

ATHENA GOVERNANCE INSIGHT

Where Deep Thinking Shapes Governance

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Reforming Transparency in Nigerian Universities to Unlock Global Funding and Restore Credibility

Athena Governance Insight is a quarterly publication delivering in-depth, data-driven analysis on policy innovations, governance trends, institutional and leadership challenges shaping effective leadership and public accountability.



Executive Summary

Nigerian universities rank among the least transparent higher education institutions globally, which directly contributes to chronic underfunding, weak research output, and a declining global reputation. Unlike peer institutions in South Africa, Kenya, and Ghana, Nigerian universities operate in secrecy, deterring international donors, private investors, and philanthropic organisations who rely on transparency as a fundamental requirement for engagement.

A recent study by the Athena Centre for Policy and Leadership, which surveyed 63 universities across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones, revealed entrenched financial opacity, with all universities failing to disclose even partial financial data. This systemic secrecy is a national embarrassment, as institutions meant to be centres of learning and excellence instead model secrecy and unaccountability to students, staff and the public, deepening a culture of corruption across the system.

This research report highlights key transparency gaps, quantifies the financial and reputational costs associated with these gaps, and presents a roadmap for reform. The goal is to restore trust, unlock global funding, and reposition Nigerian universities as credible players in the international academic community.

Addressing this crisis will require comprehensive legislative and governance reforms. A University Transparency and Accountability Act should mandate the publication of audited financial statements, budgets, and grant utilisation reports, with compliance tied directly to accreditation and funding eligibility. The National Universities Commission should establish a centralised transparency portal to host real-time financial disclosures from all universities, ensuring public access to critical financial information.

Transparent universities should be prioritised for grants and corporate partnerships, while tax incentives should encourage private sector investment in financially accountable institutions. Governance reforms the implementation of mandatory annual external audits. Finally, the Freedom of Information Act must be fully enforced to compel federal universities to proactively disclose financial data and procurement processes, reinforcing transparency as a cornerstone of public accountability in higher education.

Background and Problem Statement



Globally, institutions of higher learning—such as universities, polytechnics, and research institutes—serve as vital engines for national development. Through research, innovation, and human capital development, these institutions make direct contributions to economic growth, technological advancement, and social transformation.

However, delivering on this mandate requires significant and sustained investment. Infrastructure development, faculty recruitment and retention, research funding, and student support systems all demand capital outlays that many institutions—especially in low- and middle-income countries—are unable to finance internally.

Funding is not optional—it is foundational. Without adequate financial resources, universities cannot fulfil their mission of producing skilled graduates, driving innovation, and supporting evidence-based policymaking.

Higher education institutions globally rely on a mix of funding sources. These typically include:

- **Government subventions and grants:** Often the core funding source, particularly for public institutions.
- **Student tuition and fees:** A growing but politically sensitive revenue stream, particularly in developing economies.
- **Private support,** including endowments, philanthropic donations, and corporate partnerships.
- **Competitive research funding:** Awarded from domestic and international sources based on merit and institutional credibility.

A resilient university funding strategy requires more than just adequate funding volume—it demands diversity and predictability. Institutions that consistently attract private sector funding and research grants typically do so on the strength of their institutional transparency, governance credibility, and proven performance outcomes.

In Nigeria, however, university funding has long been a systemic challenge with profound implications for infrastructure, academic quality, and institutional

sustainability. Chronic underinvestment has produced visible and widespread infrastructural deficits. Laboratories and libraries are frequently outdated, limiting the potential for cutting-edge research and innovation. Student housing is often inadequate, with overcrowded and poorly ventilated dormitories compromising student health and well-being. Classrooms, where available, are often insufficient in number and quality, which hampers the delivery of effective teaching and learning.

These conditions reflect the urgent need for strategic funding reform and governance modernisation within Nigeria's higher education sector. These deficiencies are compounded by frequent industrial actions, which have become a defining feature of the Nigerian university landscape. Strikes led by key staff unions—including the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), Non-Academic Staff Union (NASU), Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities (SSANU), and the National Association of Academic Technologists (NAAT)—have repeatedly disrupted academic calendars, eroded learning continuity, and diminished public confidence.

Underlying these disruptions are longstanding grievances over funding shortfalls, deteriorating infrastructure, and unmet government commitments. Without structural reforms to improve financing, governance, and transparency, the cycle of disruption and decline is likely to persist—at significant cost to national development.



