

The Role of Academic Planning Units in the 21st-Century Nigerian Universities: Strategic Functions, Practices and Challenges

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Abstract: *The Academic Planning Unit (APU) has become a pivotal component of 21st-century Nigerian universities, evolving from a compliance-focused office into a strategic driver of institutional governance, quality assurance, and global competitiveness. Amid pressures of globalization, digital transformation, and employability imperatives, universities require robust mechanisms to align curricula, human resources, infrastructure, and finances with national development priorities and labour market demands. APUs serve as regulatory and coordinating subsystems, facilitating strategic alignment, accreditation compliance, data-driven decision-making, curriculum innovation, and resource optimization. Anchored in Systems Theory, APUs function within a feedback-informed organizational framework, ensuring that inputs, processes, and outputs are aligned with institutional objectives while adapting to dynamic environmental conditions. Despite their strategic significance, APUs face persistent challenges, including inadequate funding, insufficient human capacity, unreliable data systems, weak professionalization, infrastructural deficits, and leadership discontinuity. These constraints undermine planning efficiency, compromise accreditation readiness, and reduce the capacity of universities to implement evidence-based, strategic initiatives. Strengthening APUs through dedicated funding, digital planning systems, structured professional development, leadership stability, and robust data-sharing mechanisms is essential to enhance their institutional impact. When empowered and properly integrated into governance frameworks, APUs facilitate employability-focused curricula, sustainability initiatives, global benchmarking, and innovation, transforming Nigerian universities into resilient, competitive, and socially responsive institutions.*

Keywords: Academic Planning Units, Higher Education, Strategic Management, Nigerian Universities, 21st-Century Skills

INTRODUCTION

Higher education in the 21st century is increasingly shaped by globalization, digital transformation, and employability imperatives. Beyond traditional disciplinary knowledge, universities are now expected to foster competencies that enhance employability, including critical thinking, problem-solving, effective communication, teamwork, adaptability, and a willingness to learn aligned with labor market demands (World Economic Forum, 2023). These skills have been consistently identified in systematic research on global employability requirements as among the most relevant for contemporary workplaces, reflecting evolving employer expectations and the broader demands of the knowledge economy. For example, a comprehensive review of international employability research lists problem-solving, communication, teamwork, adaptability, and a learning mindset among the most widely reported skills needed for 21st-century employability across diverse job contexts, concluding that graduates who demonstrate these competencies are better positioned to meet workplace demands. These pressures require structured institutional mechanisms capable of forecasting enrolment trends, ensuring regulatory compliance, and aligning curricula with national development priorities.

In Nigeria, the establishment of Academic Planning Units (APUs) was largely driven by regulatory reforms initiated by the National Universities Commission (NUC) to ensure coordinated programme development, compliance with Benchmark Minimum Academic Standards (BMAS), and quality assurance (National Universities Commission, 2018). Over time, APUs have transitioned from compliance-oriented offices to strategic institutional actors involved in forecasting, accreditation coordination, data analytics, and governance advisory roles.

Despite their strategic importance, limited scholarly attention has been given to APUs as governance subsystems within Nigerian universities. This study addresses this gap by examining their conceptual foundations, theoretical positioning, operational functions, and structural challenges.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualizing Academic Planning in Higher Education

Academic planning refers to the systematic process through which universities align academic programmes, human resources, infrastructure, and financial allocations with institutional goals and regulatory requirements (Rowley & Sherman, 2004). Strategic academic planning integrates forecasting, curriculum design, quality assurance, and institutional research to enhance institutional effectiveness. According to UNESCO (2015), effective higher education governance requires data-informed planning systems

capable of adapting to demographic shifts, funding changes, and technological transformation. Similarly, Altbach, Reisberg, and de Wit (2017) emphasize that universities in emerging economies must institutionalize strategic planning mechanisms to remain globally competitive.

In Nigeria, academic planning gained prominence during the rapid expansion of universities in the 1980s and 1990s, when uncoordinated programme proliferation exposed regulatory gaps (Saint, Hartnett, & Strassner, 2003). The NUC subsequently institutionalized planning units across federal universities to standardize academic development and accreditation processes.

Academic Planning and Quality Assurance

Quality assurance frameworks globally recognize institutional planning as central to academic standards and accreditation compliance. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2019) identifies internal quality assurance systems as fundamental to sustainable university governance. Planning units play a coordinating role in preparing self-study reports, managing accreditation documentation, and ensuring adherence to curricular standards.

