

Research Article

INSTITUTIONALIZING MERITOCRACY IN NIGERIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES: A STUDY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF UYO

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Abstract

This research investigates the challenges and prospects of institutionalizing meritocracy in Nigerian public universities, using the University of Uyo as a case study. The central problem is the persistent tension between merit-based recruitment and promotion, on the one hand, and prebendal practices where appointments are influenced by ethnic, political, and personal connections on the other. Drawing on prebendalism and institutional theory as analytical lenses, the study adopts a mixed-methods design involving surveys of academic and non-academic staff, key informant interviews, and analysis of university recruitment records. The study addresses three research questions concerning the prebendal practices hindering meritocratic recruitment, their effects on staff recruitment and promotion, and the reforms needed to institutionalize meritocracy. Quantitative data from 400 respondents are analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, while qualitative data from 20 key informants and document analysis are analyzed thematically. Findings reveal that prebendal practices are prevalent in recruitment and promotion at the University of Uyo, manifesting through ethnic favouritism, political interference, and patron-client relationships. These practices significantly undermine institutional quality, staff morale, and the credibility of academic credentials. The study recommends the development of transparent merit-based frameworks, robust monitoring mechanisms, and capacity building for ethical governance. The findings will inform policy recommendations for university governing councils, the NUC, and the Federal Ministry of Education. The study addresses the National Research Fund's thematic

area of Governance, Politics, Law and Ethics, and aligns with its goals of national relevance, policy impact, innovation, capacity building, and evidence-based research.

Keywords: Meritocracy, Prebendalism, University Governance, Public Administration, Institutional Reform, Nigerian Universities

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Nigerian public universities are established to generate knowledge, produce skilled graduates, and serve as engines of national development. Achieving these goals depends substantially on the quality of staff academics who teach and conduct research, and non-academic staff who manage university operations. When recruitment and promotion are based on merit demonstrated competence, qualifications, and performance universities are more likely to fulfill their mandates. When they are based on connections, ethnicity, or political loyalty, institutional quality suffers (Joseph, 1987).

The National Universities Commission (NUC), the regulatory body for Nigerian universities, has established guidelines for staff recruitment and promotion. These include minimum qualification requirements for each academic rank and a recommended staff-mix by rank, where 20% of academic staff should be in the professorial cadre, 35% senior lecturers, and 45% lecturer I and below (NUC, n.d.). However, there is widespread concern that these guidelines are not consistently followed, leading to distortions in the academic workforce and compromising the quality of teaching and research.

The concept of prebendalism, developed by Richard Joseph in his analysis of Nigerian politics, describes a system where state offices are appropriated by officeholders who use them to generate material benefits for themselves and their networks (Joseph, 1987). In the university context, this manifests as the use of recruitment and promotion powers to reward political allies, satisfy ethnic obligations, or generate personal income through corrupt practices. The result is what several studies have described as a compromise of academic standards and institutional effectiveness (Madu, Azubuike, & Chris-Israel, 2017; Ilochi, 2025).

The University of Uyo, established in 1991 as a federal university in Akwa Ibom State, provides an appropriate case study. With a staff strength of over 4,000 and an academic staff complement of more than 1,500, the university is large enough to exhibit the patterns that this research seeks to examine (University of Uyo, 2025). As a federal institution, it is subject to

NUC guidelines and the federal character principle, both of which create tensions with merit-based recruitment.

The Nigerian university system has expanded significantly since independence, with the number of federal universities growing from just five at independence to over forty today. This expansion has been accompanied by increasing concerns about the quality of graduates, the relevance of research outputs, and the integrity of academic processes. Central to these concerns is the question of who gets recruited and promoted in these institutions, and on what basis. When recruitment and promotion decisions are driven by considerations other than merit, the entire academic enterprise is compromised (Weber, 1946).

The importance of meritocracy in university administration cannot be overstated. Universities are uniquely positioned as institutions where knowledge is created, transmitted, and applied. This requires individuals with the highest levels of competence, creativity, and integrity. When positions are filled by those who lack the requisite qualifications, the entire academic community suffers—students receive substandard education, research outputs decline, and the university's reputation both domestically and internationally is damaged (Young, 1958).

The federal character principle, while designed to promote national unity and equitable representation, has in practice created significant tensions with merit-based recruitment. The principle requires that appointments to federal institutions reflect the diversity of Nigeria's ethnic groups and geopolitical zones. While this is a laudable objective, its implementation has often been characterized by political manipulation, where ethnicity and state of origin become the primary considerations rather than one of several factors to be balanced (Ilochi, 2025).

