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CREATIVE LEADERSHIP AND CREATIVITY CURRICULUM FOR 21ST CENTURY RESILIENT NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY GRADUATES

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Abstract
The Nigerian university system faces a serious leadership crisis characterised by inadequate funding, lack of autonomy, corruption, and inconsistent policies. Poor governance significantly affects educational quality, hinders global competitiveness, and lowers graduates' employment prospects. As a result, many Nigerian graduates lack essential problem-solving and creative skills needed for the complex demands of the 21st century, leading to issues such as brain drain and youth disillusionment. This article explores studies on the current challenges faced by university administration in Nigeria and their impacts. It also examines the concepts of creative leadership and resilience, showing how introducing creative leadership and a creativity curriculum can develop resilient graduates within the Nigerian University System. This paper argues that resolving this crisis requires a fundamental overhaul of institutions and the Nigerian University System's existing curriculum to accommodate the inevitable changes necessary for improved effectiveness. It recommends the intentional integration of creative leadership and a creativity curriculum across Nigerian universities. Creativity, the ability to generate innovative and valuable ideas, is essential for resilience and professional success. When creative leadership is implemented in the Nigerian University System, it will promote cognitive flexibility and adaptive problem-solving skills across all levels of the system. Creativity thus helps turn challenges into opportunities. Fostering a "culture of deliberate creativity" will enable universities to produce resilient graduates equipped to address national issues, foster innovation, solve social problems, and support widespread entrepreneurial growth.
Keywords: Creativity, Creative leadership, University graduates, Curriculum and University system

Introduction
Leadership is essential for the progress and development of nations, organisations, and groups, regardless of their size, goals, or location. It is vital for maintaining organisational aims and objectives. Leadership serves as the fulcrum around which societal or organisational hopes and aspirations revolve. The issue of leadership continues to attract significant global attention. In Nigeria, leadership can be seen as symptomatic of the African experience. However, recent events in the Nigerian political landscape highlight a profound reality: leadership in Nigeria is evolving. People are showing increased interest in the type of leadership being imposed on them and the benefits each form may bring. Leadership is also assessed within its various operational contexts. Consequently, every sphere of human activity in Nigeria appears to be grappling with leadership challenges. Education is one such critical area that continues to face unresolved, and often recurring, challenges. These persistent issues require greater attention if education is to achieve its goals in the Nigerian system, as education is fundamentally about change. The kind of change education fosters must align with the objectives set by governments and other stakeholders in nations and organisations. Tertiary education, particularly university education, addresses multiple societal issues. It promotes academic excellence, administrative efficiency, and prepares graduates for the nation's manpower needs and the challenges of the modern world, thereby contributing to national development and fulfilling hopes and aspirations (Obialo, 2017; Amuda-Kannike, 2024).

The social impact of university education demands that university leaders possess the necessary skills to navigate the complexities of the ever-evolving 21st century, positively influencing undergraduates who will spearhead, sustain, and nurture the spirit of creativity and innovation during their university years and beyond. This need is especially pertinent given Nigeria’s current state of facing numerous overwhelming challenges, with the existing socio-political leadership unable to provide solutions. The failure to address these problems has led to a large-scale

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exodus of young Nigerians. There is an impression of helplessness among these youths and a waning faith in political leadership's capacity to steer the country through its difficulties.

The immediate consequence of these challenges is that Nigerian graduates must develop resilience to cope with the current realities. Therefore, this paper advocates that the Nigerian university system should deliberately institutionalise innovative leadership and curricula to foster resilient graduates. This is particularly relevant given that Chris Maiyaki, the acting Executive Secretary of the National Universities Commission, identified poor governance as one of the major challenges facing Nigerian universities (NUC, 2024). This paper seeks to address the issues of poor governance and curriculum in the Nigerian university system.

