

Shared Principles, Divergent Realities: Educational Administration versus Higher Education Administration: *An Integrated Examination of Concepts, Unique Characteristics, and Points of Distinction*

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21902827>

Published Date: 12-August-2026

Abstract: Educational administration provides the conceptual and practical foundation upon which every level of the education system is organized, directed and evaluated. Yet the increasing scale, complexity and mandate of tertiary institutions have given rise to higher education administration as a distinct field of study and practice. This article integrates and synthesizes current scholarship to examine the concept of educational administration, the concept of higher education administration, the features that make higher education institutions unique, and the substantive points on which the two fields diverge even as they remain complementary. Drawing principally on the foundational works contained in the literature, the article argues that higher education administration is best understood not as educational administration merely relocated to a university campus, but as a specialized application of administrative principles to institutions distinguished by academic freedom, institutional autonomy, collegial governance, a tripartite mission of teaching, research and community service, and a diversified funding base. The article concludes that recognizing this distinction, while affirming the complementary relationship between the two fields, is essential to preparing administrators for effective leadership at every level of the education system.

Keywords: Academic Freedom, Educational Administration, Higher Education Administration, Institutional Autonomy, University Governance.

1. INTRODUCTION

Administration lies at the heart of every organized human endeavour, and education, as one of the most extensive and consequential of such endeavours, is no exception. As education systems have grown in size, complexity and mandate, educational administration has developed into a distinct field of study concerned with how educational institutions are organized, directed and coordinated to achieve their stated goals. (Peretomode, 2019, 2026). No education system, whatever its level or resources, can function effectively without a sound administrative structure that coordinates people, policies, finances and facilities towards clearly defined objectives; administration, in this sense, is the engine that drives the entire educational enterprise. Educational administrators are implementers of government educational policies and manage the day – to – day activities of an educational institution.

Within this broad field, higher education administration has emerged as a specialized and distinct area of study and practice, owing to the peculiar characteristics of universities, polytechnics and colleges of education. Institutions of higher learning operate in an environment shaped by academic freedom, institutional autonomy, knowledge production, research

competitiveness, quality assurance and global engagement, features that call for administrative approaches markedly different from those suited to primary and secondary schools. To treat higher education administration as no more than an extension of general educational administration is therefore to overlook the governance structures, leadership demands and institutional responsibilities that define tertiary education.

The distinction between the two fields is best understood not as a difference of educational level but as a distinction between two related administrative processes operating within different institutional contexts. Both pursue the effective achievement of educational goals through planning, organizing, coordinating, directing and evaluating resources; higher education administration, however, applies these functions within a more specialized, knowledge-intensive and highly autonomous environment. This article draws on the work of Peretomode (2019, 2026), a leading Nigerian scholar in the field, together with complementary perspectives from Hoy and Miskel (2013), and Sewall & Smith (1999) to examine the concept of educational administration and higher education administration, to analyze the unique characteristics of higher education that necessitate specialized administration, and to distinguish clearly between the two fields while affirming their complementary relationship.

The Concept of Educational Administration (EA)

Educational administration may be broadly understood as the systematic process of harnessing human, material, financial and informational resources, through cooperative effort, to accomplish the objectives of an educational system. In his seminal formulation, Peretomode (1991, 2019) conceives educational administration as a social process concerned with identifying, maintaining, stimulating, controlling and unifying the formally and informally organized resources of an educational system in pursuit of predetermined goals. In a similar vein, Hoy and Miskel (2013) describe educational administration as the application of management processes within educational organizations to enhance organizational effectiveness. Read together, these perspectives converge on the understanding that administration in education is both a managerial and a leadership function aimed at improving educational outcomes, rather than a routine exercise in maintaining organizational order, it is a means to an end rather than an end in itself.

From Peretomode's perspective, educational administration comprises several interrelated processes, namely planning, organizing, directing, coordinating, staffing, budgeting, controlling and evaluating, each applied to the peculiar setting of the school or educational institution. Its principal responsibilities extend to educational planning, policy implementation, personnel administration, instructional supervision, financial management, communication, decision-making, quality assurance and institutional evaluation, and these responsibilities together provide the foundation on which every educational institution operates. Educational administration draws its theoretical grounding from general administrative and management theory, but it is shaped and modified by the distinctive purposes of education, which centre on the intellectual, moral and social development of learners rather than the pursuit only of profit.

Other scholars offer complementary formulations. Ogunu (2000) and Ozigi (1977) describe educational administration as the machinery through which the purposes and policies of an education system are translated into practical action, arranging the human and material resources of the school system towards agreed ends. A common thread runs through these definitions: educational administration is purposeful and goal-directed, concerned with the effective deployment of resources to achieve educational objectives at any level, from the primary school to the university. It is this broad, level-spanning foundation that higher education administration subsequently specializes and refines.

