

STAFF CATEGORIZATION IN THE NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY: IMPLICATIONS ON THE MANAGEMENT OF CONFLICT FOR EFFICIENT SERVICE DELIVERY

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Abstract

Staff categorization in the Nigerian University is meant to complement each other through their contrasting features so that, basic university functions are improved and completed seamlessly. Despite this intention, the diverse categories of staff disagree on matters of common interest while performing their duties. The dominant explanation of this disagreement referred to as conflict is the diversity of individual/group's backgrounds, experiences and perspectives. The disagreement results to counter productive work behaviours that debilitate individuals, teams and organizations in the long run. The author reviewed literature on staff categorization in the Nigerian University and the roles/societal expectations from the categories and, went ahead to identify problems areas among diverse staff categories in the Nigerian University. Strategies for improving the management of conflict among diverse categories of staff in the Nigerian University and the implication were also discussed. This gave rise to six recommendations given as suggestions among which is that, personality awareness by individuals and groups resulting to open-mindedness to opinions of others in order to address mutual hostility and all kinds of opposition and antagonistic interaction should be imbibed by the Nigerian University Staff. This will ensure that university processes, people skills and materials are properly integrated to give the designed service

Keywords: *staff categorization, Nigerian University, management of conflict, efficient service delivery*

Introduction

Universities by design have diverse categories of staff. According to Law Insider (n.d) a university staff means the university workforce who contributes in a broad array of positions in support of the university's mission. Law insider further assert that these staff are not exempt from the overtime provisions of the Fair Labour Standards Act (FLSA) and that they include all those employed on a permanent, temporary or contractual basis. Maurer (2009) opined that employee (staff) categorization is key planning function of the human resource department because it is important for future identification of needed resources and training. Universities have employees

which are categorized in groups because each possesses common features, defined by the type of work performed. The groups perform their duties within the job standards associated with job families and functions categorized into three by UCSC (2016) namely: operational & technical, professional and, supervisory & management. University Human Resources (2022) and UIOWA HR: (n.d) also stated that staff classified as exempt occupy managerial, administrative and professional positions while those on merit system include those contract and non-contract employees whose salary is determined by pay grades and steps listed for each merit system classification and; merit supervisory exempt/confidential staff exempted from collective bargaining because of their supervisory responsibility over other merit staff. Thus, universities all over the world have diverse categories of staff as well as employment groups and opportunities.

The diverse categorization of staff and employment groups and opportunities which is meant to ensure a seamless performance of the multiple roles expected of university is also found in universities in Nigeria. Both Lockwood (1979) and Ogunraku (2013) agree on such roles as teaching, research and public (community) service. However, like any organization where humans interact, conflict occurs as these groups carry out their legitimate function (John-Eke and Akintokunbo: 2020). Such conflict as perceived by Ejiogu in Ndum *and* Okey (2013) as the mutual hostility and all kinds of opposition and antagonistic interaction including disagreements or controversies about ideas, values, and ways of life. MSG (n.d) also defined conflict as a clash between individuals arising out of a difference in thought process, attitudes, understanding, interests, requirements and even sometimes perceptions. Conflict can be said to be a condition where two or more persons are unable to agree on matters of common interest such that the disagreement causes friction.

Disagreements arising from conflict in the University system could be triggered in situations described by Lockwood (1979) to include decision-taking processes by various decision-taking bodies, inadequate allocation of resources to the various groups due to poor funding and accountability processes for monies spent due to university's heavy dependence on public monies. Each of these actions including the major roles of universities mentioned earlier is carried out individually and/or collectively by diverse groups of staff hence as stated by CIPD (2020), conflicts are bound to occur because of the diversity of individual's experiences, backgrounds and perspective. Abdulkareem and Gabadeen (2015) also stated that the Nigerian University like any other public sector organization in the country is confronted with various problems including the management system through participatory decision-making, committee system and democratization of all policies and decisions which often manifest in role conflict among focal persons. Furthermore, Overton and Lowry (2013) opined that conflict cannot be avoided but can be managed. Thus, there is need for the management of conflict among the varying category of staff in the universities for efficient service delivery.