Conceptual Clarifications

Current Leadership Situation in Nigerian Universities

Autonomy: One outcome of the overbearing government intrusiveness in institutions like universities is the loss of autonomy. Leaders in Nigerian universities have consistently complained about the dire implications of the lack of autonomy in the Nigerian university system. University autonomy refers to self-determination, self-governance, and independence, or the capability of a university to elect to pursue policies, programs, or actions deemed necessary to enhance the accomplishment of its vision and mission (Nwaokugha, 2021). It follows that any autonomous university is able to determine its guiding and operational principles without interference, leading to the transformation of its system and the development of its graduates. University autonomy ensures that a university will experience outstanding progress in teaching/learning, research, the judicious generation and management of resources, and the advancement of accountability. Unfortunately, the complex nature of the Nigerian system, where the government seems to superintend every aspect of Nigerian life, means that an obvious lack of autonomy denies the university system the benefits that autonomy would have achieved for the university system and, ultimately, the country. Historically, interference from the political class, coupled with bureaucracy, has prevented Nigerian universities from making independent decisions concerning faculty employments and appointments, academic programmes and resource allocation (Amuda-Kannike, 2024).

Funding: Funding is another factor affecting university leadership in Nigeria. This is on two levels. The first level is the level of public universities. The second is the private university level. However, there are commonalities. Insufficient resources mean that university leadership will take whatever measures they deem necessary and appropriate to fund their university's operations. This dearth of resources has continued to afflict university administrations across the country. This lack leads to loss of autonomy as donors and sponsors manipulate universities. The government is the greatest financier, allowing it to dictate even unfavourable decisions to universities. The absence of adequate funding thus serves as a convenient pretext for the government to intervene in the running of universities in Nigeria. It must be stated that the paucity of funds for the running of Nigerian universities did not happen overnight. Since the 1980s, Nigeria's university system has experienced rapid deterioration due to a record increase in enrollment, leading to a drastic reduction in the government's ability to adequately fund the system (Bara et al., 2022). The increase continued with the licensing of private universities till this year when the Federal Government of Nigeria decided to put a seven-year moratorium on the establishment of federal tertiary institutions such as universities, polytechnics and colleges of education, not to mention other specialised institutions like colleges of agriculture, fisheries, forestry and the like (Ogundele, 2025).

Corruption: According to Transparency International (2023), Nigeria consistently ranks low on corruption perception indices, indicating widespread corruption in both public and private sectors. Corruption significantly hampers effective governance in Nigeria. It appears in bribery, embezzlement, extortion, and the misallocation of resources. This widespread corruption also exists within university governance. According to Altbach (2008), most government institutions lack accountability due to political interests and corrupt tendencies. The dominant corrupt leadership in Nigeria has heavily influenced leadership in Nigerian universities. Although corruption is extensive in Nigeria, one might expect that the ivory tower would provide a different perspective on the national narrative of corruption. However, contrasting private and public universities, Isuku (2014) agrees that most private organisations show that effective accountability is vital for organisational success, as profit-making is a primary motivation. This characteristic is rare in most government institutions, where there is generally little or no practice of accountability. Ogunode, Jacob and Ajape (2021) explained how corruption, mainly financial mismanagement, hampers universities from securing enough funds for overheads, research, and capital projects. This results in poor infrastructure and a decline in the quality of education in Nigerian public universities. According to Ofor-Douglas

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(2024), corruption is a widespread issue that allows practices such as embezzlement, nepotism, bribery, and favouritism within Nigerian universities.

Complacency: Another characteristic of Nigerian university leadership is the complacency of managers in Nigerian public universities (Fabayo, Ololade, & Ogbeide, 2022). Because they are assured of receiving periodic statutory allocations from state or federal governments, some university leaders do not seek creative and innovative ways to source funds or explore new methods to meet the demands of the highly competitive environment their graduates will face after graduation. Consequently, their universities lack sufficient funding for academic and research programmes due to inadequate government support. They are also unable to generate wealth that could benefit their institutions.

