

Issues in the Management of Academic Staff in Distance Education Institutions: A Case Study of the National Open University of Nigeria

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Abstract

The significance of human resource development in the context of distance education cannot be overemphasized. This is because the roles of different personnel in the system demand a different kind of division of labour from those found in the conventional education system. Consequently, these new roles require new skills, knowledge and attitude for effective performance. This study investigates the translational experiences of academic staff at NOUN as they adapt to new role requirements of distance learning systems. Using a structured questionnaire and interviews, opinions of academic staff regarding the personal and institutional role expectation, organizational socialization, personal and institutional performance analysis, specific job challenges, adequacy, relevance and effectiveness of the training strategies were sought. Findings indicated, among others, that academic staff: seem to be unsure of their role expectation from an institutional perspective; have a lack of confidence in career progression structures of the institution; perceive administrative and technical support staff as enjoying precedence over them. The study recommended a number of measures for bridging the identified gaps and concluded with a proposal for a sustainable model of Academic Staff Continuing Professional Development for the university.

Keywords: human resource development, distance learning systems, professional development, transitional experiences

Introduction

Open and distance learning is not completely new in the practice of higher education in Nigeria. Indeed, some form of distance education or the other has been in force in Nigeria, since the colonial period. However, contemporary distance education and open learning differs considerably and in a variety of ways from the traditional version. The model of distance education institutions which have been brought into the mainstream of higher education provision draws extensively on that of the Open University of United Kingdom (OUUK), albeit with some reasonable modification to suit contextual requirements. The evolution of Open Universities in the developing world is a result of the need to expand access and equity in educational opportunities. Open Universities have also been found to be useful in providing access to higher

education to disparate groups of hitherto unreached learners such as school drop-outs seeking a second chance, women in purdah, nomadic cattle rearers, itinerant fishermen, as well as filling the unmet educational needs of the working population desirous of improving their skills and knowledge competences without leaving their work/vocations.

Obviously in order to satisfy this heterogeneous clientele, open universities require an admixture of staff that is multi-skilled in a broad range of operations. Their operation therefore represents a managerial model different from that established for conventional and face to face institutions. Part of this model is based on the notion that academic functionaries in distance education are not solely responsible for what their learners learn rather they are facilitators who guide the learners to identify the relevant learning objectives and the most effective learning style for achieving these objectives (Lentell, 1994). With the ascendancy of information and communications technologies, there has been an expansion in the scope of activities of open universities and the ways they are patterned. Thus, a new division of labour, with different staff undertaking multiple and overlapping roles such as instructional design, course materials development, editing, learner support, instructional facilitation as well as reviews and evaluation etc. As a result, there is greater demand on academic staff in distance education institutions than on their contemporaries from conventional institutions. Unlike the conventional model where teaching is concentrated in the 'head and hands' of a single lecturer, the distance education system spreads the responsibility for instructional delivery among a number of professionals who sometimes have to play multiple and overlapping functions.

Management of Academic Human Resources

It is a trite notion that the credibility of any academic system, open universities inclusive, is contingent on the quality of academic inputs and the teaching-learning processes put in place to create optimal learning experiences. However, open universities have traditionally been regarded as second-rate institutions in comparison with the conventional system (Hellman, 2003). This perception places a huge burden on distance education institutions to establish systems that can ensure that their academic functionaries are well prepared for the demands of the multi-tasking activities of open and distance learning.

In new distance education institutions, two broad categories of academic staff are identifiable: first, the fresh entrant into the academic profession, who had just completed a PhD or any other terminal degree; and, the seasoned academic who bears several scars of academic experience, indicating years of teaching, research and ancillary activities at the conventional university system. These two categories of academic staff are usually required to undertake induction and orientation experience in order to 'convert' them into adherents of the principles that guide the practice of

open and distance learning. It is a given that when staff join a new organization, they pass through a number of translational experiences and their effective performance ultimately depends on the transition period. This is also a function of role expectations as well as occupational requirements which these new entrants bring into the system. These facts are as true of new entrants into the academic profession as it is of experienced faculty members who are joining the distance learning system for the first time.

Nicholson (1984) had argued that occupational transitions may be the source of profound personal change as new environments are encountered and new territories are established. Concomitant with adopting the new is abandoning the old, which may result in stress as events require adjustments to established behavioural repertoires (Hopson and Adams, 1976). As the individual blends into a new role mode, he or she changes role and outside life conflicts to achieve a level of satisfaction, job involvement and internalized motivation (Porter, Lawler & Hackman, 1975) which remains more or less constant until occupational, organizational or life changes occurs. Such changes initiate a recycling through some or all of the stages (Nicholson, 1984). This conceptual framework is particularly suited to this study because there is considerable evidence that the entry and encounter experiences of organizational newcomers are crucial to the formation of attitudes toward and understanding of occupational roles (Louis, 1980 and Feldman, 1976).