The Concept of Higher Education Administration (HEA)

Higher education administration (HEA) refers to the specific application of administrative principles, processes and practices to the governance and management of institutions of higher learning, including universities, polytechnics, colleges of education and mono-technics. Higher education administration as a specialized branch of educational administration, is one that addresses the distinct organizational structures, governance patterns and academic culture peculiar to tertiary institutions. While it employs the same fundamental functions of planning, organizing, directing, coordinating and evaluating that underlie educational administration generally, it extends these functions to the unique academic, research and governance responsibilities that tertiary institutions carry.

According to Peretomode, higher education administration is concerned with institutions whose core mandate extends beyond instruction to include research, knowledge creation and community service, together constituting the tripartite mission of the university. Administering such institutions requires an understanding of complex governance bodies, among them Senate, Council, Congregation and Convocation, and demands a careful balancing of academic freedom with institutional accountability, matters that are largely absent, or far less pronounced, at the primary and secondary levels (Peretomode, 2008; 2026). Asiyai (2015) similarly argues that effective administration of tertiary institutions requires strategic leadership capable of reconciling accountability with academic freedom, innovation with regulation, and institutional autonomy with public responsibility.

Higher education administration has therefore emerged as a distinct field within educational management, not simply because it operates at the tertiary level, but because the institutions it governs differ fundamentally in structure, purpose and operational dynamics from schools at lower levels (Jaiyeoba & Salami, 2021). It is not merely educational administration transplanted into a university setting; it demands specialized knowledge of academic governance, faculty management, research administration, and the peculiar funding and quality-assurance mechanisms that govern tertiary institutions.

Unique Characteristics of Higher Education (HEA)

Higher education institutions possess a cluster of distinguishing features that set them apart from primary and secondary schools (basic education), and it is these features, considered together, that account for the emergence of higher education administration as a specialized field, and these can be gleaned from the works of the following scholars (Sewell & Smith, 1999, Peretomode, 2008, 2019, 2026; Hoy & Miskel, 2013):

1. Academic Freedom

Higher education institutions protect the freedom of scholars to teach, research and disseminate knowledge without undue external interference, a freedom not typically extended to staff and students at the basic education level. This freedom encourages intellectual creativity and critical inquiry, subject only to the broad regulatory framework set by government and accrediting bodies

2. Institutional Autonomy and Complex, Collegial Governance

Unlike the comparatively simple hierarchical structures of primary and secondary schools, higher education institutions operate a dual governance system that combines an administrative hierarchy, comprising the Vice-Chancellor, Deans and Heads of Department, with formal collegial bodies such as Council, Senate, Congregation, and Faculty and Departmental Boards. This arrangement has been described as a bureaucratic-collegial structure in which authority is shared between administrative officers and academic communities, and it is this shared, consultative pattern of decision-making that gives higher education institutions their considerable measure of institutional autonomy.

3. Knowledge Creation and the Tripartite Mandate

Whereas basic education is concerned primarily with the transmission of existing knowledge – teaching, higher education institutions carry the additional responsibility of generating new knowledge through research and scholarly inquiry. Teaching, research and community service together constitute the tripartite mandate of the university, and this expanded mission places additional administrative demands on higher education managers, who must allocate resources, personnel and time across all three functions.

4. A Mature, Specialized Clientele and a Professional Workforce

Higher education caters to adult learners who are more mature, self-directed and specialized in their academic interests than pupils at the basic education level, calling for administrative practices that respect intellectual independence and professional aspiration. Correspondingly, the academic staff of higher education institutions are highly specialized professionals holding terminal qualifications in narrow fields of study; their recruitment, promotion and welfare are governed by peculiar processes such as peer review, publication requirements and academic ranking, which differ markedly from teacher management at the basic education level and call for leadership grounded in collaboration and professional respect rather than rigid bureaucratic control.

5. Diversified and Complex Funding

Higher education institutions rely on multiple and often complex sources of funding, including government subvention, tuition and fees, research grants, university – industry collaboration, endowments, donor support and internally generated revenue. This diversified funding base requires administrators to possess skills in financial management and resource mobilization that go well beyond what is required at the basic education level.

6. Quality Assurance and a Global, Comparative Orientation

Continuous accreditation, programme review and institutional assessment ensure that academic standards remain nationally and internationally competitive. At the same time, higher education institutions operate within an international academic community, engaging in student and staff exchange, collaborative research and comparative benchmarking with institutions across the world, a global outlook that is far less pronounced in primary and secondary education

7. Organizational Complexity

The existence of faculties, institutes, research centres, colleges and numerous administrative units creates a governance structure considerably more intricate than that found in lower educational institutions, one that requires coordinated, multi-layered administrative attention.