The management of conflict in organisations like the Nigerian University is particularly necessary because conflict is associated with significant cost to organizations (Overton and Lowry; 2013). It has positive and negative impacts and according to Janns *e tal* in Overton and Lowry (2013) and CIPD (2020), poor management of the negative impact could obstruct the achievement of set goals. Osakede, Ijimakinwa, Adesanya, and Ojo (2018) also stated that management of

conflict are measures put in place towards managing conflict through constructive action in resolving organizational conflict. MSG (n.d) also defined conflict management as the steps undertaken to prevent conflict at the right time as well as efforts to its effective and smooth resolution. In this paper, management of conflict among the varying category of staff in the universities entails all the processes employed to control the impact of disagreement and frictions arising from conflict. These processes would culminate in efficient service delivery in the university.

According to an online document from the OECD team led by Nick Thijs, service delivery is any contact with the public administration during which customers including citizens, residents or enterprise seek or provide data, handle their affairs or fulfill their duties. The team asserts that these services should be delivered in an effective, predictable, reliable and customer-friendly manner. Lovelock and Wright in Martins and Ledimo (2015) also described service delivery as the actual delivery of a service and products to the customer or clients therefore, is concerned with the where, when and how a service product is delivered to the customer and whether this is fair or unfair in nature. Nigerian universities are largely public sector organizations where Martins and Ledimo (2015) asserts its service components are a combination of processes, people skills and materials that must be appropriately integrated to result in the planned or designed service. Thus, efficient service delivery is a necessity which can be actualized through a smooth and healthy working relationship. Smooth and healthy working relationship is needed among university staff hence, there is need to foster an integrative team of workers devoid of conflict situations which Kumar (2020) stated arises from many factor including clash of egos, competition, conflict of interest, power struggle and professional jealousy. In addition, university stakeholders especially, students who are primary customers in universities deserve to be served right. This quality of service can be achieved in a safe and serene environment without counter productive work behaviours that debilitate individuals, teams as well as organizations with time. The researcher therefore writes on ‘Staff Categorization in the Nigerian University: Implications on the Management of Conflict for Efficient Service Delivery’.

Staff Categorization in the Nigerian University

In the Nigerian University, two basic categories covering the job standards associated with job families and functions mentioned in the introduction exist. This includes teaching and non-teaching also, referred to as academic and non-academic staff. (NPE; 2014: UNN Calendar; 2017: UI Staff Information Handbook; 2017). Being an institution that gives education after secondary education and similar to staff categorization in universities globally, the two groups can be further classified using numerous criteria so that the outcome has small groups as a honeycomb. Ideally, each group should complement each other through their contrasting features so that basic university functions are improved and completed. Their categorization is therefore meant to ensure a seamless performance of the multiple roles expected of universities which Ogunraku (2013) listed as teaching, research and public (community) service. Efficient delivery of these roles requires a coordinated broad-based group of staff with comparable job responsibilities because they form a vibrant asset upon which the university framework thrives. These staff are the basic supporting part of the university system and is structured according to the organs, departments, units and offices

available in the system. The organs, departments, units and offices further determine the nature of work performed in it. Thus, universities in Nigeria have two basic staff categories namely: teaching, including academic staff and, non-teaching, consisting administrative and technical staff. (UNN Calendar: 2017; Lawal & Atueyi: 2018) with each category classified into many more groups.

The categorization into many different groups provides for adequate functioning for the actualization of the essence of a university especially the mission-critical and non-mission-critical functions categorized by Maurer (2009). It is worthy to note that the sub-division into academic, administrative and technical staff includes those occupying managerial, administrative, professional positions as well as contract and non-contract employees and that these staff can be employed and/or appointed on a permanent/regular, temporary, contract, visiting, part-time and acting basis (UNN: 2017). These categories of staff provide service in accordance with the department/organ/unit they are attached to meet expectations society has of it. In Nigeria, apart from the primary assignment of all universities including teaching, research and public (community) service (Lockwood 1979; Ogunraku2013) these expectations are enshrined in the NPE (2014) for university education as:

- i. Intensifying and diversifying its programmes for the development of high level manpower within the context of the needs of the nation.
- ii. Making professional courses to reflect our national requirements.
- iii. Making all students, as part of a general programme of all-round improvement in university education, to offer general study courses such as history of ideas, philosophy of knowledge and nationalism.

