Institutional Empowerment Strategies for Academic Service Delivery Sustainability in Nigerian Private Universities

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Every modern organization particularly in the private sector that desires sustainability must ensure effective and efficient service delivery. It is also the general belief that the private sector led economy is usually more efficient and sustainable given considerate government support in terms of enabling laws and infrastructure. The Nigerian university system currently has 111 private, 49 federal and 57 state approved universities by the National Universities Commission (NUC). Therefore, one would naturally expect the private universities in Nigeria to offer the best in terms of attaining the university goals of effective teaching and learning, multi-disciplinary insightful researches towards providing potent solutions to national woes as well as all inclusive and impactful community service delivery. However, the current reality does not reflect expected outcomes from private universities despite outnumbering the public universities in Nigeria. No university in Nigeria was among the best Ten (10) in Africa nor among the best Three Hundred (300) globally in the 2022 rating of universities across the globe. This paper used qualitative approach to identifying and finding solutions to problems bedeviling attainment of quality service delivery in private universities in Nigeria. The paper also suggested measures through which this disheartening service gap could be minimized or eliminated through enhanced institutional supports to academic workforce in this educational subsystem.

Keywords: Institutional Empowerment Strategies, Academic Service Delivery Sustainability, Nigerian Private Universities

Word count: 212

Introduction

The place of employees' service delivery in the attainment of organization goals and objectives cannot be underplayed, this is because the expected quality of performance of staff within an

organization must be in line with the aims and objectives of such an organization; otherwise, the achievement of organization aims and objectives may be jeopardized. Service delivery is basically and fundamentally concerned with the end product of the combination of all the inputs made in a given job. It is an extent to which an individual, unit or department of an organization discharges its assigned or statutory responsibilities, and it is a means by which an organization evaluates attaining set goals or task assigned. The spate of service delivery could therefore be determined by the performance of employees' in achieving the organizational goals and satisfying its customers effectively and efficiently. It is a continuous cyclic process for developing and delivering userfocused services. It is cyclic because feedbacks from the clients being served are always good inputs towards improving the current service delivery level. In fact, no organization could be sustainable if the level of service delivery is deteriorating, static or not continuously being improved upon. Therefore, every modern organization (including the educational institutions) should endeavour to continually review its activities at certain intervals if the preset aims are being achieved as attested to by verifiable service delivery indicators.

The main goal of educational institutions at all levels is to optimize educational services for stakeholders' satisfaction towards achieving preset learning goals.

The University system being the peak of educational institutions all over the world including Nigeria could not be an exception in effective and efficient service delivery. It is important to note that; service delivery could be traceable to two broad personnel categories in the University system vis a vis academic and non-academic groups (Abosede, 2013). However, this study covers the academic personnel category only being the group whose output is the main focus of measuring Ivory Tower's contributions to national development.

Nigeria as the assumed giant of Africa currently has no university rated as the first in the continent neither does it have any one rated among the first 300 globally. If the nation's public universities have failed to achieve remarkable strides due to administrative inefficiency, poor academic infrastructure, bureaucracy, ethnicity, favouritism, industrial actions and so on, it is expected that private universities should reflect good governance, academic freedom, professionalism, personnel commitment, robust academic infrastructure and most importantly, a highly motivated scholarly human resource for assured academic service delivery optimization (Hogg and Vaughan, 2005). However, private universities students, parents, host communities and other service recipients have shown great concerns regarding reported poor academic service delivery as a result of poor academic content delivery by lecturers, inadequate tutorial classes, delayed supervision of projects, examination questions disclosure beforehand thereby reducing mastery of holistic learning contents as stated in the curriculum, delayed examination results to students/sponsors, low contact hours with lecturers, dearth of modern instructional facilities to mention a few.

The observed poor service delivery in Nigerian private universities could be attributed to many factors based on findings of related studies. However, contributions of an unassuming factor which is failure of private universities' management to adequately empower their work force with necessary tools such as uninterrupted internet facilities, multimedia instructional equipment (personal laptops, multimedia boards, projectors, chips etc),well equipped lecture halls and offices, personnel development as well as employee recognition programmes that could enhance job performance (institutional empowerment) seems to have not been researched intensively especially to determine how it interacts with optimizing service delivery of academic staff in Nigerian universities (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2006). This gap has been identified and instigated the need for this paper.

