

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Navigating Cultural Diversity in Globalised Education Systems: An Empirical Analysis of Leadership Practices among Student Unions

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Abstract

As education becomes increasingly globalised, higher institutions have become a hub for cultural exchange where individuals from different cultures, languages, and ethnic groups interact. In addition to academics, the institutions are places where students from many backgrounds can share their perspectives and experiences. Against this backdrop, educational leaders face the complex challenges of navigating diversity and fostering inclusivity where academic excellence thrives. This study employed a descriptive survey research design, focusing on undergraduate students at Al-Hikmah University. A sample of 200 students was selected from the population of 6,852 undergraduate students at the institution through simple random sampling to gather insights into their perceptions of the influence of culturally responsive leadership on student union leaders' practices. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire titled "Culturally Responsive Leadership and Students' Participation Scale" (CRLSPS). The analysis involved descriptive statistics to summarise the data and inferential statistics, including regression analysis, to test the formulated hypotheses at a 0.05 significance level. Findings revealed that student leaders demonstrated a high level of culturally responsive leadership, with an overall mean score indicating effective cultural awareness and inclusive practices, as well as high participation in various campus activities. Based on the findings, the study recommends that universities implement training programs focused on culturally responsive leadership to equip student leaders with the skills needed to foster inclusivity. Additionally, institutions should create supportive environments that encourage active participation from all students, ensuring that campus activities reflect the diverse cultural identities of the student body.

Keywords: Inclusiveness, Globalisation, Culture, Leadership practices.

Introduction

Education is a crucial foundation for both personal and societal development. It is not just about academic success; it involves the overall development of individuals, preparing them to actively participate in their communities and make positive contributions (Santamaria & Santamaria, 2016). In this regard, education serves as a bridge between individual aspirations and societal progress, shaping future leaders and contributors to economic, social, political and cultural development. According to the National Policy on Education, one of the primary objectives of higher education in Nigeria is to promote national unity. This implies that education should bring together students from different cultural, social, economic and religious backgrounds. Nigeria is a deeply multicultural society, home to over 250 ethnic groups and a range of religious traditions. This diversity is both a strength and a source of tension, as historical conflicts and socio-political divisions have shaped the country's educational landscape. However, this diversity often brings about challenges, including intergroup tensions, cultural misunderstandings and systemic inequalities (Brown et al., 2022). Institutions of higher education are microcosms of the broader society, reflecting its complexities and challenges. The presence of students from varied backgrounds creates a unique opportunity for dialogue and collaboration, but also necessitates intentional efforts to address cultural sensitivities and foster unity. Higher education institutions serve as a melting pot for diversity, creating opportunities for understanding and collaboration among young Nigerians (Johnson & Fuller, 2015).

Effective leadership within these institutions is critical for harnessing the potential of diversity. Student leaders play a vital role in shaping campus culture, advocating for inclusivity, and addressing the unique needs of their peers. According to Khalifa et al (2016), leadership in a multicultural environment requires not only awareness of cultural differences but also a commitment to equity and respect for all individuals. In Nigerian tertiary institutions, where students often encounter cultural differences for the first time, student leaders have the responsibility to model inclusive behaviour and create spaces where everyone feels valued through activities that actively engage students with the experiences of diverse groups and implement practices that promote fairness and inclusivity. Frawley et al (2020) argue that culturally responsive leaders are proactive in addressing disparities, ensuring that all voices are heard and that every student has the opportunity to succeed.

This is particularly important in Nigeria, where socio-economic inequalities and cultural biases can marginalise certain groups. For instance, a culturally diverse classroom may lead to richer discussions and more comprehensive problem-solving approaches. However, these benefits can only be realised if institutions actively address the challenges associated with diversity.

Culturally responsive leadership is a critical aspect of educational leadership that emphasises understanding and valuing diverse cultural backgrounds in educational settings. According to Ladson-Billings (2020), culturally responsive leadership involves recognising the cultural strengths and assets of students from diverse backgrounds and using this knowledge to inform decision-making and practices within educational institutions. This approach is rooted in the belief that culture plays a significant role in shaping students' identities, experiences, and academic success. Culturally responsive leadership involves recognising, respecting, and valuing the diverse cultural backgrounds and experiences of individuals within an educational community. In a multicultural society, university students need to develop culturally responsive leadership skills to effectively engage with diverse populations and promote social justice. This project will focus on understanding how university students in Kwara State perceive and practice culturally responsive leadership in their academic and social interactions.

