



Participative Leadership and Cultural Diversity in Southwest Nigerian Universities

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Abstract

Participative leadership is a key factor in ensuring inclusive and culturally diverse university environments. This study examined the influence of participative leadership on cultural diversity in selected public universities in Southwest Nigeria using a quantitative survey design. Data were collected from 592 final-year students across six public universities, with one public university selected from each state in the Southwest geopolitical zone. Participative leadership was measured with ten questionnaire items, while cultural diversity was measured with 15 items covering intercultural competence, curriculum inclusivity, and student participation. The instruments showed acceptable internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values of .748 for participative leadership and .865 for cultural diversity. Descriptive results showed that participative leadership was moderately practised ($M = 2.96$, $SD = .9669$), while cultural diversity was perceived more positively ($M = 3.16$, $SD = .7756$). Ordinal logistic regression showed a statistically significant model, $\chi^2(2) = 7.469$, $p = .024$, although the effect size was small (Nagelkerke $R^2 = .015$). The moderate participative leadership category was positive and significant ($B = 0.749$, $p = .028$, 95% $CI [0.080, 1.418]$), so the null hypothesis was rejected. The findings indicated that participative leadership contributes to cultural diversity when consultation is linked to feedback, policy input, rule-making, curriculum inclusion, and student participation. It is recommended that universities establish structured participatory platforms, inclusive curriculum review, transparent feedback systems, and stronger student representation in university governance.

Keywords: participative leadership, cultural diversity, democratic leadership, public universities, Southwest Nigeria, higher education leadership

Introduction

Universities are increasingly expected to serve students and staff from different ethnic, linguistic, religious, gender, social, and national backgrounds (Kolster & van der Wende, 2026; Ward et al., 2025). This diversity can strengthen learning, social interaction, and institutional growth when it is well managed, but the mere presence of different groups does not automatically create inclusion (Corres-Medrano et al., 2026; Morgan et al., 2025). For this reason, cultural diversity in this article is understood as a lived university experience that is shaped by teaching, policy, participation, and campus relationships, rather than as a simple count of different groups on campus (Ramdas et al., 2025; Zuo, 2025).

This understanding makes leadership central to cultural diversity in higher education. University leaders influence how policies are made, how resources are distributed, how students and staff relate, and how different groups are represented in institutional life (Cumar et al., 2025; Idahosa & Love, 2025; Montgomery & Black, 2025; Ward et al., 2025). Diversity work should not stop at admission figures, public statements, or occasional cultural events (Bhowmik et al., 2026; Corres-Medrano et al., 2026). Inclusion requires leadership practices that give people a voice, support, and the opportunity to participate.

Globally, higher education is being reshaped by internationalisation, migration, student mobility, digital learning, and cross-border collaboration (Kolster & van der

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Wende, 2026; Zuo, 2025). Heinz et al. (2025) linked teacher diversity to inclusive learning environments, while Misiaszek (2025) argued that teaching in higher education should make space for diverse voices and pedagogical approaches. The African higher education context provides a stronger reason to study leadership and cultural diversity together: African universities often operate within colonial histories, unequal resource allocation, language divisions, ethnic tensions, and political influence on institutional leadership (Cumar et al., 2025; Idahosa & Love, 2025). Cumar et al. (2025) described leadership as a form of cultural architecture because leadership practices shape the institutional culture in which students and staff relate. This means that diversity in African universities cannot be understood only through global diversity debates, since local governance, institutional culture, and leadership behaviour also affect how inclusion is experienced (Bhowmik et al., 2026; Cumar et al., 2025).

Nigeria provides an important setting for this study because the country is deeply plural in ethnicity, language, religion, region, and social class (Obiagu et al., 2025). Nigerian public universities admit students from different states and communities, but university life may still be affected by state of origin, dominant language, religious identity, public-sector bureaucracy, and informal networks (Adewale & Ghavifekr, 2025; Ukeje et al., 2025). This makes it necessary to examine how leadership can help move cultural diversity from mere presence to practical inclusion in university life (Montgomery & Black, 2025; Ward et al., 2025).