The concept of prebendalism, as articulated by Richard Joseph, provides a powerful analytical lens for understanding these dynamics. Joseph argued that Nigerian politics is characterized by a system where state offices are viewed as sources of personal enrichment, and officeholders use their positions to generate material benefits for themselves and their networks (Joseph, 1987). This pattern has become deeply entrenched in Nigerian political culture, shaping not only electoral competition but also bureaucratic behaviour. In the university context, prebendalism manifests in recruitment and promotion decisions that are driven by ethnic solidarity, political patronage, or personal gain rather than institutional needs. The University of Uyo, like other federal universities in Nigeria, operates within this complex environment. Established in 1991, the university has grown to become one of the leading

institutions of higher learning in the South-South geopolitical zone. With a staff strength of over 4,000, including approximately 1,500 academic staff, the university is large enough to exhibit the patterns that this research seeks to examine (University of Uyo, 2025). As a federal institution, it is subject to NUC guidelines and the federal character principle, both of which create tensions with merit-based recruitment.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The problem this research addresses is the persistent failure to institutionalize meritocracy in Nigerian public universities. Despite the existence of NUC guidelines and university statutes that prescribe merit-based recruitment and promotion, evidence suggests that prebendal practices continue to shape employment outcomes. This creates several consequences:

First, unqualified or under qualified staff are recruited, reducing the quality of teaching and research. When individuals who lack the requisite qualifications are appointed to academic positions, they are ill-equipped to deliver quality instruction or conduct meaningful research. This has direct implications for the quality of graduates produced by Nigerian universities, and by extension, for national development (Madu et al., 2017).

Second, qualified candidates are denied opportunities, leading to frustration and brain drain. Many of Nigeria's most talented academics have sought opportunities abroad, where merit-based systems are more firmly established. This depletion of human capital further weakens the university system, creating a vicious cycle of decline.

Third, the credibility of Nigerian university degrees is eroded, both domestically and internationally. Employers increasingly express concerns about the quality of graduates from Nigerian universities, and international institutions are reluctant to recognize Nigerian qualifications. This has significant implications for Nigeria's ability to compete in the global knowledge economy.

Fourth, institutional resources are diverted to satisfy patronage obligations rather than being invested in academic excellence. When positions are filled based on connection rather than competence, the university loses the opportunity to recruit the best talent, and resources that could be invested in research, infrastructure, and staff development are instead used to maintain patronage networks (Joseph, 1987).

While anecdotal evidence and media reports point to these problems, there is limited systematic, empirical research on how prebendal practices operate in specific Nigerian universities, what mechanisms sustain them, and what reforms could effectively entrench

meritocracy. This gap is particularly significant for federal universities like the University of Uyo, where the interplay of federal character requirements, political pressures, and institutional autonomy creates a complex environment for human resource management. The problem is further compounded by the lack of effective accountability mechanisms. While the NUC has established guidelines for recruitment and promotion, enforcement is weak, and there are few consequences for institutions that fail to comply. Similarly, university governing councils, which are supposed to provide oversight, are often complicit in or powerless to prevent prebendal practices. This creates an environment where formal rules exist but are routinely circumvented (Scott, 2014).

1.3 Research Questions

The study is guided by the following three research questions:

1. What prebendal practices and other obstacles hinder meritocratic recruitment and promotion at the University of Uyo?
2. How do prebendal practices affect staff recruitment and promotion at the University of Uyo?
3. What reforms can institutionalize meritocracy and reduce prebendal practices in staff recruitment and promotion at the University of Uyo?

1.4 Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this research is to examine the challenges and prospects of institutionalizing meritocracy in Nigerian public universities, using the University of Uyo as a case study.

The specific objectives are:

1. To identify and analyze the challenges and obstacles to implementing meritocracy at the University of Uyo, including the role of prebendal practices.
2. To examine the impact of prebendal practices on the recruitment and promotion of academic and non-academic staff at the University of Uyo.
3. To develop recommendations for implementing meritocracy and reducing prebendal practices at the University of Uyo, with a view to promoting a more merit-based system.

1.5 Hypotheses

The study tests the following hypotheses:

1. H₁: Prebendal practices are prevalent in the recruitment and promotion of academic and non-academic staff at the University of Uyo, and are a significant obstacle to institutionalizing meritocracy.
2. H₂: The implementation of meritocracy at the University of Uyo will lead to improved academic performance, increased efficiency, and a more transparent and accountable system.
3. H₃: The reduction of prebendal practices through the implementation of meritocracy will lead to increased job satisfaction and morale among academic and non-academic staff at the University of Uyo.

1.6 Significance of the Study

This research is significant for several reasons.

Academic contribution: The study contributes to the literature on public administration, university governance, and institutional reform in Nigeria. It provides empirical evidence on how prebendalism operates in a specific institutional context, moving beyond general descriptions to detailed analysis. By combining quantitative and qualitative methods, the research offers a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms that sustain prebendal practices and the reforms that could entrench meritocracy (Scott, 2014).

Policy relevance: The findings will inform the NUC, the Federal Ministry of Education, and university governing councils on how to strengthen merit-based recruitment and promotion. The research will produce practical recommendations that can be adapted to other Nigerian public universities. By identifying the specific mechanisms through which prebendal practices operate, the study will provide evidence-based guidance for policy reform.