In the Nigerian context, the NUC (2018) mandates universities to maintain updated academic briefs, enrolment projections, and staff-student ratios as part of accreditation requirements. Ogunode and Abubakar (2021) observe that weak institutional planning structures often contribute to accreditation failures and programme inefficiencies in Nigerian universities.

Institutional Research and Data-Driven Governance

Globally, universities are placing growing importance on their institutional research offices, relying on them to provide the data analysis and knowledge needed to guide informed, evidence-based decision-making. Volkwein (2010) describes institutional research as the “intelligence arm” of university governance, providing empirical evidence for policy formulation and strategic investment. Technological transformation has further expanded the scope of academic planning. Learning analytics, graduate outcome tracking, and performance benchmarking are increasingly embedded as essential components of institutional planning frameworks, serving as critical mechanisms for evidence-based decision-making and strategic development. (Daniel, 2015). In developing countries, however, data fragmentation and persistent deficiencies in information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure continue to constitute major impediments to the development and effective functioning of institutional research systems. (World Bank, 2020).

While literature acknowledges the importance of strategic planning and quality assurance, limited scholarship specifically examines APUs as systemic governance actors within Nigerian universities. Existing studies focus more broadly on funding crises, governance instability, and infrastructural deficits, leaving the strategic transformation of APUs underexplored. This study addresses that conceptual and empirical gap.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SYSTEMS THEORY

This study is anchored in Systems Theory, originally articulated by Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1968) and later adapted to organizational analysis. Systems Theory conceptualizes organizations as interconnected subsystems interacting with their environment through input–process–output–feedback cycles.

Universities function as open systems that receive inputs (students, funding, policies, human resources), transform them through processes (teaching, research, administration), and generate outputs (graduates, research outputs, societal impact). Feedback mechanisms (accreditation reports, graduate employment data, rankings) inform subsequent adjustments.

Within this framework, the Academic Planning Unit operates as a regulatory and coordinating subsystem that:

- Collects and processes institutional data
- Aligns programme development with environmental demands
- Ensures regulatory compliance
- Facilitates feedback loops between governance and operational units

Weaknesses in the planning subsystem such as unreliable data or leadership discontinuity disrupt systemic equilibrium and reduce institutional effectiveness. Strengthening APUs therefore enhances systemic coherence, adaptability, and sustainability.

FUNCTIONS OF ACADEMIC PLANNING UNIT

Strategic and Institutional Alignment

- Provide strategic guidance and oversight of university activities, ensuring full compliance with the regulatory frameworks established by the National Universities Commission (NUC) while advancing the institution’s vision, mission, and core objectives.
- Engage with departments and faculties to assess programme viability, forecast enrolment trends, and identify opportunities for interdisciplinary development.
- Conduct long-term forecasting and ensure alignment with national and global higher education trends by monitoring emerging disciplines, technological innovations, and labour market demands.
- Facilitate evidence-based decision-making by integrating data analytics with strategic foresight to strengthen governance and sustainability.

- Ensure academic programmes align with the institutional mission, vision, and strategic priorities while complying with NUC standards.
- Assist in the preparation of the Annual Estimate Meeting submission to the NUC in collaboration with the Bursary Department.

Quality Assurance and Accreditation

- Coordinate and ensure accreditation of academic programmes, including the preparation and submission of NUC self-study forms.
- Oversee mock accreditation visits and supervise the completion of Self-Study Reports (SSRs).
- Monitor programme quality through internal audits, graduate outcome assessments, and periodic evaluation of teaching and learning processes.
- Ensure adherence to the NUC's Benchmark Minimum Academic Standards (BMAS)/ Core Curriculum and Minimum Academic Standards (CCMAS) for all undergraduate and postgraduate programmes.
- Participate in University Curricular Revision Committees, ensuring compliance with NUC procedures and other regulatory bodies.

Data Management and Institutional Research

- Collect, analyze, and interpret institutional data from various university offices (Registrar, Bursar, Provost, Deans, Admission Officer, Establishment Officer) to support planning activities.
- Maintain comprehensive databases on student enrolment, faculty qualifications, research outputs, graduation rates, and infrastructural resources.
- Update and interpret institutional data analyses to facilitate planning, including the rationalization of courses, restructuring of academic units, and continuous programme evaluation.
- Project student enrolment, calculate Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) figures, and provide guidance on appropriate staffing levels.
- Transform raw data into actionable findings to enable evidence-based decision-making by university leadership.