While internal funding challenges remain acute, Nigerian universities face an equally critical—but often overlooked—barrier: their persistent inability to attract external sources of funding, including support from donors, corporations, alumni, and international partners.

Globally, external funding serves as a key pillar of financial sustainability in higher education, enabling institutions to scale research, infrastructure, and innovation beyond the scope of public budgets. However, Nigerian universities have struggled to unlock these opportunities due to a chronic lack of financial transparency, weak governance systems, and outdated reporting practices.

Several systemic issues contribute to this challenge:

- **Obsolete financial reporting infrastructure**, which limits accountability and data accessibility.
- **Entrenched administrative opacity and poor work culture**, which undermine trust among potential stakeholders.
- **Minimal stakeholder engagement and disclosure**, which dissuade partnerships and philanthropic contributions.
- **A broader crisis of institutional governance**, marked by weak oversight and limited enforcement of accountability standards across the education sector.

These challenges do not only hinder funding—they erode the credibility of Nigerian universities in global rankings and diminish their competitiveness in international collaborations. In a funding landscape where transparency is a prerequisite, Nigerian institutions remain structurally unprepared to meet the expectations of global donors and private-sector partners.

This study was undertaken to examine the relationship between financial transparency and the ability of Nigerian universities to attract private and international funding. Specifically, the research sought to:

- **Evaluate the current state of financial transparency practices** across federal, state, and private universities.
- **Investigate the correlation between institutional transparency, governance quality, and access to external resources**, including grants, endowments, and alumni support.

- **Provide a data-driven foundation for evidence-based policy reform**, aimed at embedding transparency and accountability within university governance systems.

The findings of this study offer a critical foundation for federal and state governments to initiate reform efforts that:

- Strengthen transparency standards across higher education institutions.
- Modernise financial reporting and audit practices.
- Incentivise private sector and donor engagement through improved governance and trust-building mechanisms.

The significance of this study lies in its ability to inform federal and state governments on targeted policy reforms that can strengthen governance frameworks across the university system, enhance institutional accountability, and improve access to diversified funding.





Methodology:

A Rigorous and Representative Approach

To ensure empirical credibility and nationwide relevance, this study employed a structured, multi-tiered methodology that combined quantitative sampling precision with qualitative contextual insight.

SAMPLING FRAMEWORK: NATIONWIDE COVERAGE ACROSS OWNERSHIP TYPES AND REGIONS

The total study population consisted of the 271 universities approved by the National Universities Commission (NUC) as of December 2023. These included:

- **62 Federal Universities**
- **63 State Universities**
- **146 Private Universities**

A final sample of 63 universities was drawn using a hybrid sampling approach that combined probability-based selection with purposive stratification. The goal: to capture the structural and regional diversity of Nigeria's higher education landscape, particularly across dimensions of governance, funding, and institutional maturity.

Sample Composition:

- **30 Federal Universities:** Five universities from each of Nigeria's six geopolitical zones.
- **18 State Universities:** Three institutions from each zone to reflect variations in subnational funding and governance.
- **15 Private Universities:** Three per zone, except the Northeast (1) and Northwest (2) zones, where private university presence remains limited.

This stratified, regionally balanced design was selected for three reasons:

1. **System-wide diagnostic:** Nigeria's university system is fragmented by ownership, funding mechanisms, and regulatory oversight. Capturing all segments was essential to assessing whether transparency deficits are systemic or category-specific.
2. **Regional insight:** A disproportionate stratified sample enabled the nuanced analysis of regional disparities in financial reporting practices and transparency infrastructure.

3. **Policy generalisability:** The broad-based sample enables high-confidence policy recommendations that are relevant to stakeholders nationwide, including federal and state governments, university councils, donor agencies, and civil society groups.

DATA COLLECTION: MIXED METHODS FOR DEPTH AND VALIDATION

The study leveraged a combination of primary and secondary data sources, ensuring both real-time insights and international benchmarking.

Primary Data Collection

- **Freedom of Information (FOI) Requests:** Formal FOI applications were submitted to all sampled federal universities requesting audited financial statements, grant utilisation records, and procurement data.
- **Direct Formal Requests:** For state and private universities—outside the scope of FOI legislation—formal requests were followed by emails and phone engagement.
- **Website Audits:** Each institution's website was systematically reviewed for public disclosures related to budgetary allocations, financial statements, and procurement records.
- **Key Informant Interviews (KIIs):** Structured interviews were conducted with six experts, one from each of the six geopolitical zones, who possess in-depth knowledge of university finance, policy, and governance.