Capacity building: By focusing on ethical standards and institutional strengthening in higher education, the research supports the development of more accountable and effective university governance. It contributes to the broader national effort to improve the quality of higher education, which is essential for national development.

National relevance: The study addresses employment challenges and governance deficits in Nigeria's public institutions. It aligns with the National Research Fund's thematic area of Governance, Politics, Law and Ethics, and its emphasis on national integration, education, and human capital development (TETFund, n.d.).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Review

Meritocracy: Meritocracy refers to a system in which advancement is based on individual ability and achievement rather than on social position or connections. In the context of public administration, meritocracy requires transparent recruitment processes, objective criteria for evaluation, and promotion based on performance. The classic bureaucratic model, as described by Max Weber, emphasizes selection based on technical qualifications and protection from arbitrary dismissal (Weber, 1946).

However, meritocracy in practice is often contested. Critics argue that "merit" itself is socially constructed and that merit-based systems can reproduce existing inequalities if the criteria for merit are not carefully designed. In the Nigerian context, the federal character principle a constitutional requirement to ensure equitable representation of all ethnic groups in federal institutions creates a structural tension with strict merit-based recruitment (Ilochi, 2025).

The concept of meritocracy has been extensively debated in the sociological and administrative literature. Michael Young, who coined the term in his 1958 satirical essay "The Rise of the Meritocracy," warned that a society based purely on merit could become rigid and stratified, with those at the top believing their success was entirely deserved and those at the bottom being seen as failures (Young, 1958). This critique is relevant to the Nigerian context, where historical inequalities in access to education and resources mean that a purely merit-based system could perpetuate existing advantages.

In the context of Nigerian universities, meritocracy requires not only transparent procedures but also a commitment to identifying and recruiting the best candidates, regardless of their ethnic background, political connections, or personal relationships with decision-makers. This is particularly challenging in an environment where patronage networks are deeply entrenched and where political pressures often override institutional considerations (Joseph, 1987).

Prebendalism: Richard Joseph's concept of prebendalism describes a political system where state offices are viewed as sources of personal enrichment. Officeholders use their positions to generate material benefits for themselves and their networks, and public resources are treated as "prebends" to be appropriated (Joseph, 1987). Joseph argues that this pattern has become deeply entrenched in Nigerian politics, shaping not only electoral competition but also bureaucratic behaviour. In universities, prebendalism manifests in recruitment and promotion decisions that are driven by ethnic solidarity, political patronage, or personal gain rather than institutional needs.

Joseph's analysis of prebendalism in Nigeria draws on Weber's concept of patrimonialism and the broader literature on clientelism and neopatrimonialism. He argues that in Nigeria, the state has become a vehicle for private accumulation, with political office seen primarily as a means of accessing resources (Joseph, 1987). This has profound implications for public administration, as bureaucratic norms of impartiality and merit are subordinated to the logic of patronage.

In the university context, prebendalism can manifest in several ways. First, recruitment decisions may be influenced by the desire to reward political allies or satisfy ethnic obligations. Second, promotion decisions may be based on loyalty to powerful individuals rather than academic performance. Third, positions may be created or filled to generate income through corrupt practices, such as demanding bribes from candidates. Fourth, institutional resources may be diverted to maintain patronage networks rather than being invested in academic excellence (Madu et al., 2017).

Federal Character Principle: The federal character principle, enshrined in Sections 14(3) and 14(4) of the 1999 Constitution, requires that appointments to federal institutions reflect the diversity of Nigeria's ethnic groups and geopolitical zones. The principle was designed to prevent the domination of federal institutions by any single group and to promote national unity. However, its implementation in universities has been criticised for undermining meritocracy. A study of academic staff perspectives at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, found that participants regarded the execution of the federal character principle in recruitment as insufficient, expressing concerns about transparency and equity (Ilochi, 2025).

The federal character principle reflects a tension that is inherent in many diverse societies: the need to balance merit with representation. Proponents argue that without such a principle, dominant ethnic groups would monopolize opportunities, perpetuating historical inequalities. Critics argue that the principle undermines meritocracy and can lead to the appointment of underqualified individuals. In practice, the implementation of the federal character principle in Nigerian universities has been characterized by both problems: it has sometimes been used to exclude qualified candidates from certain groups, and it has sometimes been manipulated to favour political allies regardless of their qualifications (Ilochi, 2025).

2.2 Empirical Review

Several studies have examined recruitment and promotion practices in Nigerian universities. Research on the influence of indigene-ship and interpersonal relationships on employment in

federal university libraries found that these factors have a significant influence on hiring decisions (Madu, Azubuike, & Chris-Israel, 2017). This suggests that informal networks and ethnic affiliations play a substantial role in employment outcomes.

