
**STRATEGIES FOR AMELIORATING THE CHALLENGES OF ACADEMIC STAFF
IN THE UNIVERSITIES OF AGRICULTURE IN NIGERIA**

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Abstract

This paper examined challenges faced by Nigerian universities academic staff in directing and facilitating teaching and learning process. It is the position of the authors that in spite of the fact that academic staff are the fulcrum upon which the university education system especially the universities of agriculture revolves, not much attention and regard is given to this category of staff as a number of factors continue to serve as a cork in the progress and in wheel of achieving the objective of teaching by the academic staff. The authors identified some of the challenges to effective teaching and learning in the universities in Nigeria to include poor salary/welfare, inadequate educational facilities, poor funding, poor leadership among others. Some strategies were identified to ameliorate the challenges. It was recommended among others that Government of Nigeria should place high premium on education by meeting up the recommended 26% educational spending prescribed by UNESCO, especially in university education including universities of agriculture to help revitalize the university education system.

Keywords: challenges, academic staff, ameliorating strategies

Introduction

Education is the fulcrum upon which the development of any nation depends. Education especially at the university level is the key to both individual and societal aspirations. This view is supported by Onaga (2010) that university education is a vital tool and formidable instrument for socio-economic and human capital development. Peretomode (2007) submitted that university education is the facilitator, the bed rock, the power house and the driving force for the strong socio-economic, political, cultural, healthier and industrial development of a nation. In the observation of the World Bank (2004), university education is fundamental to all developing countries if they are to prosper in a world economy where knowledge has become a vital area of advantage.

Teaching and learning at the university level involves helping students to learn, acquire problem-solving skills, develop critical thinking skills, and also helping them to know how and where to obtain needed information, develop the spirit of enquiry and above all prepare them for the process of life-long education (Inomies & Osakwe, 1998). To achieve these, the universities should deploy the right facilities, well qualified, dedicated and motivated staff, and above all, new technological resources in the teaching

and learning process for best results. In order to move the economy of the nation forward, especially in agriculture, specialized university of agriculture was established. The establishment was done to address the myriads of problems facing the Nigerian State like the issue of food insecurity and other associated problems like the environmental degradation, the Federal Government of Nigeria established the Universities of Agriculture.

University of Agriculture is an advanced institution primarily saddled with the mandate of awarding degrees in branches of agriculture and related disciplines aimed at solving the problem of food security of the nation and the world at large by equipping its graduates with pre-requisite knowledge and skills. According to Ukih (2012) the tasks and objectives of Nigerian Universities of Agriculture include; the acceleration of the pace of agricultural production for attainment of self-sufficiency in food production and improvement of human development and personal well-being of Nigeria through improved agriculture and rural development. The university can enhance the verification of discoveries and can be better managed when the academics are properly catered for by the management of the universities.

University education especially the specialized universities of agriculture are crucial for the development of human capital necessary for sustainable growth in agricultural enterprise. Agreeing to this assertion, Onaga (2010) submitted that countries can achieve sustainable development by improving through training in higher level institutions such as the universities especially the specialized universities of agriculture on the skills of their human capitals. From a global perspective, higher level manpower training has been recognized as a primary tool for national development (Ehiamezor, 1988). According to the author, such high level educational provision enables the citizens to acquire skills and techniques which are ploughed into human productivity, creativity, competence, initiative, innovation and inventiveness. The role of the university system in manpower development is achieved through the instrumentation of individuals to facilitate or help the students to learn. These facilitators of learning in the universities are known as academic staff.

Academic staff has been described by Modebelu and Onyali, (2011) as group of individuals that are employed in the universities and other tertiary institution to train and groom students through higher level manpower training needs. According to Asiyai (2015), academic staff are competent individuals, instructional experts in a given discipline who plan, guide and evaluate student's learning in higher institution like a university. Azuh and Modebelu (2014) defined academic staff as professionals whose duties are to teach, instruct, train, educate and facilitate students' knowledge, learning and performance. As experts and professionals, these staff are expected to be versatile, creative, resourceful, innovative, dedicated and motivated.