Secondary Data Sources

- **International Benchmarking:** Practices from peer institutions across Africa, including the University of Cape Town, the University of Nairobi, and the University of Ghana, were reviewed for comparative insights.
- **Public Databases:** The 2024 African University Transparency Index (FiscalTransparency.org) and similar repositories were utilised to validate institutional transparency metrics.
- **Donor Funding Analysis:** Patterns of external funding were examined using publicly accessible donor reports, philanthropic grant databases, and institutional financial statements to assess the relationship between transparency and access to funding.

Key Findings: Widespread Gaps in Financial Transparency Across Nigerian Universities

1. Absence of Open Financial Disclosure

Open access to financial information is a foundational marker of institutional transparency. Globally, universities that publish audited financial statements, budget allocations, and revenue sources build confidence among donors, alumni, and private partners—unlocking diversified funding and strengthening governance credibility.

However, analysis of the 63 universities surveyed reveals a systemic lack of financial transparency across Nigeria's higher education sector:

- Zero institutions publicly disclosed full financial statements. None of the surveyed universities published audited accounts, annual budgets, or expenditure profiles on their official websites.
- Key financial governance documents were absent. Not a single university provided access to endowment reports or visitation panel findings—core instruments used in assessing financial integrity and institutional performance.
- Internally Generated Revenue (IGR) data remains opaque. Despite many universities relying heavily on student fees and commercial revenues, none provided a complete or disaggregated breakdown of their income generation (IGR) streams.

This near-total opacity reflects a deeper structural issue: financial information in Nigerian universities is treated as confidential rather than a public accountability tool. This

culture of secrecy not only undermines donor confidence and private sector engagement but also weakens internal governance and stakeholder trust.

Comparative Context: Nigerian Universities Lag Behind Global Transparency Standards

A global review of financial disclosure practices among leading universities reveals a significant disparity between Nigerian institutions and their international counterparts. Universities in the United States, United Kingdom, Egypt, and Singapore provide real-time, publicly accessible financial data, demonstrating how transparency enables trust and unlocks funding.

Global Best Practice: Financial Transparency as a Funding Enabler

Leading institutions such as Stanford University, the University of Cambridge, and the National University of Singapore publish comprehensive financial disclosures—including audited financial statements, detailed budget allocations, and granular expenditure reports—directly on their websites.

This transparency correlates directly with their ability to attract substantial private sector funding and international research grants:



University	Ownership	Donations & Endowment Funding (2022–2023)
The American University in Cairo (Egypt)	Private	\$15.19M
Missouri University of Science & Technology (USA)	Public	\$25.60M
Stanford University (USA)	Private	\$74.16M
University of Cambridge (UK)	Public	\$249.75M
National University of Singapore (Singapore)	Public	\$456.50M

Source: Compiled from official institutional websites.

These institutions demonstrate that transparency is not a compliance burden—it is a strategic asset that builds stakeholder confidence, drives donor engagement, and expands access to diverse funding streams.

The Nigerian Gap: Low Transparency, Low Donor Confidence

In contrast, Nigerian universities exhibit minimal financial transparency, with virtually no institutions publishing their budgets, audit reports, or Internally Generated Revenue (IGR) data on public platforms. This lack of transparency has led to consistently low donor confidence scores across even the country’s most established institutions.

According to the 2024 African University Transparency Index (FiscalTransparency.org), three of Nigeria’s top universities performed poorly on donor trust metrics.

