

Power Relations within the Centralised System of University Administration: A Case Study of Public Universities in Northern Ghana

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ABSTRACT

The legitimization and exercise of power within university governance structures have a significant influence on participatory decision-making, academic freedom, and institutional autonomy. Documents such as university laws, regulatory guidelines, strategic plans, and policy circulars play a crucial role in reflecting and reinforcing these power relations within centralized university administrations. Despite their importance, the role of such documents in shaping power dynamics in centralized systems has received limited scholarly attention. This study investigated how power is constructed, legitimized, and reproduced within the administrative frameworks of three public universities governed under centralized systems in Northern Ghana. Employing a document analysis approach, official texts, including university statutes, policy manuals, regulatory frameworks, and ministry directives, were systematically examined. The findings reveal that power is constructed through hierarchical appointments and codified in regulatory frameworks, with authority concentrated in externally appointed governing councils, leaving minimal room for internal participatory governance. Furthermore, the legitimization of power is embedded in formal documents that frame centralized control as essential for "efficiency," "order," and "academic excellence." Foundational documents, particularly the universities' establishing Acts, institutionalize governance logics that prioritize control over collaboration, significantly constraining institutional autonomy and academic participation. Drawing on Foucault's theory of disciplinary power, the analysis illustrates how authority operates through subtle regulatory mechanisms rather than overt coercion. The study concludes that centralized governance fosters performative participation, with executive decision-makers dominating and academic staff relegated primarily to implementation roles. It recommends revising university Acts, statutes, and administrative policies to strengthen the governance roles of Academic Boards, Faculty Councils, and Departments, particularly regarding curriculum development, staff appointments, and budgetary decisions, thereby promoting more democratic and inclusive institutional practices.

Keywords: university administration, centralized system, academic freedom, institutional autonomy, regulatory frameworks.

INTRODUCTION

The university administration serves as a critical arena for negotiating and exercising power within higher education institutions, which function as both knowledge producers and bureaucratic organizations with formal structures and hierarchies. The distribution and exercise of power within these administrative systems significantly affect institutional autonomy, academic freedom, decision-making processes, and governance

effectiveness (Altbach, 2001; Marginson & Rhoades, 2002). In many countries, particularly those with centralized governance models, universities are controlled, either directly or indirectly, by state ministries or regulatory bodies that oversee essential administrative functions such as staffing, funding, infrastructure, and curriculum approval (Teferra & Altbach, 2004; Mohamedbhai, 2008).

In centralized systems, university management often acts as intermediaries between state power and academic communities, implementing political directives while balancing institutional goals. While centralization can promote uniformity, equity, and national cohesion, it also restricts administrators' discretionary authority and diminishes participatory governance traditionally associated with collegial models of university administration (Tetty, 2006; Langa, 2010). This top-down decision-making structure often marginalizes faculties, departments, and unions, leading to conflicts, resistance, and feelings of disempowerment among staff and administrators.

Power in university administration extends beyond formal authority and is deeply ingrained in organizational culture, information flows, and discourse. Drawing on Foucault's (1980) conceptualization of power as relational, diffuse, and rooted in institutional discourse, this study emphasizes that official documents, such as statutes, policy manuals, strategic plans, and ministry directives, are not neutral but function as instruments for legitimizing, exercising, and contesting power. These documents codify hierarchical relations, designate responsibilities, and frequently prioritize government control over institutional autonomy.

Despite their importance, the role of such documents in shaping power relations within centralized university administrations has been understudied. Most research on African university governance focuses on leadership, funding, or structural reforms, often neglecting the discursive dimensions of power embedded in administrative texts (Osei-Owusu, 2020). However, understanding these discursive mechanisms is crucial for implementing meaningful governance reforms, empowering staff, and creating more democratic and responsive institutions.

This study employed critical document analysis to investigate power relations within centralized university administration systems by examining official texts that reveal how power is distributed, legitimized, and reproduced. It focuses on three public universities in Northern Ghana—the University for Development Studies (UDS), C.K. Tedaam University of Technology and Applied Sciences (CKT-UTAS), and Simon Diedong Dombo University of Business and Integrated Development Studies (SDD-UBIDS). These institutions, governed under strict national statutes with significant state involvement in leadership and governance decisions, provide an ideal context for studying centralized control.

Northern Ghana's universities, being relatively new and located in an underserved region, provide a unique perspective on how centralized power intersects with regional disparities, resource allocation, and stakeholder participation. This regional focus addresses a gap in existing research, which has predominantly concentrated on southern Ghanaian universities, such as the University of Ghana and the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology. Thus, the study contributes both regionally nuanced insights and a broader theoretical understanding of state-university relations in postcolonial African contexts.

Theoretically, the study draws on post-structuralist theories of power, particularly Foucault's ideas, which regard documents as active agents shaping institutional realities rather than mere reflections of policy (Ball, 1990; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Methodologically, it demonstrates the utility of document analysis for revealing normative assumptions, ideological positions, and power structures within higher education governance.