This paper aims to examine the influence of institutional empowerment strategies on academic service delivery sustainability in Nigerian private universities by examining the parameters for measuring academic service delivery in the university system, evaluating the state of academic service delivery in Nigerian university system and assessing institutional empowerment strategies that can enhance university system sustainability in Nigeria.

Academic Service Delivery Parameters in the University System

Academic staff service delivery in Nigerian universities can be described as the quality of performance expected of an academic staff within the university system. It should be noted that universities exist to advance knowledge and contribute to nation building through teaching, research and community service. This triple mandate makes universities unique with chains of contributions towards societal growth and development. The academic staff's efficiency and effective performance of their cardinal functions are all geared towards the achievement of the visions and missions of the universities. Every profession has its variables of measuring the quality and quantity of service delivery, and this to a very large extent determine the level of the output made or produced. In contemporary Nigerian universities, academic staff service delivery is usually measured through teaching, research and community service. Service delivery of academic staff of many Nigerian universities seems to have become a matter of great concern to stakeholders in recent time because of the low global rating of Nigerian Universities, employers complaints about some graduates job performances and the critical roles academic staff of universities play in the realization of goals, objectives, mission, visions and overall quality of university education via effective teaching, research and community service as mentioned earlier. Universities hence depend largely on the intellectual and creative performance of their human resource to realize these goals. Academic staff are to disseminate information to students and this in turn does increase knowledge acquisition both for themselves and the students they teach (Upev, Chorun & Idachaba, 2015). This process of teaching and learning leads to the production of quality graduates for manpower development. Likewise, the quest for new discoveries, innovations and inventories

(research) do help project or enhance the university standard. It is therefore imperative for university management to ensure that its academic personnel are well empowered for a progressive improvement in their daily deliverables. Despite the essentiality of university human resource and daily performance of same over time, there seems to be a major decline in the quality-of-service delivery of the Ivory Tower in Nigeria in terms of teaching and learning, quality of researches being undertaken and visible impacts of community service on the developmental strides of our nation. Stakeholders have shown tremendous concerns about the deplorable state of our university system as compared to other developing nations and that of western giants. The situation is so despicable to the extent that, university education is now being seen as a show of class and celebration of certificates rather than having invaluable impacts by providing sustainable solutions to the developmental challenges of our immediate environment and that of the international community. Most public and private employers of labour seem to have lost confidence in the quality of graduates of Nigerian universities as they are perceived to be largely defective in learning excellence and character. There is a kind of mix- match between Nigerian universities graduates and labour market requirements (Adelekan, 2018). This may not be totally divorced from assumed defective curriculum, poor teaching and research going on in many Nigerian universities due to the perceived failure of the system, which bothers on poor funding of the university system that had invariably degenerated to poor infrastructure provision in many Nigerians universities over the years. Apart from the perceived failure in teaching and research activities in many Nigerian universities, community service which is the third area of service delivery of academic staff appear to have been totally neglected by many Nigerian universities. It seems there is no cordial relationship between town and gown any more. How universities fulfill their corporate social responsibilities to their host communities could also determine the extent of their service delivery. This aspect of university service delivery seems to have become totally passive or gone comatose. Things appear so bad for this third function to the extent that academic staff for instance only have their promotions in many Nigerian universities based mainly on teaching experience and research productivity. Community service impact has never been an important part of staff promotion criteria perhaps the reason for neglect of this very important function and this is one of the veritable goals of the university system. In the light of the aforementioned, research, teaching and community service are considered as true measurement for academic staff service delivery in Nigerian universities (Abiodun-Oyebanji, and Adekola, 2014).

Teaching is the process of attending to people's needs, experiences and feelings and intervening so that they learn particular things and go beyond the given. It is universally recognized that teaching is one of the measures of quality service delivery in Nigerian institutions of higher learning especially, the university system in Nigeria.

Similarly, the importance of education as a weapon against ignorance, conflict, disease and poverty demands quality in teaching. Higher education is a fundamental instrument for the

construction of knowledge and development of human capitals all over the world. It is the facilitator, the bed rock, the power house and the driving force for the strong socioeconomic, political, cultural and industrial development of a nation.