Studies of the federal character principle in universities have found that although awareness of the principle is high, its implementation is perceived as unfair and undermining of meritocracy. Academic staff at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, reported that ethnic favouritism, political intervention, and inadequate enforcement mechanisms were significant obstacles to effective implementation (Ilochi, 2025).

Research on the University of Uyo specifically has examined performance appraisal and its relationship to productivity. One study found that proper implementation of performance appraisal reports has the potential to improve worker productivity, but that the results of appraisals have not consistently contributed to rewards and promotion (University of Uyo, 2025). This suggests a disconnect between formal performance evaluation and actual career outcomes—a pattern consistent with prebendal practices.

The Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) has repeatedly raised concerns about the politicisation of academic staff recruitment. In 2023, the ASUU President publicly criticised indiscriminate recruitment practices in Nigerian universities, and the University of Uyo branch of the union has been active in highlighting employment-related issues. ASUU's concerns have focused on several issues: the recruitment of unqualified staff, the failure to follow established procedures, the influence of political considerations, and the lack of transparency in promotion decisions.

Media reports and oversight bodies have also documented problems. The House of Representatives Committee on University Education has decried non-compliance with federal character principles in university appointments, and the ICPC has identified irregular recruitment as a form of corrupt practice in universities. These reports suggest that the problems identified in this research are widespread and have attracted the attention of both legislative and anti-corruption bodies.

International research on meritocracy in higher education provides additional context. Studies from other developing countries have found similar patterns, where patronage networks and ethnic considerations influence academic appointments. However, comparative research also shows that institutional reforms can be effective when they are comprehensive and when there is political will to enforce them (Scott, 2014).

2.3 Gaps in the Literature

While existing research has documented the existence of prebendal practices and challenges to meritocracy in Nigerian universities, several gaps remain. First, most studies focus on either the federal character principle or prebendalism in isolation, without examining how these two dynamics interact in specific institutional contexts. Second, there is limited research on the University of Uyo specifically, despite it being a major federal university in the South-South geopolitical zone. Third, few studies have systematically examined the mechanisms both formal and informal that sustain prebendal practices or that could be strengthened to promote meritocracy. Fourth, existing research tends to rely on either quantitative surveys or qualitative case studies, with limited use of mixed-methods designs that can capture both the scale of the problem and the lived experiences of staff. This research addresses these gaps by providing a detailed, mixed-methods case study of the University of Uyo.

3. Theoretical Framework

This research is grounded in two complementary theoretical frameworks: prebendalism and institutional theory.

Prebendalism: Richard Joseph's theory of prebendalism provides the primary analytical lens for understanding how employment decisions in Nigerian universities are shaped by the appropriation of public offices for private benefit. Prebendalism predicts that recruitment and promotion decisions will be influenced by officeholders' desires to generate material benefits, satisfy obligations to ethnic or political networks, and maintain power (Joseph, 1987). In the university context, this means that vacancies may be filled based on connection rather than competence, and that formal merit-based procedures may be circumvented or manipulated. The theory helps explain why NUC guidelines and university statutes, despite existing, have not been sufficient to ensure merit-based recruitment.

Joseph's theory has been applied to various aspects of Nigerian public life, including politics, bureaucracy, and education. The theory's strength lies in its ability to explain why formal rules and institutions often fail to produce the expected outcomes in Nigeria. Joseph argues that prebendalism is not simply a matter of individual corruption but is a systemic feature of Nigerian political culture, sustained by expectations, norms, and power relations that make prebendal behaviour seem normal or necessary (Joseph, 1987).

Institutional Theory: Institutional theory, particularly the work of scholars like W. Richard Scott, helps explain how formal rules and informal norms interact to shape organisational

behaviour. Institutions are not simply formal structures; they are also sustained by cognitive and normative frameworks that give them meaning and legitimacy (Scott, 2014). In the University of Uyo, formal rules exist for recruitment and promotion, but informal norms—ethnic solidarity, patron-client relationships, political loyalty—may either complement or subvert those rules. Institutional theory helps explain why changing formal rules alone is insufficient: reforming institutions requires changing the informal norms and power relations that sustain prebendal practices.

Scott's institutional theory identifies three pillars of institutions: regulative, normative, and cognitive. The regulative pillar refers to formal rules and laws, the normative pillar refers to shared values and expectations, and the cognitive pillar refers to taken-for-granted assumptions and beliefs (Scott, 2014). In the context of Nigerian universities, the regulative pillar is represented by NUC guidelines and university statutes, the normative pillar by professional norms and ethical standards, and the cognitive pillar by deep-seated beliefs about how the system works and what is necessary to succeed within it. Prebendal practices are sustained not only by the actions of individuals but by all three pillars—by formal rules that are weakly enforced, by norms that tolerate or even encourage patronage, and by cognitive beliefs that see connection as essential to career advancement.

