacy (shared moral leadership) and team cohesion, which reveals that institutional culture can enable or hinder ethical leadership.

The limitations demonstrate that ethical-transformative leadership is not the exclusive product of a leader's personal character traits. Ethical-transformative leadership can be realised if conditions of governance, resource allocation, regulatory independence, and the existence of routines for academic staff to participate in quality improvement are sufficiently present. This is significant for the current study because the independent leadership variables can help in the challenge of creating sustainable quality education, only when contextual factors allow ethical leadership decisions and innovations for participation to be enabled.

2.2.3 Evidence Informing the Conceptual Framework

Objective 3 calls for a conceptual framework that includes ethical leadership, transformational leadership, social capital, and distributed leadership. This call is supported by the evidence that the constructs explain different aspects of the quality-improvement process. Ethical leadership provides legitimacy, integrity, and procedural fairness (Brown et al., 2005; Ng & Feldman, 2015). Transformational leadership provides visionary beliefs, empowerment, and innovation (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978; Saif et al., 2024). Social capital explains the role of trust, networks, and norms in enabling interdepartmental collaboration (Ng & Feldman, 2015). Distributed leadership explains how quality work is distributed in faculty boards, departmental committees, peer review committees, and other academic units, which is necessary because sustainable quality assurance cannot be realised by top management alone (Lucander & Christersson, 2020; Nason, 2023).

The empirical review leads straight to the conceptual proposition of this study: sustainable quality education is more likely in Kenyan universities when ethical leadership enables trustworthy governance, and transformational leadership encourages innovation through distributed trust-based participation. Sustainable quality education (the dependent variable) is manifest through quality assurance culture, academic integrity, innovation in teaching and learning, and the public-good nature of the university.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design and Rationale

This study adopts a narrative synthesis approach within a desktop research design. Narrative synthesis is appropriate where evidence is heterogeneous in method and context, combining empirical studies, conceptual papers, and policy sources, yet can be integrated through theory-informed thematic interpretation. The research on Kenyan higher education leadership is based on qualitative case studies, policy analyses, and cross-sectional surveys; such a narrative synthesis thus has the benefit of comparative systems and circumstances across different sources, but at the same time, it should be sensitive to the context of a particular location. The method is also applicable in establishing a conceptual model because it permits the cyclic transfer between evidence, theory, and explanatory propositions.

3.2 Secondary Data Sources

The research was based solely on secondary literature. No primary data were gathered. Sources were selected via systematic searches of publicly available scholarly databases and repositories (Google Scholar, ERIC, DOAJ, and publisher websites that had full bibliographic information) and by targeting searches of Kenyan higher education policy and quality assurance documents. Major keywords consisted of leadership (ethical leadership, transformational/transformational leadership, distributed leadership) and sector (higher education, university), and results (quality assurance, quality culture, academic integrity, innovation, sustainability) and geography (Kenya, Africa). The sources that were published between 2022 and 2026 were given priority to consider the relevance of contemporary sources, although the foundational theoretical materials were used to provide conceptual definitions.

3.3 Search Strategy and PRISMA-informed Screening Protocol

A structured desktop search was conducted using combinations of the following keyword blocks: (ethical leadership OR integrity OR ethical climate) AND (transformational leadership OR transformational leadership OR distributed leadership) AND (higher education OR university) AND (quality assurance OR quality culture OR academic integrity OR innovation OR sustainability) AND (Kenya OR Africa). Searches were iteratively refined by adding or removing terms to improve relevance. Records were screened for higher-education relevance and explicit linkage to quality, integrity, innovation, sustainability, or stakeholder engagement. Full texts were then appraised for conceptual contribution and the presence of verifiable bibliographic information. Only sources meeting the inclusion criteria were transferred into the extraction matrix used for thematic synthesis. Across the documented corpus cited in the manuscript, 20 full-text sources were appraised in detail. Seventeen were entered into the evidence matrix in Table 1, while three additional sources were retained outside the matrix for theoretical, methodological, or contextual support.