In the context of universities in Kwara State, Nigeria, culturally responsive leadership plays a crucial role in promoting inclusivity, equity, and academic success among students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Kwara State is known for its rich cultural diversity, with various ethnic groups and traditions coexisting within the region. Therefore, it is essential for university leaders to adopt culturally responsive practices to effectively support and empower students from different cultural backgrounds. Effective leadership is crucial for fostering inclusive and diverse campus environments, promoting student engagement, and enhancing academic success. However, leadership styles and practices can be culturally bound, and cultural responsiveness is essential for effective leadership in diverse university settings (Ladson-Billings, 2020). While much of the literature on CRL comes from Western contexts, its application in non-Western settings such as Nigeria remains underexplored. In the Nigerian context, particularly in Kwara State, there is a pressing need to examine how culturally responsive leadership can be implemented to bridge the gap between students' diverse cultural backgrounds and university

leadership practices. This study seeks to address this gap by exploring the implications of CRL in Kwara State's higher education institutions.

Literature Review

Cultural Competence Theory, updated by Sue et al. (2019), emphasises the necessity for leaders to develop skills to interact effectively with students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Cultural competence involves not only understanding one's own cultural identity but also recognising and addressing cultural differences. Leaders who are culturally competent are better equipped to support diverse students, enhancing both their academic experiences and success (Sue et al., 2019). In practice, culturally responsive leadership involves continuous professional development in cultural competence, the implementation of inclusive policies, and fostering open dialogues about cultural issues. By adopting these theories, leaders in Kwara State universities can effectively navigate the complexities of cultural diversity, creating an environment where every student feels valued and empowered, thereby supporting their academic and personal growth. Theoretical and practical evidence underscores the importance of CRL in addressing challenges posed by cultural diversity in educational leadership. For example, research by Banks (2019) stresses the necessity of preparing students for a multicultural and interconnected world, advocating for leadership practices that prioritise inclusivity and equity. Although each author emphasises different dimensions such as multicultural preparation, systemic equity, or academic success, all studies recognise cultural competence as an essential prerequisite for effective leadership, differing mainly in whether they emphasise its development, application, or contribution to social justice.

This field explores leadership practices that recognise, respect, and integrate students' varied cultural identities, fostering a supportive and inclusive academic environment. The theoretical framework for culturally responsive leadership is based on key concepts emphasising cultural awareness and inclusivity. Effective leadership is believed to be enhanced when leaders engage with the cultural identities of their students, understanding and adapting practices to meet diverse needs. Several contemporary theoretical perspectives shape this framework for culturally responsive leadership in Kwara State. These frameworks guide leaders in engaging with a diverse student body and promoting academic and personal growth. Banks (2019) also noted that leadership practices in higher education must be designed to prepare students

for a multicultural and interconnected world. He suggested that universities should promote inclusivity by ensuring that leadership reflects diverse student experiences and needs. Research by DeAngelis and DeAngelis (2018) corroborates the importance of CRL in promoting positive student outcomes, particularly in terms of academic achievement, retention, and social integration. Geneva Gay (2018) highlights the transformative potential of culturally responsive practices, emphasising their role in creating equitable educational systems. She asserts that CRL involves fostering cultural competence among students and staff while addressing systemic barriers that hinder academic success. Similarly, Ladson-Billings (2020) argues that leaders must incorporate cultural knowledge into their decision-making processes to ensure all students feel represented and supported.

Academic collaboration thrives within a diverse environment. Students from varied backgrounds work together on research projects, leading to innovative solutions and a deeper understanding of complex issues (Ojo, 2019). Furthermore, the linguistic diversity on campus, with languages such as Yoruba and Hausa spoken alongside English, promotes a multilingual environment and enhances communication skills (Ogunyemi, 2021). Universities in Kwara State frequently organise cultural exchange programs and seminars to foster cross-cultural understanding. These events provide opportunities for students to share and learn about each other's traditions (Salami, 2022). Student organisations and clubs dedicated to specific ethnic and religious groups further support this cultural exchange, creating strong networks that enhance both academic and social experiences (Eze, 2020). Cultural diversity also manifests in campus dining and events. Food festivals and cultural nights allow students to experience a variety of cuisines, showcasing Nigeria's culinary richness (Durojaiye, 2021).