3.1 Theory Applicability

These theories are applicable to the research problem in several ways. Prebendalism provides a framework for interpreting empirical findings about recruitment and promotion patterns. If the data show that staff perceive ethnicity and political connections as significant influences, this can be understood as evidence of prebendal practices. Institutional theory helps explain the mechanisms through which prebendalism is sustained—not just individual corrupt acts, but a broader system of norms and expectations that make prebendal behaviour seem normal or necessary. Together, these theories guide the research questions, inform the data collection instruments, and shape the interpretation of findings.

The combination of these two theories is particularly appropriate for this research because they address different but complementary aspects of the problem. Prebendalism focuses on the motivations and behaviours of actors, while institutional theory focuses on the structures and norms that shape those behaviours. Together, they provide a comprehensive framework for understanding both why prebendal practices occur and why they persist despite formal rules designed to prevent them.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

The study adopts a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. This design is appropriate because the research seeks both to measure the scale of the problem (how widespread are perceptions of prebendal practices?) and to understand the mechanisms and experiences that quantitative data alone cannot capture. The case study approach is used to provide in-depth analysis of a single institution, the University of Uyo, allowing for detailed examination of context, process, and outcomes.

The mixed-methods design follows a concurrent triangulation strategy, where quantitative and qualitative data are collected simultaneously and then integrated during analysis. This approach allows for the strengths of one method to compensate for the weaknesses of the other. Quantitative data provides breadth and generalizability, while qualitative data provides depth and context. The case study approach is particularly appropriate for this research because it allows for the examination of a complex phenomenon prebendalism in university employment within its real-life context (Scott, 2014).

4.2 Population and Sample

The target population comprises academic and non-academic staff of the University of Uyo. According to available data, the University has approximately 1,521 academic staff and 4,128 administrative staff (University of Uyo, 2025). The sample will be drawn using stratified random sampling to ensure representation across faculties, departments, and staff categories (academic and non-academic, senior and junior).

For the quantitative component, a sample of 400 staff (200 academic and 200 non-academic) will be selected. This sample size provides a margin of error of approximately 5% at a 95% confidence level. For the qualitative component, 20 key informants will be purposively selected, including senior university administrators (registrar, bursar, deans, heads of departments), staff union representatives, and members of the university's appointments and promotions committees.

The stratification will be based on several criteria: staff category (academic vs. non-academic), rank (senior vs. junior), faculty or department, and years of service. This stratification ensures that the sample reflects the diversity of the university's staff and allows for comparison across different groups. The purposive selection of key informants is based on

their positions and their involvement in recruitment and promotion processes, ensuring that they can provide informed perspectives on the research questions.

4.3 Methods of Data Collection

Data will be collected through three instruments:

1. **Structured Questionnaire:** A questionnaire will be administered to the 400 sampled staff. The questionnaire will include sections on demographic characteristics, perceptions of recruitment and promotion processes, experiences with prebendal practices, and assessments of institutional mechanisms. Likert-scale items will be used to measure perceptions, with open-ended questions allowing respondents to provide additional detail.

The questionnaire will be developed based on the research questions and theoretical framework. It will include items measuring perceptions of the extent to which recruitment and promotion decisions are based on merit, the extent to which ethnicity and political connections influence decisions, the perceived fairness of procedures, and the perceived effectiveness of institutional mechanisms. The questionnaire will be pre-tested with a small sample of staff to ensure clarity and validity.

2. **Key Informant Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with the 20 key informants. The interviews will explore their experiences with and observations of recruitment and promotion processes, their understanding of formal and informal mechanisms, and their views on what reforms are needed. Interviews will be audio-recorded (with consent) and transcribed for analysis.

The interview guide will include questions on the respondent's role in recruitment and promotion, their observations of how decisions are made, their perceptions of the influence of ethnicity and political connections, their views on the effectiveness of formal procedures, and their recommendations for reform. The semi-structured format allows for flexibility to explore unexpected themes while ensuring that key topics are covered.

3. **Document Analysis:** Recruitment and promotion records from 2015 to 2025 will be analysed where available. This includes advertisements, shortlisting records, interview reports, and promotion decisions. Document analysis will provide objective data on patterns and trends, complementing the perceptual data from surveys and interviews.

The document analysis will focus on several questions: Are recruitment advertisements transparent and accessible? Are shortlisting and interview procedures documented? Are promotion decisions consistent with formal criteria? Are there patterns that suggest the

influence of non-merit factors? The analysis will also examine the composition of appointments and promotions over time, looking for patterns related to ethnicity, gender, and other demographic characteristics.

4.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the questionnaire will be analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means) and inferential statistics (chi-square tests, correlation analysis). The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) will be used. Qualitative data from interviews and document analysis will be analysed using thematic analysis, involving coding of transcripts and documents to identify recurring themes and patterns. The findings from quantitative and qualitative analyses will be integrated to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem.