There is a general agitation that owing to poor teaching, the quality of education in Nigerian tertiary institutions in recent years has reduced. This syndrome to a large extent, may not be unconnected to inadequate incentives, poor equipped education system in an increasingly hostile working environment, inadequate social recognition and delay in payment of teachers' salaries among others. This vicious circle contributes to the lowering status of education in the universities especially in the achievement of quality service delivery and even as the trend impacts on the economy negatively (Adelekan, 2018).In the same vein, it was observed that graduates from universities in Nigeria seems to lacks requisite competencies for optimal practical performance to the expectations and satisfaction of their employers. Also, there is continuous public discussions frequently focus on decline in standard of teaching in Nigerian universities. Again, Students' outcomes from these higher institutions of learning do not match the government and parental investment The National Policy on Education (NPE) (2004).Stakeholders are concerned about why the system is turning out graduates with poor background and lack requisite skills, all of which has been attributed to poor teaching methods employed by lecturers' and the non-chalant attitude towards research innovations (Adelakun, 2018). The National Policy of Education states that "No Education system can rise above the quality of the teachers in the system (Elumah, Shobayo& Olaniyi, 2018). Hence, the need to adequately empower academic personnel of universities for efficient and effective service delivery. Another factor of academic staff service delivery is research which refers to the activities related to the acquisition of basic knowledge which can be designed to solve specific problems that are strategic to advancement of human existence. The National Policy on Education (NPE), the National Policy on Science and Technology (NPST) and other related policy documents have placed emphasis on research as an integral part of national development (Adelakun 2013). The university system which is regarded as the pinnacle of higher education in Nigeria is saddled with the responsibility of undertaking research. Some scholars have highlighted that, there are presumptions of very weak research culture in Nigerian universities. It was further stated that several academics are known to have showcased the products of their researches in the international intellectual scene but the bulk of these studies were said to be conceived for publications, career advancement and intellectual prestige of the individual researchers rather than social relevance and providing solutions to varying developmental challenges of their immediate environment and beyond.

Nigerian universities need to collaborate in research both domestically and internationally, but lack of facilities for collaborative research remains one of the greatest constraints The National Policy on

Education (NPE) (2004)

Admittedly, poor motivation, poor and irregular funding, obsolete research facilities, inadequacy of qualified research personnel, poor availability or accessibility to reliable data, lack of research focus, poor linkage between researchers and the industrial sector and lately, insecurity are yawning gaps in research advancement in Nigeria (Krauss &Turiman, 2018). These constraints constitute serious limitations to research capacity and research capability of Nigerian universities as compared to their counterparts abroad. Similarly, research in universities in Nigeria is routinely funded through the relevant supervisory bodies namely, the National Universities Commission (NUC), the National Board for Technical Education (NBTE), National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE), Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund), Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and Multilateral Agencies. The funding of research in these institutions has been generally poor and irregular. However, the federal institutions of higher learning in Nigeria seem to be better funded and more autonomous than the state government and privately owned institutions. All these are likely contributors to observed poor service delivery which is the concern of this study.

Community service is the third unique responsibility of an academic which refers to rendering selfless service to the larger society and it is a concept applied in different context by practitioners. There are several definitions and interpretations of this concept in the literature, it is important to first understand the term community and then community service. Communities refer to those specific, local, collective interest groups that participate, or could potentially participate, in the community service activities of a higher education institution (Inuwa & Yusof 2014). In the above definition, the term community is seen as made up of local groups which may be the entire community or a subgroup within a community. In this study, the term communities represent the immediate environment in which the university is located which may be urban or rural locations. Community service therefore is defined as initiatives and processes through which the expertise of the institution in the areas of teaching and research are applied to address issues relevant to its community (Ifedili&Ifedili, 2015). Community service as a strategy in developing career in academia has been undervalued in comparison to research and teaching and is not being rewarded appropriately (Wang, Yae and Zheng, 2016). Higher education often perceives research, teaching and community service outreach as separate elements of the academic continuum because community service is perceived as additional activities engaged by academics that contribute positively to the community wellbeing (Inuwa & Yusof 2014). Just like research and teaching activities that university academics engage in, community service has its own challenging attributes. Research and teaching in higher education have been traditionally prioritized as the major agenda and determinant for promotion of faculty members. This is because little attention is given to community service (Krauss &Turiman, 2018). It was noted that, while some university academics that are potentially engaged, perceive community service as a means of career development, others perceive it as irrelevant to their job performance. They also do not perceive it

as an approach that can enhance their understanding of scholarship; neither do they perceive it as a legitimate approach which may be suitable for their research.