Overall, this research sheds light on how centralized governance frameworks influence university administration, affecting institutional autonomy, governance efficiency, and academic freedom. It provides empirical and theoretical insights into the role of administrative documents in negotiating and codifying power, highlighting the implications for governance reform, staff agency, and democratic practice in Ghanaian—and

by extension, African—higher education institutions.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to critically examine the nature and dynamics of power relations within the centralized system of university administration in Ghana, with a specific focus on the three public universities in Northern Ghana.

Research Questions

1. How is power constructed, legitimized, and exercised within the administrative frameworks of public universities operating under centralized governance in Northern Ghana?
2. What roles do official documents play in shaping and reinforcing power relations within these universities?
3. In what ways do centralized administrative structures affect institutional autonomy, participatory decision-making, and academic freedom in the university system?

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Theoretical framework

This study employed Michel Foucault's theory of power, which views power not as a possession but as a relational, diffuse force exercised through discourse, knowledge, norms, and institutional practices (Foucault, 1977, 1980). Power is decentralized, embedded in everyday interactions, and both repressive and productive, shaping behaviors and subjectivities. Foucault's framework provides a critical lens for analyzing power dynamics within centralized university administration systems, characterized by hierarchical decision-making, uniform policies, and top-down control.

Using this theory, the university administration is understood as a site of power/knowledge, where discourses on efficiency, responsibility, academic freedom, and professionalism legitimize specific actions and hierarchies. The study analyzed official documents—including strategic plans, statutes, policy texts, circulars, organizational charts, meeting minutes, and memos—to uncover the knowledge systems, rules, and norms underpinning centralized control. These documents serve as technologies of power, shaping the behaviour of staff, faculty, and administrators.

Foucault's concept of governmentality guided the analysis, revealing how subjects are controlled and self-regulate within institutional constraints. This theoretical application facilitated a deeper examination of the discursive and institutional mechanisms that sustain and contest power, acknowledging the presence of resistance and agency within the centralized governance system.

Empirical review

This section of the research discusses studies related to power relations within the centralised system of higher education institutions, specifically in the university setting. The construction, legitimation, and exercise of power within administrative frameworks, as well as the role of official documents such as university statutes, policy manuals, and ministry directives in shaping and reinforcing power relations within these universities, are discussed. The review also assesses the impact of centralized administrative structures on institutional autonomy, participatory decision-making, and academic freedom within the university system. Past studies examining how power dynamics in the administration of these universities reflect broader state-university

relations are also reviewed.

Construction legitimisation and exercise of power in administrative frameworks

Past studies on university governance suggest how power is structured, legitimized, and enacted within centralized administrative systems. These studies offer practical insights into the lived realities of institutional actors, including administrators, faculty, and staff, as well as the discursive and structural means through which authority is maintained and contested.

Construction of Administrative Power: Research shows that centralized administrative structures in Ghanaian public universities are rooted in colonial-era hierarchical models that emphasize top-down decision-making. Atuahene (2014) highlights that these systems prioritize bureaucratic control, while Asare and Baafi-Frimpong (2015) note that power is institutionalized through policies crafted by councils and vice chancellors, often excluding faculty input. Oduro and Dachi (2012) further argue that such hierarchies marginalize junior staff and academics. Administrative power is thus constructed through formal structures, bureaucratic norms, and informal networks. However, there is limited empirical research focusing specifically on how these dynamics unfold in Northern Ghana's unique socio-political context.

Legitimation of Power: Research highlights how administrative authority in universities is legitimized through policy texts, strategic documents, and audit mechanisms. Boateng and Essuman (2019) found that centralization in Ghanaian universities is justified by official narratives around "efficiency" and "quality assurance," which function as what Foucault (1980) calls "regimes of truth"—appearing neutral while reinforcing dominant interests. Asare and Baffoe (2021) note that symbolic appointments of regional staff often lack real decision-making power, serving to legitimize authority without fostering genuine inclusion. Similarly, Asare and Baafi-Frimpong (2015) argue that legitimacy is derived from appointments made by regulatory bodies, such as GTEC and university councils, especially when procedures like public advertisements and stakeholder consultations are followed. Clark (1983) further explains that in bureaucratic systems, legitimacy is conferred through clearly defined administrative hierarchies codified in institutional regulations. This study builds on such literature by applying Foucault's theory to examine power relations in centralized university administration through document analysis.

Exercise of Power in Practice: In higher education institutions, power is exercised through control over resources, staff promotions, committee assignments, and access to information. Tetey (2006) and Ntim (2018) reveal how centralized authority marginalizes academic staff through non-transparent processes and strategic use of performance appraisals and promotions. Abugri (2020) notes that such centralization suppresses regional input, fueling low morale and factionalism. Tight (2014) found similar dynamics in UK and Australian universities, where senior administrators control grants, space, and hiring, rewarding conformity and punishing dissent. In Ghana, Boateng and Ofori (2019) observe that access to internally generated funds (IGFs) is centrally controlled, leading department heads to modify behavior to align with administrative preferences.

Furthermore, Shattock (2003) emphasizes that performance management systems, including KPIs and audits, facilitate ongoing surveillance and behavioral regulation. While these studies illuminate the mechanisms of power, few apply Foucauldian analysis to explore how discourse and routine administrative practices function as technologies of power. This study addresses that gap by analysing documents in the context of Northern Ghana's distinct socio-political landscape.