Inconsistent Policies: The literature shows that inconsistent policy is a major governance challenge in Nigeria's sociopolitical realm (Suleiman et al., 2023; The Economist, 2023; Centre for the Study of the Economies of Africa, 2023; Olakunle, 2023). Suleiman et al (2023) argued that the lack of policy continuity and long-term vision remains a persistent problem and a key reason behind Nigeria's limited economic development. Policy inconsistency is apparent in areas such as economic and fiscal policy, trade and industrial policy, and monetary policy (National Bureau of Economic Research, 2023; Udeh, 2022; International Monetary Fund, 2023). Causes of policy inconsistency include a lack of coherence and coordination among government institutions, ministries, departments, and agencies (Yakubu, 2025).

Consequences of the Current University Leadership Crisis on University Graduates

The main consequence of ineffective governance in Nigerian universities is the significant deterioration of educational quality (Obasanjo, 2021). This has led to Nigerian graduates often struggling with low global competitiveness. Obialo (2011) and NUC (2022) found that a significant percentage of Nigerian graduates required extensive retraining by employers to meet basic industry standards, a direct result of the quality of their education. This lack of preparedness reduces their global mobility and access to better opportunities. Further, the leadership crisis exacerbates brain drain syndrome where most talented academics and students leave Nigeria for countries with more stable and better-funded educational systems thereby robbing Nigeria of its intellectual capital weakening the quality of education for those who remain (Omoniyi, 2023). Ultimately, these issues lead to a decrease in employability and add to a bigger social crisis because their skills do not meet the needs of employers. This situation results in financial hardship and fuels crime, social unrest and youth disillusionment.

A major problem with current Nigerian university leadership is that many university leaders fail to create an environment that nurtures graduate's capable of meeting 21st century Nigerian needs. This is because every system expects its leaders to achieve their goals within their specific contexts. Past research (Obialo, 2011; Pitan & Adedeji, 2012; Ezeani, 2018; Obialo & Emeke, 2019; Obialo & Emeke, 2020) showed widespread dissatisfaction among stakeholders about the relevance and usefulness of Nigerian university graduates in solving modern Nigerian problems. Although various reasons were given for this lack of confidence, Obialo' s (2011) study found that poor performance of graduates after graduation was not due to a lack of intelligence. His conclusions, based on a case study of undergraduates from southwestern universities and reviews of graduation records over ten years, indicated that over 50% of graduates finished with at least a second- class lower degree.

Obialo (2011) noted that these graduates lacked problem- solving skills, which involve detecting difficulties, recognising them, and generating and evaluating multiple solutions to select the best options for implementation (p. 13). Further, Obialo (2011) argued that Nigeria has a culture of chance creativity rather than a deliberate creativity culture, which would help the system intentionally foster creativity from an early age through education. Countries with a culture of deliberate creativity have rapidly advanced in innovation, and Nigeria should adopt similar strategies. He recommended a comprehensive overhaul of the educational system to embed a culture of deliberate creativity and innovation. This change would ensure students and graduates develop and nurture creative skills beginning from early childhood education.

Creativity and Resilience

Creativity: The phenomenon called "Creativity" is perceived from multiple perspectives, eliciting many definitions and interchangeable terms. It is a phenomenon that is understood differently by cultures and individuals (Obialo, 2018a). Yet, there exist some commonalities in the numerous definitions that authors have proffered

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throughout the ages. Runco and Jaeger (2012) conceive creativity as the ability to generate original, flexible, and effective ideas and solutions. Amabile (1996) contends that a product only qualifies to be declared "creative" when it is novel and appropriate. Similarly, Zhou and George (2001) view creativity as the generation of new and useful ideas by individual employees. The OECD (2023a) perceives creativity as the ability to generate new ideas and solutions and to think outside the box. The consistencies in the explained perspectives influenced Obialo (2022a, p. 65) to declare that:

> it is generally agreed that creativity is the production of what is novel and valuable. The implication is that whatever is not new and does not add value to the context in which the creative expression occurred cannot qualify as "creative" or an act of "creativity". Furthermore, there is an element of pragmatism in the general understanding of creativity. Essentially, whatever qualifies for the garb of "creativity" must be helpful to both the creator and the environment in which the product of the creative activity transpired. Creativity, therefore, is a beneficial phenomenon for human existence.

