The Challenge of Support Staff in Public Universities Nigeria

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Abstract

Public universities are institutions of higher learning that are funded and operated by the government. These universities are usually established to provide affordable and accessible education to the public. The operations of these institutions involve an intricate interconnection of diverse factors, and each component plays a crucial role in determining its overall success and efficiency. The paper examines "the challenge(s) of support staff" whose operational dynamics involves a strong support system, the custodian of university records, safeguarding and maintaining the fundamental elements of the public university system, faced myriads of challenges, which includes heavy workloads, limitations in resources, technological hurdles, and administrative obstacles which hinders their performances and subsequently, the overall effectiveness of academic institutions. Using content analysis, the paper relies on secondary materials to present this data. It is discovered that, despite their critical role in safeguarding the sanctity of records, and providing support services, these categories of staff were most often relegated and seen as second rate instead as complementary. To enhance the performances and remedy the challenge being faced by support staff in public universities in Nigeria, it is recommended that there should be continuous training and retraining, eliminates the feud being experienced against the support staff to encourage mutual working relationship in streamlining administrative processes for efficiency and effectiveness.

Keywords: Support staff, University; Public university.

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1. Introduction

A university is a complex institution that not only provides higher education but also plays a crucial role in knowledge creation, dissemination, and societal transformation. Its academic mission is to provide a structured environment for intellectual growth and skill development, while its research and knowledge creation focus on advancing human understanding. Universities also serve as cultural and social hubs, contributing to economic development, fostering globalization, preserving academic freedom, and promoting lifelong learning. Public universities are integral components of the higher education system in many countries, serving as engines of societal progress. They play a crucial role in shaping the future workforce, fostering innovation, and addressing the educational needs of diverse communities.

In Nigeria, there are considerable number of public universities, each with its own unique challenges and opportunities. The functioning of these public universities is a complex interplay of various factors, with each element contributing significantly to the overall success and effectiveness of these institutions. Among the critical components of these institutions are people who form the backbone of administrative operations, commonly known as support staff. The support staff play a pivotal role in ensuring the smooth functioning of academic, administrative, and regulatory processes in public universities. In other words, the effective management and coordination of these universities necessitate a robust administrative system, and at the heart of this system are the individuals working in the university registries. However, despite their pivotal role, support staff in Nigerian public universities faces myriads of challenges that hinder their performances and, subsequently, the overall effectiveness of academic institutions.

2. Public Universities in Nigeria: An Overview

A university is an institution of higher learning, usually comprising colleges, faculties, departments, and programs; involved in teaching and research in the arts and sciences for graduate and professional schools; and having the authority to confer degrees in various fields of study [1]. A public university is an institution of higher education that is funded and operated by the government. These universities were established to provide affordable and accessible education to the public. Public universities play a crucial role in offering a wide range of academic programs and degrees, conducting research, and contributing to the overall development of society.

In Nigeria, the establishment and evolution of public universities have been influenced by historical, socio-political, and economic factors. Nigeria, as a British colony, was initially influenced by the British education system. The first higher education institution, Yaba Higher College, was established in Lagos in 1934 to provide advanced education in the arts and sciences. The need for higher education institutions became more apparent as Nigeria moved towards independence. This led to the establishment of the University of Ibadan in 1948 as the first university in the country.

Following Nigeria's independence in 1960, there was a growing demand for higher education to meet the needs of the expanding population and the desire for skilled professionals. The 1962 Ashby Commission Report recommended the establishment of more universities to cater to the increasing demand for tertiary education.

Subsequently, several universities were established across different regions of Nigeria. In the 1970s, the Nigerian government implemented a series of reforms aimed at unifying the higher education system. This resulted in the merger of existing universities and the creation of new ones to foster national integration. The government's commitment to expanding access to education led to the establishment of state and federal universities, each contributing to the country's educational landscape. The oil boom in the 1970s provided Nigeria with substantial financial resources. The government invested significantly in various sectors, including education, to enhance infrastructure, faculty development, and research capabilities in public universities.