Since inception, university education in Nigeria serves as mechanism for national development. Meanwhile, teaching and research functions of university are expected to serve as a guide to the production of high-level manpower and development of national awareness. Other functions include: dissemination of existing and new information, rendering of services to the community and being a storehouse of knowledge (O.K. Adelekan, 2017). Notwithstanding, there has been an unlimited importance attached to universities globally, and in spite of this, universities do not often utilize their full capacity of general human and societal development. This can be seen in the Nigerian society reluctance attitude to university services and approaches of university community to the larger society. The two "university and community" do not critically link their services and issues of development and research to community service (Ayeni, Jaiyeoba& Atanda, 2018).

In addition to exploring university education function for economic, social and moral development of the immediate and larger community (Adelakun, 2017); if social and educational circumstances are made conducive to faculty members' participation in community service practice, they will have the potential to bridge service gap (Bello, 2017). Even though Nigeria has the largest universities in the Sub-Sahara Africa the documentary evidence of university and faculty members community service outreach is still lacking (Imran, Ahmad, Nisar & Ahmad 2015). Despite the fact that universities were establish with the intention to contribute richly to the human resource, sociocultural and community development of the Nigerian states, unfortunately, the series of academic activities such as research, teaching, community service being carried out in these universities are not measuring up with the public expectations (Hammed, 2014). In other words, these universities are performing below average standard. This development appears very frustrating when viewed against the backdrop that Nigeria once served as the nucleus of university education in the West-African subregion.

Knowledge creation and sharing through university community service outreach has been internationally recognized as a tool for national development, and Nigeria among developing country rightly share in this view. Regrettably, inadequate access to research grants/funds for faculty members participation in community service initiatives in Nigeria, reveals one of the reasons why most universities in Nigeria are having problem to be ranked among top best institutions of higher learning when compared with their counterparts globally (Adekalu, 2018).

Optimizing University Academic Service Delivery through Institutional Empowerment Strategies

Optimization refers to the capacity to perform assigned duties effectively by putting one's best (Fafunwa, 2006). Therefore, optimization of university academic service delivery means a situation

whereby, there are concerted and deliberate efforts by handlers of academic responsibilities in universities at ensuring that every aspect of teaching-learning processes, research and community service is dutifully carried out towards achieving efficiency, higher productivity and performance for customers' satisfaction.

Institutional empowerment is an important tool for achieving effective service deliver in Nigerian universities. It refers to specific and well articulated efforts of the internal management of universities to enhance the skills, knowledge base and professionalism of members of staff in order to give their best and render enhanced productivity to the establishment and relevant stakeholders (students, parents, government and the society). Institutional empowerment could be in form of conditions or motivational strategies created in the work place by the management to enhanced job performance. There are several means or strategies of empowering personnel but this paper will take cognizance of personnel development programmes and employee recognition as mechanisms that could improve employees' productivity and effective service delivery by extension.

Employee empowerment by employers means freeing personnel's internal forces as well as providing platforms and creating opportunities for the talents, abilities, and competencies of the workforce as well as assurance of sustained stay or relative longevity in their current employment The National Policy on Education (NPE) (2004). Some scholars reported that, when organizations want to increase the quality, efficiency and productivity of their workforce, they struggle more to strengthen empowerment factors or resources at their disposal. This corroborates the saying that 'what you do not have, you cannot give it'. This means that, an employee can only give the best of what he/she is equipped with. In another vein, empowering employees means giving them some level of responsibility and autonomy for making decisions in the organization about specific tasks. This allows for decisions to be made at the operational levels of the company, where employees will address organizational collective concerns in a way to achieve superior service delivery. In this paper, personnel development and employee recognition are considered as indicators of institutional empowerment.

Personnel development is a key aspect of institutional empowerment which states the extent to which the management of universities engages in proactive processes for the overall growth of individual member of staff that could enhance employee productivity as well as attainment of organizational goals. It is one of the most successful methods for enhancing employee productivity and making the best use of their individual and group strengths in order to meet organizational goals (Krauss &Turiman, 2018). It is also important to note that every modern organization desires to have competitive advantage over their competitors and various scholars have come to a consensus that human capital is the most important factor or asset of any organization. Personnel are the single most important factor for business performance (Elumah et al 2018). Therefore, for universities to ensure optimum service delivery to relevant stakeholders, it is not out of place for

its personnel to be adequately empowered and the current perceived drop in service delivery in universities could be as a result of non-challant attitude of administrators of the Ivory tower towards qualitative empowerment of its academic personnel. Coaching, training, empowerment, participation and delegation are also good strategies management can use to develop their personnel capabilities and improve performance (Udoh, 2013).