Taken together, these characteristics explain why the general framework of educational administration, though foundational, is not by itself sufficient to manage institutions operating under conditions of academic freedom, institutional autonomy, research intensity and collegial governance. They point instead to the need for a specialized administrative field attuned to the distinctive demands of tertiary education.

Distinction between Educational Administration (EA) and Higher Education Administration (HEA)

Although higher education administration is properly regarded as a branch of the wider field of educational administration, a number of important distinctions may be drawn between the two, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Basis of Distinction	Educational Administration	Higher Education Administration
Scope	Broad field covering the administration of education at every level, from pre-primary through tertiary institutions.	A narrower, specialized field concerned specifically with the governance of universities, polytechnics, colleges of education and related tertiary bodies.
Governance structure	Generally hierarchical and centrally supervised, with head teachers and principals accountable to Ministries of Education or School Boards.	A bureaucratic-collegial structure in which authority is shared between administrative officers (Vice-Chancellor, Deans, Heads of Department) and statutory collegial bodies such as Council, Senate, Congregation and Faculty Boards.
Core mandate	Concentrated mainly on instruction and the character formation of pupils and students.	Anchored on a tripartite mandate of teaching, research and community service.
Clientele	Children and adolescents who require close guidance and supervision.	Adult learners who are relatively autonomous, self-directed and specialized in their academic interests.

International Journal of Novel Research in Education and Learning

Vol. 13, Issue 4, pp: (55-60), Month: July - August 2026, Available at: www.noveltyjournals.com

Staff management	Teachers are engaged and supervised through fairly standard recruitment, training and appraisal processes set by education ministries or agencies.	Academic staff are managed through specialized processes such as peer review, publication records and structured promotion criteria, and are led through collaboration rather than rigid bureaucratic control.
Funding	Depends largely on government subvention and, for private schools, tuition fees.	Diversified across government subvention, tuition, research grants, endowments, donor support and internally generated revenue.
Autonomy	Limited; schools generally function under close supervision of education authorities.	Considerable institutional autonomy and academic freedom, exercised within a broad regulatory and quality-assurance framework.
Evaluation	Judged chiefly by effectiveness in meeting educational objectives and efficient school management.	Assessed not only by administrative efficiency but also by research productivity, academic quality, innovation, graduate outcomes and institutional reputation.
Theoretical base	Draws broadly on general administrative and management theory applied to schools.	Draws on general administrative theory together with specialized theories of academic governance, research administration and university management.

Beyond these structural contrasts, the two fields differ in the range of stakeholders they must coordinate. Educational administration is concerned chiefly with the interests of learners, teachers, parents and government agencies, whereas higher education administration manages a considerably broader network that includes governing councils, academic unions, professional bodies, alumni, industry partners, funding agencies and international organizations, a breadth that adds materially to its administrative complexity (Jaiyeoba & Salami, 2021).

These distinctions notwithstanding, it has been argued that educational administration and higher education administration share the same fundamental purpose of organizing human and material resources towards the achievement of educational goals. Higher education administration does not replace educational administration; rather, it builds upon it and represents its specialized application within the distinctive environment of tertiary education. It follows that persons preparing for leadership positions in universities and other higher education institutions require training that goes beyond general educational administration to embrace the peculiar governance, financial and academic management challenges of the higher education sector. Failure to distinguish the two fields can lead to administrative inefficiencies, policy mismatched and policy somersault, and reduced institutional effectiveness.

2. CONCLUSION

Educational administration supplies the broad theoretical and practical foundation for the management of educational institutions at every level, while higher education administration represents a specialized application of that foundation to the distinctive context of universities and other tertiary institutions. As this article has shown, higher education is set apart by academic freedom, institutional autonomy, a bureaucratic-collegial governance structure, a tripartite mandate of teaching, research and community service, a mature and specialized clientele served by a professional workforce, diversified funding, sustained quality assurance, and a global orientation. These features, considered together, makes a higher education a complex organization to be described as an organized anarchy or loose coupling system justify the treatment of higher education administration as a specialized field of study and practice, one deserving of dedicated theoretical attention and professional preparation.

Ultimately, the relationship between educational administration and higher education administration is complementary rather than competitive. Educational administration establishes the foundational principles of educational management, while higher education administration adapts and refines those principles to meet the particular demands of tertiary

institutions. Recognizing this distinction, while appreciating the shared purpose that unites the two fields, is essential to developing administrative practice capable of enhancing institutional effectiveness, advancing academic excellence, and promoting national development through education at every level. Therefore, training programmes and scholarly inquiry must continue to treat higher education administration as a distinct yet interconnected field within educational administration.

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