This study therefore seeks to investigate, among other things, the translational experiences of academic staff at NOUN as they adapt to new role requirements of distance learning systems. It examines the nature and processes of recruitment and selection; induction and orientation; training and development; work transitions and organizational socialization, as well as, appraisal and promotion of academic functionaries within NOUN.

Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the factors that motivate academics to join distance education institutions?
2. Is there a systematic staff development programme for new academics in distance education institutions in Nigeria?
3. What factors are likely to demotivate academics after joining distance education institutions?
4. What are the challenges experienced by senior academics who joined distance education institutions them from the conventional education systems?
5. What approaches are necessary for overcoming the fundamental challenges experienced by academic staff in distance education institutions?

6. What policies/strategies can distance education institutions adopt for retaining quality academic staff?

Methodology

Sample

All academic functionaries at the National Open University of Nigeria, both full-time and part-time, formed the population for this study. Using the current personnel record of the institution, at the time of study, 66 full-time academic staff from the various schools, institute and centre were randomly selected as sample.

Instrumentation and Procedure of Administration

The instrument consisted of looking at the previous attempts at recruitment exercise in the University, and a five-page semi-structured questionnaire divided into five sections. Section 1 related to biographical details while sections 2, 3, 4 and 5 sought opinions on factors that motivate, encourage and or discourage academic staff from functioning effectively in the institution. Sections 2, 3, & 5 sought responses to the 33 items contained in the sections on a five-point Likert type scales of ‘Strongly agreed, agreed, undecided, disagree and strongly disagree scored as 5, 4, 3, 2, and 1 respectively. Section 5 also contains 15 short-answer open-ended items. The research instrument was validated by a competent panel of experts following a pilot study consisting of 10 percent of the sample population. The questionnaire was administered personally to the respondents by a research assistant employed for this purpose. The Test-retest reliability of the questionnaire was calculated to be .81

Results and Findings

The National Open University of Nigeria began its academic operations in 2003 with the appointment of deans of Schools and the subsequent assumption of duty of the academic faculty members of the Schools.

The first sets of academic staff (including the deans), employed by the NOUN were through employment advertisements for the various academic positions in the national dailies. Through interactive audience with the applicants at the three different geographic sites of the federation, 13 programme leaders out of 16 (Senior lecturer status and above) were recommended for appointment through its stringent employment criteria but only 10 of them assumed employment at the University. At the lower level of academic status, i.e lecturer one and below, 14 of the 25 course coordinators recommended assumed duty at the University. 34 applicants had been interviewed at that entry level.

The results give clear indication of low response to the advertorials. In addition, the response rate from the senior academics was remarkably lower than at the junior level. Reasons for this low response may be due to lack of awareness at the time of

advertorials or as a result of ambivalent reactions due to uncertainty to the existence and commencement of academic activities in the University at its second coming. It could also be perhaps due to the perception of the work environment of an Open University.

The higher response rate at the lower academic level could be seen as an indication of the presence of a wider pool of personnel willing to try their hands or trust their fate to a 'new experience'. Senior academics especially at the professorial level tend to be satisfied with their status at their place of work unless some 'tsunamic' policies move them away from their comfort zone.

On analysis of the response rate based on professional areas, it was found that of the 13 senior academics that reported, 8 (62%) of them were for the School of Education; 3 (22%) were for the School of Science and Technology; and 2 (16%) were for the School of Business and Human Resource Management. No senior academic was interviewed for the School of Arts and Social Sciences, thus none reported. It is thus clear that the different professional areas hold different perceptions of the working environment in an Open University and are differently attracted to it.

After four years of existence, the demographic professional situation has changed little. The selection process for this subsequent entrants have been extended to include other methods such as head hunts to specific individuals.

It now has currently about 66 academic staff, 23 of whom are professors and the remaining are cadres from programme leaders downwards to assistant course coordinators. The professor cadre which represents about 35 % of the academic staff strength may indicate that the University has enough senior academics to pilot it through its formative stages. However, of this 23 in number, 9 are only on tenure positions, 5 are on sabbatical positions; 9 are on contract appointments and 12 are adjunct professors. The category of adjunct professors was created when the policy of using very senior academic staff to man the study centres was made. This category of professors therefore has widened the available expertise to practice the multi tasking approach of the University personnel in administration.

Clearly, the University has not been able to attract in sufficient number, highly experienced tenure academic staff. It is a considered opinion that part reason for this could be attributable to the perception of what an Open University represents and how they will fit into its operations. It could perhaps have meant that the recruitment adverts did not provide enough information about the job content and job schedules of academics. The University management may clearly need to look into modifying the advertorials to reflect the nature of the job at the Open University.