Southwest Nigeria is a useful context for the study because the region contains six states and several public universities that receive students from different parts of Nigeria. Although Yoruba culture is dominant in the region, public universities in the zone are not culturally uniform because students come from different ethnic, religious, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds. Students from minority cultural backgrounds may still feel excluded when institutional policies, language practices, student leadership structures, or curriculum materials fail to reflect diverse perspectives (Morgan et al., 2025; Obiagu et al., 2025). Cultural diversity in this context requires structures that help different groups to interact, participate, and feel recognised within the institution.

Participative leadership is relevant to this problem because it is the leadership style that deals most directly with voice, consultation, feedback, and involvement in decision-making (Ashikali & Groeneveld, 2022; Riza et al., 2025). Although recent studies have advanced the understanding of diversity and inclusion in higher education, empirical evidence on the influence of participative leadership on cultural diversity remains limited, particularly in public universities in Southwest Nigeria (Bhowmik et al., 2026; Cumar et al., 2025; Morgan et al., 2025). Existing research has largely adopted conceptual, qualitative, or review-based approaches or has examined broader inclusion systems rather than statistically testing this relationship (Corres-Medrano et al., 2026; Montgomery & Black, 2025). This study addresses these contextual and methodological gaps by examining whether participative leadership influences cultural diversity among final-year students in selected public universities in Southwest Nigeria. This focus is important because cultural diversity in a university is shown not only by who is present on campus,

but also by how students interact despite differences, how curriculum materials reflect diverse experiences, and how students from different backgrounds participate in academic and social life.

Specifically, the study addressed the following research question: To what extent do students' perceived participative leadership practices predict their perceived cultural diversity experience in selected public universities in Southwest Nigeria? The following null hypothesis was tested (H_{01}): Participative leadership has no significant influence on cultural diversity among final-year students in selected public universities in Southwest Nigeria.

Literature Review

Participative Leadership

Participative leadership is commonly conceptualised as a leadership practice in which leaders involve followers, employees, students, or other stakeholders in decisions and institutional processes that affect them (Ashikali & Groeneveld, 2022; Riza et al., 2025). It is closely related to democratic leadership because both concepts emphasise participation, consultation, voice, shared responsibility, and collective ownership of decisions (Dike & Madubueze, 2019; Raupu et al., 2021; Riza et al., 2025). Participative leadership does not remove the formal authority of leaders, but it requires leaders to create room for members' ideas, concerns, and experiences to influence decisions before they are finalised (Gastil, 1994; Ashikali & Groeneveld, 2022). Thus, participative leadership draws heavily from democratic leadership theory, which emphasises shared responsibility, member empowerment, and deliberative decision-making (Lewin et al., 1939; Gastil, 1994).

Recent studies conceptualise participative leadership as a measurable leadership behaviour associated with organisational culture, inclusion, innovation, and stakeholder engagement in higher education and public organisations (Ashikali & Groeneveld, 2022; Riza et al., 2025; Ukeje et al., 2025). In higher education, participative leadership is important because universities are made up of students, lecturers, administrators, and other stakeholders who experience policies and institutional practices from different positions (Riza et al., 2025; Ukeje et al., 2025). When these groups are excluded from institutional decision-making, university policies may remain formally organised but fail to respond to the lived experiences of diverse students and staff (Adewale & Ghavifekr, 2025; Corres-Medrano et al., 2026).

Empirical evidence from higher education consistently supports the value of participative leadership for nurturing inclusive institutional environments. Studies conducted in university settings have associated participative leadership with improved collegiality, collaboration, organisational culture, commitment, innovation, and inclusive practices (Vitous et al., 2019; Selzer & Foley, 2018; Riza et al., 2025; Cumar et al., 2025). However, much of this evidence has focused on staff, organisational performance, or institutional culture rather than students' experiences of cultural diversity. Although evidence from Nigerian universities is emerging, it has largely focused on governance and institutional change rather than students' experiences of cultural diversity. For

example, Adewale and Ghavifekr (2025) showed that political, bureaucratic, and resource constraints influence leadership practices in Nigerian universities, while Ukeje et al. (2025) argued that stakeholder participation is most effective when institutional structures enable meaningful involvement in governance. However, neither study examined the influence of participative leadership on students' perceptions of cultural diversity.