Table 1*Evidence Base and Thematic Mapping used in the Narrative Synthesis*

Source	Context/setting	Method/type	Primary theme(s)	Key contribution to this study
McCowan (2018)	Kenya	Empirical (interviews/observation/document analysis)	Resources; governance; pedagogy	Identifies quality barriers: resources, governance, pedagogical culture.
Oketch (2022)	Kenya	Conceptual/policy analysis	Financing; public good	Explains financing shifts and implications for equity and public-good roles.
Nason (2023)	Kenya	Desktop review	Quality assurance systems	Synthesizes determinants of sustainable QA in Kenyan HE.
Atibuni & Olema (2021)	East Africa	Empirical/conceptual	Politicization; QA legitimacy	Shows how political intrigue can undermine QA independence and credibility.
Nabaho et al. (2020)	Africa	Content analysis (ASG-QA)	Governance; leadership	Defines governance/management imperatives for African QA standards.
Lucander & Christersson (2020)	Europe (comparative relevance)	Process design/evaluation	Quality culture; engagement	Details participatory QA process phases supporting continuous improvement.
Noda et al. (2021)	Japan/Taiwan (comparative relevance)	Qualitative analysis	Internal QA integration	Clarifies how internal QA embeds learning-outcome assessment into routines.
Kerubo & Oliver (2025)	Kenya	Conceptual/analytic	Academic integrity; culture	Explains incentives for unethical practices and strategies for integrity reform.
Ng & Feldman (2015)	Global	Meta-analysis	Ethical leadership; trust	Establishes trust-mediated links between ethical leadership and performance/citizenship.
Brown et al. (2005)	Global	Theory/scale development	Ethical leadership mechanisms	Provides social learning foundation for ethical leadership construct.
Taamneh et al. (2024)	Jordan (HEIs)	Survey/SEM	Ethical leadership; citizenship behavior	Shows ethical leadership supports OCB among academic staff.
Saif et al. (2024)	HEIs	Survey/SEM	Transformational leadership; innovation	Links transformational leadership to knowledge sharing and innovative work behavior.
Etomes et al. (2025)	HEIs (Africa)	Empirical	Transformational leadership; productivity	Links transformational leadership to sustainable productivity in HEIs.
Eustachio et al. (2024)	HEIs	Empirical/conceptual	Transformational leadership; sustainability	Shows leaders influence institutional sustainability implementation.
Mauti & Nyambane (2025)	Kenya	Qualitative thematic analysis	Transformative leadership; equity; digital transformation	Connects transformative leadership ethics to equitable innovation.
Nyandiwa (2024)	Kenya	Conceptual/practice-oriented	Transformative leadership; governance	Highlights leadership crises and proposes transformative leadership responses.
Mohi Ud Din et al. (2025)	Pakistan/China/Saudi Arabia HEIs	Quantitative survey	Ethical climate; moral efficacy; team cohesion	Shows how ethical climate and leadership interact with moral efficacy and team cohesion in higher education institutions.

3.4 PRISMA-informed Data Collection and Study Selection Process

The review was based on a PRISMA-informed, but narrative review-specific path, adjusting the source collection process to be explicit and replicable (Page et al., 2021). The reached counts are reported in Figure 2: 20 full-text sources were retrieved and appraised, 17 entered into the evidence matrix and thematic synthesis in Appendix A, and 3 were retained as theoretical, methodological, or contextual framing sources outside the evidence matrix.