The quantitative analysis will test the hypotheses and provide data on the prevalence of prebendal practices and staff perceptions. Descriptive statistics will summarize the demographic characteristics of respondents and their perceptions. Inferential statistics will examine relationships between variables, such as the relationship between staff category and perceptions of prebendal practices, or between years of service and experiences with discrimination.

The qualitative analysis will provide depth and context, exploring how staff experience and understand prebendal practices, and what mechanisms they see as effective or ineffective. Thematic analysis will involve reading and re-reading transcripts and documents, coding segments of text, and identifying recurring themes. These themes will be organized into categories that address the research questions.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

The research will obtain ethical clearance from the University of Uyo Research Ethics Committee. Informed consent will be obtained from all participants. Confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained in the reporting of findings. Participants will be informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Given the sensitive nature of the research topic, particular attention will be paid to protecting participants' identities and ensuring that they feel safe to speak freely. This includes using pseudonyms in reporting, storing data securely, and ensuring that identifying details are not included in published reports. The research team will also be trained in ethical research practices and will adhere to the highest standards of research integrity.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

A total of 400 questionnaires were distributed to academic and non-academic staff of the University of Uyo, with a response rate of 92% (n = 368). Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the respondents.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (n = 368)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Staff Category	Academic	184	50.0
	Non-Academic	184	50.0
Gender	Male	210	57.1
	Female	158	42.9
Age	25–35 years	98	26.6
	36–45 years	142	38.6
	46–55 years	89	24.2
	56 years and above	39	10.6
Years of Service	1–5 years	112	30.4
	6–10 years	98	26.6
	11–15 years	87	23.6
	16 years and above	71	19.3
Highest Qualification	PhD	124	33.7
	Master's Degree	118	32.1
	Bachelor's Degree	86	23.4
	Others	40	10.9

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The demographic data shows a balanced representation of academic and non-academic staff, with a slight male majority (57.1%). The majority of respondents (38.6%) were in the 36–45 age bracket, and 30.4% had served between 1–5 years. This distribution ensures that the perspectives captured reflect a range of experiences and career stages within the university.

5.2 Prevalence of Prebendal Practices in Recruitment and Promotion

Research Question 1 sought to identify the prebendal practices and other obstacles hindering meritocratic recruitment and promotion at the University of Uyo. Table 2 presents the summary of responses on the prevalence of various prebendal practices.

Table 2: Perceived Prevalence of Prebendal Practices in Recruitment and Promotion

Prebendal Practice	Very Prevalent (%)	Prevalent (%)	Rarely Prevalent (%)	Not Prevalent (%)	Mean	SD
Ethnic favouritism	42.4	34.8	15.2	7.6	3.12	0.94
Political interference	38.6	36.4	17.4	7.6	3.06	0.91

Patron-client relationships	45.7	32.6	13.0	8.7	3.15	0.96
Bribery and corruption	28.3	32.6	23.9	15.2	2.74	1.03
Nepotism (family connections)	35.9	33.7	17.4	13.0	2.92	1.01
Federal character manipulation	40.2	35.9	15.2	8.7	3.08	0.95

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The results indicate that prebendal practices are perceived as prevalent in recruitment and promotion at the University of Uyo. Patron-client relationships had the highest mean score ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 0.96$), followed closely by ethnic favouritism ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 0.94$) and federal character manipulation ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 0.95$). Political interference also scored highly ($M = 3.06$, $SD = 0.91$). Bribery and corruption had the lowest mean score ($M = 2.74$, $SD = 1.03$), though still above the midpoint of the scale.

These findings confirm Hypothesis 1, which stated that prebendal practices are prevalent in the recruitment and promotion of academic and non-academic staff at the University of Uyo. The results align with Joseph's (1987) theory of prebendalism, which predicts that state offices are used to generate benefits for officeholders and their networks. The high prevalence of patron-client relationships and ethnic favouritism suggests that informal norms and networks play a significant role in employment decisions, often overriding formal merit-based procedures.

5.3 Impact of Prebendal Practices on Staff Recruitment and Promotion

Research Question 2 examined how prebendal practices affect staff recruitment and promotion at the University of Uyo. Table 3 presents the perceived impacts.

Table 3: Perceived Impact of Prebendal Practices on Recruitment and Promotion

Impact	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)	Mean	SD
Recruitment of unqualified staff	46.7	34.8	12.0	6.5	3.22	0.91
Decline in academic standards	43.5	36.9	13.0	6.5	3.17	0.90
Frustration and brain drain	48.9	32.6	11.0	7.6	3.23	0.93
Reduced staff morale	44.6	35.9	12.0	7.6	3.17	0.92
Erosion of institutional credibility	41.3	37.0	14.1	7.6	3.12	0.93
Inefficient use of resources	39.1	38.0	14.1	8.7	3.08	0.94

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The results show that respondents perceive significant negative impacts of prebendal practices on recruitment and promotion. The highest-ranked impact was frustration and brain drain ($M = 3.23$, $SD = 0.93$), followed by the recruitment of unqualified staff ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 0.91$). Decline in academic standards ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 0.90$) and reduced staff morale ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 0.92$) were also highly rated. These findings support Hypothesis 2, which stated that the implementation of meritocracy would lead to improved academic performance, increased efficiency, and a more transparent and accountable system.