In this study, participative leadership is operationalised through stakeholder involvement, followers' input, and consultative decision-making, all of which are widely recognised in previous studies (Ashikali & Groeneveld, 2022; Bhatti et al., 2021; Haryanto et al., 2022; Riza et al., 2025). Stakeholder involvement refers to the inclusion of students, staff, faculty members, administrators, and other relevant groups in institutional processes that affect university life (Ashikali & Groeneveld, 2022; Corres-Medrano et al., 2026; Ukeje et al., 2025; Ward et al., 2025). Followers' input refers to the extent to which leaders listen to the views, concerns, and suggestions of those who are affected by institutional decisions (Ashikali & Groeneveld, 2022; Riza et al., 2025; Ukeje et al., 2025). The same policy may affect students from different ethnic, religious, linguistic, or socio-economic backgrounds in different ways (Corres-Medrano et al., 2026; Ward et al., 2025). Consultative decision-making is a leadership process in which leaders seek feedback, consider different views, and incorporate stakeholder contributions before making final decisions (Gastil, 1994; Haryanto et al., 2022). This indicator goes beyond informal discussion because it requires consultation to become part of an institution's decision-making practice (Caillier, 2020; Ukeje et al., 2025).

Cultural Diversity

Cultural diversity has been conceptualised as the presence of people from different cultural backgrounds within the same institution, encompassing differences in values, beliefs, language, religion, ethnicity, gender, nationality, and social experience (Cherian et al., 2020; Cox, 1993; Lin, 2020). In higher education, cultural diversity goes beyond the physical presence of different groups because it also concerns how students interact, participate, learn, and feel recognised within the university (Corres-Medrano et al., 2026; Ward et al., 2025).

Earlier studies frequently examined cultural diversity through national cultural dimensions such as power distance and collectivism (Escandon-Barbosa et al., 2021; Hofstede et al., 2010; Northouse, 2021), but recent higher education research has shifted towards students' lived experiences of inclusion and participation. Cultural diversity is increasingly being conceptualised in terms of student interaction, curriculum inclusivity, belonging, and participation (Corres-Medrano et al., 2026; Ramdas et al., 2025; Ward et al., 2025). Notably, emphasis is on students' lived experiences of inclusion rather than mere demographic representation.

Empirical evidence from higher education shows that cultural diversity is strengthened not simply by enrolling students from different backgrounds, but by creating inclusive learning environments that promote intercultural interaction, curriculum inclusivity, belonging, and active participation. Studies have linked positive diversity outcomes with students' sense of belonging, equitable learning experiences, multicultural

curriculum, and meaningful engagement in institutional life (Corres-Medrano et al., 2026; Ramdas et al., 2025; Ward et al., 2025). However, evidence from Nigerian universities remains limited, particularly regarding students' perceptions of cultural diversity as an outcome of leadership practices.

In this study, cultural diversity is conceptualised through three indicators: intercultural competence, curriculum diversity, and student participation. Intercultural competence refers to students' ability to communicate, relate to, adapt to, and work effectively with people from different cultural backgrounds (André-Das Dores et al., 2025; Jin & Sercu, 2025; Yamada, 2025). This indicator is important because culturally diverse universities may still experience tension if students lack the ability to engage respectfully across cultural differences (André-Das Dores et al., 2025; Ward et al., 2025; Zuo, 2025).

Curriculum diversity refers to the extent to which teaching content, learning materials, classroom examples, assessment practices, and pedagogical approaches reflect different cultural perspectives (Akintayo et al., 2024; Misiaszek, 2025; Ramdas et al., 2025). Recent higher education literature often discusses this idea as curriculum inclusivity, because the concern is not only whether different cultures are mentioned but also whether students from different backgrounds can see their identities, histories, communities, and experiences represented in the learning process (Misiaszek, 2025; Ramdas et al., 2025). This indicator is important because students may be physically present in the university but still feel excluded when curriculum content does not recognise their cultural realities (Obiagu et al., 2025; Ramdas et al., 2025). In Nigerian universities, curriculum diversity is also relevant because multicultural education continues to face challenges in content, attitudes, practice, and implementation (Obiagu et al., 2025).