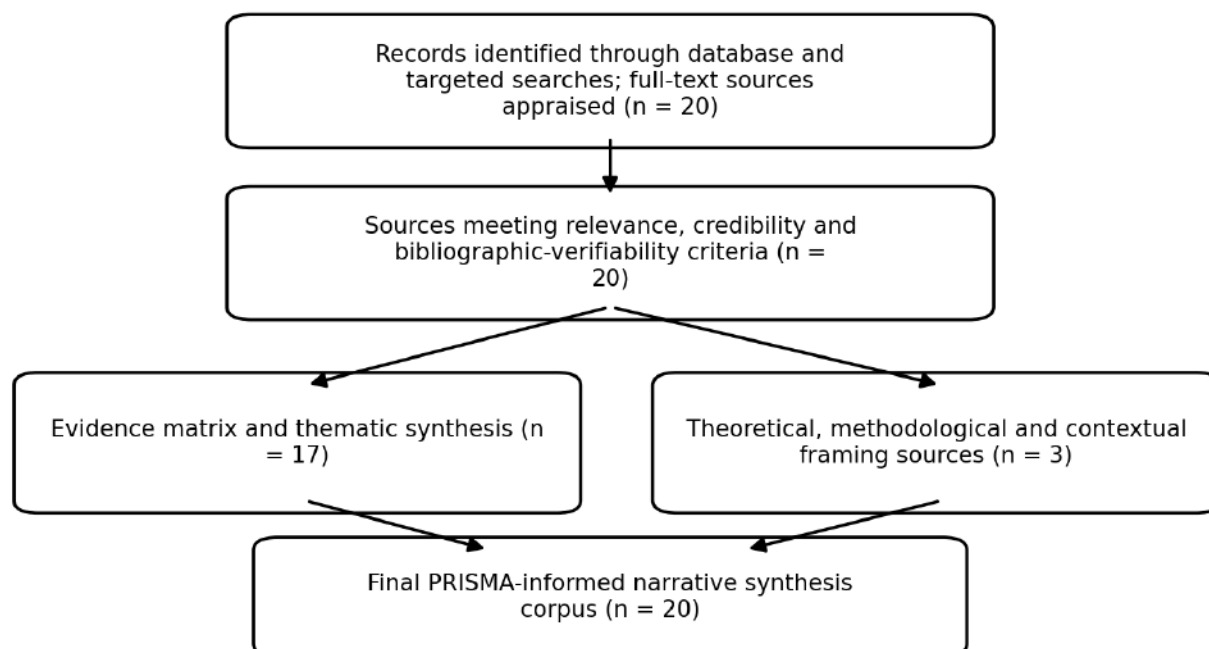


Figure 2

PRISMA-informed source selection with documented counts.

3.5 Eligibility and Selection Criteria

The included sources fulfilled four criteria: (i) covered leadership practices or governance mechanisms in higher education; (ii) linked leadership to quality or integrity, or innovation, sustainability, or outcome of stakeholder engagement; (iii) were peer-reviewed journal articles or credible policy documents; and (iv) included verifiable bibliographic information such as DOI links where possible. The exclusion criteria included excluding sources that addressed only primary/secondary education and did not include higher education, sources that did not provide sufficient methodological specificity and opinion sources that did not identify a scholarly or policy foundation. The screening was done in two phases: title/abstract relevance screening and full-text appraisal on conceptual fit and contribution of evidence.

3.6 Data Extraction and Analysis

Each source was documented in a structured extraction matrix where the context, the research design, the focus of leadership construct(s), the identified mechanisms, and the conclusions derived in relation to sustainable quality education were recorded. Data analysis was based on theory-driven thematic synthesis: the statements extracted were coded in rough categories coordinated to the theoretical lenses (ethical governance, transformational change, social capital, distributed leadership, and quality assurance systems). Constant comparison between codes was done to further refine and develop higher-order themes. The resulting themes were then mapped to the study objectives and used to organize the Results and Discussion sections.

3.7 Trustworthiness and Limitations of the Method

To enhance trustworthiness, the synthesis focuses on convergent evidence between sources, differentiates between Kenya-specific evidence and evidence that focuses on broader comparative insights, and reports countervailing evidence where found. However, narrative synthesis is restrained by publication bias, as well as by the inconsistent methodological quality of studies. Since the research is based on secondary sources, the conclusions must be considered as analytic propositions and not as causal estimates; the Conclusions section encompasses implications of future empirical studies.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

The research used only secondary data based on published literature and policy papers. No human subjects or primary field work was used; hence no formal ethical approval was necessary.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Findings