Curriculum Development and Innovation

- Coordinate systematic curriculum review processes to ensure academic programmes remain relevant, contemporary, and compliant with NUC standards.
- Evaluate course content, learning outcomes, and teaching methods to ensure alignment with societal needs and global trends.
- Facilitate the integration of digital skills, entrepreneurship, and interdisciplinary approaches into academic programmes.
- Guide the development, review, and periodic updating of the University's Academic Brief and academic programme planning documents.

Resource Planning and Institutional Optimization

- Assess classroom availability, laboratory utilization, staff workloads, and infrastructure adequacy to inform decision-making.
- Collaborate with the Bursary and Physical Planning Units to align infrastructure development and resource allocation with academic priorities.
- Prevent overstaffing and over-enrolment by guiding faculty allocations and class sizes.
- Support research and development initiatives through optimal resource management.

Stakeholder Engagement and Policy Advisory

- Liaise with internal stakeholders (Registrar, Bursar, Deans, Provost, Admission Officer, Establishment Officer/Human Resources (HR) to collect data for planning purposes.
- Oversee the appraisal and processing of affiliation requests from other tertiary institutions.
- Serve as a professional instrument for analyzing and interpreting educational policies to guide decision-making processes.
- Engage with external stakeholders to align academic programmes with labour market expectations, thereby supporting graduate employability and institutional reputation.

EXPANDED STRATEGIC ROLES IN PRACTICE

Modern Academic Planning Units (APUs) in Nigerian universities have transcended traditional administrative duties, evolving into strategic engines that drive institutional excellence, global competitiveness, and innovation. Their roles now align with international best practices in higher education and 21st-century academic demands: These include;

- Supporting institutional ranking and benchmarking initiatives. APUs provide robust data and analytics on faculty output, research productivity, student outcomes, and graduate employability. By doing so, they enable universities to strategically position themselves in global rankings, meet accreditation standards, and identify areas for continuous improvement.
- Advising governance structures on strategic academic decisions. Beyond programme approvals, APUs offer evidence-based guidance on curriculum redesign, interdisciplinary programme development, and strategic academic investments, ensuring alignment with global educational trends and national priorities.
- Integrating risk management and continuity planning. APUs incorporate comprehensive risk assessments and business continuity frameworks into academic operations. This includes proactive strategies to mitigate disruptions from strikes, pandemics, financial volatility, or technological failures, thereby ensuring academic resilience and institutional sustainability.

- Fostering internationalization and global partnerships. APUs play a central role in promoting collaborative research, student and faculty exchange programmes, and international accreditation efforts, positioning Nigerian universities as globally connected institutions.
- Leveraging digital transformation for academic excellence. APUs drive the adoption of learning analytics, e-learning platforms, and digital assessment tools, ensuring that universities leverage technology to enhance teaching, research, and student engagement in line with 21st-century learning standards.
- Championing sustainability and social responsibility in academic planning. APUs integrate Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into curricula, research agendas, and institutional policies, ensuring that universities contribute meaningfully to societal development while meeting global ethical and environmental standards.
- Monitoring graduate employability and industry alignment. Modern APUs actively track alumni outcomes, skills acquisition, and employer feedback, using this knowledge to inform curriculum reforms that equip students with the competencies required in a rapidly evolving global workforce.
- Data-driven career support enables institutions to monitor graduate outcomes, identify skills gaps, and adopt evidence-based planning for programme development and student services. Strategic academic planning research emphasizes the value of systematic planning processes in higher education, incorporating data on employer feedback, job placement rates, and skill shortfalls allows APUs and management to make informed decisions (Graves & Erickson, 2024).
- Integration of experiential learning such as internships, cooperative education, and work-based learning has been linked to improved student skills, problem-solving ability, and employability outcomes (Chen & Gan, 2021). APUs can work with the Vice-Chancellor's office to institutionalize mandatory industrial attachments and employ structured internship offices that liaise with industries, while management ensures appropriate credit recognition and policy enforcement.
- Partnerships with industry and startups strengthen employability through real-world projects, mentorship, and networking opportunities (Enhancing Student Employability Through Strategic Industry Partnerships, 2022). Embedding industry challenges and collaborations into curriculum design ensures students gain relevant practical experience and insights into current workplace needs. APUs must secure management approval for MoUs with industries, create joint task forces, and organize industry-linked events that deepen engagement between academia and practice.
- Promoting entrepreneurship and innovation is also critical, particularly in African contexts where job creation and independent income are essential (Igbokwe-Ibeto, Agbodike, & Osakede, 2018). Entrepreneurial curricula and support frameworks enable students to develop business competencies and self-employment skills that reduce dependency on formal sector jobs. With management support, APUs can institutionalize funding for incubation centers, entrepreneurship modules, and access to seed capital through the Office of Research & Development.
- Promoting evidence-based policy and institutional innovation. By collating and analyzing academic, financial, and operational data, APUs provide actionable insights to support policy decisions, innovation strategies, and the continuous improvement of academic quality.