Student participation refers to the active involvement of students from different cultural backgrounds in academic, social, cultural, leadership, and institutional activities (Corres-Medrano et al., 2026; Sinaga, 2024). It includes participation in classroom discussions, student leadership, departmental activities, student associations, cultural events, group work, and decision-making structures (Corres-Medrano et al., 2026; Sinaga, 2024). Student participation is important because cultural diversity becomes meaningful when students from different backgrounds are not only admitted into the university but also visible in campus life (Corres-Medrano et al., 2026; Ward et al., 2025). If some groups are present but silent, excluded from leadership, or absent from major student activities, cultural diversity remains weak in practice (Corres-Medrano et al., 2026; Morgan et al., 2025).

Overall, existing studies suggest that participative leadership contributes to inclusive institutional environments, while cultural diversity is strengthened through equitable participation, intercultural engagement, and inclusive institutional practices. However, most empirical evidence originates outside Nigeria, focuses on staff rather than students, or examines organisational outcomes instead of students' perceptions of cultural diversity. Although Nigerian studies have highlighted the importance of participatory governance and the contextual challenges affecting university leadership, limited quantitative evidence exists on whether participative leadership influences cultural diversity among students in

public universities. This gap provides the rationale for the present study.

Theoretical Framework

Democratic Leadership Theory

Democratic leadership theory was developed by Lewin, Lippitt, and White, whose studies distinguished democratic leadership from autocratic and laissez-faire leadership (Lewin et al., 1939). Their work associated democratic leadership with group participation, shared decision-making, open discussion, and a less authoritarian leadership climate. In this view, leadership is not only the exercise of authority by one person, but a process through which members of a group are allowed to contribute to decisions that affect them. These principles provide the conceptual foundation for understanding participative leadership in institutional settings.

Gastil (1994) later strengthened the theory by explaining democratic leadership in terms of three major functions: distributing responsibility, empowering members, and aiding group deliberation. Distributing responsibility means that leadership tasks and institutional responsibilities should not be concentrated only in the hands of formal leaders. Empowering members means that leaders should give followers the opportunity, confidence, and support needed to contribute meaningfully to institutional decisions. Aiding group deliberation means that leaders should create room for discussion, guide the decision-making process, and ensure that different voices are heard before decisions are made. Together, these functions explain how participative leadership is expressed through stakeholder involvement, followers' input, and consultative decision-making.

In the present study, democratic leadership theory is the primary theoretical lens used to explain how participative leadership may influence cultural diversity in universities. Universities are made up of students, lecturers, administrators, committees, and other stakeholders who experience campus life from different positions. In culturally diverse universities, these groups may also differ by ethnicity, religion, language, gender, region, social class, and institutional experience. When leaders consult these groups, listen to their input, and use their feedback, decisions about teaching, welfare, rules, curriculum, representation, and student affairs can become more inclusive (Ashikali & Groeneveld, 2022; Riza et al., 2025; Ukeje et al., 2025). Accordingly, participative leadership is operationalised in this study through stakeholder involvement, followers' input, and consultative decision-making.

The theory also connects with the dependent variable, cultural diversity. Cultural diversity in this study is not treated only as the presence of students from different backgrounds. It is treated as the extent to which students interact across cultural differences, see diverse perspectives reflected in the curriculum, and participate meaningfully in academic, social, and leadership activities. Democratic leadership theory supports this view because participation, empowerment, and deliberation can create conditions where different cultural groups are heard, represented, and included in institutional life. Therefore, participative leadership is expected to support intercultural competence, curriculum inclusivity, and student participation.

However, the theory also allows the effect of participative leadership on cultural diversity to be modest. This is because cultural diversity does not depend on leadership voice alone. It is also shaped by curriculum content, institutional culture, language, religion, ethnicity, resources, student affairs structures, feedback systems, and the wider governance environment. A leader may consult students and staff, but cultural diversity may remain weak if consultation is not linked to curriculum review, fair representation, transparent feedback, and policy implementation. This explains why participative leadership may have a statistically significant but limited influence on cultural diversity.

Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory was developed mainly through the works of Tajfel and Turner (1979), who argued that people often understand themselves and others through group membership. The theory explains that individuals classify themselves and others into social groups, identify with those groups, and may compare their group with other groups. In a university setting, students may interpret institutional life through ethnic, religious, linguistic, regional, gender, or social identities. These identities may influence how they respond to policies, curriculum content, student leadership, representation, and student affairs decisions.

Social identity theory is relevant to the present study because cultural diversity in universities involves relationships among different groups. When students feel their group is ignored, misrepresented, or excluded, they may experience a sense of not belonging and limited participation. Where they feel heard, respected, and represented, they are more likely to participate in academic and social life. Participative leadership may therefore reduce identity distance by giving different groups an opportunity to express their views, contribute to decisions, and see their concerns reflected in institutional action (Morgan et al., 2025; Zare & Pathania, 2025). This aligns with the argument that leadership practices can influence how students from different cultural groups experience diversity.

Together, democratic leadership theory and social identity theory provide a complementary framework for the present study. Democratic leadership theory explains how participative leadership creates opportunities for consultation, empowerment, and shared decision-making, while social identity theory explains how students from different cultural groups interpret these leadership practices and experience inclusion within the university environment. Together, the theories support the proposition that participative leadership may enhance cultural diversity by promoting intercultural competence, curriculum inclusivity, and student participation.

Conceptual Framework

For this study, participative leadership is operationalised through stakeholder involvement, followers' input, and consultative decision-making, while cultural diversity is operationalised through intercultural competence, curriculum inclusivity, and student participation (Ramdas et al., 2025; Riza et al., 2025; Ward et al., 2025; Zuo, 2025). Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework illustrating this hypothesised relationship between participative leadership and cultural diversity.

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework



The framework proposes a direct relationship between participative leadership and cultural diversity. It assumes that leadership practices characterised by stakeholder involvement, followers' input, and consultative decision-making enhance students' perceptions of intercultural competence, curriculum inclusivity, and student participation in selected public universities in Southwest Nigeria. This relationship forms the basis of the study hypothesis and subsequent empirical analysis.

Methodology

A quantitative survey design was used to examine whether students' perceptions of participative leadership predicted their perceptions of cultural diversity. Participative leadership was treated as the independent variable, while cultural diversity was treated as the dependent variable. The design was appropriate because it enabled the measurement of structured responses and hypothesis testing.

The study area was Southwest Nigeria. The zone consists of six states: Ekiti, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Osun, and Oyo. A subset of six public universities was selected, with one university from each state to ensure geographical spread across the geopolitical zone. The selected universities were Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti; Federal University of Agriculture, Abeokuta; Federal University of Technology, Akure; Ladoké Akintola University of Technology, Ogbomoso; University of Lagos; and Osun State University, Osogbo.

The target population consisted of final-year undergraduate students in the six selected public universities. Final-year students were considered suitable because they had spent several years in the university environment and were better positioned to assess leadership practices, curriculum exposure, intercultural relations, and student participation. Students in lower levels, postgraduate students, private university students, and students outside the selected institutions were excluded from the quantitative sample.

Stratified random sampling was used to select students across different departments in the six universities. The technique was suitable because it enabled the selection of students from different institutional and departmental strata while maintaining representation within the selected public universities (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A total of 618 questionnaires were distributed using Yamane's (1967) sample size approach, and 592 valid responses were returned, giving a response rate of 95.79%.

Data were collected using printed structured questionnaires distributed by research assistants. Participative leadership was measured with 10 items, while cultural diversity was measured with 15 items covering intercultural competence, curriculum inclusivity, and student participation. Responses were measured

on a four-point Likert scale, where 4 = strongly agree, 3 = agree, 2 = disagree, and 1 = strongly disagree.

Content validity was established through expert review, while a pilot study involving 98 final-year students at Obafemi Awolowo University, which was not part of the main sample, supported instrument refinement. Construct validity was assessed using exploratory factor analysis, and reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha coefficients. The reliability coefficients were .748 for participative leadership and .865 for cultural diversity. These values indicated acceptable internal consistency.