4.1.1 Leadership and Sustainable Quality Assurance Cultures

The first finding is that sustainable quality education depends on the quality assurance culture created by institutional leadership. In terms of the study variables, leadership practices are the independent variable and quality assurance culture is a key expression of the dependent variable. The evidence indicates that quality assurance systems become sustainable when leaders move them from external compliance to internal learning. Lucander and Christersson (2020) and Noda et al. (2021) similarly argued that quality development depends on staff engagement, embedded learning-outcome assessment, and routine reflection. This finding also agrees with Nabaho et al. (2020), who placed governance and management values at the centre of African quality assurance, and with Nason (2023), who showed that Kenyan quality assurance remains weak when institutional leadership treats evaluation as an external obligation. Therefore, leadership affects sustainable quality by shaping whether quality assurance is a bureaucratic requirement or a culture of continuous academic improvement.

The fourth insight is that distributed leadership is the enabler of quality and sustainable quality education. The work of quality assurance cannot solely depend on vice-chancellors, senate bodies, or regulatory bodies. It needs curriculum committees, department heads, peer moderation, student support units, and involvement of faculty. This helps to affirm Lucander and Christersson (2020) claim about how quality development is enhanced by collective participation in quality assessment and improvement processes. The finding also refutes Nason (2023) and Nyandiwa (2024) that reform in Kenyan universities is dependent on their own governance leadership and capacity. As such, distributed leadership serves as the channel through which good and transformative leadership becomes the norm in academia.

The fifth finding is that resource stewardship mediates the link between leadership and sustainable quality education. Oketch (2022) showed that higher-education finance, equity, and the public-good role of universities are interconnected in Kenyan higher education, and McCowan (2018) suggested resource, governance, and pedagogy are quality issues connected to the public-good role. These insights suggest that ethical leadership is also distributive: leaders must ensure proper allocation of finance, workload, technology, human resources, and training, for the sake of maintaining teaching and support to students. The outcome is congruent with Nabaho et al. (2020), who consider governance and management as essential to quality. Consequently, it is unlikely to deliver sustainable quality education without institutional capacity.

4.1.2 Ethical Leadership, Integrity Governance, and Stakeholder Trust

The second finding is that ethical leadership strengthens academic integrity and stakeholder trust, both of which are necessary conditions for sustainable quality education. Brown et al. (2005) and Ng and Feldman (2015) attributed this to role modelling, moral management, and trust. This is also in line with Taamneh et al. (2024), who reported that ethical leadership drives staff citizenship behaviour and thus enhances collegial support in higher-education institutions. In Kenyan public universities, Kerubo and Oliver (2025) demonstrated that academic integrity issues are related to institutions and incentives, not just individual actions. This finding suggests that ethical leadership affects the dependent variable by legitimating exams, certifying qualifications, and enhancing trust in university quality.

The synthesis shows that political interference, poor resourcing, and leadership capability are major barriers to ethical-transformative leadership. Atibuni and Olema (2021) demonstrated the constraints of political intrigue on quality assurance independence and credibility. McCowan (2018) and Oketch (2022) demonstrated that resource and human resource pressures constrain quality reforms. Nason (2023) and Nyandiwa (2024) showed the risks of complacent, rather than transformative, leadership strategies. And Din et al. (2025) suggested that the ethical climate is determined by moral efficacy and team cohesion, and so ethical leadership needs to be supported by the institution. These findings address Objective 2 by demonstrating that leadership is dependent on finance, governance, culture, and capacity.

4.1.3 Transformative Leadership and Conditions for Academic Innovation

The other finding is that transformational leadership facilitates academic innovation, especially when leaders empower staff and promote knowledge sharing, and link university operations with sustainability targets. This is in line with Saif et al. (2024), who associated transformational leadership with knowledge sharing and innovative work practices, and Eustachio et al. (2024), who associated transformational leadership and sustainability leadership with teaching sustainability. And Etomes et al. (2025) also demonstrated the role of transformational leadership in enabling sustainability productivity in higher education. For Kenyan universities, this would mean that leadership impacts on

sustainable quality not only through regulation but also through facilitation of curriculum renewal, digital readiness, responsive teaching, and sustainable teaching.