Public universities are regulated by the National University Commission (NUC). Also, public universities in Nigeria are established by law passed by the legislature either at the federal or state level. There are 116 public universities in Nigeria [2]. The 1979 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria moved the jurisdiction of university education from the exclusive list to the concurrent legislative list. Consequently, this grant states the authority to establish their own universities should they choose to do so [3]. In view of this, the federal and state governments have been establishing universities without adequate funding. Some have argued that the establishment of these public universities is politically motivated. Senators and members of the House of Representatives in Nigeria have proposed bills to advocate for the creation of public universities in their local areas. However, educational experts argue that this move is merely a tactic to gain favor with their constituents [4]. The Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) has expressed its opposition to the introduction of new legislation aimed at establishing additional universities in Nigeria [5]. ASUU questioned the rationale behind the government's push for the establishment of new universities, emphasizing the neglect of the already existing ones, which are currently in a state of disrepair [5].

Public universities in Nigeria face numerous challenges that affect their operations, quality of education, and overall effectiveness. These include inadequate funding, infrastructure decay, overcrowding, staffing issues, industrial actions, and the quality of education. Insufficient funding often leads to inadequate resources for maintaining infrastructure, supporting research activities, and recruiting and retaining qualified faculty. For instance, federal universities in Nigeria receive subventions from the Federal Government, and the allocation is determined by factors such as staff strength, student numbers, and location [6]. However, the amount each university receives varies based on government financial capacity. Protests by the Non-Academic Staff Union (NASU) and the Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities (SSANU) at Ekiti State University highlighted concerns about irregular subvention payments, with leaders alleging a lack of capital votes for the university over a decade [6]. The demonstration underscored challenges in financial support and capital funding for universities, indicating potential financial instability in the higher education sector.

The challenges within the Nigerian public university system are compounded by the pressing issues of overcrowding and insufficient facilities. The exponential growth in student enrollment, driven by a burgeoning demand for higher education, has resulted in overcrowded classrooms and stretched resources. The sheer volume of students often overwhelms existing infrastructure, compromising the quality of the learning environment. Moreover, inadequate facilities, including insufficient lecture halls, laboratories, and library resources, hinder the delivery of quality education. It is evident that the teaching and learning facilities in Nigerian public universities significantly deviate from both international best practices and the minimum

standards set by Nigeria's National Minimum Standard [7]. The staffing landscape further aggravates the problem as the universities grapple with the phenomenon of brain drain, where experienced faculty members migrate to other institutions or countries seeking better opportunities. Additionally, delays in the hiring process contribute to understaffing, placing additional strain on the existing faculty and administrative personnel. The confluence of these factors creates a challenging scenario, underscoring the urgent need for strategic planning, investment in infrastructure, and effective personnel management to address the growing demands on the education system.

Industrial actions, such as strikes by academic and non-academic staff unions, disrupt the academic calendar and contribute to an unstable environment. Issues such as salary arrears, inadequate funding, and disagreements with the government on policy matters often lead to industrial actions. The quality of education is compromised due to a lack of modern teaching methodologies, outdated curriculum, and inadequate facilities for practical learning. This affects the competitiveness of graduates in the job market and the overall reputation of universities. Examination malpractice and academic misconduct, such as plagiarism, undermine the credibility of academic qualifications and the value of the educational experience. Security concerns, such as cultism and kidnappings, also pose a significant threat to the campus environment. For example, certain public universities situated in northern Nigeria have consistently faced ongoing assaults, and numerous incidents have resulted in the loss of lives among students, lecturers, and administrators, with others being abducted. The recurrent attacks on these universities have forced closures, causing disruptions to the regular academic schedule (Monday & Mallo, 2021). Lastly, regional inequality in access to higher education exists across different regions of Nigeria, with some states having a higher concentration of universities, leading to unequal access to higher education.

3. The Role of support Staff in Public Universities in Nigeria

The role of support staff in public universities in Nigeria are fundamental to the efficient administration and functioning of academic and administrative processes. The evolution of their role is rooted in the historical development of higher education in Nigeria, reflecting the dynamic changes and challenges faced by public universities over the years. Registry staff serve as the custodians of academic records, facilitating the entry and progression of students through their educational journey. The admissions process involves several key roles and responsibilities for registry staff. They handle applications, manage entrance examinations and screenings, verify academic credentials, assist in registration, issue student identification cards, maintain student records, manage databases, implement admission policies, and ensure compliance with regulations. Registry staff handle application handling, ensuring completeness and assistance during the initial stages of the admissions process. They also coordinate entrance examinations, interviews, and other screening processes to identify eligible candidates. Student enrollment involves verifying credentials, ensuring compliance with university admission criteria, and assisting in course selection. Registry staff also oversee the issuance of student identification cards, which are crucial for accessing university services and facilities.