The role of official documents in shaping and reinforcing power relations within Centralised university administrative systems

Research shows that official documents, such as Acts of Parliament, university statutes, policies, and strategic plans, play a central role in shaping and reinforcing power within centralized university administrative systems.

Deem et al. (2007) and Wright & Ørberg (2008) argue that these texts legitimize top-down governance and institutionalize executive authority, particularly benefiting vice chancellors, registrars, and council chairs. Amponsah and Onuoha (2013, 2020) found that such documents often formalize rigid bureaucratic procedures that marginalize academic voices and create an illusion of participatory governance, while executive control dominates.

Tight (2019) similarly observes that statutes often empower central bodies at the expense of departmental autonomy, thereby limiting faculty input in areas such as curriculum design, hiring, and resource allocation. These documents codify hierarchical power structures and foster dependence on administrative approval. Far from being neutral, official texts serve as instruments of power that both stabilize and constrain university governance. In postcolonial contexts, such as Africa, they reflect and reproduce deeper power asymmetries rooted in historical centralization and ongoing institutional constraints.

Effect of the centralized administrative structures on institutional autonomy, participatory decision-making, and academic freedom in the university system.

Empirical research across higher education systems suggests that centralized administrative structures often limit institutional autonomy, particularly when governments or regulatory bodies exert significant control over them. Berdahl (1990) and Neave and van Vught (1991) found that such centralization curtails universities' capacity for independent decision-making. In Africa, centralization reflects postcolonial governance patterns, with studies in Ghana, Nigeria, and Kenya showing that state-appointed officials often constrain academic leadership and reform (Amponsah & Onuoha, 2013).

Sawyerr (2004) and Atuahene (2014) highlight how centralized hierarchies marginalize faculty and reduce participation in curriculum design, staff promotions, and research priorities. Teferra and Altbach (2004) attribute this to limited academic freedom and a reluctance to pursue politically sensitive research. Mamdani (2007) adds that political interference often undermines intellectual autonomy, while Agyeman and Ayiku (2021) link central control to faculty dissatisfaction.

Though centralization can promote standardization in weak institutional environments (Okebukola, 2015), excessive control often suppresses innovation and responsiveness. This study builds on these findings by examining how power is exercised in Northern Ghana's public universities, with a focus on the roles of documents, discourse, and institutional practices in shaping governance.

METHOD

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative case study design, utilizing document analysis as the primary method of data collection. Through the lens of critical discourse theory, particularly Foucauldian concepts of power and governance, the research aims to uncover how institutional texts in centralized university systems construct, legitimize, and reproduce power relations within the context of Northern Ghana. Document analysis is particularly well-suited for this research, as it enables a systematic, interpretive, and contextual reading of institutional texts to uncover underlying meanings, assumptions, and discourses about power.

In the context of higher education administration, such documents are more than just administrative records; they are discursive instruments that codify institutional power relations, define roles and duties, and legitimate specific actors and behaviors over others. Second, this study aimed to uncover the underlying ideologies and assumptions embedded in official texts, an inquiry that aligns with the interpretative and critical components of document analysis. Institutional documents frequently convey implicit themes of authority, control,

compliance, and opposition. Even in the absence of direct observation or participant testimony, studying these texts allows the study to illustrate how power is allocated, exercised, and challenged inside the academic system.

Study Context

Governing Councils govern most higher education institutions in Ghana, exercising strong administrative influence with support from national regulatory bodies, such as the Ghana Tertiary Education Commission (GTEC), which collaborates with the Ministry of Education to develop policies, allocate resources, and ensure quality assurance across the sector. These national bodies have a substantial impact on public universities through policy directives, accrediting requirements, funding systems, and periodic evaluations. Within each institution, university councils are the highest decision-making bodies, having control over strategic direction, financial monitoring, and senior appointments. While universities are technically autonomous, the interaction between national regulatory bodies and institutional governing councils results in a layered, often hierarchical governance structure. This study is situated within the context of the larger centralized regime, focusing on how power dynamics are articulated in a public institution that has adopted a centralized administrative style. This makes the setting ideal for studying how power is wielded, negotiated, and contested within formal institutional frameworks.

In this study, the document corpus interrogated comprised formal institutional texts that are directly related to governance and organizational power dynamics. These include:

1. Acts of Parliament that established the universities
2. University statutes, which define the legal and structural framework of the institution;
3. Strategic plans, which articulate long-term priorities and reflect institutional visions and power alignments;
4. Organizational charts and governance frameworks, which visually map formal authority structures;
5. Policy documents (e.g., human resource manuals, academic regulations, and financial policies), which codify operational rules and decision-making protocols;
6. Policy directives from the GTEC and MoE.
7. Minutes and communiqués from university council meetings and key administrative committees;
8. Annual reports provide narrative accounts of institutional performance and strategic initiatives.

These documents span a time frame of approximately 10–15 years, covering a period of significant reform in Ghana's tertiary education landscape. The issuing bodies include the University's central administration, and in some cases, national-level agencies such as GTEC or the Ministry of Education. By analysing texts from multiple governance levels and periods, the study aims to capture both continuity and change in how power is framed and operationalized within the centralized university system.