The role of creativity in human evolution cannot be overstressed. Puccio (2012) describes it as an essential life skill for the 21st century. Corazza et al. (2025) affirm that: "Creativity is the primary driver of our cultural evolution" (p.2). Florida's (2002) work focuses on the role of creativity and talent in contemporary urban and economic development. Florida maintains that a new "Creative Class" has emerged as the prime engine of economic growth. This class is not restricted to artists and entertainers, but accommodates a broad range of experts whose tasks comprise creativity, problem-solving and independent judgment. This group of professionals includes engineers, educators, scientists, architects, designers, and various business and financial professionals. These assertions about creativity demonstrate that, throughout human evolution, creativity has been widely regarded as the primary driver of the exponential growth of human culture (Enquist et al., 2008). The creativity phenomenon, thus, is its own distinctive playground.

Resilience: Analyses of resilience often emphasise its complex and multifaceted nature (Ungar, 2021). Scholars describe it as both a process and an outcome. Resilience is widely studied across various disciplines, including psychology, sociology, and ecology. Most definitions of resilience focus on positive adaptation when facing adversity. Current reviews of psychological resilience show a shift from viewing it as a static trait to a dynamic, multi-level process (Infurna & Luthar, 2018). A better understanding of the intricate interaction between psychological, biological, and social factors has driven this development. The literature increasingly highlights that resilience is a common human capacity that can be cultivated and improved through specific interventions (Frieze et al., 2024). A growing body of research is focused on developing and testing interventions to facilitate resilience. Recent meta-analyses have demonstrated that resilience-promoting interventions, primarily those delivered in schools and through digital platforms, have a small but statistically significant positive effect on mental health outcomes and resilience factors (Seaborn, 2021; Frieze et al., 2024).

Changing Ineffective Leadership to Creative Leadership and Creativity Curriculum for 21st Century Resilient University Graduates

Creative Leadership: Undoubtedly, the above exposé on the nature of current Nigerian university leadership reveals an inescapable fact: many factors have contributed to ineffective governance, resulting in university graduates who are unprepared for the 21st century. It follows that any solution to the prevailing circumstances must begin with an overhaul of the type of leadership existing in the Nigerian university system. Leadership is conceived from multiple perspectives. Efforts to understand the concept aim to ensure that the contexts in which leaders operate benefit optimally from the various aspects of leadership. Leadership is the engine of development, playing a fundamental role in shaping the developmental destiny of any nation (Okeke, 2025). For Africans, the importance of leadership becomes more pronounced, given the continent's persistent struggles with governance failures and institutional breakdowns (Okeke, 2025; Obialo, 2024).

Creative leadership deliberately does the following:

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Fostering a Creative Environment: Creative leaders cultivate a culture of psychological safety, where team members feel content and are free to take risks, make mistakes, and share unconventional ideas without fear of criticism (Amabile, 1988). They provide the necessary resources, freedom, and time for exploration.
Visionary and Strategic Thinking: A creative leader articulates a convincing vision that is original and inspirational to the group they lead using such vision to guide their group to realise group goals and objectives.
Facilitating and Directing: A creative leader can play multiple roles in various contexts. They act as a facilitator, guiding and supporting the team's creative process, or as a director, providing a strong vision that others join to implement (Mainemelis, Kark, & Epitropaki, 2015).
Empowering the Team: Instead of a top-down, authoritative style, creative leadership empowers followers, decentralising creative ownership. The leader trusts that every team member is a potential contributor of innovative ideas (Puccio, Mance, & Murdock, 2011). Creative leadership is thus a collaborative process which empowers the team members to contribute freely to team objectives.