Database management is another key duty, with registry staff managing databases that store and organize student information, streamlining enrollment processes, and improving data accuracy. They also ensure the university's compliance with national and international standards related to student enrollment. Student support

and communication is another key role of registry staff. They participate in orientation programs for new students and facilitate communication regarding enrollment procedures, academic deadlines, and any changes in university policies. They also collaborate closely with academic departments to ensure the enrollment process aligns with the curriculum and meets academic standards.

The careful management of academic records forms the backbone of the registry staff's responsibilities. This intricate task involves maintaining a comprehensive repository of each student's academic journey, meticulously documented from the moment of enrollment to the triumphant culmination at graduation. Keeping detailed records of students' academic performance, including grades, course completion, and any disciplinary actions, is essential for assessing progress and determining eligibility for graduation. This function establishes a foundation of transparency and accountability within the academic system. Responding to requests for official transcripts, verifying academic achievements, and issuing transcripts for various purposes, such as job applications or further education, registry staff facilitate the seamless transition of students from university to the broader professional and academic landscape.

As students approach the culmination of their academic journey, registry staff step into the spotlight to plan the grand finale: graduation and certification. This phase involves meticulous planning, verification, and coordination to ensure a memorable and dignified conclusion to the students' university experience. Conducting a comprehensive review of students' academic records, registry staff verify that all requirements for graduation, including completing necessary courses and maintaining specified grade point averages, have been met. This ensures the integrity of the graduation process. Registry staff are the architects behind the organization and coordination of graduation ceremonies. From venue arrangements to issuing invitations and managing logistics, they contribute to the seamless execution of events that celebrate the achievements of graduating students. The issuance of academic certificates, diplomas, or degrees marks the formal recognition of students' completion of their prescribed course of study. Registry staff facilitate this process, officially acknowledging the educational milestones achieved by each graduate.

The role of registry staff in public universities in Nigeria extends beyond administrative functions; it directly influences the human resource landscape of these institutions. Registry staff play a vital role in the recruitment and onboarding of new employees within public universities. This process involves various stages, from the creation of job openings and advertisements to the shortlisting of candidates, conducting interviews, and finalizing employment offers. The registry staff ensures that recruitment procedures adhere to established guidelines, policies, and relevant regulations. Furthermore, they play a crucial role in the orientation and onboarding of new hires. This involves introducing them to the university's culture, policies, and procedures. By facilitating a smooth transition for new employees, registry staff contribute to a positive work environment, fostering a sense of belonging and alignment with the university's mission and values.

The maintenance of accurate and up-to-date employee records is a fundamental responsibility of registry staff in public universities. This includes creating and managing personnel files, documenting employment histories, and keeping track of various employment-related details such as promotions, transfers, and disciplinary actions. The meticulous maintenance of these records ensures compliance with regulatory requirements and serves as a

valuable resource for decision-making within the university administration. Additionally, registry staff contribute to the implementation and management of electronic human resource information systems. These systems streamline record-keeping processes, enhance data accuracy, and provide a comprehensive overview of the university's workforce, facilitating strategic planning and decision-making.

Registry staff are actively involved in designing, coordinating, and implementing training and development initiatives for university employees. This includes organizing workshops, seminars, and training sessions aimed at enhancing the skills, competencies, and professional growth of staff members. The identification of training needs, collaboration with academic departments, and facilitation of both internal and external training programs fall within the purview of registry staff. By promoting continuous learning and development, they contribute to the overall capacity building within the university, ensuring that employees remain abreast of industry trends, technological advancements, and best practices in their respective fields. Furthermore, the registry staff often liaises with external training providers and institutions to offer specialized programs that align with the evolving needs of the university community. This proactive approach to training and development enhances the overall competence and effectiveness of the workforce.

In essence, registry staff serve as the backbone of administrative processes, facilitating a conducive learning environment for students and contributing to the academic success of the institution. By efficiently managing staff recruitment and onboarding processes, meticulously maintaining employee records, and spearheading training and development initiatives, registry staff contribute significantly to the development of a skilled, motivated, and well-functioning workforce within the academic environment. As the custodians of human resource functions, their commitment to excellence plays a pivotal role in the success and sustainability of public universities in Nigeria.