University	Donor Confidence Score (out of 10)
University of Ibadan	3.1
Ahmadu Bello University	2.8
Stanford University (USA)	2.6

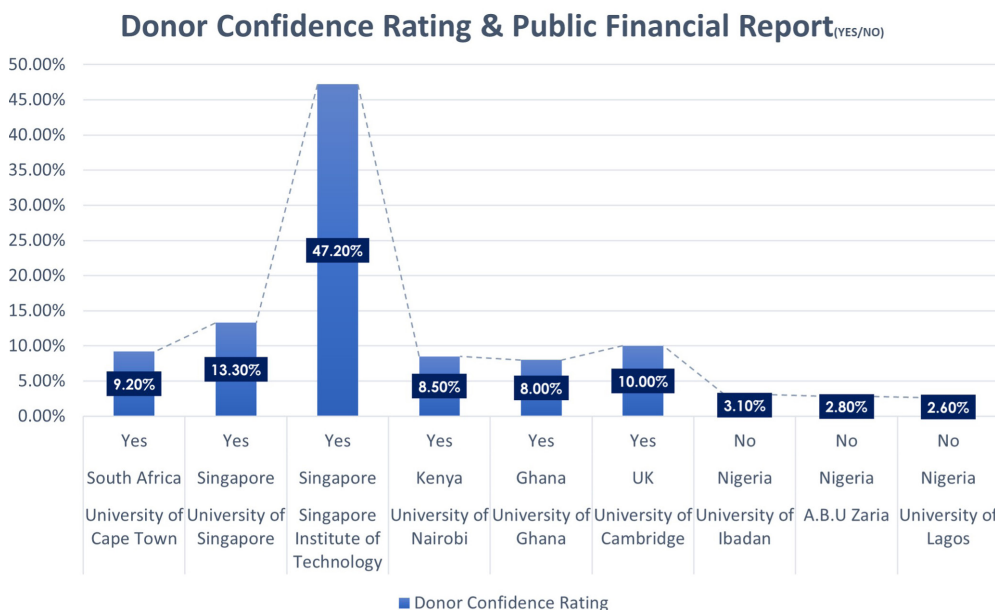
By comparison, peer institutions on the continent—such as the University of Ghana and the University of Nairobi—achieve significantly higher scores, owing to more consistent financial disclosures and institutional openness

Core Insight: Transparency Drives Funding, Secrecy Drives Isolation

This comparison underscores a problematic but critical insight: Financial secrecy in Nigerian universities is not incidental—it is structural.

Information is treated as a privilege rather than a public right. As a result, potential partners and funders are routinely denied the basic financial data necessary to assess credibility and commit resources.

Without urgent governance reforms and the institutionalisation of financial transparency, Nigerian universities will remain on the periphery of the global funding ecosystem—disconnected from the resources, partnerships, and innovations shaping the future of higher education.



Source: Authors’ compilation based on figures obtained from fiscal transparency.org (2024).

Challenges of Transparency in Nigerian Universities:

A Systemic Breakdown Transparency Index Scores Reveal Structural Weaknesses

The data-gathering process for this study highlights the depth and breadth of the transparency deficit in Nigerian universities. Globally, institutions with high Transparency Index (TI) scores attract more funding, form stronger international partnerships, and inspire trust from key stakeholders—donors, alumni, regulators, and the public.

These institutions demonstrate:

- Clear, publicly accessible financial statements and procurement records.
- Transparent allocation of funds and contractor selection processes.
- Independent oversight mechanisms to ensure accountability.

In contrast, Nigerian universities consistently underperform across all transparency indicators.

Legal Obligations Ignored, Transparency Standards Absent

Despite being legally mandated under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and NUC guidelines, nearly all federal universities surveyed failed to respond to formal requests for financial statements.

- **State and private universities fared worse**, often citing “lack of authorisation” as a blanket reason for withholding financial data.
- **University websites**—an essential tool for transparency—were largely non-functional or outdated. In several cases, links to budget reports redirected to irrelevant pages or produced error messages.
- **Administrative follow-up** via phone and email yielded evasive responses, circular referrals, or outright refusal to engage.

This suggests a culture of institutional secrecy, where financial information is viewed as proprietary rather than public.

International Benchmark: Transparency as a Precondition for Funding

In sharp contrast, universities in South Africa, Kenya, and Ghana offer seamless access to financial disclosures through user-friendly digital platforms.

- These institutions provide audited financial reports, detailed expenditure records, and grant utilisation summaries online.
- The result: consistently higher donor confidence scores and significantly greater access to global research funding.

Major international donors, such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the Wellcome Trust, require verifiable transparency as a non-negotiable condition for grant eligibility. Nigerian universities, by failing to meet this basic threshold, are systematically excluding themselves from international funding ecosystems.

Domestic Donors and Alumni Networks Also Shut Out

The consequences extend beyond international funding. Nigerian universities’ refusal to disclose how resources are allocated also:

- **Alienates alumni and corporate sponsors**, who lack assurances that their contributions will be properly managed.
- **Undermines efforts** to build private sector partnerships, which depend on trust, visibility, and data-driven accountability.