Additionally, traditional performances and art exhibitions provide platforms for celebrating and appreciating the diverse cultural heritage of the student body (Akinola, 2021). The presence of international students adds another dimension to campus life, encouraging global understanding and cooperation (Ibrahim, 2023). Moreover, diverse student groups often collaborate on community service projects, integrating cultural insights to address social issues effectively (Musa, 2022). To accommodate and honour this diversity, universities provide facilities such as multi-faith prayer rooms and culturally-themed study areas (Olaniyan, 2022). These amenities ensure that the needs of all students are

respected and met. While Ojo (2019) and Ogunyemi (2021) focus on the academic advantages of diversity, Salami (2022), Eze (2020), and Durojaiye (2021) emphasise cultural exchange through institutional activities and student organisations. Ibrahim (2023) and Musa (2022) further highlight diversity's contribution to global understanding and community development. Together, these studies suggest that cultural diversity becomes an institutional strength when leaders intentionally create opportunities for interaction, participation, and inclusion. Their studies collectively conclude that cultural diversity enriches university life by enhancing learning, innovation, collaboration, and intercultural understanding when supported by inclusive leadership.

According to Ladson-Billings (2020), advocates for the incorporation of cultural knowledge into leadership decision-making processes to ensure all students are represented and supported. Scholars such as Banks (2019) also stress the necessity of preparing students for a globalised, multicultural world by promoting leadership practices that prioritise inclusivity, equity, and social justice. Culturally responsive leadership, derived from the concept of culturally responsive pedagogy, involves those leadership philosophies, practices, and policies that create inclusive schooling environments for students and families from ethnically and culturally diverse backgrounds. Common practices include emphasising high expectations for students' achievement, incorporating the history, values, and cultural knowledge of students' home communities in the school curriculum, working to develop a critical consciousness among both students and faculty to challenge inequities in the larger society, and creating organisational structures at the school and district level that empower students and parents from diverse racial and ethnic communities. Similar terms to describe this approach to leadership include culturally proficient leadership, culturally relevant leadership, culture-based leadership, cultural competency, multicultural leadership, and leadership for diversity. Although there are subtle differences in how authors and researchers employ these different terms, in general, these approaches encourage teacher leaders, school principals and district level leaders to "lead for diversity" and work with teachers, parents, and the larger community to develop curriculum frameworks, pedagogical practices, and organisational structures and routines that are consistent with the cultural orientations of ethnically diverse students and their families. While much of the investigation of culturally responsive practices has focused on classroom teaching, recent efforts have applied a culturally responsive framework to school leadership. Despite using different

concepts and terminology, the reviewed studies converge on the importance of inclusive leadership practices that integrate diversity into institutional structures and decision-making.

In general, these studies characterise culturally responsive school leaders as those who emphasise high expectations for students' academic achievement, exhibit an ethic of care, promote inclusive instructional practices, and develop organisational structures that empower parents and the broader community in the life of the school. Culturally responsive leadership often overlaps with "leadership for social justice" approaches, a term that has been prevalent in the Kwara state educational literature and focuses on improving the educational experiences and outcomes for all students, particularly those who have been traditionally marginalised in schools. While this bibliography incorporates some sources that focus on socially just leadership, it emphasises those school leadership theories and practices that respond to issues of ethnicity, culture, language, and race. Ann E. Lopez (2016) emphasises that culturally responsive leadership is essential for fostering inclusivity and promoting positive change in diverse educational environments. She argues that without cultural competence, students may face difficulties in leading diverse groups, addressing issues related to social justice, and promoting equitable participation among peers. Similarly, Banks (2013) and Nieto (2017) highlight the importance of cultural competence in leadership development, noting that inclusive leadership practices help prepare students to become agents of change, capable of addressing issues such as inequality, discrimination, and social exclusion.