Data were analysed using descriptive statistics and ordinal logistic regression. Descriptive statistics summarised item means and standard deviations for participative leadership and cultural diversity. Ordinal logistic regression was used to test the null hypothesis because the dependent variable was treated as an ordered outcome. The logit link function was used, and Level 4 served as the reference category in the parameter estimates. Before interpreting the regression result, the Test of Parallel Lines and multicollinearity statistics were checked.

Ethical procedures were observed during the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, participation was voluntary, and responses were kept confidential. The findings were reported in aggregate form so that individual respondents were not personally identified.

Results

Table 1 presents the distribution of respondents across the six selected public universities. It also shows the ownership of each institution and the response rate achieved during data collection.

Table 1
Selected Universities, Ownership, and Respondent Distribution

University	State	Ownership	Actual respondents	Response rate
Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti	Ekiti	State	97	93.27%
Federal University of Agriculture, Abeokuta	Ogun	Federal	98	95.15%
Federal University of Technology, Akure	Ondo	Federal	102	98.08%
Ladoké Akintola University of Technology, Ogbomoso	Oyo	State	103	100.00%
University of Lagos	Lagos	Federal	101	97.12%
Osun State University, Osogbo	Osun	State	91	91.00%
Total	South-west Nigeria	Federal and state	592	95.79%

Note. One public university was selected from each Southwest Nigerian state to ensure geographical spread.

Before testing the study hypothesis, the internal consistency of the measurement scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. Table 2 presents the reliability coefficients for the main study constructs.

Table 2
Reliability of the Main Study Constructs

Construct	Number of items	Cronbach's alpha	Interpretation
Participative leadership	10	.748	Acceptable internal consistency
Cultural diversity	15	.865	Strong internal consistency

Note. The .70 threshold was used as the minimum acceptable benchmark for internal consistency.

Diagnostic Tests for Ordinal Logistic Regression

Diagnostic tests were conducted before the ordinal logistic regression result was interpreted. The proportional odds assumption was met for the participative leadership model, and the multicollinearity values were within acceptable limits, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3
Diagnostic Tests for Ordinal Logistic Regression

Diagnostic test	Statistic	Value	Interpretation
Test of Parallel Lines	$\chi^2(2) = 0.860$; $df = 2$; $p = .650$	$p > .05$	Proportional odds assumption met
Tolerance	Participative leadership	.409	Acceptable
Variance Inflation Factor	Participative leadership	2.444	Acceptable

Note. The Test of Parallel Lines result shows that the ordinal logistic regression assumption was satisfied for the participative leadership model.

Descriptive Statistics for Participative Leadership and Cultural Diversity

The findings are presented in two stages. Descriptive statistics summarise students' perceptions of participative leadership and cultural diversity, followed by ordinal logistic regression analysis to test the study hypothesis.

Participative leadership was perceived to be moderately practised ($M = 2.96$, $SD = .9669$). The highest mean was recorded for inclusion in decision-making ($M = 3.48$, $SD = .7215$), while student voice also scored relatively high ($M = 3.24$, $SD = .7260$). Input before policy change recorded a lower mean ($M = 2.63$, $SD = .9193$), while participation in drafting rules and procedures recorded the lowest mean ($M = 2.44$, $SD = .9782$) (see Table 4).

Table 4
Descriptive Statistics for Participative Leadership

No.	Item	Mean	SD
1	Inclusion in decisions	3.48	0.7215
2	Student voice valued	3.24	0.7260
3	Involved in tasks	2.89	1.0054
4	Consensus sought	3.03	0.7375
5	Initiatives accepted	3.04	0.9346
6	Open meetings	2.92	0.9725

7	Input before policy change	2.63	0.9193
8	Different views valued	3.01	0.8917
9	Feedback on suggestions	2.89	0.9483
10	Drafting rules and procedures	2.44	0.9782
	Aggregate score	2.96	0.9669

Note. $N = 592$. Mean values are based on a four-point response scale.

Cultural diversity recorded an aggregate mean of 3.16 with a standard deviation of .7756. The strongest item was the promotion of student clubs and activities that encourage cultural diversity and inclusion ($M = 3.42$, $SD = .7265$). The lowest item was open classroom discussion on cultural diversity and inclusivity ($M = 2.89$, $SD = .8969$), as shown in Table 5.