Staffs are further expected to disseminate their research results to government and industries, inculcate community spirit in the students through projects and action research and expose students in technically-based courses to relevant working environment. These expectations are enormous and cannot be adequately accomplished by one group of staff rather, diverse categories of staff need to partner to meet these expectations. Thus, the specific role of each category of staff in the university need to be identified so as to reveal their areas of partnership, challenges that may arise in the partnership and strategies for its handling.

Role of the Diverse Categories of Staff in the Nigerian University

Academic staff: ISCED (2003) defined an academic staff as personnel whose primary assignment is instruction, research or public service; one that hold an academic rank with titles such as professor, assistant professor, instructor, lecturer or the equivalent of any of these academic ranks and that the category includes personnel with other titles like dean, director, associate dean, assistant dean, chair or head of department if their principal activity is instruction and research. According to UNN Regulations Governing Conditions of Service(n.d), an academic staff includes all persons holding appointments as members of the teaching or research staff of the University and whose primary duty is teaching or research or both while, UI Staff Information Handbook (2017) opined that, this category of staff means all persons holding appointments as members of the teaching and/or research staff of the university and whose primary duty is teaching and/or research including the professional library staff of the status of Librarian II and above. These definitions reveal the role

of an academic staff also referred to as academic personnel and faculty member to be that of generation and dissemination of knowledge for utilization by the society. The cardinal role of an academic staff derives from the major purposes of any university which is teaching, research and community service hence, the academic staff is employed to instruct, teach, research and provide public (community) service. UNN Regulations Governing Conditions of Service (n.d), explains public service as service which ranks as such for the purpose of the Federal Pension Scheme.

Administrative staff: This category of staff occupy non-faculty positions Lawinsider (n.d) and are also referred to as academic administrators. JSTOR (2012) in Wikipedia Encyclopedia stated that administrative staff are a branch of university employees responsible for the maintenance and supervision of the institution. Lawinsider (n.d) also asserts that administrative staff are professional and administrative personnel of the university other than teaching faculty with administrative duties subject to the types of appointments that are primarily associated with higher education institutions or their administrations and, that persons whose duties include both academic and administrative responsibilities shall be considered administrative staff to the extent of the administrative appointment. According to Fowler (2015), administrative staff is a body of professional services staff. Eurydice (2022) also stated that this category of staff comprises civil servants belonging to administrative bodies and various levels of public administrations. Thus, similar to the academic staff, the role of an administrative staff in the university also derives from the major purposes of university.

According to Lawal and Atueyi (2018), these roles are recognized by the universities and centres on university administration and, cannot be filled by just anyone. Scholars like Nakai (2014) earlier opined that administrative staff in universities possesses practical knowledge with a deep and long experience in academic administration and that their role is currently an important issue in higher education policies including the promotion of educational management in universities. Fowler (2015) also assert that administrative staff ensure that the enormous growth of accountability, auditing and reporting needs in the university are satisfied ; that they generate income used to support the core activity of the university and that they work collaboratively to ensure that academic time is reserved for academic pursuits. Eurydice (2022) stated that administrative staff responsibility include support, assistance and advising of academic authorities; management and supervision of everything related to human resources, administrative organization, financial affairs, information technology, archives, libraries, information and general services as well as any other administrative management process. JSTOR also stated that some administrative staff may have joint responsibilities however, their key broad responsibilities include admissions; supervision of academic affairs for example; hiring, promotion, tenure and evaluation with faculty input where appropriate; maintenance of official records, maintenance of audit and financial flows; maintenance and construction of campus buildings; safety and security of people and property on campus, supervision and support of office computers and network; fundraising from private individual and foundation; research administration; public affairs and student services.

Technical Staff: According to Lawinsider (n.d), university technical staff are persons employed by the University and categorized in terms of statues as members of the technical staff to conduct

general clerical, laboratory and field courses, and to assist in the conduct of lectures, examinations and research of the university. They form part of the non-teaching staff and according to Fowler (2015) account for the professional services grouping while Lawal and Atueyi (2018) reported that their role cannot be filled by just anyone. The university technical staff work in partnership and collaborate with other category of staff to achieve the university mission especially, using their technical knowledge to help the teaching faculty in the area of skill inculcation through laboratories, workshops, media units, counselors for rendering guidance to the students among others. In the Nigerian University, this category of staff occupies positions like technologists and technical officer to provide support for research and teaching to other category of staff especially the academic. According to Vere (2013), technicians are often a department's most experienced fixture; they provide essential technical duties and are the first port of call for both staff and students in an academic department; drive innovation through knowledge transfer activities and educate technicians of the future. Fowler (2015) also stated that technical staff accounted for the professional services grouping and are vital to science teaching and research while, Jones (n.d) stated that the university technician play a vital role in the kind of experiential learning emphasized in the university and that these staff has assumed greater significance as pressure on academic roles has increased.