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of cultural responsiveness in leadership, limited research has been conducted on how university students, particularly in Nigerian contexts like Kwara State, perceive and practice culturally responsive leadership. This lack of empirical studies has left a gap in understanding both the specific challenges students face in diverse environments and how these challenges might be overcome through targeted leadership development programs. Furthermore, while universities in Nigeria are increasingly embracing diversity, the absence of a structured framework to address cultural differences within leadership development programs means that many students may lack the skills needed to lead inclusively. As a result, students may miss valuable opportunities for personal and professional growth, and the university community may experience fragmentation and lack of

cohesion, undermining both academic and extracurricular activities. Kwara State is known for its rich cultural diversity, with various ethnic groups and traditions coexisting within the region. Therefore, it is essential for university leaders to adopt culturally responsive practices to effectively support and empower students from different cultural backgrounds. In conclusion, this project will contribute to the existing literature on culturally responsive leadership in higher education and provide practical recommendations for promoting cultural competence and inclusivity among university students in Kwara State. By fostering culturally responsive leadership skills, students can become effective advocates for diversity, equity, and social justice within their academic and professional endeavours. In the diverse academic environment of Kwara State, university students are frequently called upon to assume leadership roles within their academic institutions, often representing a wide array of cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

However, a critical concern exists regarding the preparedness of these students to engage in leadership practices that respect and incorporate cultural diversity. Despite the growing importance of leadership in university life, there is a significant gap in the education and training related to culturally responsive leadership. Without this crucial cultural competence, students may encounter challenges in leading effectively, resulting in exclusionary practices, interpersonal conflicts, and diminished team dynamics that negatively affect academic and social outcomes. While leadership development programs in Nigerian universities have focused on skills such as decision-making, communication, and problem-solving, there is insufficient attention given to the integration of cultural diversity into leadership practices among students. This is especially true in Kwara State, where university students come from a variety of ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds. The failure to incorporate culturally responsive leadership training in university curricula means that many students may struggle to navigate and lead in a multicultural environment, leading to challenges such as misunderstandings, marginalisation, and a lack of cohesion among diverse student groups.

The literature demonstrates a broad consensus that culturally responsive leadership fosters inclusion, equity, and improved educational outcomes through leaders' cultural competence and inclusive practices. While previous research has extensively examined these issues among school leaders and institutional administrators, there is limited empirical evidence concerning

student union leaders in Nigerian universities. This gap provides a strong justification for investigating how culturally responsive leadership influences leadership practices among student unions in globalised higher education systems. This study seeks to fill this gap by investigating the experiences and challenges of university students in Kwara State regarding culturally responsive leadership. It aims to explore the barriers that prevent students from leading inclusively, identify the key competencies needed for culturally responsive leadership, and propose practical strategies for integrating cultural responsiveness into leadership development programs. By addressing these issues, the study hopes to enhance students' leadership abilities, foster greater inclusivity, and contribute to the development of a more harmonious and productive university community.

Problem Statement

Culturally responsive leadership is becoming increasingly important in higher education as universities face the challenges of growing diversity on their campuses. Despite the importance of CRL, significant challenges remain in implementing such leadership in Kwara State universities. One of the main barriers is the lack of formal cultural competence training for university administrators and faculty. While many leaders recognise the importance of cultural inclusivity, they often lack the skills or knowledge necessary to effectively implement strategies. Another challenge is resistance to change, particularly in institutions where traditional leadership styles are deeply entrenched, making it difficult to adopt new practices that prioritise cultural responsiveness. Additionally, resource constraints present a challenge, as universities may struggle to allocate the funds and personnel needed to support inclusive initiatives. Nevertheless, culturally responsive leadership is essential for ensuring that universities in Kwara State offer an inclusive and supportive environment for all students, regardless of cultural background. Empirical studies show that while there is growing recognition of the importance of cultural diversity, more concrete actions are required to translate this awareness into effective leadership practices. By providing training in cultural competence, developing inclusive policies, and engaging more directly with students from diverse backgrounds, university leaders can create academic environments that are not only culturally inclusive but also conducive to the success of all students.

Unfortunately, many student leaders struggle to develop the skills and frameworks needed to create inclusive environments that genuinely value cultural differences. This gap often leaves marginalised groups feeling isolated, which can significantly affect their sense of belonging and academic success. Research shows that culturally responsive leadership bridges these divides by fostering equity, trust and collaboration. Yet despite its potential, practical implementation among university students remains limited (Mansfield & Lambrinou, 2022). Lack of culturally responsive practices among student leaders can lead to issues such as underrepresentation and biases in decision-making, leading to alienation among minority students. Even though the importance of culturally responsive leadership is widely acknowledged, many universities fall short in providing adequate training for student leaders to develop the necessary cultural competencies. This lack of preparation means that valuable opportunities to harness cultural diversity as a strength in leadership practices are often missed.