The integrated discussion answers Objective 3. Evidence supports the Ethical-Transformative Leadership Framework, where ethical leadership generates trust and legitimacy, transformational leadership generates innovation, social capital generates working relationships, and shared leadership creates localised quality work embedded in academic units. This framework explains why standards are not an approach to sustainable quality education. Movement beyond standards towards practice requires leadership practices that ensure standards are perceived as credible, participatory, and responsive to change. The framework builds on existing literature by synthesising ethical leadership theories by Brown et al. (2005), transformational leadership theories by Bass (1985) and Burns (1978), and higher-education quality assurance research by Lucander and Christersson (2020), Noda et al. (2021), Nabaho et al. (2020), and Nason (2023). The Kenyan contribution is the focus on broader contexts (mainly politicisation, financing and capacity) which affect the extent to which leadership will secure sustainable quality.

The policy and practice implications follow from this alignment between findings and literature. Leadership development programmes should integrate ethical reasoning, integrity governance, transformational change management, and distributed quality-assurance practice. Regulators and governing councils should protect the independence of quality assurance processes and promote transparent appointments. Finally, financing and institutional planning should be aligned with the public-good mission of universities so that leadership reforms have sufficient staffing, infrastructure, and professional-development support.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

Standards alone do not bring sustainable quality education to the Kenyan universities, but it is created by the moral and transformative powers of leadership and the cultures of the institutions that the powers bring about. This paper demonstrates that ethical leadership enhances the trust and integrity as well as the legitimacy of quality processes, whereas transformational leadership promotes innovation, empowerment, and sustainability-based change. The mechanisms of distributed leadership and social capital also facilitate quality work through instilling leadership at different levels of an organisation and maintaining a working relationship with others.

In practice, the Kenyan universities and regulating bodies ought to embrace the leadership development, integrity governance, and quality assurance reform as one agenda instead of parallel goals. The policy that involves improvement of transparency of appointments, maintenance of independence in quality assurance, and congruity of financing with the mission will probably improve the circumstances under which ethical- transformative leadership can provide sustainable educational results.

The research is limited to secondary sources and to the inconsistencies in the quality of methodologies in the literature. Future studies ought to examine leadership within Kenyan universities in longitudinal and comparative designs, such as constructing ethical climates, how distributed leadership is operationalised, as well as the nature in which leadership relates to financing reforms to influence the quality of teaching and learning in the long run.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings, Kenyan universities should institutionalise leadership development programmes that combine ethical reasoning, integrity governance, change management, and distributed leadership practice. This recommendation follows from the finding that sustainable quality education depends on both moral legitimacy and institutional change capacity. Leadership development should thus not be limited to general management courses, but leadership courses should also encompass a hands-on training unit on transparent decision-making, fair resource allocation, academic integrity, dealing with stakeholders, and participative quality assurance.

Additionally, universities need to shift internal quality assurance to make curriculum review, assessment and moderation, evidence-based reflection, and continuous planning for improvement, regular aspects of academic life, rather than periodic compliance exercises. This recommendation is based on the observation that if academic staff is involved with assessment, review, and improvement in the processes, they become part of the culture of quality assurance. Secondly, through the incorporation of good work within departments/ faculties, it would lead to enhancing the distributed leadership and to lessen the reliance on the top-level leaders only.

Regulators, governing councils, and university senates need to improve their transparency in appointments, safeguard the independence of quality assurance arrangements, and make clear, fair, and consistently applied their methods of dealing with academic dishonesty and violations of integrity. The recommendation is based on the understanding that politicised governance and a lack of integrity systems affect the trust and credibility stakeholders place in the work of quality assurance. Finally, sustainable quality education must be accompanied by sufficient funding, personnel, digital tools, and training. Institutions must be well-resourced to support and improve teaching, learning, research, and student service, or else leadership reforms cannot bring about sustainable quality. Finance and institutional

planning should thus be aligned with the public-good function of universities for the betterment of the practical conditions for enabling ethical and transformative leadership to enhance and strengthen sustainable quality education in Kenya.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare that they do not have any known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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