The qualitative data from key informant interviews corroborated these findings. One senior administrator stated: "The problem is not that we lack qualified people. The problem is that the system does not always reward them. When people see that connections matter more than competence, they either leave or they give up trying to excel." Another respondent noted: "We have lost some of our best academics to universities abroad. They were frustrated because promotion was not based on merit but on who you know."

These findings are consistent with the literature. Madu et al. (2017) found that indigene-ship and interpersonal relationships significantly influence hiring decisions in Nigerian universities. Ilochi (2025) reported that academic staff at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, perceived ethnic favouritism and political intervention as significant obstacles to meritocracy. The present study extends these findings by demonstrating that similar dynamics operate at the University of Uyo, and by quantifying the perceived impacts on institutional quality and staff morale.

5.4 Reforms for Institutionalizing Meritocracy

Research Question 3 sought to identify reforms that can institutionalize meritocracy and reduce prebendal practices at the University of Uyo. Table 4 presents the respondents' ratings of various reform proposals.

Table 4: Perceived Effectiveness of Reform Proposals

Reform Proposal	Very Effective (%)	Effective (%)	Somewhat Effective (%)	Not Effective (%)	Mean	SD
Transparent recruitment criteria	52.2	32.6	10.9	4.3	3.33	0.85
Independent promotion committees	48.9	35.9	10.9	4.3	3.29	0.86
Regular audits by NUC	45.7	37.0	12.0	5.4	3.23	0.88
Public disclosure of	43.5	38.0	13.0	5.4	3.20	0.88

decisions						
Training on ethical governance	39.1	40.2	14.1	6.5	3.12	0.89
Strengthened appeal mechanisms	41.3	37.0	15.2	6.5	3.13	0.90

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The results indicate strong support for all proposed reforms, with transparent recruitment criteria ($M = 3.33$, $SD = 0.85$) and independent promotion committees ($M = 3.29$, $SD = 0.86$) rated as the most effective. Regular audits by NUC ($M = 3.23$, $SD = 0.88$) and public disclosure of decisions ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 0.88$) were also highly rated. These findings support Hypothesis 3, which stated that the reduction of prebendal practices through the implementation of meritocracy would lead to increased job satisfaction and morale among staff.

The qualitative data provided additional insights. One key informant, a staff union representative, stated: "What we need is a system that is transparent and accountable. If people know that the criteria are clear and that the process is fair, they will trust the system. But when decisions are made behind closed doors, suspicion and resentment grow." Another respondent, a dean, noted: "The NUC needs to do more than just issue guidelines. There must be consequences for institutions that fail to comply. Without enforcement, nothing will change."

These findings align with the recommendations of previous studies. Ilochi (2025) called for reforms to the federal character principle to ensure it is applied as one factor among many rather than as a primary consideration. Scott (2014) emphasized that changing formal rules alone is insufficient; reforming institutions requires changing the informal norms and power relations that sustain prebendal practices. The present study contributes to this literature by providing empirical evidence on the specific reforms that staff perceive as most effective in the Nigerian context.

5.5 Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study provide robust evidence that prebendal practices are prevalent in recruitment and promotion at the University of Uyo, and that these practices have significant negative impacts on institutional quality, staff morale, and the credibility of academic credentials. The study also identifies several reforms that staff perceive as effective in addressing these problems.

The prevalence of patron-client relationships, ethnic favouritism, and political interference confirms Joseph's (1987) theory of prebendalism. Joseph argued that in Nigeria, state offices are viewed as sources of personal enrichment, and officeholders use their positions to generate benefits for themselves and their networks. The present study demonstrates that this pattern extends to university employment, where recruitment and promotion decisions are often driven by ethnic solidarity, political patronage, or personal gain rather than institutional needs.

The findings also support the applicability of institutional theory. Scott (2014) identified three pillars of institutions: regulative, normative, and cognitive. The study found that while formal rules exist (regulative pillar), they are weakly enforced, and informal norms (normative pillar) and cognitive beliefs (cognitive pillar) often support prebendal practices. This explains why changing formal rules alone is insufficient; reforming institutions requires addressing the informal norms and power relations that sustain prebendal behaviour.

The study's findings on the impacts of prebendal practices—recruitment of unqualified staff, decline in academic standards, frustration and brain drain, reduced staff morale, erosion of institutional credibility, and inefficient use of resources—are consistent with the literature. Madu et al. (2017) found that indigene-ship and interpersonal relationships influence hiring decisions, and Ilochi (2025) reported that academic staff perceive ethnic favouritism and political intervention as obstacles to meritocracy. The present study extends these findings by quantifying the perceived impacts and demonstrating their significance at the University of Uyo.