Although culturally responsive leadership has gained increasing attention in educational leadership literature, significant gaps remain. Existing studies have largely focused on school administrators and faculty, leaving limited knowledge about how culturally responsive leadership influences leadership practices among university student union leaders. Furthermore, most previous studies have employed qualitative or descriptive approaches, with few using predictive quantitative methods such as multiple regression to examine these relationships. In addition, there is a paucity of evidence from Nigerian universities, particularly in Kwara State, where increasing cultural diversity presents unique leadership challenges. Addressing these gaps is essential for generating evidence that can strengthen culturally responsive leadership practices and promote inclusive student leadership in globalised higher education systems.

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this study is to explore culturally responsive leadership among university students in Kwara State. Specifically, the study will aim to: #

- i. I. How often do University students participate in campus activities?

- ii. What impact does culturally responsive leadership have on leadership practices?
- iii. What is the impact of cultural awareness of student leaders on leadership practices?

Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design to examine the relationship between culturally responsive leadership and leadership practices among student union leaders in a culturally diverse higher education environment. The descriptive survey design was considered appropriate because it enables the collection of quantitative data from a representative sample of respondents at a single point in time and facilitates the examination of relationships among variables without manipulating the study environment. The study population comprised 6,852 undergraduate students of Al-Hikmah University, Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria. A sample of 200 undergraduate students was selected using convenience sampling. The sampling technique was considered appropriate because the study targeted readily accessible students who were willing to participate in the online survey. Furthermore, convenience sampling facilitated timely data collection within the available resources while providing adequate responses for regression analysis.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire comprising two sections. Section A elicited respondents' demographic information, including gender, age, level of study, faculty, and previous participation in student union activities. Section B measured the study variables using items adapted from Hines's (2022) culturally responsive leadership framework. The questionnaire assessed four dimensions of culturally responsive leadership: inclusiveness, development, validation, and cultivation as the independent variables, while leadership practices constituted the dependent variable. Responses were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). To ensure content and face validity, the questionnaire was reviewed by experts in Educational Management and Measurement and Evaluation, who assessed the relevance, clarity, and adequacy of the items in relation to the study objectives. Their observations informed the revision of ambiguous statements before the instrument was administered.

A pilot study was conducted among students at a university outside the study area who had characteristics similar to those of the study participants. The

internal consistency of the instrument was determined using Cronbach's Alpha. The overall reliability coefficient was 0.83, indicating satisfactory reliability. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all respondents, anonymity was maintained, and participants were assured that the information provided would be used solely for research purposes. The questionnaire was converted into a Google Form, and the survey link was distributed through official student communication platforms. Responses were exported from Google Form to Microsoft Excel and into Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) for analysis.

The demographic characteristics of the respondents were analysed using frequency counts and percentages, while descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) were used to summarise responses to the study variables. Prior to the analysis, the data were screened for completeness, missing values, outliers, and data entry errors. The assumptions underlying multiple regression analysis were also examined. Normality was assessed using skewness and kurtosis values as well as a normal probability plot; the results confirmed that the data satisfied the assumptions for multiple regression analysis. Thereafter, descriptive statistics were used to answer the research questions, while multiple regression analysis was employed to determine the predictive influence of the dimensions of culturally responsive leadership on leadership practices among student union leaders. Statistical significance was determined at the 0.05 level.

Findings

Research Question 1: What is the level of students' participation in campus activities?

Table 1: Students' Participation in Campus Activities

S/N	Items	Mean	SD	Decision
1.	I take part in events and programmes organised by my school	3.34	0.64	High
2.	I join clubs, groups or student organisations on campus	3.20	0.75	High
3.	I attend seminars, workshops or talks arranged by the school	3.21	0.77	High
4.	I participate in cultural and social activities at school	3.09	0.80	High
5.	I get involved in sports and fitness activities offered by the school	3.09	0.80	High

6.	I take part in student leadership and decision-making	3.15	0.79	High
7.	I volunteer for school events or service projects	3.13	0.75	High
8.	I help plan and organise activities for other students	3.12	0.79	High
9.	I feel encouraged by the school to join campus activities	3.16	0.79	High
10.	I believe my participation in campus activities helps me learn	3.18	0.76	High

Key: <2.50 = Low, >2.50 = High

Table 1 shows that the level of students' participation in campus activities in Al-Hikmah University was high. Specifically, students agreed that they take part in events and programmes organised by the school, with a mean score of 3.34, they also indicated active involvement in clubs, groups, or students' organisations on campus. Other items also suggest that students are actively engaged in a wide range of campus activities and feel supported by their institutions in contributing to a vibrant campus community.