However, academic staff are constrained by a number of challenges which affect their output and on the long run affect the quality of their products with grave consequence to national growth and development. Some of the challenges affecting academic staff of Nigerian universities and possible solutions to such challenges have been discussed in this paper.

Challenges facing the academic staff of Nigerian Universities of agriculture

The following challenges facing the academic staff of the universities, especially universities of agriculture are discussed below:

Inadequate funding

Inadequate funding is the most critical challenge that has threatened educational delivery and learning in universities across Nigeria. The problem of inadequate funding of education is a case of lack of government's commitment to the system and has been a bane to educational development in the country. The country's budgetary allocation to education falls far below recommended minimum by the United Nations Education, Social and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). UNESCO had recommended 26% budgetary allocation to education based on Gross National Product, GNP, but the amount allocated to education by Nigerian government has continued to be reducing by the year and smaller when compared to other African countries. For example, in 2011, the budgetary allocation to education generally was N306.3 billion, rose slightly in 2012 to N400.15 billion, and increased again in slightly in 2013 to N426.53 billion and in 2014 it was N493 billion representing 19.7 percent of the N4.6 trillion nation budget in that year (The Guardian Newspaper, January, 21, 2015). A comparison of budgetary allocation to education by other African countries revealed the following: Switzerland, 24.6%; Kenya, 23.0%; South Africa, 25.8%; Cote d'Ivoire, 30.0% (Vanguard, 2012). A World Bank Report cited by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU, 2013) noted that the amount spent by Nigeria for the entire education sector was less than what individual universities spend on education in some countries. Constraint of inadequate finances faced by Nigerian universities has made many academics to be working under difficult circumstances and resulted to the inability of many universities particularly, universities of agriculture in Nigeria to build lecture halls, students' hostels, equip laboratories, workshops, payment of staff salaries, and research grants.

Insufficient Information and Communication Technology (ICT) facilities

In this age of globalization and knowledge explosion, there is an increasing demand on the universities to embrace the opportunities presented by technological development. Integration of Information Communication Technology facilities help to facilitate teaching and learning. Some of the ICT facilities that could be used to enhance teaching and learning in the universities include fax, radio, teleconferencing, videoconferencing and the internet (Ifeakor & Okoli, 2010). However, Ifeakor and Okoli reported that most ICT instructional technological resources such as over-head projectors, digital video disc, Interactive Compact Disc-Read Only Memory (CD-ROM), Television, radio, fax machine, Internet connectivity, Extranet Wide Area Network (WAN), Satellite broadcast, World Wide Web (WWW) and computer software programmes are not sufficiently available in federal and state universities in Nigeria. In the same vein, Onyegebu (2006) reported that ICT facilities that could be utilized for teaching and learning are not sufficiently available in most universities in the country.

Inadequate educational facilities or infrastructure

The condition of facilities in a learning environment determines teachers' and students' performance. This is because, if facilities are inadequate or dysfunctional, the

learning process would be impaired and academic productivity will decrease. There is enough evidence that the inadequacy of infrastructural facilities, particularly buildings, has led to unproductive learning environment in Nigeria (Olatunji, 2013 and Isaiah, 2013). Quality university education is dependent on the quality and quantity of human and material resources put in place in universities of agriculture. Inadequacy of infrastructure such as science laboratories, workshops, students' hostels, libraries and electricity will affect the quality of education in universities. For good quality delivery, these facilities must meet the minimum standard specified by the National Universities Commission (NUC). For quality teaching and learning, the class size must be small for effective students-teacher interaction. Unfortunately, according to EIlisu, Abdulrasak and Isaac (2016) lecture halls of most universities in Nigeria are overcrowded with majority of the students standing at the corridors during lectures. The authors continued that besides, the libraries in most universities including universities of agriculture in the country are stocked with obsolete text books. The authors further observed that students in universities across Nigeria including universities of agriculture are learning in dilapidated buildings which are poorly ventilated, illuminated, furnished and environmentally depressing and disabling situations. Even many lecturers share small offices. This situation does not encourage the lecturers to put in their best.