In this study not all these staff responded to the questionnaire. Only 43 staff representing 66% of the total academic staff responded to the questionnaire. Of the total respondents about 65% are men. The rest are of course female showing that the appointment procedure was not gender bias. There was no significant difference in relative response from the different academic faculties in the survey. Of the 43 staff, 7% were professors. The majority of the respondents (58%) are from the course coordinator category. In terms of years of experience that have been brought to their academic function at the University, only 38% of the assistant coordinator cadre have had previous teaching experience of between two to five years prior to joining NOUN whilst 27% of them have had up to 10 years of tertiary teaching experience. About 50% of the respondents have been in the service of the NOUN for the last three years.

What then are the factors that motivate academics to join distance education institutions?

In the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to state their agreement to certain enumerated motivating factors that could have influenced the academics to taking up appointment at the University. These factors are: increased personal income, flexible working environment; the need for gainful employment, the need to gain distance teaching experience; opportunity to use technology; the probability of upward career progression; the perceived the intellectual challenges involved at teaching at a distance education institution; opportunity to share knowledge with others; and encouragement of colleagues. The survey show that the opportunity to use technology ranked highest (96%) amongst the factors that motivated people to seek employment at the University followed by the opportunity to share knowledge(91%). Respondents from all cadres of academic staff thus recognise the potential opportunity to use technology as the greatest motivating factor that informed employment seekers to the NOUN and a belief of team (group) work approach to their tasks. Closely linked to these is the need to gain distance teaching experience accounted for 78% of the respondents.

Once they had been employed, the questions turned to what was maintaining the motivation impetus on the job. In this category, the ability to share knowledge with other academic staff (96%) formed the most motivating factor to stay on the job. This was followed by the challenge to intellectual development (89%). Encouragement of colleagues (56%) and flexible working conditions (40%) were factors presumed to have maintained interest on the job which the respondents disagreed to.

Discouraging factors

As a corollary to asking the academics what motivated their continued stay with the University is the question regarding the factors that discourage academics from continuing to work at the Open University.

In order to draw empirical correlation with the motivating factors, the respondents were requested to respond to a list of discouraging factors to their continued stay on the employment of the University. These factors included lack of proper training; lack of institutional support; lack of sufficient financial compensation in comparison to workload; lack of personal connection with the University; the fact that development of course materials does not contribute towards tenure and promotion; lack of professional prestige; concerns about workload; concerns about quality of students; isolation from other faculty staff; dislike teaching in distance education environment; lack of adequate time to research in subject area; preoccupation with research on open and distance learning; and activity schedules in distance education prevents personal research efforts.

A number of factors were identified as discouraging the continuation of a job in the NOUN. Lack of sufficient financial compensation in comparison to workload (77%) scored the highest followed by concerns about time commitment to any type of research (subject or systemic) (71%) and to lack of flexibility in working hours (61%) they had expected were major discouraging factors. The respondents also indicated that activity schedules in distance education preventing personal research efforts and concerns about workload (50%) were discouraging.

The respondents thus identified that longer working hours which is non commensurate with pay and flexible working hours are factors that discourage the academics from mostly discharging their responsibilities effectively and efficiently. On the professional aspect, the fact that they have little time to devote to subject research area in addition to the fact that the main stay of academic work by the academics which is development of course materials and its maintenance are not contributory to promotion is considered strong enough to be a discouraging factor for their continued stay in the University and are issues that will force them out of the Open University. So far no empirical studies have been done to look at academic staff turn out rate but it is clear that there have been academic staff movements out of the University based on these factors. Interestingly, lack of professional prestige as staff of the NOUN (42%) was not seen as strong enough to be a discouraging factor.

In order to reinforce the responses relating to time commitment to research, the respondents were further asked to comment on it as an encouragement factor. The 56% response from the respondents strongly suggested it is considered as a major demotivating work variable in their schedule in the Office. By far the greatest encouraging factors considered by the respondents are; additional opportunities to interact with academics from other distance education institutions (81%); the continuous training provided by the University (84%) and increased institutional support (78%). This view was supported in the open ended question that sought to know if there a systematic staff development programmes for new academics in

distance education institutions in Nigeria. By asking whether the respondents have received any formal training on how to develop course materials to which the respond was a clear yes with 78% of the respondents. Although 58% of them reported that the training was not adequate. Apart from development of course materials, the study also reveal the respondents view to whether they have received formal training on how to respond to tutor marked assignment responses and although 53% of them said yes, 63% of the yes respondents said the training was not adequate. Almost 40% of the respondents reported that the present work load in the academic unit allows for optimal performance. On hindsight, about 57% of the staff would still pick NOUN as first choice for employment.