Problem Areas among Diverse Staff Categories in the Nigerian University

The diverse categories of staff encounter a plethora of problems in the process of rendering efficient service. These problems culminate to conflict among and between individuals and groups and, if not properly managed could become university-wide. Doubtlessly, such condition would hinder the attainment of university essence which Ugwu in Anyebe (2014) states are to advance themselves in academic programmes, research and innovations towards academic excellence and world-class status with a current trend that emphasizes reputation and recognition including ranking of universities as key performance indicators. Quite often, these problems derive from frequent causes of conflict which several researchers including Overton & Lowry (2013) asserts are lack of clarity with expectations or guidelines, poor communication, lack of clear jurisdiction, personality differences, conflicts of interest and changes within the organization (university).

Each of these factors poses a lot of challenge to efficient service delivery by the varied category of staff in the Nigerian University especially, where there is individual conflict referred to as "man against self" by Lamb in Tabitha and Florence (2019). Individuals form the groups that are categorized as staff and conflict arising from these individuals is described by Kodiakal, Rahiman and Pakkeerrappa (2014) as conflict in the intrapersonal level. Such conflict can be seen through emotions like anger, frustration, depression, aggression and withdrawal from others because such individual disagrees with others on how a job or task should be executed, has different perception about work in the university including lack of understanding about the scope and parameters of the job as well as the goals and priorities to pursue referred to as role ambiguity by McCormick and Cotter (2013), engage in pull him down syndrome (not wanting to collaborate with others) or lacks the skill required for the job.

These factors also find expression in interpersonal conflicts existing between workers of the same hierarchy or category. In the Nigerian university, opportunity for equivalent status/rank exist for the different category of staff for example, a senior lecturer (academic staff) and a principal assistant registrar (administrative staff) however, according to Ojutiku (1986) the Nigerian university organizational structure places decision-making powers in the hands of academics with little direct participation by other staff groups. Sometimes staff from a particular group is meant to supervise staff from another with the result that there is a display of behaviours like lack of respect so that the quality of working relationships are reduced; negative feelings towards one another arising from role conflict referred to by McCormick and Cotter (2013), as competing and incompatible demands placed on an employee, for example, being both a supervisor and a friend or the demands of providing good service while striving to reduce costs; differences in personality style or working including management style, competition for recognition and positions of authority and the display of eye service.

The factors can further be seen in inter-group conflict involving differences between two or more groups like the academic, administrative and technical staff existing in the university. These categories of staff suffers from suspicion and animosity because of lack of mutual respect and confidence between the groups; bullying, intimidation and rivalry for positions for example some of the positions occupied currently by academic staff as deans and directors were originally meant for the non-teaching (administrative staff) in the scheme of service; pressure from excess workload resulting to anxiety and role stress which Igharia and Shayo (2003) asserts is as a result of role ambiguity and/or role conflict; inability to manage performance in a systematic way; non-inclusive workplace environment built on acceptance and celebration of every group because as Ojutiku (1986) stated the university organizational structure places decision-making powers in the hands of academics with little direct participation by other groups of staff and, lack of transparency and accountability.

Strategies for Improving the Management of Conflicts among Diverse Categories of Staff in the Nigerian University

- Nurture self awareness in relation to one's physical and emotional reaction to incidents involving conflict. Individuals as well as the varied categories of staff working in the university should recognize how they react physically and emotionally to various conflict situations and allow themselves to develop mentally and morally to overcome the negative consequences arising from their reaction. This consciousness will help them become open-minded to the ideas and perspectives of others and so promote positive outcomes of conflict (Quinn e tal in Overton & Lowry 2013).
- Teach the necessary communication skills required in the workplace. This is vital in the modern workplace where people with diversity of backgrounds, experiences and perspectives work together to achieve a common goal. The teaching can be held during orientation of new staff and capacity building sessions to better habits exhibited by the varied category of staff working in

the university when faced with difficult issues at the workplace. It will also impact these staff's perception of conflict as well as relieve the negative results.