The highest position within the registry staff hierarchy is held by the registrar, who also functions as the secretary to the university's governing council. In other words, the Registrar holds the position of chief administrator of the university and, by statutory mandate, serves as the Secretary to the Council, Senate, Congregation, and Convocation. Indeed, the registrar is a prominent principal officer within the Nigerian public university system, serving as a vital member of the university's leadership team. In essence, the registrar plays a pivotal role in overseeing the university's operations to ensure effectiveness and efficiency. This underscores the registrar's substantial contribution to the seamless functioning of the university and emphasizes their central role in upholding the institution's integrity and reputation. The registrar is anticipated to possess a blend of administrative, managerial, and interpersonal skills.

4. The Challenges of support Staff in Public Universities in Nigeria

A number of registry staff exhibit inefficiencies in their ability to operate effectively and contribute to the attainment of the stated objectives and goals of the university system, particularly within public universities in Nigeria [8]. As an illustration, the examinations and records division within Nigerian public universities has a prolonged history of mishandling student results and the generation of academic transcripts [9]. This operational inefficiency has become so entrenched that foreign universities or organizations attempting to verify a student's

academic standing by sending inquiries to the examinations and records department often do not receive any response [9].

Support staff in public universities in Nigeria face a myriad of challenges that impact their ability to effectively carry out their responsibilities. The challenges posed by workload and resource constraints among registry staff in public universities in Nigeria are multifaceted and significantly impact the effectiveness of their operations. Firstly, the sheer volume and complexity of administrative tasks that registry staff handle on a daily basis contribute to a demanding workload. Processes such as student admissions, records management, and documentation require meticulous attention to detail, accuracy, and timeliness. The multitude of responsibilities can overwhelm registry staff, leading to increased stress levels and the potential for errors in crucial tasks. The consequences of such errors can extend beyond the immediate operational impact, affecting the overall efficiency and reputation of the university.

Secondly, limited human resources further compound the challenges faced by registry staff. Insufficient staffing levels can result in an overburdened workforce where individuals are stretched thin across numerous responsibilities. This not only affects the quality of work but also places undue pressure on staff members, potentially leading to burnout. For instance, the number of qualified support staff in public universities in southeast of Nigeria is inadequate [10]. The shortage of skilled personnel may also hinder the implementation of necessary improvements and innovations, restricting the ability of the registry to adapt to evolving administrative demands.

Moreover, inadequate funding exacerbates these challenges by impeding the ability of public universities to invest in essential resources. The Nigerian government's failure to impartially embrace and apply the 26% funding formula for education, as suggested by UNESCO, has adverse effects on the effectiveness and continuity of higher education[11]. Insufficient financial support may lead to outdated technological infrastructure, hindering the automation of administrative processes that could alleviate the workload. Without modern tools and systems, registry staff may be forced to rely on manual and time-consuming methods, further slowing down operations and increasing the likelihood of errors. Insufficient funding also impacts training opportunities for registry staff. In a rapidly evolving technological landscape, ongoing training is crucial for professionals to stay abreast of industry best practices and advancements. A lack of financial resources dedicated to staff development limits the ability of registry professionals to acquire the necessary skills to navigate modern administrative challenges effectively.

Registry staff in public universities in Nigeria often find themselves grappling with administrative bottlenecks that pose significant challenges to their effective performance. The bureaucratic processes inherent in the administrative framework, coupled with cumbersome workflows, create a web of complexities that hinder the seamless execution of tasks. The lack of streamlined communication channels further exacerbates these challenges, resulting in delays in decision-making and a general slowdown in overall productivity. The adherence to rigid administrative structures adds an additional layer of difficulty, creating barriers to innovation and responsiveness. In such an environment, registry staff may encounter obstacles when attempting to address issues promptly and adapt to changing needs within the university.