These roles demonstrate the evolution of APUs from procedural units to proactive strategic partners within university governance, highlighting their critical role in enhancing institutional resilience, performance, and reputation.

Challenges Limiting the Effectiveness of Academic Planning Units in Nigerian Universities

Despite their central role in the university system, Academic Planning Units (APUs) face persistent challenges that undermine their effectiveness and compromise the quality of planning and decision-making. As noted in the literature, challenges such as inadequate funding, poor infrastructure, limited data availability, and human capacity constraints are common across most Nigerian higher education institutions (Ogunode & Abubakar, 2021; Isah, 2021).

Inadequate Funding

Inadequate funding remains the most pressing challenge confronting APUs in Nigerian universities. Annual budgetary allocations for the administration and management of the unit are insufficient, affecting the effective performance of the units in delivering their mandates and achieving overall university objectives. This underfunding also hinders long-term planning and limits the units' ability to implement innovative solutions, such as digital systems for data management (Ogunode & Abubakar, 2021; BusinessDay Nigeria, 2023).

Over bloated Student Enrolment and Admission Pressure

The rapid increase in applications and student numbers creates immense pressure on academic planners to balance access with institutional capacity. This surge often exceeds existing infrastructural and staffing capacities, leading to overcrowded classrooms, strained facilities, and challenges in maintaining quality academic delivery. APUs must therefore design admission strategies that accommodate growth without compromising academic standards or overstretching limited resources.

Human Resource Constraints

Academic Planning Units in many Nigerian universities operate with insufficient manpower. Often times, significantly undermine their ability to execute their mandates effectively. The shortage of qualified personnel limits productivity, delays planning processes, and weakens coordination, monitoring, and evaluation functions within the university system. Adeyemi (2018) observed that the

shortage of non-academic staff in Nigerian universities adversely affects the implementation of institutional programmes and administrative efficiency. Many Academic Planning Units experience persistent staffing gaps that constrain their operational capacity (Abubakar, 2022). More broadly, Nigerian universities are widely reported to be understaffed, placing excessive workloads on existing personnel and compromising institutional effectiveness (Akomolafe & Ibijola, 2014; Akpan & Etor, 2016).

Leadership of the Institution

Effective academic planning in universities depends largely on strong and consistent institutional leadership. The direct involvement and support of the chief executive officer, particularly, the Vice-Chancellor, are essential to the success of academic planning activities. In the absence of stable and long-term leadership capable of providing guidance and empowerment for sustained commitments, planning initiatives often lose momentum, morale declines, and resistance or inaction becomes widespread. Frequent changes in the Directorate of Academic Planning and other administrative positions have contributed to discontinuity in some universities, encouraging opportunistic behavior among some staff while others delay action in anticipation of new leadership. To steer the institution effectively, academic leaders must possess vision, courage, and the capacity to take initiative, recognizing that the greater risk lies not in action but in waiting for directives. Administrators at all levels must therefore act as leaders rather than merely managers, since weak administration has often hindered the effective implementation of academic plans in some Nigerian universities.

Administration of the Academic Planning Unit

The effectiveness of the Academic Planning Unit depends significantly on the competence and professional capacity of its personnel. In some institutions, poor operational performance can be traced to inadequate training, limited experience, and insufficient skills among those assigned to academic planning responsibilities, thereby posing challenges to good governance within the Unit. Poor management practices. When leadership of academic planning units is drawn from disciplines unrelated to planning or lacks professional grounding in academic planning, it risks undermining both institutional goal achievement and the professional status of academic planning as a distinct field. Planning officers often come from diverse disciplinary backgrounds and acquire skills informally through on-the-job experience, leading to uncertainty about who qualifies as an academic planner and what form of training is required for the role. As noted by Uvah (1995), the status of academic planning as a profession rather than merely a practice is far from satisfactory. The absence of a clearly defined career structure and formal training pathways has limited professional growth and effectiveness, underscoring the need for a structured career framework for academic planners in Nigerian universities similar to what operates at the National Universities Commission.

Inadequate Working Facilities

The effectiveness of APUs is directly linked to the availability of essential office and ICT infrastructure. Key tools such as computers, printers, scanners, calculators, office storage facilities, and stationery are often inadequate, thereby limiting operational efficiency. Ogunode and Abubakar (2021) observed that the lack of sufficient ICT resources significantly hampers the ability of academic planners to carry out their responsibilities effectively.