Table 5
Descriptive Statistics for Cultural Diversity

No.	Item	Mean	SD
1	I feel confident when interacting with students from different cultural backgrounds.	3.28	0.6979
2	I adjust my communication style based on the cultural background of the person I am speaking to.	3.32	0.6924
3	I actively seek opportunities to learn about different cultural traditions and customs.	3.11	0.7502
4	I find it easy to adapt to new cultural environments within the university.	2.96	0.8247
5	I try to understand the perspectives of people from different cultures before making decisions.	3.36	0.6434
6	Academic content and teaching practices reflect diverse cultural perspectives.	3.07	0.8917
7	My university curriculum includes topics that reflect diverse cultural perspectives.	3.28	0.8228
8	My courses include materials written by scholars from different cultural backgrounds.	2.97	0.8170
9	My professors encourage open discussions on cultural diversity and inclusivity.	2.89	0.8969
10	The course materials I use challenge stereotypes and promote cultural understanding.	2.98	0.7910
11	My university provides learning resources that represent diverse cultural identities.	3.24	0.7679
12	Students from various cultural backgrounds engage in academic, social, and leadership activities.	3.10	0.7526
13	I feel comfortable participating in university events that involve students from different cultural backgrounds.	3.06	0.8488
14	I frequently collaborate with students from different cultures on group projects and assignments.	3.33	0.7098
15	My university promotes student clubs and activities that encourage cultural diversity and inclusion.	3.42	0.7265
	Aggregate score	3.16	0.7756

Note. $N = 592$.

Hypothesis Testing

The ordinal logistic regression results showed that participative leadership had a statistically significant influence on cultural diversity, $\chi^2(2) = 7.469$, $p = .024$ (see Table 6). The Level 2 category of participative leadership was positive and significant ($B = 0.749$, $p = .028$, 95% *CI* [0.080, 1.418]). However, the Level 3 category was not statistically significant ($B = -0.117$, $p = .487$, 95% *CI* [-0.446, 0.212]).

The explanatory power of the model was very low. The Nagelkerke R^2 value was .015, which means that participative leadership explained only about 1.5% of the variation in cultural diversity. This is far below the level normally considered moderate or strong, since common effect-size benchmarks treat values around .02 as small, .13 as moderate, and .26 as large (Cohen, 1988; Peng et al., 2002).

Table 6
Ordinal Logistic Regression Analysis of Participative Leadership on Cultural Diversity

Model Fit Statistics	Value	df	p
-2 Log Likelihood (Final)	29.129	—	—
$\chi^2(2)$	7.469	2	.024
Pseudo R-Square	Value		
Nagelkerke	.015		
Parameter Estimates	Estimate	p	95% Confidence Interval
Participative = 2	Level 2 = 0.749	.028	[0.080, 1.418]
Participative = 3	Level 3 = -0.117	.487	[-0.446, 0.212]
Reference Category	Level 4	—	—

Discussion

The ordinal logistic regression showed that participative leadership significantly improved the prediction of cultural diversity compared with a model without the predictor. However, its explanatory power was small, indicating that participation is relevant but accounts for only a limited proportion of students' perceptions of cultural diversity. This finding is theoretically and practically important because it indicates that student and staff voice is not only a democratic value but also a measurable leadership practice associated with cultural diversity in public universities (Ashikali & Groeneveld, 2022). Similarly, Riza et al. (2025) reported that participative leadership contributes to institutional outcomes through organisational culture. Thus, participation can shape how people experience their institutions.

The finding extends recent higher education leadership literature by making cultural diversity the outcome variable. Riza et al. (2025) examined performance and commitment, while the present study investigated whether participative leadership predicts intercultural competence, curriculum inclusivity, and student participation. This distinction matters because diversity outcomes concern whether different groups feel recognised, represented, and able to participate in institutional life (Ward et al., 2025; Zuo, 2025). The perspective is also consistent with Ward et al. (2025), who linked multicultural policies and practices with inclusion and

positive student attitudes. Participative leadership may be one route through which multicultural policies are translated into practice because affected groups can report needs, challenge assumptions, and suggest changes before decisions are finalised (Ashikali & Groeneveld, 2022; Ukeje et al., 2025). This finding should nevertheless be interpreted cautiously because the observed effect was small.

