

Inclusive Employment and Employees' Engagement of Senior Staff in Selected Federal Universities in South-East, Nigeria

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Abstract

this study focused on inclusive employment and Employees' Engagement of Senior Staff in Federal Universities in South-East, Nigeria. Guided by two objectives, the adopted the descriptive survey design as its methodological framework and covered a population of 23,126 senior staff of the five (5) Federal Universities in South-East, Nigeria. Data used in the study were generated from both primary and secondary sources and stratified random sampling technique was adopted in determining the 430 senior staff that were sampled. The research instrument was subjected to validity test while Cronbach Alpha was used to test its reliability. The research questions were analyzed using Spearman's rank correlation statistics while the hypotheses were tested with Theil-Sen regression technique. The acceptance or rejection of null hypothesis was based on whether the calculated p-value is less than the level of significance (0.05). Sequel to the findings from the analysis of the data used, the study concludes that inclusive employment has significant effects on employees' engagement in federal government owned universities in South-East, Nigeria. The study recommended that the management of universities under study should ensure that there is a regular monitoring and auditing of affirmative action by scrutinizing the hiring, promotion, and compensation practices to identify and address potential disparities. They should also be intentional in ensuring that underrepresented groups are adequately represented in all spheres and that federal universities in South-East, Nigeria should ensure that the ethos of industrial democracy are respected and the protection of labour rights unbiased.

Keywords: *compliance to affirmative action, employee retention, fair labour right protection, physical engagement*

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Introduction

Historically, employment practices in Nigerian federal universities have been shaped by several factors, including ethnicity, political affiliations, and gender biases. The quota system, which is designed to ensure regional representation and balance in federal institutions, has been a significant factor in recruitment processes. While the system aims to promote inclusivity in terms of geographic representation, it has not fully addressed other forms of exclusion, such as those based on gender and disability. Moreover, gender inequality has been a longstanding issue within Nigerian federal universities. Women are often underrepresented in academic and leadership positions, and this disparity is even more pronounced in disciplines traditionally dominated by men, such as engineering and the physical sciences. Additionally, persons with disabilities have faced significant challenges in accessing employment in Nigerian universities due to both infrastructural barriers and discriminatory attitudes (Lindsay, Cagliostro, Albarico, Mortaji, & Karon, (2018). The federal government has made efforts to address these inequalities through policies such as the National Policy on Education, which emphasizes the need for equal opportunities in education and employment. However, the implementation of these policies has been uneven, and many universities continue to struggle with creating truly inclusive work environments. Federal universities in Nigeria are key institutions, not only in the provision of education and research but also in influencing the broader social and economic policies of the country. The adoption of inclusive employment practices in these universities can serve as a model for other public and private sector organizations. By implementing inclusive employment policies, universities can help address the systemic barriers that exclude marginalized groups from the workforce, promote equality, and support Nigeria's broader goals of socio-economic development and national unity (Accenture, 2020).

Inclusive employment is a concept that embodies the principles of equality, fairness, and non-discrimination in the workplace, ensuring that all individuals, regardless of their backgrounds, have equal access to employment opportunities. In the context of federal universities in Nigeria, inclusive employment refers to the deliberate and structured policies that aim to accommodate a diverse workforce, including people with disabilities, women, ethnic minorities, and other marginalized groups. It is critical in fostering an environment where everyone, irrespective of their differences, has a fair chance of being employed and contributing meaningfully to the organization. Inclusive employment goes beyond just hiring people from diverse backgrounds (AARP, 2020). It is about creating an environment where everyone, regardless of their physical abilities, gender, ethnicity, or socio-economic background, can work effectively and feel valued. The concept encompasses several dimensions, including equal access to job opportunities, fair treatment in the recruitment process, the provision of necessary support for employees to perform their jobs, and the creation of policies that promote work-life balance and discourage discrimination and harassment. In federal universities, this concept is particularly significant due to the diversity of individuals who interact within the system. Universities are microcosms of society, hosting students, academic staff, and non-academic staff from various ethnic, religious, and socio-

economic backgrounds. Implementing inclusive employment practices within this context involves ensuring that all groups are fairly represented in the workforce, particularly those that have historically been marginalized, such as persons with disabilities and women.