Lack of opportunity for training and retraining

Training and retraining of academic staff will help to develop their knowledge, skills and competencies. Adeogun, (2006) noted that an employee who is not trained and exposed to continuous retraining in the modern methods and new discoveries in his or her field will soon become irrelevant to the organization. Peretomode and Chukwuma (2007) in their study revealed that a significant relationship existed between manpower development and lecturers productivity. Romina (2013) stressed the importance of staff training and retraining programmes when he stated that staff development is paramount because knowledge of today is only sufficient for today. The authors noted that in this era of knowledge explosion and emergent knowledge based economy, staff development should be the priority of any nation. Romina, despite the importance of staff development programmes, it is unfortunate to note that most universities especially universities of agriculture do not have effective academic staff training and retraining programmes.

Poor leadership

Poor leadership of Nigerian university administrators has been one of the problems affecting academic staff output and invariably affecting the attainment of set goals. Universities and especially universities of agriculture in Nigeria exist in order to properly guide learners to learn. For effective teaching and learning in the universities, academic staff within the institutions must be properly managed for their positive impacts on productivity. This is the place of leadership in the institutions of higher learning. The duty of leadership is to reduce problems within the system in order to enhance efficiency. Accordingly Iyayi, (2002) argued that dismissal of some academics without following due process were indication of poor governance which made many academic staff demotivated to serious academic pursuit while Jelilov & Onder (2016) presented another problem that the type of education which graduates receive even in universities of Agriculture has made more white-collar job seekers than blue-collar. Additionally

Bamiro (2012) maintained that the unfavourable leadership has led to series of strikes resulting to closure of some universities with its attendant effects on quality of products. In such situations, leadership of the universities determined who to employ and this has led to high academic staff turnover in the universities including universities of agriculture which now establishes programmes not related to what they were established for.

Excess workload

Due to inadequate academic personnel, most workers were given excess capacity which may affect productivity and efficiency. Tettey (2006) asserted that the relatively low level of academic salaries during the past decade, the declining financial attractions of university employment in comparison with other opportunities and rising workloads associated with deteriorating teacher-students ratios led to brain-drain in the past. The past brain-drain is still having much impact on the university system up till today (Satope, 2014) especially in universities where specialized programmes are established.

Poor salary

Academic staff of universities are required to conduct researches, compile lecture notes and update same from time to time, publish papers in reputable journals, attend conferences, obtain higher degrees and undergo retraining and other self-development programmes. These are financially involving and take a large chunk of the staff salaries. Unfortunately, academic staff of Nigerian universities such as universities of agriculture are poorly remunerated. Most lecturers in the universities in the country have been drained away from the system because of the unattractive nature of the lecturing profession in Nigeria (Asika 2006). Supporting this position, Chidimma and Isaac (2013) pointed out that the salary and service benefits paid to lecturers in Nigerian universities is about the lowest in the world and because of this, they migrate to other countries especially the United States of America or local industry for better pay. Lecturers from within and outside Nigeria also migrate to Botswana and South Africa because of high wages that they pay to the lecturers.

Strategies for ameliorating the challenges facing the academic staff of the universities of agriculture

The following strategies can help to address the challenges of academic staff in universities of agriculture:

Poor remuneration: Government must make the issue of remuneration of university lecturers a top priority in order to get the best output from the country's academia. This will help to stem the tide of brain drain and spur novelty and ingenuity in research and local technology activities necessary for economic and technological advancement.