The small effect size can be explained by the descriptive pattern. Students perceived stronger inclusion in general decision-making than in policy input and rule drafting. This suggests that some leaders may be willing to hear students and staff, but less willing or less structurally able to involve them in formal governance processes. Montgomery and Black (2025) argued that higher education transformation requires system-level work, and the present findings are consistent with that perspective because cultural diversity is unlikely to improve deeply if participation is not embedded in committees, curriculum review, feedback systems, and accountability structures.

An important feature of the model was that the positive relationship was evident at the moderate level of participative leadership but was not consistent across all levels. The non-linear parameter estimates should therefore be interpreted carefully. This pattern does not prove that higher participation is harmful. It may reflect uneven category distribution, differences in how students interpreted the response scale, or the possibility that participation is effective only when structured and connected to action.

The results have significant curriculum implications. Cultural diversity was stronger in interpersonal engagement and student activities than in curriculum-related items. Misiaszek (2025) emphasised that diversity in teaching requires voices and pedagogical approaches that disturb narrow knowledge patterns. Similarly, Ramdas et al. (2025) argued that equitable learning environments should be designed around students' differences. These studies suggest that participative leadership should extend beyond student affairs to include curriculum review through meaningful student and faculty involvement.

The Nigerian context further explains why participative leadership matters but may not be sufficient on its own. Adewale and Ghavifekr (2025) found that higher education change in Lagos State is constrained by political, social, human, economic, and resource-related factors. Ukeje et al. (2025) argued that stakeholder-driven co-governance can move policy toward action in Nigerian higher education. The present findings align with both positions by showing that participation is statistically significant and that it must move beyond consultation into policy input, rule drafting, and feedback.

The small effect size also suggests that other variables may mediate or strengthen the relationship between participative leadership and cultural diversity. These may include institutional culture, curriculum design, resource availability, language practice, student affairs structures, and the quality of feedback after consultation. Participative leadership should therefore be viewed as one of several factors that shape cultural diversity within universities.

Overall, participative leadership is useful but not sufficient for strengthening cultural diversity. It contributes to cultural diversity by building voice, trust, representation, and shared ownership (Ashikali & Groeneveld, 2022; Ward et al., 2025). However, cultural diversity becomes stronger when participation is supported by inclusive teaching, accessible feedback systems, fair representation, and leadership accountability (Bhowmik et al., 2026; Bussu & Karp, 2026; Montgomery & Black, 2025). The principal contribution of this study is that it provides student-based quantitative evidence from Southwest Nigerian public universities for a relationship that is often discussed in broad terms but less often tested with student data.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Participative leadership was found to be a statistically significant but weak predictor of cultural diversity among final-year students in selected public universities in Southwest Nigeria. Participation contributed to students' perceptions of intercultural competence, curriculum inclusivity, and student participation, but explained only a small proportion of the observed variation. The conclusion is therefore that participative leadership matters, but its impact is connected to institutional practices regarding feedback, curriculum inclusion, student representation, policy consultation, and institutional accountability.

The study enriches higher education leadership literature by providing student-based quantitative evidence that participative leadership is associated with cultural diversity in public universities. It also extends previous work by examining intercultural competence, curriculum inclusivity, and student participation as diversity outcomes.

University leaders should not treat participation as a ceremonial activity. Participation is more effective when it is built into policy review committees, departmental forums, student affairs structures, curriculum review, and feedback systems (Montgomery & Black, 2025; Ukeje et al., 2025). Participation should extend beyond consultation to meaningful engagement in institutional decision-making, with transparent mechanisms for communicating how stakeholder input influences policy and practice.

The findings should be interpreted in light of several limitations. The study focused on final-year students in six public universities in Southwest Nigeria and relied on cross-sectional self-reported data. Further studies should examine other factors that may explain why the effect size of participative leadership was small. These factors may include institutional culture, governance structure, curriculum design, student belonging, faculty attitude, resource availability, and student affairs practices. Such studies may also compare public and private universities or extend the study to other Nigerian geopolitical zones.

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