In terms of the challenges experienced by senior academics who joined distance education institutions from the conventional education systems, the greatest challenges they raised were lack of institutional support in clerical an technical matters (50%); the fact that writing of course materials does not count towards promotion to higher levels nor emoluments; lack of time for research in staff's subject area; and work load (60%) relative to their pay advices.

What approaches are necessary for overcoming the fundamental challenges experienced by academic staff in distance education institutions?

Analysis of responses to the items designed to elicit answers to this research question indicates that academics are desirous of improved work conditions including parity of remuneration with work schedules; opportunities for professional development through participation in trainings, seminars and conferences; provision of infrastructure and resources for conducting research in both systemic and individual special areas; and the recognition of course development as part of career progression criteria. Currently most academics in NOUN do not see themselves as being on the same scale as their counterparts from other universities in the country. This is not to say that they perceive themselves as better, rather they believe that the fact that open and distance learning is a novel addition to higher education practice in Nigeria puts them at a disadvantage compared with their counterparts in other institutions. This situation is certainly not made better by the working environment and conditions which they perceive as heavily regimented since it draws extensively on the industrial model of operations. Thus it is imperative for administrators of distance education institutions to make the industrialised system of education more humane, and help the teacher adapt him/herself to the learner to benefit most from this new educational situation (Peters,1993). Another way of doing this is to encourage academics at the middle and lower cadres to enrol for higher degrees (which benefit themselves as well as the institution) with full fee compensation and with necessary duty leave.

What policies/strategies can distance education institutions adopt for retaining quality academic staff?

A multi-stage process of continuing professional development (CPD) of academic staff is proposed as part of the university policy on capacity building. The CPD process draws on the existing system where orientation into the basic building block and philosophical underpinnings of open and distance education are enunciated; this is usually followed by short training in specific aspects of operations such as course writing, licensing and copyright issues, technology application etc. Then training is organised in critical as work schedules changes in response to needs analysis and programme evaluation done by the institution. Regular appraisals and schemes for updating the knowledge of the participants should be carried out. It has also been observed that incentives, rewards, promotion, welfare and other benefits have to be viewed as a package. This is because the changing context of open and distance education practice demands policies that support the development of multi-skilled capacities among academics. In such changing institutional priorities and policies, the issue of promotion, and tenure, activities to be rewarded, and the degree of support (monetary compensation, release time, training, instructional, technical and administrative resources) are to be regarded as part of the compliment of factors which lead to improved staff development and by extension lead to improved productivity among academic staff. This modified version of CPD model for academics by Panda (2004) is proposed as functional and relevant to Distance Education Institutions in developing countries:

- Induction (at the time of joining the institution);
- Orientation (during the first year of service);
- Refresher (subsequently, in discipline areas and in areas of distance education teaching/learning, before the next promotion, followed by orientation to the next job role);
- Thematic/focused (relating to particular operational area such as new models of course development, new assessment mechanisms, new formats of self-learning material, media mix and media integration, online teaching/learning);
- Specialised training (especially for technical and professional fields);
- Training in the utilization of relevant information and communication technology tools and applications;
- All full-time academics must have a short stint in face-to-face contact with their learners and submit a report to their deans on how the knowledge gained will be use to improve course development activities;
- Junior academics must serve periods of mentoring under senior academics before they rise to senior policy making positions.

Conclusions

This study has shown that the National Open University of Nigeria has in two main attempts at recruitment not recruited enough of the academic staff it requires perhaps as a result of the perception attached to the nature of work in the University and an argument in favour of providing more details about the work nature of an ODL institution has been advocated. On a contextual basis, this unattractiveness can therefore be seen as the prospective employee believing in his/her prospects both academically and in terms of the welfare. The Open Universities can therefore be said NOT to be the first choice of the prospecting academic. Nevertheless the study was able to demonstrate the attractiveness of working in an Open University. Part of this was the belief that working at the Open University provided them with the opportunity to use technology, work in group, meet with other practitioners in the field and have opportunity for induction trainings on many aspects of ODL operations such as content development, instructional design and multi media development. Although the respondents agreed to the efforts of the Open University, there is a general perception that they were inadequate. The study also indicate their frustration at working at the Open University partly due to non commensurate pay packet with hours of work, lack of compensation in terms of course material development and inadequate time to subject research for systemic research in ODL. It was also insinuated that the university is greatly in need of a systematic programme of continuous professional development of academics if the momentum that is being created is to be sustained in the years to come. If the foregoing challenges is exacerbates and leads to fatigue and frustration in the current corps of academics, there will be a situation where productivity will completely plummet and the university will still not be attractive to formidable academics who will contribute to revitalizing the system.

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