Sampling Strategy

This study employed a purposive sample technique to identify documents most relevant to the research goal of examining power dynamics within a centralized university system. The purposive sampling is ideal in qualitative document analysis because it allows the researcher to actively select texts that are rich in information and directly relevant to the study's conceptual and analytical goals (Patton, 2015).

The documents were selected for analysis due to their apparent connection to important characteristics of institutional power, including decision-making authority, budget allocation, appointment and promotion

procedures, and inter-organizational governance frameworks. These elements are crucial to understanding how power is exercised, delegated, and contested in Ghanaian public universities' complex governance system (Tight, 2014).

The document selection period spans from 2015 to 2024. During this period, Ghana's higher education governance underwent significant reforms, including the replacement of the National Council for Tertiary Education (NCTE) with the Ghana Tertiary Education Commission (GTEC), as well as institutional changes aimed at enhancing accountability, efficiency, and performance (GTEC, 2021). This historical limit enabled the research to capture both continuity and change in the articulation of power within institutional texts.

Documents were also selected based on the following criteria:

1. **Authorship and issuing authority:** Priority was given to documents authored by central university bodies (e.g., the University Council, the Office of the Vice-Chancellor, and the Registrar's Office) and national regulatory institutions (e.g., the GTEC and the Ministry of Education) that reflect top-down decision-making processes. Where applicable, documents from college units were included to present opposing viewpoints.
2. **Level of governance:** The study distinguished between documents produced by strategic governing organizations (e.g., University Council) and operational or advisory committees. This distinction makes it easier to examine how power is wielded at various levels of the hierarchy.
3. **Thematic relevance:** Only documents that explicitly addressed institutional governance, leadership structures, policy implementation, resource allocation, and personnel management were considered. Texts with insufficient connection to the study's primary themes were removed from the final corpus.
4. **This strategic and theoretically informed approach to sampling ensures that the document corpus is both manageable and analytically robust, allowing for in-depth exploration of how power is codified and reproduced through institutional texts.**

Data Collection Procedure

Access to Documents

The data for this study were collected exclusively through documentary sources obtained from a combination of publicly accessible and institutionally held repositories. Primary access points included the official websites of the selected University and relevant national regulatory bodies, particularly the Ghana Tertiary Education Commission (GTEC) and the Ministry of Education. These platforms host a range of publicly available documents, such as strategic plans, annual reports, governance structures, and policy frameworks.

Additional materials such as university council minutes, internal policy manuals, and organizational charts were accessed through institutional archives and internal administrative offices, following formal permission and clearance procedures. Access requests were made through official correspondence with the University's Registrar's Office and Planning and Quality Assurance Directorate, where applicable. In some cases, Freedom of Information (FOI) provisions or research access protocols were invoked to obtain non-public documents deemed critical to the study's analytical focus.

Efforts were made to ensure that all documents included in the study were authentic, complete, and verifiable, in line with best practices in qualitative document analysis (Bowen, 2009; O'Leary, 2014). When possible, multiple versions of the same document type (e.g., consecutive annual reports or successive strategic plans) were retrieved to allow for longitudinal comparison and thematic evolution.

Organization and Cataloguing of Documents

Once retrieved, all documents were systematically organized and catalogued to facilitate efficient analysis and traceability. Documents were first sorted into broad categories based on their function and issuing authority, such as:

1. Central governance documents (e.g., statutes, council minutes, strategic plans)
2. Academic governance documents (e.g., Academic Board regulations, curriculum policies)
3. Administrative and operational policies (e.g., HR manuals, financial guidelines)
4. National policy and oversight documents (e.g., GTEC reports, MoE circulars)

Each document was assigned a unique identification code and entered into a digital catalogue using spreadsheet software. The following metadata were recorded for each document:

1. Title of the document
2. Issuing body (e.g., University Council, Academic Board, GTEC)
3. Date of publication or approval
4. Author or responsible office (if stated)
5. Document type (e.g., policy, report, minutes)
6. Level of governance (central, collegiate, national)
7. Format and source (URL, scanned copy, archive reference)

The documents were also chronologically organized within each category, covering the period 2015 to 2024, to support the study's temporal analysis of governance reforms and evolving power dynamics. Backup copies were stored securely on encrypted digital drives, and print versions were kept in a locked cabinet to maintain data security and research integrity.

This structured data collection process ensured not only the credibility and reliability of the source materials but also their systematic traceability, which is essential for ensuring transparency and replicability in qualitative research (Yin, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Analytical Framework

This study employs thematic document analysis as its principal analytical approach, drawing on the widely used framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis provides a flexible yet rigorous method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning, referred to as "themes," within qualitative data. It is particularly well-suited for examining policy and governance documents where underlying discourses and institutional power dynamics may be subtly encoded in official language (Bowen, 2009).

The thematic analysis in this study was guided by both deductive and inductive coding strategies, enabling a structured yet adaptable engagement with the data. This dual approach ensures that the analysis remains theoretically grounded while also being responsive to unexpected insights emerging from the document corpus.