- Build a neutral, safe and supportive working environment. Such environment respects and treats all participants fairly. It involves using a tone of voice, words and facial expressions that convey respect for others as human beings and having the common goal of problem solving. Where these exist, the university including the diverse categories of staff will naturally enjoy the confidence of each other's intention. The varied categories of staff will also be comfortable that people will be honest, share information and keep private information confidential as well as have confidence in the abilities that every one of them will deliver on promises.
- Maintain an inclusive structure that actively engages all categories of staff. Organizational structure in universities of global standard is clearly defined and, since Nigerian universities are striving for academic excellence and world-class status, it should practice same. This is important because the university ranking in this era is not restricted to achievement from academic staff alone but, that of other categories of staff. Moreover, according to Fowler (2015) universities are complex organizations with a wide range of stakeholders to satisfy. There should therefore be an active engagement of all categories of staff in the area of their employment and necessary partnership and collaboration between the groups should be promoted. This will ensure services that enhance stakeholders' experience and sustain accountability as well as scrutiny required from practitioners in the university system. It will also solve the challenges arising from role ambiguity, role conflict and role stress experienced among the diverse categories of staff in the university.

Implications on the Management of Conflict in the Nigerian University

- Individuals and groups working in the Nigerian University should develop awareness about their personality and be open-minded to the diversity of opinions common among people from diverse experiences, competences and background.
- Requisite communication skills for working in the university should be taught to new entrants including the organization of employee relations training courses/capacity building seminars and workshops for every category of staff in the university by the University Management.
- Individuals and groups working in the university should avail themselves of the opportunities provided for employee relations trainings/capacity building seminars and workshops by the management.
- Working climate that promotes respect for every cadre of staff, honesty, information sharing and confidence in the ability of each individual and/or group of staff should be established by the university management.
- Active engagement of all categories of staff in relation to the individual/group's terms of employment should be encouraged by both the university management and the supervising ministries/departments.

- Sufficient funds, equipment and tools required for work by each category of staff should be provided by the ministry/department responsible for supervising/regulating the university and its workforce.

Conclusion

The university staff irrespective of his/her categorization is meant to contribute in a broad array of positions in support of the university mission. This broad contribution may not be realized because of unavoidable disagreements that occur among and between the varying categories of staff when they perform their legitimate function. In this paper, the author identified these staff categories and their role/what society expects from them, problem areas among diverse staff categories, strategies for improving the management of such conflict situations and implications on the management of conflict with particular reference to the Nigerian University. Consequently, six suggestions believed would improve the management of conflict for efficient service delivery was made in line with the strategies for a seamless performance of the multiple roles expected of universities.

Suggestions

- Individuals and groups working in the Nigerian University should develop an awareness about their personality and so encourage themselves to be open-minded to the diversity of opinions common among people from diverse experiences, competences and background. This will reduce the mutual hostility and all kinds of opposition and antagonistic interaction including disagreements or controversies about ideas, values, and ways of life.
- Necessary communication skills required for work in the university should be taught to new entrants to work including the organization of employee relations training courses/capacity building seminars and workshops for every category of staff in the university by the University Management. This will enable staff acquire new insights, experiences and perceptions about acceptable best practices and skill for their job as well as promote professionalism among them.
- Individuals and groups working in the university should avail themselves of the opportunities provided for employee relations trainings/capacity building seminars and workshops by the management. This will help them recognize and appreciate the scope and parameters of different jobs in the university and know the goals and priorities they should pursue while working.
- Working climate that promotes respect for every cadre of staff, honesty, information sharing and confidence in the ability of each individual and/or group of staff should be established by the university management. This will promote the interdependence of these staff and ensure that university processes, people skills and materials are properly integrated to give the designed service.
- Active engagement of all categories of staff in relation to the individual/group's terms of employment should be encouraged by both the university management and the supervising ministries/departments. This will result to inclusiveness in the educational management of the



university and enable the nation to avert significant cost associated with conflict between the diverse categories of staff.

- Sufficient funds, equipment and tools required for work by each category of staff should be provided by the ministry/department responsible for supervising/regulating the university and its workforce. This will help to promote educational management in the universities and provide feedback through accountability, auditing and reporting.

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