Poor funding: Government should show greater commitment to education in general and university education in particular. This can be done by adhering to the 26% annual budgetary allocation recommended by UNESCO and making sure that the budget is implemented to the letter. Okebukola (2015) observed that better budgetary allocation to education sector and its full implementation will help to better the deplorable state of the

system by applying the funds largely to significantly improve facilities for teaching, learning and teacher welfare. The authors further noted that if education in Nigeria were to be better funded, the country will parade the best academics in the world.

Poor leadership: University administrators should change their style of leadership from dictatorial and high handedness to a more democratic and civilize style. Leaders in the universities must see academic staff as partners in progress and important stakeholders in the university system by maintaining an open communication line. Once there is communication between the management and the staff, the staff will have a sense of belonging. Academic staff should be involved in decision making process. This will reduce gap which ordinarily would cause misunderstanding and suspension between academics and university authorities. Communication as viewed by Onah (2014) is a means by which employees are linked together to achieve a common purpose in organizations such as universities.

Poor salaries and welfare: Prompt and timely payment of salary and other welfare packages to academics is a *sin-qua-non* if high productivity is to be guaranteed. Omebe (2014) explained that upkeep of academic staff through prompt and regular salary payment, promotion, staff safety, security and health services are morale boosters. According to Asiyai (2015), staff welfare is paramount and should not be toyed with by university administrators. The authors submitted that good salary structure will help to boost the staff morale for better service delivery.

Reward for job performance: Outstanding performance should be rewarded for encouragement of the performer and others who are in the system. According to Omebe (2014), academic staff should be rewarded for hard work and dedication to duty and that such reward must be commensurate with the service rendered. The ideal thing is to have a systematic procedure for establishing a sound reward system and structure. A good reward remuneration helps in reducing inequalities between personnel, raise their morale, motivate them to work for pay, increase promotions, reduces inter group conflict and personnel grievances. In a nutshell, when academic staff are rewarded in kind or cash or award such as Nobel Prize, it goes a long way in motivating them to do same or more.

Assuring internal funding of research projects: ensure dedicated internal funding of the University for conducting research and attending conferences. As recommended by Onwujekwe (2017), at least 10% of the university's budget should be allocated to undertaking and disseminating research. Support the development of the University Research Trust Fund for attracting external sources of research funding.

Promotion of the use of PPP to improve the infrastructure of the university: using Public Private Partnerships to develop staff as well as other infrastructure.

Strengthen and expand Postgraduate Programmes: this will help staff of the university especially the young ones to advance in knowledge and degree while teaching to make them capable and more effective in discharging their assigned duties.

Recommendations

To address the challenges of academic staff in Nigerian universities, the following are recommended:

1. Government of Nigeria should place high premium on education by meeting up the recommended 26% educational spending by UNESCO, to help revitalize the university education system which include the universities of agriculture.
2. Enabling environment should be created for staff through improved conditions of service, provision of basic infrastructure, virtual libraries and information communication technologies and internet connectivity;
3. Lecturers should be motivated to make them more dedicated, devoted and committed and effective in their jobs.
4. Funding of the universities of agriculture should not be left in the hands of government alone. Other stakeholders and philanthropists could help to fund university education which includes universities of agriculture. For instance giving agricultural loan, building of hostels, staff quarters among others.
5. Establishing ventures such as poultry, fish farm, and piggery among others to help in internal funding of the universities.

Conclusion

The role of the teacher in achieving the goals of teaching and learning cannot be over emphasized. However, the academic staff in the universities are constrained by a number of challenges in effective discharge of their responsibilities. Some of the problems affecting university academic staff to effectively guide learners in the teaching and learning process include poor education infrastructure, poor salary and welfare, inadequate funding, excess workload among others. More government commitment to education sector and university education especially, universities of agriculture in particular will help to allocate more funds necessary in addressing most of the challenges identified. To ensure strategies for ameliorating challenges in the university system, the academics in the universities including the University of Agriculture should be professionally catered for the task of nation building through university education for responsible family living

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