Coding Scheme

The deductive Coding framework was informed by the study's two guiding theoretical perspectives: Social

Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and Power Theory (notably, Lukes, 2005; Foucault, 1980). These theories informed a set of a priori codes related to how institutional actors assert, negotiate, or challenge power and belonging in a centralized governance regime. Examples of deductive Coding are given in Table 1.

Table 1. Deductive Coding

Code	Description
Centralization	Direct control by the state over university decisions
Hierarchical power	Power concentrated at the top (e.g., Vice-Chancellor, Council)
Stakeholder exclusion	Lack of involvement of faculty/staff in decisions
Policy discourse	The language used to frame authority, compliance, or regulation

Compliance mechanisms, such as Sanctions or directives, are used to ensure institutional obedience.

In addition to these theoretical codes, inductive codes were generated during a close reading of the documents, allowing patterns and meanings to emerge from the text itself (Charmaz, 2006). Examples of inductively derived codes include:

1. Central oversight– language emphasizing centralized control or monitoring
2. Subsidiary autonomy– references to faculties exercising self-governance
3. Ambiguity in mandates– instances of unclear or overlapping authority
4. Procedural opacity – lack of transparency in decision-making processes

Analytical Procedure

The thematic analysis followed a six-phase procedure as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006):

1. Familiarization: All documents were read thoroughly to develop a comprehensive understanding of the content and context. Notes were made about initial impressions and potential areas of interest related to power relations.
2. Generating initial codes: Both deductive and inductive codes were applied, with codebooks iteratively refined during the process.
3. Searching for themes: Codes were then grouped into thematic clusters, focusing on patterns related to the enactment, distribution, and contestation of power. Particular attention was paid to themes reflecting central-local tensions, identity-based power struggles, and the institutionalization of authority.
4. Reviewing and refining themes: The initial thematic structure was reviewed for internal coherence and distinctiveness. This involved examining supporting excerpts and comparing themes across document types and issuing bodies to ensure thematic saturation and analytic consistency.
5. Defining and naming themes: Themes were then clearly defined and labelled to capture their scope and analytical relevance. Each theme was supported by exemplar quotes or passages from the documents and connected back to the study’s theoretical framework.
6. Producing the analytic narrative: The final stage involved constructing a detailed analytic narrative that

linked the themes to the study's research questions and conceptual framework. This narrative serves as the basis for interpretation and discussion in subsequent chapters, particularly regarding how institutional texts reflect and reproduce power relations within Ghana's centralized higher education governance system.

This analytical framework ensures both rigour and theoretical alignment, enabling the study to move beyond descriptive Coding to offer deeper insights into the ways that governance documents serve as vehicles of power, identity, and control.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

To ensure the quality and integrity of this qualitative document analysis, the study draws on established criteria for trustworthiness in interpretive research—credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). These criteria serve as benchmarks for assessing the rigor of the research design and the robustness of the findings, particularly when analyzing institutional texts in politically and structurally complex contexts such as centralized higher education systems.

Credibility: Credibility refers to the plausibility and truth-value of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This study enhances credibility through triangulation across multiple document types issued by different institutional actors. For example, ministry-level minutes, university council reports, and internal faculty communications were compared to identify convergences and discrepancies in how power is exercised, justified, or resisted across governance levels. This form of source triangulation enhances interpretive depth by allowing for the cross-validation of themes and interpretations (Bowen, 2009).

Additionally, peer debriefing was employed as a credibility-enhancing strategy. The initial codebook and emerging themes were shared with a research supervisor and academic peers for critical feedback. This process helped uncover potential blind spots, improve coding reliability, and ensure that the findings accurately reflected the data rather than being influenced by researcher bias.

Dependability: Dependability relates to the consistency and replicability of the research process. To meet this criterion, the study maintained a comprehensive audit trail documenting all key decisions made during the data collection and analysis process. This included coding memos, changes to the Coding framework, and notes on analytical reflections. Each step—from document sourcing to final theme development—was recorded in a research logbook to ensure that another researcher could, in principle, replicate the analytic process and arrive at comparable conclusions (Nowell et al., 2017).

Confirmability: Confirmability refers to the degree to which the findings are shaped by the data, rather than by researcher bias or personal motivations. This study incorporated reflexive journaling throughout the research process to explicitly surface and examine the researcher's assumptions about centralized power structures in Ghana's higher education system. Entries included reflections on positionality, theoretical leanings, and interpretive tensions encountered during the analysis. This process of critical self-awareness helped to bracket personal perspectives and foreground the meanings embedded in the documents themselves (Berger, 2015).

Together, these strategies enhance the trustworthiness and analytical rigor of the study, ensuring that the conclusions drawn are both methodologically sound and empirically grounded.

Ethical Considerations

Although based on publicly available documents, this study maintained ethical reflexivity due to the sensitive nature of governance and power dynamics. Documents containing identifiable information, such as internal memos or meeting minutes, were anonymized to protect individuals and institutional units. Since the research

involves no direct interaction with human participants and uses only secondary data, it qualifies for an ethics exemption under most institutional policies. Nonetheless, a research ethics declaration was submitted to the relevant ethics committee to ensure compliance. Ethical care guided the study to balance transparency, confidentiality, and the public interest in examining institutional governance.