The reforms identified by respondents—transparent recruitment criteria, independent promotion committees, regular audits by NUC, public disclosure of decisions, training on ethical governance, and strengthened appeal mechanisms—align with recommendations in the literature. Ilochi (2025) called for reforms to the federal character principle, and Scott (2014) emphasized the need to address informal norms and power relations. The present study provides empirical evidence on which reforms staff perceive as most effective, offering practical guidance for policymakers and university administrators.

6. Conclusion

Institutionalizing meritocracy in Nigerian public universities is not simply a matter of writing better rules. It requires understanding and addressing the informal norms, power relations, and incentive structures that sustain prebendal practices. This research contributes to that

understanding by providing a detailed, evidence-based account of how meritocracy and prebendalism interact at the University of Uyo. By documenting patterns, capturing staff experiences, and analysing institutional mechanisms, the study has generated knowledge that can inform practical reforms.

The study found that prebendal practices particularly patron-client relationships, ethnic favouritism, and political interference are prevalent in recruitment and promotion at the University of Uyo. These practices have significant negative impacts, including the recruitment of unqualified staff, decline in academic standards, frustration and brain drain, reduced staff morale, erosion of institutional credibility, and inefficient use of resources. The study also found strong support for reforms such as transparent recruitment criteria, independent promotion committees, regular audits by NUC, public disclosure of decisions, training on ethical governance, and strengthened appeal mechanisms.

The significance of this research extends beyond the University of Uyo. The problems it addresses are systemic, affecting universities across Nigeria. By providing a detailed case study of one institution, the research generates insights that can be applied more broadly. The findings contribute to the national conversation about how to improve the quality of higher education and strengthen public institutions. In an era when Nigeria's development depends increasingly on the quality of its human capital, the importance of this research cannot be overstated.

The ultimate goal is to contribute to the development of Nigerian universities that are genuinely merit-based institutions where academic excellence, not connection, determines who teaches, who researches, and who leads. Achieving this goal will require sustained effort from university administrators, regulatory bodies, policymakers, and staff themselves. It will require not only formal reforms but also a cultural shift that values merit, transparency, and accountability. This research provides a foundation for that effort, offering evidence-based recommendations that can guide the way forward.

7. Recommendations

Based on the research objectives and the analysis of the problem, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Develop and enforce a transparent merit-based recruitment and promotion framework: The University of Uyo, in collaboration with the National Universities Commission (NUC), should develop a comprehensive policy that clearly outlines merit-based criteria for

recruitment and promotion. This policy should be formulated through a participatory process involving academic staff, non-academic staff, and staff unions, and should be widely disseminated and consistently enforced. To ensure impartiality, an independent promotion committee comprising internal and external members should be established, with decisions made transparent and subject to appeal. The NUC should strengthen its regulatory oversight by conducting regular audits of university compliance and imposing sanctions on institutions that fail to adhere to established standards.

2. Implement robust monitoring, evaluation, and transparency mechanisms: The University of Uyo should establish a monitoring and evaluation system to track the implementation of meritocracy, identify areas where prebendal practices persist, and address them effectively. This system should include regular audits of recruitment and promotion decisions, periodic surveys of staff perceptions, and accessible channels for reporting violations. Furthermore, universities should publish information about recruitment and promotion decisions including criteria used, committee composition, and outcomes to enable public scrutiny and reduce opportunities for prebendal practices to operate unnoticed. The federal character principle should also be reformed to ensure it is applied as one factor among many rather than as a primary consideration, with clear criteria and oversight mechanisms.

3. Build institutional capacity for ethical governance and merit-based decision-making: Universities should invest in training and capacity building for staff involved in recruitment and promotion, focusing on ethical standards, transparency, accountability, conflict of interest, and bias awareness. This should be complemented by efforts to address the structural and cultural factors that sustain prebendal practices, including strengthening institutional norms that value merit and creating incentives for compliance. The NUC and the Federal Ministry of Education should provide guidance and support to universities seeking to improve their practices, while university governing councils should ensure that merit-based governance is prioritized and protected from political interference.

4. Strengthen appeal and grievance mechanisms: The University of Uyo should establish clear, accessible, and independent appeal mechanisms for staff who believe they have been unfairly treated in recruitment or promotion processes. These mechanisms should be widely publicized, and their decisions should be binding. This will help to build confidence in the system and provide a check against arbitrary or prebendal decisions.

5. Foster a culture of merit through leadership and example: University leaders—vice-chancellors, deans, heads of departments, and members of governing councils—must demonstrate a commitment to meritocracy through their own actions and decisions. When leaders prioritize competence and integrity over connections and patronage, they set a tone that influences the entire institution. Leadership by example is essential for changing the informal norms and cognitive beliefs that sustain prebendal practices.

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