Creative and Resilient Graduates

This work has clearly delineated the crucial role creativity plays in fostering resilience in individuals, even beyond educational settings. The OECD (2021) views resilience as a fundamental skill for personal well-being and a key predictor of success in an uncertain world. The OECD's perspective is that creativity and resilience are mutually reinforcing. They argue that students who are encouraged to think creatively are better able to find new solutions when faced with challenges, thereby building their resilience. Conversely, resilient students are more likely to take risks and experiment with new ideas, which are essential for creative exploration. This synergy is central to their vision for education—preparing students not only to survive but also to thrive and innovate in the face of future challenges (OECD, 2023b). Obialo's (2022b) work revealed that adolescents and young adults turn to substance abuse when they face difficulties because they lack the skills to make the right choice. He argues that by teaching them creative problem-solving using a Cognitive-Behavioural Skills Enhancement model, they can learn to reframe challenges, generate novel solutions and strengthen their coping mechanism. Essentially, incorporating deliberate and structural creativity training into the university curriculum will equip students with the skills necessary for cognitive flexibility in the face of uncertain, unplanned, and extraordinarily challenging future realities.

The prevailing socio-economic situation in Nigeria has hurt the youth. There is a high incidence of depression and related outcomes due to the economic challenges of the country (The World Bank, 2018; Olusola & Omigbodun, 2020; Ajiboye & Owolabi, 2021). A creative youth or undergraduate will not give up but look for means to navigate the uncertainties that surround them and come up with options that they can explore to their advantage. When creativity becomes an integral part of the university curriculum, cognitive flexibility, a key product of creative skills and abilities, will be deployed adequately by university graduates to mitigate the effects of Nigeria's hostile sociopolitical environment. Consequently, they will develop a level of resilience that enables them to cope, recognising that the tough times are not meant to overwhelm them, but rather to seek opportunities that still exist amidst the unfavourable socioeconomic climate. Tang, Reiter-Palmon, and Ivcevic (2022) provide an overview of empirical evidence from multiple countries, showing an increase in "everyday creativity" during the pandemic and how it served as a means of coping with the crisis. Creativity thus enhanced the resilience of the respondents during the crisis period.

Creativity fosters innovation. One of the challenges facing 21st-century Nigeria is its slow progress in encouraging innovation and inventiveness. This is due to the dominance of chance-driven creativity over deliberate creativity (Obialo, 2017). Nigerian graduates will become more creative, innovative, and inventive when creativity is adopted as a deliberate policy and integrated into the university curricula, which will be achievable through resilient undergraduates and graduates of the proposed university system.

Conclusion

This paper advocates for the intentional integration of creative leadership and creativity curricula into the Nigerian university system. Creative leaders will drive the transformation of the nation's universities by exemplifying the innovative change that is urgently needed. The 21st century is characterised by cultural progress propelled by creativity. Creativity fosters resilience in individuals who become innovators, entrepreneurs, and influential

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leaders, especially in countries facing numerous challenges, as well as in other advanced nations with seemingly fewer leadership issues. Rapid global shifts will not pardon individuals, groups, or nations that neglect creativity and resilience. Creativity will equip us with the skills to find alternatives for addressing challenges, while resilience will enable us to endure and persist as solutions are devised. If Nigeria aims to be a significant contributor to the global economy and discourse in the 21st century, it must begin immediately to anticipate and actively pursue that goal.

Suggestions for Stakeholders

1. The Nigerian University System should begin piloting a course on creative leadership by making it an integral part of the compulsory courses in the Nigerian university curriculum, rather than restricting it to leadership programmes.
2. The science of creativity should also be taught as an essential component of university education.
3. Graduates of the creativity and creative leadership programmes should be employed to promote the science of creativity and creative leadership in the Nigerian ecosystem.
4. More studies should be commissioned to leverage the impact of creativity and creative leadership across our universities, the corporate world, government, and other non-governmental spaces in Nigeria.

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