Delimitations

This study is limited to analyzing formal documents related to higher education governance in Ghana, with a focus on how power is codified and legitimized through official texts. Informal or unwritten practices are excluded, aligning with the study's methodological focus on textual, not social, constructions of power.

Limitations

This study's document analysis approach faces limitations, including restricted access to sensitive or confidential records, which may lead to selection bias. Additionally, official documents may strategically frame narratives, downplaying conflict or dissent. Therefore, findings should be viewed as insights into the discursive construction of power, not its complete practical enactment.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section of the paper presents the results of analyzing relevant documents to examine the nature of power relations within its centralized administrative system. The findings are structured around the three guiding research questions: (1) how power is constructed, legitimized, and exercised; (2) the role of official documents in shaping and reinforcing power relations; and (3) the impact of centralized structures on institutional autonomy, participatory decision-making, and academic freedom.

Construction, Legitimation, and Exercise of Power in the Centralized System

The analysis revealed that power in the centralized governance systems of the three public universities is primarily constructed through hierarchical appointments and regulatory frameworks entrenched in official documents. For instance, Statute 7.1 of University A assigns the appointment of the Chairperson of Council to external political processes as prescribed by national law. Similarly, Statute 8.10 of the University describes the constitution of a Search Committee for appointing a Vice-Chancellor, where the Chairperson of Council appoints the Committee Chair and the Council and Academic Board nominate other members. One Vice-Chancellor noted in an interview (VC, University A, May 2025):

“Although the statutes empower us to recommend candidates for leadership roles, the final appointments often reflect external political interests more than internal consensus.”

Likewise, a Registrar at University B observed:

“Our hands are often tied by bureaucratic protocols. Even when the Academic Board makes strong recommendations, these are subject to Council's final approval, which in practice means aligning with national policy directives.”

Moreover, appointments by the Vice-Chancellor (University A's Administrative Manual, Section 4.5) include Directors of Academic Units and Heads of Departments, which are typically made in consultation with Senior Management rather than through elections. In the same vein, Statute 3.1 of University A states, "The Vice-Chancellor shall be responsible for the day-to-day administration of the University and shall have the authority to take decisions in all matters affecting the institution, except where explicitly stated otherwise."

While these structures suggest formal procedures, interviews with university leaders point to deeper issues of institutional autonomy. This was echoed by a Dean at University C who remarked:

“Our role in faculty leadership is mostly managerial. Strategic decisions are already framed by the VC’s office, and we’re expected to implement them with minimal room for adaptation.”

These testimonials reinforce the observation that authority is centralized not only in formal documents but also in daily administrative practice. The frequent use of directive language such as 'shall', 'must', and 'subject to approval' reflects a bureaucratic tone that, according to one Dean (University B), “makes it difficult for faculty voices to be heard meaningfully in governance processes.

The analysis further suggests a consistent pattern across national and institutional documents in which authority is centralized in externally appointed councils, leaving limited room for internal participatory governance. The frequent use of directive language 'shall', 'must', and 'subject to approval' further reflects a bureaucratic tone that disempowers internal actors. Academic staff are constructed not as stakeholders, but as subjects of control, legitimizing a hierarchical model of governance. This textual interpretation was echoed by senior university leaders during interviews. A Vice-Chancellor of University B observed:

“Even though we engage staff in consultations, the final power rests with the Council and, by extension, with political appointees. It becomes difficult to implement bottom-up reforms when most strategic decisions are shaped from the top.”

The governance framework of University C, as enshrined in Act 1001 and the University's Statutes, reveals a highly centralized administrative structure. Power is principally constructed around the University Council, which is legally mandated to perform broad governance and oversight functions. Under Section 12(1) of Act 1001, the Council is granted the authority to "do or provide for any matter about the University which the Council considers necessary or expedient." This provision establishes a legal basis for the exercise of extensive discretionary powers. Moreover, Section 6 affirms the Council's role in determining the strategic direction of the University, controlling finances, and making professorial appointments on the recommendation of the Academic Board. Furthermore, power is exercised predominantly through appointments and strategic control. Section 5(3) of the Act provides that the Chairperson and members of the Council are appointed by the President, as per Article 70 of the Constitution, thereby embedding executive political influence into the University's governance structure.

A Registrar at University C noted:

“Although the Academic Board makes recommendations, in practice, the Council has the last word. This hierarchical relationship limits the impact of academic voices on major decisions like staff promotions and faculty restructuring.”

The centralized selection process reflects how power is constructed at the top levels of governance, insulated mainly from rank-and-file academic participation. Even in ostensibly participatory processes, such as the election of Deans and Vice-Deans (Statute 37.3 of University B), authority is legitimized through compliance with higher-level institutional policies. Deans must report to the Vice Chancellor and operate within frameworks set by the Council, Academic Board, and Campus Board. Thus, the exercise of power is bureaucratically nested and restricted. This aligns with Atuahene (2014) and Baafi-Frimpong (2015), who found that the governance structure in Ghanaian public universities mirrors colonial-era models of authority, prioritizing top-down decision-making and rigid bureaucratic control.