By comparison, universities in Ghana, Kenya, and South Africa have leveraged transparent practices to cultivate robust alumni-giving programs and attract private investment into research and infrastructure.

Institutional Culture of Secrecy: A National Concern

The entrenched culture of opacity within Nigeria’s higher education system is not simply an internal administrative issue—it is a broader governance crisis with profound implications for public trust, institutional effectiveness, and national development.

This persistent lack of transparency erodes public confidence in the governance of academic institutions, weakening the social contract between universities and the communities they serve. It also sends a troubling signal to students, faculty, and administrators—that unaccountability is acceptable and that secrecy, rather than openness, is the norm. This undermines the foundational role of universities as models of national integrity, civic leadership, and best institutional practices.

Without urgent reforms, this culture of secrecy risks becoming normalised—further isolating Nigerian universities from global academic systems and diminishing their role in shaping the country's development trajectory.

Union Advocacy: Transparency as a Reform Priority

Transparency is not only a concern for external donors or international partners, but it is also a central demand of internal stakeholders, particularly university staff unions. The Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) has consistently placed transparency and governance accountability at the forefront of its reform agenda.

During its 2022 industrial action, ASUU explicitly called for the constitution of visitation panels and the release of white papers from previous panels as non-negotiable demands. Earlier, in 2013, the union successfully pressured the federal government to make the creation of a budget monitoring committee a condition for accessing funds under the NEEDS Assessment Program.

These advocacy efforts underscore that the call for transparency is rooted within the system itself. Staff unions recognise that transparent governance is crucial for maintaining institutional credibility, ensuring equitable funding, and fostering long-term academic stability. As such, any serious reform effort must recognise transparency as both a governance imperative and a frontline demand of those working within the university system.

Unless Nigerian universities make a decisive break from the status quo and adopt modern, transparent, and accountable financial practices, they will remain trapped in a cycle of institutional underperformance. Continued opacity will perpetuate funding constraints, accelerate reputational decline, and deepen the system's isolation from global academic and research networks.

The path forward is clear: transparency must be institutionalised. It must be embedded into the governance architecture of every university—not as a compliance exercise but as a foundational principle for credibility, sustainability, and global relevance.

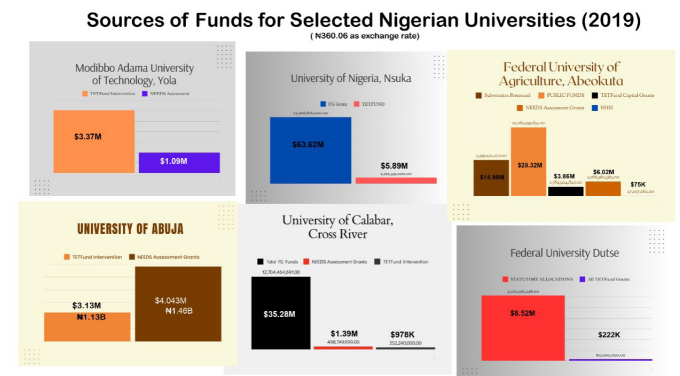
Access to Funding: A Structural Weakness in Nigerian Higher Education

Funding Deficit as a Root Cause of Institutional Decline

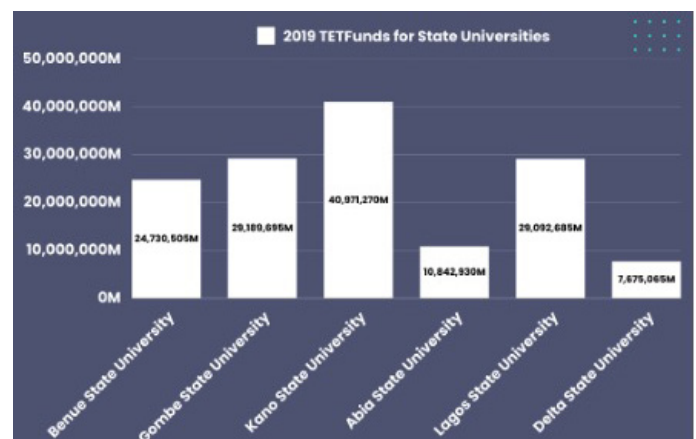
A critical insight from this study is the systemic funding imbalance that continues to undermine the sustainability and performance of Nigerian universities. The worsening conditions across campuses—dilapidated infrastructure, outdated laboratories, and declining academic services—can be traced directly to a lack of adequate and diversified funding.