Research Question Two: What impact does culturally responsive leadership have on students' participation in school activities?

Table 2: ANOVA on Culturally Responsive Leadership and Students' Leadership Practices

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig
1	Regression	5.606	1	5.606	35.459	.000
	Residual	31.304	198	.158		
	Total	36.910	199			

This table presents the analysis of Variance (ANOVA) results used to evaluate the statistical significance of the regression model examining the impact of culturally responsive leadership on students' participation in school activities. The regression sum was 5.606, indicating the proportion of variation in students' participation that is attributable to culturally responsive leadership. The model produced f-statistic of 35.459, with a significance value of .000, which is well below the conventional .05. This result indicates that the model is statistically significant, meaning that culturally responsive leadership of

student leaders as a predictor significantly improves students' participation in campus activities. The residual sum of 31.304 represents the portion of variance in students' participation not accounted for by the model. Since the p-value is less than .05, the results provide strong evidence to confirm that culturally responsive leadership has a significant impact on students' active participation in campus activities.

Research Question 3: What are the impact of cultural awareness of student leaders on leadership practices

Table 3: ANOVA on cultural awareness and leadership practices

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	2.899	1	2.899	16.879	.000 ^b
	Residual	34.010	198	.172		
	Total	36.910	199			

a. Dependent Variable: Leadership Practices

This table presents the analysis of Variance (ANOVA) results used to elevate the statistical significance of the regression model examining the impact of cultural awareness of student union leaders on leadership practices in the university. The Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) results were used to assess the statistical significance of the regression model, examining the impact of cultural awareness of student leaders on students' participation in campus activities in Al-Hikmah University, Ilorin, Kwara State. The regression sum of squares was 2.899, indicating the proportion of variation in students' participation that is attributable to cultural awareness. With 1 degree of freedom, the corresponding mean square was also 2.899. The model produced an F-statistic of 16.879, with a significance value ($p = .000$), which is well below the conventional threshold of 0.05. This result confirms that the regression model is statistically significant, meaning that the inclusion of cultural awareness as a predictor significantly improves the model's ability to explain variation in students' participation. The residual sum of squares was 34.010, representing the portion of variance not explained by the model. Given that the p-value is less than .05, the results provide sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis. Therefore, it can be concluded that cultural awareness of

student leaders has a significant impact on students' participation in campus activities.

Discussion of Findings

Findings from research question one revealed that students reported a high level of participation in campus activities, with a mean score of 3.18. This suggests that students are actively involved in academic, social, and co-curricular initiatives, indicating a vibrant and inclusive campus culture. The implication of this finding is significant: when students perceive that their identities are respected and their voices heard, they are more likely to contribute to campus life. Rugambuka and Mazzuki (2023) affirmed this by stating that inclusive and respectful environments are catalysts for student engagement and participation. Similarly, Ettekal et al. (2020) argued that culturally relevant programming activities that reflect students' cultural values, traditions, and experiences increase students' sense of ownership and belonging within academic institutions. Adding to this discourse, the findings of Deni Surapto et al. (2024) in a study on inclusive leadership in distance higher education programs revealed that leadership styles that prioritise inclusion and representation significantly enhance both student participation and retention. Their study highlights the relevance of inclusive leadership beyond traditional campus settings, showing its impact in diverse learning modalities. This supports the notion that participation is not solely an outcome of student interest but is deeply influenced by the institutional climate and leadership practices that either promote or inhibit engagement.

Research question two tested hypothesis that specify the statistically significant impact of culturally responsive leadership on leadership practices. The result demonstrates a moderate positive impact of culturally responsive leadership on leadership practices ($\beta = .390$, $p < .001$). This result indicates that students are more likely to engage actively in campus life when student leaders employ leadership styles that respect cultural identities and promote fairness and collaboration. It highlights the critical role of leadership in shaping student behaviour and motivation. This finding is in line with Solis-Grant et al. (2023), who reported that students show higher levels of engagement and institutional loyalty in environments where leadership is inclusive and culturally attuned. Barksdale (2024) similarly emphasised that students feel empowered to participate when they perceive that their leaders are fair, empathetic, and culturally competent. Reinforcing this view, Murwanto (2024) showed that

inclusive leadership across various educational contexts plays a transformative role in ensuring participation and dismantling structural inequities that limit access to involvement for marginalised student groups. Together, these findings imply that culturally responsive leadership should not be viewed as a supplemental trait but as a foundational element of effective student governance and campus development.