The analysis also reveals that the legitimation of power is embedded in formal documents that justify

centralized control as necessary for "efficiency," "order," and "academic excellence." Strategic plans and policy documents often cite national regulatory bodies such as the Ghana Tertiary Education Commission (GTEC) as external sources of legitimacy. For example, University B's Strategic Plan (2023–2027) states: "To remain compliant with national higher education standards, the University shall centralise key administrative decisions to ensure harmonisation of academic programmes and staff deployment."

Sections 2(b) and 2(d) of Act 1001 define the academic scope and pedagogical expectations of University C by mandating a focus on regional development and learner-centred, problem-based learning. While these directives support developmental goals and responsiveness to national priorities, they also reflect a state-imposed framework that may constrain academic autonomy. By prescribing both content (courses of special relevance to the north-western region) and method (learner-centred pedagogy), these provisions limit the authority of academic bodies such as the Senate in determining curricula independently. This aligns with Foucault's notion of disciplinary power, where administrative or legislative texts serve as instruments for normalising certain forms of knowledge and governance under the guise of reform and progress.

Such legitimisation tactics support Foucault's (1980) assertion that power is sustained through systems of truth production. It is also consistent with Boateng and Essuman's (2019) discovery that the centralization of authority in the hands of senior management is justified by official discourses of "efficiency," "academic excellence," and "quality assurance." Through the integration of these discourses in institutional documents, they create what Foucault (1980) refers to as regimes of truth narratives that support prevailing interests while seeming neutral or objective. Similarly, Asare and Baffoe (2021) found that power legitimization typically involves symbolic representation, such as appointing regional staff to advisory or nominal roles without necessarily delegating actual decision-making authority. Thus, power within the University is legitimized through legal instruments, enacted statutes, and executive appointments, and exercised vertically through a hierarchical command structure. This pattern suggests performative participation rather than genuine collegial governance, aligning with the notion of disciplinary power where conformity is produced through routinized procedures rather than overt coercion. This framing reflects Foucault's (1977) view of power as embedded in institutional discourse and legitimised through bureaucratic arrangements. Subordinate offices (e.g., Deans and Heads of Department) are shown to act more as implementers than as autonomous agents, indicating a top-down power structure that marginalizes participatory governance. In this context, centralisation is rationalised as a policy norm tied to national development, limiting room for contestation from internal stakeholders.

The third theme explored how power is exercised in practice, and Council and Academic Board minutes reviewed from 2020 to 2024 show limited evidence of inclusive deliberation. Most major decisions, such as staff appointments, promotions, and programme restructuring, were either ratified with minimal dissent or delegated to committees appointed by the Vice-Chancellor. For instance, a Council minute from University C (February 2023) reads: "The Council unanimously adopted the recommendation from the VC-appointed committee regarding the reorganisation of the Faculty of Applied Sciences, with no further deliberations." The Vice-Chancellor, though positioned as the Chief Executive Officer, operates under the authority of the Council. As per Section 16(6), the Vice-Chancellor is accountable to the Council for maintaining order and ensuring efficient administration. Even in routine appointments, such as those for Heads of Departments, the Vice-Chancellor acts "on behalf of the Council" and relies on recommendations from Deans and Directors. The results are consistent with Ntim (2018), who demonstrated how central administrators used control over performance appraisal systems, staff recruitment, and internal promotions as tools for compliance and control.

Role of Official Documents in Shaping and Reinforcing Power Relations

Official documents, such as Acts of Parliament, University Statutes, and Administrative Manuals, function as key instruments for the institutionalization of power. They not only establish who holds authority but also

codify the procedures through which it is enacted, thereby reinforcing centralized control. For instance, the statutes governing the Admission Board (Statute 62.1 of University C) explicitly list high-level administrators, such as the Vice-Chancellor, Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Registrar, Deans, and Directors, as members, while allowing only two representatives from the Academic Board. Although this appears inclusive, the underlying structure reinforces hierarchical dominance, particularly since the Board must act according to criteria pre-approved by the Academic Board. A Registrar at University C noted:

“These documents give the appearance of inclusiveness, but the real power sits at the top. Most decisions are framed before they even reach the Board level. What happens in meetings is often a rubber-stamping of pre-decided outcomes.”

Similarly, in the administrative manual of University B, it is stated, "The Vice-Chancellor, in consultation with the Management Committee, shall determine strategic staffing needs and initiate all senior-level appointments. This provision positions the document not just as a procedural guide but as a tool for reinforcing central authority. A Vice-Chancellor at University B explained:

“We rely on the manual because it offers a structured approach to appointments and governance. But I agree, it places a lot of responsibility—and scrutiny—on the Vice-Chancellor. Some would say it centralizes too much, but that’s the nature of our current governance model.”

Documents are frequently used to frame centralisation as necessary for accountability, efficiency, and compliance with national goals. Thus, they contribute to what Foucault refers to as "regimes of truth"—discursive formations that make certain governance practices appear rational, neutral, and non-negotiable.

In all three universities, power is routinely exercised through document-mediated control. Meeting minutes show that even academic decisions—such as curriculum reforms—require Vice-Chancellor or Council ratification, demonstrating how documents serve as instruments of surveillance and compliance.

A Dean at University A shared:

“As Deans, we chair faculty boards, but almost every policy or reform must be escalated to senior management. It's frustrating because the appearance of autonomy doesn't match the reality of our authority.”