Despite the lack of financial transparency from most institutions, stakeholder feedback confirms that both federal and state universities rely almost exclusively on government funding, with minimal diversification. The core funding sources include:

- Statutory government allocations and subventions
- Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund) grants
- NEEDS Assessment intervention fund



Source: Compiled from the Vistation Panel Reports of the selected Universities



Source: Compiled from figures obtained from TETFundofficial website.

TETFund, initially conceived as the Education Trust Fund (ETF) was established as an intervention mechanism to address the chronic underfunding in the education sector.

Similarly, the NEEDS Assessment fund, introduced in 2013 during President Goodluck Jonathan's administration, was an ad hoc response to the widespread infrastructural decay in public universities, which was exposed during prolonged industrial actions led by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU).

Both funding mechanisms were direct responses to mounting pressure from university stakeholders—particularly ASUU—who demanded targeted investments to revive the collapsing tertiary education system. However, while these interventions have provided short-term relief, they are neither sustainable nor sufficient to meet long-term institutional needs.

These funding sources, while essential, are inflexible, insufficient, and non-competitive, limiting universities' ability to scale innovation, invest in critical infrastructure, or respond to evolving academic and research needs.

Limited Private Sector Engagement and Philanthropic Support

Private sector and philanthropic engagement in Nigerian universities remains critically limited, undermining efforts to build diversified and resilient funding models. Endowments, where they exist, are extremely rare and not managed at a scale that could meaningfully support institutional development. Alumni-giving programs are either weak or absent, reflecting a missed opportunity to mobilise long-term support from past graduates.

Strikingly, the most cited source of private financial contributions—according to respondents—is through honorary degree conferrals, a practice that is not only unsustainable but also lacks transparency, consistency, and long-term value. This model stands in stark contrast to global best practices, where universities actively cultivate structured philanthropic networks, legacy giving, and corporate partnerships to drive innovation and institutional growth.

Without a fundamental shift in governance transparency and stakeholder engagement, Nigerian universities will remain unattractive to private donors, leaving them overly dependent on public funds and unable to scale their ambitions.

Global Benchmark: Diversified Revenue as a Resilience Strategy

In both advanced and emerging economies, universities have demonstrated that financial resilience is closely linked to revenue diversification. Leading institutions maintain robust endowments and legacy donations complemented by tuition and auxiliary income streams. They actively pursue private sector research partnerships while also cultivating philanthropic grants and alumni contributions.

For example, the University of Cambridge draws on a multibillion-dollar endowment and an active donor base to fund capital projects, support student aid, and sustain global research leadership. Similarly, the University of Pretoria and the American University in Cairo combine tuition income with corporate-sponsored research, donor grants, and public funding to maintain financial agility. This diversified funding model enables universities to withstand economic shocks, scale innovation, and remain competitive within the global academic ecosystem.

Implication: Nigeria's Funding Model is Neither Sustainable nor Competitive

The overreliance on government allocations leaves Nigerian universities financially exposed and unable to scale beyond basic operations. In the absence of robust financial planning, donor engagement strategies, and transparency in fund management, institutions are unlikely to attract or retain meaningful private or international support.

To reposition Nigerian universities for long-term sustainability, there must be a deliberate shift toward:

- Diversification of funding streams
- Reform of governance and transparency structures
- Creation of institutional frameworks to attract and manage endowments, alumni-giving, and public-private partnerships

Financial Opacity is a Structural Risk to National Development

The prevailing funding structure of Nigerian universities—characterised by overdependence on government allocations, limited access to diversified revenue streams, and near-total absence of financial transparency—has rendered the sector both financially vulnerable and institutionally stagnant.

More critically, the failure to institutionalise transparent financial practices has entrenched a culture of impunity and opacity at the heart of the university system. Institutions responsible for shaping Nigeria's future leaders have, instead, become models of poor accountability. The signal this sends to students, faculty, and administrators is damaging: accountability is discretionary, and secrecy is the status quo.