Finding from research question three revealed that cultural awareness among student union leaders significantly predicts leadership practices within the university environment. The regression model was statistically significant ($F = 16.879, p < .05$), indicating that cultural awareness contributes meaningfully to explaining variations in leadership practices. This suggests that student leaders who demonstrate greater awareness and appreciation of their peers' diverse cultural backgrounds are more likely to adopt inclusive, participatory, and effective leadership practices. The finding underscores the importance of cultural awareness as a critical leadership competency for promoting cohesion and fostering meaningful engagement within multicultural university communities. This finding is consistent with the principles of culturally responsive leadership, which emphasise that effective leaders acknowledge, respect, and integrate the cultural identities of those they serve into leadership decision-making and organisational practices (Geneva Gay, 2018; Gloria Ladson-Billings, 2020).

According to James A. Banks (2019), leaders who possess strong cultural awareness are better positioned to create inclusive environments that promote equity, mutual respect, and active participation among culturally diverse groups. Similarly, Derald Wing Sue et al. (2019) argue that cultural competence enhances leaders' ability to understand diverse perspectives, minimise cultural bias, and foster positive interpersonal relationships, thereby improving leadership effectiveness. The finding further supports Hines' (2022) culturally responsive leadership framework, which identifies cultural awareness as a foundational element of effective leadership in diverse educational settings. Student leaders who understand and appreciate cultural differences are better equipped to resolve conflicts, communicate across cultural boundaries, and make decisions that reflect the interests of diverse student constituencies. Such leadership practices contribute to stronger organisational cohesion and greater participation in university activities. This finding implies that universities should intentionally integrate cultural

awareness into student leadership development programmes. Leadership training should extend beyond administrative and organisational skills to include cultural competence, diversity management, inclusive communication, and intercultural collaboration. Such initiatives would enhance the capacity of student union leaders to effectively navigate cultural diversity and promote inclusive participation within increasingly globalised higher education systems.

Conclusion

This study examined the influence of culturally responsive leadership on leadership practices among student union leaders in Al-Hikmah University, Ilorin, Kwara State, within the context of an increasingly globalised and culturally diverse higher education environment. The findings revealed that students actively participate in campus activities and that culturally responsive leadership significantly enhances effective leadership practices. Specifically, cultural awareness emerged as a significant predictor of leadership practices, demonstrating that student leaders who recognise, appreciate, and respond to the diverse cultural identities of their peers are more likely to foster inclusive, participatory, and collaborative leadership. These findings affirm that culturally responsive leadership is not merely a desirable leadership attribute but an essential competency for promoting equity, mutual respect, and meaningful student engagement in multicultural university settings. The study contributes to the growing body of literature on culturally responsive leadership by extending its application beyond institutional administrators to student union leadership, an area that has received limited empirical attention, particularly within the Nigerian higher education context. By employing a quantitative approach to examine the predictive relationship between culturally responsive leadership and leadership practices, the study also provides empirical evidence that addresses existing methodological and contextual gaps in the literature.

The study concludes that universities seeking to strengthen student leadership should intentionally integrate culturally responsive leadership into student leadership development programmes. Training initiatives should equip student leaders with competencies in cultural awareness, inclusive communication, intercultural collaboration, conflict management, and equitable decision-making. Such efforts will not only enhance the effectiveness of student unions but also promote social cohesion, strengthen students' sense of belonging, and prepare future leaders capable of navigating the complexities of increasingly

diverse and globalised educational environments. This suggests that beyond simply understanding students' cultural identities, student leaders who actively promote equity, shared decision-making, and fair treatment are more likely to foster a vibrant and participatory campus culture. It can therefore be concluded that culturally responsive leadership is not just a value-driven approach but also a practical strategy for enhancing student engagement and fostering community among a diverse student body. Promoting inclusiveness and culturally aware student leadership can improve the social and academic life of students on campus.

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