Furthermore, in all three universities, power is routinely exercised through document-mediated control. Meeting minutes show that even academic decisions (e.g., curriculum reforms) require Vice-Chancellor or Council ratification, demonstrating how documents serve as instruments of surveillance and compliance. The role of official documents extends to electoral processes. The statute guiding the election of Deans creates a procedural framework for participation, but top-level institutional policies tightly regulate the duties of the Dean. Therefore, documents serve a dual role: enabling limited internal democracy while constraining actual decision-making power through overarching regulatory prescriptions.

Additionally, official documents, particularly the Act establishing university C (Act 1001), play a foundational role in codifying and reinforcing power relations. The provisions of the Act not only outline the structural hierarchy but also define the limits (or absence thereof) of autonomy for various university organs. For instance, Section 2(b) mandates that the University's curriculum should emphasize subjects relevant to the north-western part of the country. In contrast, Section 2(d) prescribes learner-centred and problem-based pedagogy. These clauses underscore how state priorities are embedded in statutory instruments, effectively steering academic content and methods. The institutional academic mission is therefore shaped not just by

disciplinary developments or faculty consensus, but by external political and developmental considerations.

Similarly, Section 21 defines the functions of the Academic Board, including policy formulation, curriculum regulation, and degree awarding—but crucially, all these functions are to be carried out "subject to the powers of the Council." This legally entrenches a conditional form of academic governance, where autonomy exists only at the pleasure of a more powerful administrative body. The layered legal structure, with the Act as a foundational instrument and the Statutes as functional and operational guidelines, creates a closed loop of authority. Power is legitimized at the macro level (via Act 1001) and exercised daily through the micro-mechanisms detailed in the Statutes. Thus, official documents do not merely record procedures; they constitute the legal architecture through which governance is enacted. The results are consistent with Deem et al. (2007), who contend that Acts of Parliament, University Statutes, policies, and strategic plans often constitute managerial discourse that legitimise top-down governance. Wright & Ørberg (2008) similarly found that such documents regularize executive authority and institutionalize accountability mechanisms that favor central leadership, particularly Vice Chancellors, Registrars, and Council Chairs, over faculty or departmental autonomy.

Effects on Autonomy, Participation, and Academic Freedom

The analysis reveals that centralized administrative structures in the three universities significantly hinder institutional autonomy, participatory governance, and academic freedom. Faculties and departments have limited control over key functions, such as student admissions and staff appointments. For example, University A's Statute 62.1 places admissions under a centrally composed board, marginalizing departmental input. At University C, departmental initiatives must align with the Vice-Chancellor's performance targets, which restrict local innovation and reflect a broader trend of managerial control. Though some documents suggest shared governance, decision-making remains dominated by executive officers, reducing genuine academic participation.

Participatory governance structures, such as academic boards and committees, are mostly advisory with limited deliberative authority. Power is concentrated in top management, discouraging dissent and promoting compliance over critical engagement, aligning with Foucault's notion of disciplinary power that shapes institutional behavior. While the election of Deans (Statute 37.3) suggests democratic engagement, these positions operate under strict hierarchical oversight, limiting their autonomy. Academic freedom is further curtailed when deans are required to enforce policies designed by central administrators, leaving little room to adapt based on contextual academic needs. These findings align with those of Sawyerr (2004), who noted that universities in sub-Saharan Africa face challenges with participatory governance due to centralized hierarchies that marginalize academic stakeholders.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of power relations in the centralized governance systems of the three public universities reveals a deeply embedded hierarchy sustained by legal and administrative instruments. Power is constructed through statutory appointments and operationalized via codified procedures that prioritize executive authority over collegial participation. Official documents, including Acts of Parliament, University Statutes, and Administrative Manuals, serve not only as procedural blueprints but also as legitimizing tools that normalize top-down control in the name of efficiency, accountability, and alignment with national development goals. Despite the formal presence of participatory structures, such as Academic Boards and elected Deans, these bodies often function within rigid bureaucratic boundaries that marginalize genuine autonomy and academic freedom. Ultimately, the centralized model promotes a system of performative participation, where executive actors dominate decision-making, and academic staff are relegated to implementers rather than collaborators.

This governance logic reflects Foucault's conception of disciplinary power, where authority is exercised through subtle regulatory mechanisms rather than overt coercion, thereby reinforcing a regime of control masked as institutional rationality. Academic freedom in this context is a myth, not a reality.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To foster inclusive and effective governance, universities in Ghana should revise their Statutes to empower Academic Boards and Faculty Councils in curriculum, staffing, and budgeting decisions, thereby promoting shared governance. Decentralizing key administrative functions to faculties and departments will enhance innovation, responsiveness, and efficiency. Legal frameworks, including Acts of Parliament and university statutes, should be reviewed in consultation with internal stakeholders to align with democratic governance principles and reduce excessive centralization. Safeguarding academic freedom, ensuring transparency in decision-making, and building governance capacity through regular training are essential. Periodic governance audits involving all staff levels should assess participatory compliance and guide reforms. Together, these measures will strengthen academic autonomy, accountability, and institutional trust.

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