Insufficient and Unreliable Data

Accurate, timely, and comprehensive data are essential for strategic academic planning; however, APUs frequently struggle to obtain such data due to poor cooperation from other units and departments. When departments delay sharing information, such as student demographics, programme statistics, and enrolment figures, planners are unable to generate reliable forecasts or evidence-based plans. This data deficiency compromises university planning quality and undermines efforts to align academic programmes with broader institutional goals.

Limited Professional Capacity Building and Staff Training

For academic planners to remain effective, continuous professional development through training and retraining is essential to address emerging trends, technologies, and analytical techniques. However, there is often a lack of structured capacity-building programmes, workshops, and training opportunities for planning staff. Without ongoing professional development, academic planners may lack the competencies needed to interpret complex data, utilize advanced planning tools, or design strategic responses to institutional challenges (Ogunode & Abubakar, 2021; Ajape & Ogunode, 2019).

Brain Drain and Staff Attrition

A significant number of skilled academic planners are leaving the university system due to poor working conditions, low remuneration, limited career development opportunities, and insufficient motivation. This brain drain creates gaps in institutional memory and expertise, making it difficult for APUs to maintain continuity in planning activities or benefit from seasoned judgment in decision-making. The loss of qualified personnel further slows institutional progress and weakens planning consistency over time.

Insufficient Infrastructure Facilities

APUs are also tasked with managing physical space and resource allocation across campuses; however, the exponential growth in student populations and inadequate space management compound planning challenges. Classrooms, laboratories, and lecture halls are often overcrowded or poorly allocated, limiting lecturers' ability to deliver quality instruction and impeding students' learning experiences. Effective space planning requires professional expertise and up-to-date management systems, both of which are commonly lacking.

Addressing these challenges is essential to ensure that APUs perform optimally and contribute effectively to institutional strategic objectives.

CONCLUSION

The Academic Planning Unit (APU) has emerged as a central pillar in the governance, sustainability, and global competitiveness of 21st-century Nigerian universities. From its historical roots in regulatory compliance and coordination, the APU has evolved into a strategic engine that drives institutional alignment, quality assurance, curriculum innovation, data-informed decision-making, and resource optimization. In an era defined by digital transformation, employability imperatives, global benchmarking, and sustainability concerns, the Unit's responsibilities extend far beyond administrative control to encompass strategic foresight, risk management, internationalization, and labour market alignment. However, persistent challenges such as inadequate funding, human resource shortages, unreliable data systems, weak professionalization, infrastructural deficits, and leadership discontinuity continue to constrain its effectiveness. For Nigerian universities to remain relevant, resilient, and globally competitive, Academic Planning Units must be strengthened institutionally, technologically, and professionally. When properly empowered, resourced, and integrated into strategic governance structures, the APU becomes not merely a regulatory mechanism but a transformative catalyst for academic excellence, institutional innovation, and sustainable national development in the digital age.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- i. Institutionalize Digital Planning and Data Analytics Systems. Universities should invest in integrated digital planning platforms, learning analytics systems, and centralized institutional databases to ensure accurate forecasting, real-time data access, and evidence-based decision-making.
- ii. Establish a Structured Professional Career Framework for Academic Planners. A clearly defined career progression pathway, professional certification structure, and formal training standards for academic planners should be developed, similar to frameworks at national regulatory levels.
- iii. Provide Sustainable and Dedicated Funding for APUs. Universities should allocate ring-fenced budgets for Academic Planning Units to support technological upgrades, research activities, benchmarking exercises, and strategic initiatives.
- iv. Strengthen Continuous Professional Development (CPD). Regular workshops, international training collaborations, certification programmes, and exposure to global best practices should be institutionalized to enhance academic planners' competencies in data science, strategic forecasting, and quality assurance.
- v. Enhance Leadership Stability and Governance Support. Vice-Chancellors and governing councils should provide consistent institutional backing for planning initiatives, ensure leadership continuity within the Unit, and embed academic planning into long-term strategic plans.
- vi. Develop Robust Data-Sharing Policies and Accountability Mechanisms. Clear institutional policies should mandate timely submission of academic and administrative data by faculties and departments, supported by accountability frameworks to improve planning reliability.
- vii. Integrate Employability, Sustainability, and Global Benchmarking into Planning Processes. APUs should systematically track graduate outcomes, align curricula with labour market intelligence, integrate Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into planning frameworks, and support institutional participation in global ranking and accreditation systems.

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