The integration of modern technology plays a critical role in optimizing registry operations within Nigerian public universities. However, the seamless adoption of technology in these institutions is often hindered by a range of challenges, creating bottlenecks that impede efficiency and hinder progress. One of the primary obstacles faced by registry staff is the prevalence of outdated or inadequate information systems. Some public universities in Nigeria continue to operate with legacy systems that lack the sophistication required for streamlined and automated processes. These obsolete systems not only slow down routine tasks but also make them more susceptible to errors, leading to inaccuracies in student records, admissions, and other crucial administrative functions. Automation, a cornerstone of efficient registry operations, is often compromised due to the limitations of these outdated systems. Manual intervention becomes necessary, consuming valuable time and human resources. This not only contributes to a slower pace of operations but also increases the likelihood of errors in data entry and retrieval.

Moreover, the rapid evolution of technology in the digital landscape poses a considerable challenge to registry staff. Limited access to training programs on new technologies makes it difficult for staff members to keep pace with the advancements in the field. The absence of comprehensive training programs creates a skill gap, leaving registry staff struggling to adapt to the latest tools and software. The consequences of this technological lag are far-reaching. Public universities in Nigeria may find themselves trailing behind in the implementation of advanced systems that could otherwise revolutionize registry operations. These advanced systems could include modern databases, data analytics tools, and integrated platforms designed to automate and streamline administrative processes. Such technologies have the potential to significantly enhance overall efficiency, reduce workload, and minimize errors.

5. Strategies for Enhancing support Staff Performance in Public Universities in Nigeria

Enhancing the performance of registry staff in public universities in Nigeria necessitates a comprehensive approach that takes into account various dimensions of their roles and responsibilities. Regular workshops and seminars form a crucial component of this strategy, providing opportunities to keep the registry staff well-informed about the latest developments in their field. These sessions should cover a spectrum of topics, ranging from updates in university policies to changes in administrative procedures and advancements in registry management. By facilitating continuous learning, universities can ensure that their registry staff remains agile and adaptive in a dynamic academic environment.

In addition to technical skills, the enhancement of soft skills is paramount. Providing training in communication, time management, and customer service is essential for registry staff who interact with students, faculty, and other stakeholders. Effective soft skills not only improve interpersonal relationships but also contribute to a positive and efficient work environment. Professional development is further reinforced by encouraging registry staff to pursue relevant certifications. These certifications not only serve to broaden their knowledge base but also enhance the credibility of their skills. By investing in the professional growth of registry staff, universities can foster a culture of expertise and competence within their administrative ranks.

Technological innovation plays a critical role in streamlining administrative processes. Introducing modern

record-keeping systems, such as a robust student information system and electronic document management systems, is essential to enhance efficiency and minimize manual errors. Automation of repetitive and time-consuming tasks, such as admissions processes and grade submissions, liberates staff from routine activities, enabling them to focus on more strategic aspects of their roles. However, the successful implementation of technology solutions requires a concurrent emphasis on training to ensure that registry staff are adept at utilizing these tools effectively.

Conducting regular audits of existing administrative processes is imperative for identifying bottlenecks and areas in need of improvement. This systematic approach helps optimize workflow and ensures that registry staff adhere to efficient procedures. Developing and disseminating clear Standard Operating Procedures for various registry functions is a foundational step towards maintaining consistency and reducing the likelihood of errors in administrative tasks. To further enhance the versatility of registry staff, cross-training programs should be implemented. These programs equip staff with a broader skill set, promoting flexibility in task assignments. This versatility proves especially beneficial during peak periods, allowing for the efficient distribution of workloads. By prioritizing professional development and leveraging technological advancements, universities can cultivate a skilled and adaptable administrative workforce that contributes significantly to the overall success of the academic institution.

6. Conclusion

In examining the challenge (s) between support staff and public universities in Nigeria, it becomes evident that support staff plays crucial roles in the efficient functioning of academic institutions. These categories of staff are responsible for maintaining accurate records, managing student enrollment, and facilitating administrative processes. The synergy between registry staff and public universities is essential for the overall success of the educational system in Nigeria. However, challenges such as bureaucratic bottlenecks, outdated systems, and a lack of training opportunities have been identified, hindering the optimal performance of support staff. To enhance their effectiveness, it is imperative for universities and relevant authorities to invest in modernizing administrative processes, providing continuous training, and fostering a conducive work environment. Addressing these challenges will not only empower registry staff but also contribute to the improvement of the Nigerian higher education system, ultimately benefiting both the academic institutions and the students they serve.

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