This is beyond a crisis of funding; it is a profound governance failure with cascading implications for Nigeria's educational quality, economic competitiveness, and global integration. Without urgent corrective measures to modernise financial governance, embed transparency, and attract external investment, Nigerian universities risk being permanently excluded from the global academic funding ecosystem. They will continue to be marginalised in international research networks and further disconnected from the evolving global knowledge economy.

In its current state, underfunding in the university system symbolises a broader national vulnerability in a world increasingly driven by innovation, credibility, and institutional excellence.

Conclusion: Transparency is a Non-Negotiable Imperative for Reform

The persistent transparency failures within Nigerian universities are not isolated lapses—they are the predictable outcomes of weak governance, insufficient regulatory oversight, and a deeply embedded culture of institutional secrecy. These systemic deficiencies have made Nigerian universities unattractive to global funders, untrustworthy to potential partners, and increasingly disconnected from their own alumni and private sector stakeholders.

As this study demonstrates, the absence of financial transparency and governance accountability is more than an administrative shortcoming. It is a structural barrier that prevents institutions from accessing global funding flows, undermines reputational capital, and erodes public confidence in higher education leadership.

Without decisive and coordinated reform, Nigerian universities will remain locked in a vicious cycle of underfunding, reputational decline, and international isolation. This issue reflects a broader failure in public sector governance and national strategic planning, extending beyond the education crisis.



Policy Recommendations

Embedding Transparency and Accountability as Governance Fundamentals

Transparency must evolve from an aspirational ideal to a core governance requirement, supported by legislation, institutional incentives, and effective regulatory enforcement. It must become the standard by which all universities—federal, state, and private—are assessed, funded, and accredited.

Policy Priority 1: Enact a Legal Framework for Mandatory Financial Disclosure

To institutionalise transparency across Nigeria's higher education system, a University Financial Transparency and Accountability Act should be enacted. This legislation should:

- **Mandate the annual publication of audited financial statements,** budget allocations, grant utilisation reports, and procurement records.
- Apply uniformly across all categories of universities—federal, state, and private.
- **Set minimum transparency standards** aligned with global best practices, including the **International Public Sector Accounting Standards (IPSAS) and International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS).**

Critically, compliance should be enforced through strong financial and regulatory levers. The publication of complete financial data should become a precondition for access to public funding, including:

- Federal and state subventions
- TETFund and other government intervention programs
- Accreditation renewal and participation in competitive research grants

Non-compliant institutions should face defined consequences—including suspension from funding programs and reduction in government allocations.

This is the foundational step toward building a university system that is not only accountable to the public but competitive on the global stage.

Policy Intervention 2: Establish a Unified Audit Framework Under the Oversight of the Auditor-General

To institutionalise financial integrity and governance accountability across Nigeria's university system, the Office of the Auditor-General of the Federation should be empowered to serve as the central authority for university audit governance. This approach consolidates both financial audits and governance risk assessments under one credible oversight mechanism.

Under this framework, all federal, state, and private universities should be legally required to publish annual, externally audited financial statements. These audits must be conducted by reputable firms selected from a pre-approved list curated and managed by the Auditor-General's office in collaboration with the National Universities Commission (NUC). This ensures audit independence, quality control, and standardisation of processes across institutions.

The scope of the audit must go beyond basic financial reporting. It should include:

- Financial transparency and fund flow validation (including subventions, IGR, grants, and donations)
- Procurement process reviews and vendor accountability
- Governance systems audits, including evaluation of internal controls, decision-making structures, and oversight effectiveness
- Compliance with visitation panel recommendations and financial transparency laws (e.g., FOI Act)
-

These audits should culminate in comprehensive annual Governance and Financial Risk Reports that are:

- Publicly disclosed, both on the university's website and the centralised University Transparency and Accountability Portal (UTAP)
- Used to inform eligibility for funding, accreditation renewal, and participation in government-backed programs

By empowering the Auditor-General to lead both audit coordination and governance oversight, this reform establishes a unified system of accountability and transparency. It also enhances regulatory capacity to identify institutional risks early, enforce compliance, and restore trust in Nigeria's university governance model.

Policy Intervention 3: Reform Visitation Panels into a Three-Year Governance Cycle

The current five-year visitation panel framework, intended initially to identify governance and financial deficiencies, has become largely ceremonial. Reports are often delayed, shelved without action, or disconnected from ongoing performance monitoring.