Employee recognition seems to be another potent tool of institutional empowerment. It has been identified as a powerful motivational tool that helps employees channel their energies toward achieving organizational goals and objectives optimally (Singh, 2007). The attainment of critical roles of universities in today's highly competitive era may be undermined if employees' exceptional contributions are not acknowledged, embraced and recognized to serve as a motivating tool to continuously give their best. Praising employees for their good works in terms of verbal and written commendation, promotion, special privileges such as special parking space or showcasing recipient picture at strategic places on campus, awards, gifts, monetary and other non-monetary rewarding strategies could be effective ways of recognizing employees' efforts in order to exceed benchmark service expectation and perhaps ensure optimized academic service delivery.

Theoretical Intervention – Management by Objective (MBO)

The Management by Objective (MBO) theory was propounded by Peter F. Drucker in his book entitled 'The Practice of Management' in 1954. It is a strategic management planning model aimed at improving job performance by clearly defining organizational goals that are jointly agreed to by management and employees. It is amplified by comparing actual performance with the pre-defined objectives. The broad objectives (aim) of universities are based on optimized service delivery in qualitative teaching and learning, research and community service for the development of selfreliant individuals and the society at large. Therefore, application of this theory by private universities in Nigeria could largely enhance academic service delivery in this sub-system and Nigeria University System by extension. Involvement of academic workforce in setting universities broad objectives would give them sense of belonging and full awareness of the expectations of their service recipients and the high level of service that would bring about desired satisfaction. They can as well do self assessment of themselves regarding services rendered and quickly readjust and take remedial actions within a relatively short period of time before the service gap(s) noticed reflect negatively on the overall deliverables of their immediate faculty or the university as large. There are basically Five (5) steps involved in the MBO Model which reflect high involvement of academic workforce in the end-to-end processes within the university education system. That is, from entry (admission) of students to exit (graduation) from the system. Externalizing the academic workforce by the management in reaching strategic goals of the institutions will do more harm at the implementation stage of achieving the preset desirable outcomes. The five (5) processes are;

defining university broad objectives, translating objectives to employees, monitoring employees' performance, evaluating progress and rewarding achievements.

Management by Objective Processes and Optimizing Academic Service Delivery

Goals Definition	Goals Translation to Employees	Monitor Performance	Evaluate Progress	Reward Achievement

Teaching & Learning

Training & Development

Training & Academic Development

Employee Service

Recognition

Research

Employee Recognition

Delivery

Community Service

Summary and Conclusion

This paper posited that, private universities in Nigeria should be at the front-bunner of ensuring optimization in university education within and beyond our national boundaries. It also reported that using a strategic management planning tool named Management by Objective (MBO) can ensure effective and efficient academic service delivery in this sub-system of our university education. The use of institutional empowerment tools such as personnel development and employee recognition are potent at optimizing academic service delivery in Nigeria's Ivory Towers.

Suggestions

1. Management of private universities in Nigeria should view personnel development as their responsibility being that, academic personnel's output and contributions towards actualizing the university's goals will eventually bring the institution to global reckoning.

2. Private universities should devote more funds to academic personnel training and development as well as provision of functional working tools (laptops, multimedia boards, projectors etc) in order to effectively capture the focal points of their engagement.

3. Community service engagements indices should be incorporated in lecturers' performance appraisal and promotion to create more robust symbiotic partnerships with the society. Community service ambassador recognition awards can also be introduced for deserving academic personnel to encourage others.

4. Annual special awards and competitions should be established for outstanding scholars in the sub-system by the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Registrars of Private Universities in Nigeria (CVCPUN) for global projection and visibility of their success.

5. There should be improved and well-structured benefits, compensation and employee retirement plans in place by private universities to attract best brains globally and for academic staff retention.

6. Private universities should collaborate with international organizations in order to access research grants and also benefit from linkages and exchange programmes that can expose their faculty members to top notch academic service deliverable strategies.

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