To strengthen accountability, the visitation process should be restructured into a mandatory three-year cycle of governance and performance reviews. The revised framework should:

- Expand its scope to include financial transparency, procurement integrity, governance effectiveness, and implementation of prior recommendations
- Require governing councils to formally review and respond to panel findings, with a public annual progress update
- Make panel recommendations a living governance document that guides institutional reform

To close the enforcement gap, external auditors—appointed under the independent audit mandate—should be required to assess the implementation of visitation panel recommendations as part of their annual reports.

This integrated structure establishes a continuous feedback loop between audit findings, governance reforms, and regulatory oversight, enabling institutions to evolve in real time while ensuring that accountability mechanisms yield tangible outcomes.

Policy Intervention 4: Launch a Centralised University Transparency Portal (UTAP)

To institutionalise public accountability and enable performance benchmarking across Nigeria's higher education system, the National Universities Commission (NUC) should establish a University Transparency and

Accountability Portal (UTAP)—a centralised, digital platform for real-time financial and governance data.

All accredited universities should be required to upload the following to the portal:

- Annual audited financial statements
- Full documentation of procurement processes and contract awards
- Disaggregated internally generated revenue (IGR) breakdowns
- Grant utilisation reports
- Annual performance scorecards showing progress on visitation panel recommendations

The UTAP should be designed with:

- Public access, at its core, to support transparency and drive accountability
- Benchmarking functionality, enabling comparisons across institutions
- Donor and stakeholder engagement tools, allowing corporate partners, international funders, and alumni networks to make informed decisions based on verifiable data

By providing a single source of truth for financial and governance data, UTAP would not only enhance transparency but also act as a credibility engine for Nigerian universities, enabling them to attract funding, partnerships, and global recognition.

Policy Intervention 5: Make Transparency a Driver of Competitive Advantage

Transparency should not be treated as a regulatory checkbox—it should become a core metric of institutional performance. Nigerian universities that demonstrate high levels of transparency, based on audit compliance, data quality, and implementation of governance reforms, should be strategically prioritised for TETFund disbursements, research and innovation grants, infrastructure development funding

To institutionalise this shift, the Athena Centre, in partnership with key stakeholders, will support the development of an Annual University Transparency Index. This independent index will:

- Assess and rank Nigerian universities on transparency and governance effectiveness
- Publicly recognise high-performing institutions
- Promote reputational incentives and stimulate healthy competition for transparent leadership

Over time, this index will embed transparency into the public identity of Nigerian universities, aligning institutional recognition with good governance and financial accountability.

Policy Intervention 6: Professionalise University Financial Management

No transparency or accountability framework can succeed without competent and ethically grounded financial leadership. Nigerian universities currently face a significant skills gap in financial management, which hinders efforts to institutionalise transparency and modern financial governance. To address this gap, the National Universities Commission (NUC), in partnership with the Office of the Auditor-General and professional accounting bodies, should establish a mandatory national certification program for key financial personnel—including bursars, finance officers, and internal auditors.

This certification should encompass global best practices, including International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS), digital financial management and reporting systems, public procurement regulations, anti-corruption and risk control mechanisms, and stakeholder engagement strategies. Beyond technical knowledge, the training must also build capacity for public communication and trust-building through transparent reporting.

Going forward, the designation of Certified Financial Officer (CFO) should be a prerequisite for all financial

leadership positions in both federal and state universities. By professionalising financial oversight and mandating certified expertise, this intervention will ensure that lack of technical capacity is no longer a barrier to delivering transparency, accountability, and institutional credibility.

Policy Intervention 7: Enforce Full Compliance with the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act

Despite clear legal obligations under the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act of 2011, compliance among Nigerian federal universities remains negligible. Most institutions fail to proactively publish financial data or respond to transparency requests, thereby undermining public trust and violating statutory duties.

To close this compliance gap, the NUC and the Auditor-General should jointly establish an FOI Compliance Task Force with the authority to:

- Audit universities for FOI compliance
- Issue sanctions and penalties for non-compliance
- Provide support in establishing dedicated FOI compliance units within each university

Critically, FOI compliance should be formally integrated into:

- Accreditation criteria
- Eligibility for public funding
- Performance reviews of university governing councils

By enforcing FOI requirements, Nigerian universities can begin to reset their relationship with the public—positioning transparency not as a threat but as a tool for building legitimacy, securing funding, and enhancing institutional performance.

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