Nigeria has a number of laws and policies that provide the framework for inclusive employment, including the Nigerian Constitution, the Labour Act, and the Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act, 2018. The Nigerian Constitution prohibits discrimination on the grounds of ethnicity, gender, religion, or disability, and guarantees the right to equal employment opportunities for all citizens. The Labour Act also provides protection against unfair labor practices, while the Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act specifically mandates that public institutions, including universities, must provide reasonable accommodations for persons with disabilities. In addition to national legislation, Nigeria is a signatory to several international conventions that promote inclusive employment, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the International Labour Organization's (ILO) conventions on equality and non-discrimination in employment. These legal frameworks provide a strong basis for the promotion of inclusive employment practices in federal universities. However, the challenge lies in the effective implementation and enforcement of these laws. (International Labour Organization, 2015)

Statement of the Problem

The concept of inclusive employment, which ensures that all individuals, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, disability status, or socio-economic background, have equal access to job opportunities, remains an elusive goal in many Nigerian federal universities. Despite national legislation such as the Nigerian Constitution, the Labour Act, and the Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act (2018), as well as Nigeria's commitments to international conventions, federal universities struggle to fully implement inclusive employment practices. These institutions often face a range of systemic, institutional, and attitudinal barriers that limit the employment of marginalized groups, including women, persons with disabilities, and ethnic minorities. Additionally, employee engagement—a critical factor for productivity, job satisfaction, and organizational success—remains low in many Nigerian universities. Employee engagement refers to the emotional commitment and involvement of employees in their work and the organization. Inclusive employment is strongly linked to employee engagement, as a diverse and inclusive workplace tends to foster a more motivated and engaged workforce. However, in Nigerian federal universities, where inclusive employment practices are often lacking, there is a corresponding negative impact on employee engagement levels. Employees who perceive discrimination, bias, or exclusion based on gender, disability, or other factors are less likely to feel valued, motivated, or fully engaged in their roles.

This problem is further exacerbated by inadequate infrastructure, discriminatory recruitment and promotion practices, and the absence of clear institutional policies on diversity and inclusion. As a result, many marginalized employees, such as persons with disabilities, women, and ethnic minorities, are either underrepresented or face hostile work environments. Consequently, these employees are less likely to be fully engaged, affecting not only their personal well-being but also the overall performance and effectiveness of the university. The lack of effective inclusive

employment practices and low employee engagement poses a significant challenge to the broader mission of federal universities in Nigeria, which aim to be centers of excellence in education and research. Without concerted efforts to address these issues, universities risk perpetuating inequality and missing out on the benefits that a diverse and engaged workforce can bring, including improved innovation, productivity, and organizational growth. This situation calls for urgent research into the factors contributing to the gap in inclusive employment and employee engagement, as well as the development of strategies to address these challenges within the federal university system.

Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of this study examined the effects of inclusive employment on employees' engagement of senior staff (teaching and non-teaching) of federal universities in South-East, Nigeria. The specific objectives were to;

- i. examine the influence of compliance to affirmative action on the physical engagement of senior staff in federal universities in South-East, Nigeria
- ii. assess how fair labour right protection affects retention of senior staff in federal universities in South-East, Nigeria.

Research Questions

The following research questions served as guide to this study;

- i. How have compliance to affirmative action affected the physical engagement of senior staff in federal universities in South-East, Nigeria?
- ii. What are the effects of fair labour right protection on the retention of senior staff in the federal universities under study?

Research Hypotheses

Hypotheses for this study were stated and tested in null forms, thus;

H0₁: Compliance to affirmative action does not have significant effects on the physical engagement of senior staff in federal universities in South-East, Nigeria.

H0₂: Fair labour right protection does not have significant effects on employee retention in federal universities in South-East, Nigeria

Review of Literatures

Inclusive Employment

According to World economic forum (2021), inclusive employment refers to practices that ensure equal access to job opportunities for all individuals, regardless of their gender, race, disability status, or other characteristics. It emphasizes diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the workplace, ensuring that everyone, particularly marginalized or disadvantaged groups, has a fair chance at employment. As the world moves toward a more global and interconnected economy, companies and governments alike have increasingly prioritized the importance of inclusive employment. This empirical review examines various dimensions of inclusive employment,

including its benefits, challenges, and the effectiveness of various strategies implemented in different sectors. Inclusive employment is essential for creating more just and equitable societies. Empirical research consistently highlights the benefits of inclusivity in terms of innovation, financial performance, and employee satisfaction. However, significant challenges remain, particularly in terms of overcoming cultural resistance, bias, and economic barriers. Policymakers and organizations must continue to refine and implement evidence-based strategies that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workforce (McKinsey & Company, 2018)

Dimensions of Inclusive Employment

Compliance to Affirmative Action (AA): Similar to AA, equal employment opportunity (EEO) policies comprise initiatives, policies or strategies which aim to accomplish better representation of excluded minorities in employment. Moreover, both AA and EEO initiatives are based on moral and legal arguments, while diversity management (DM) differs by resting on a business case argument that a diverse workforce contributes to the organization's performance and success (Furtado, Moreira, & Mota, 2022). More comprehensively, EEO is understood as antecedent AA, which in turn leads to DM. Nonetheless, EEO and AA share similar outcomes when it comes to employees' attitudes. Indeed, as proposed by Galbreath, the four dimensions of gender relationships are division of labor, relations of power, emotion and human relations, and culture and symbolism; whenever EEO had been used as a tool of organizational reconstruction, resentments were found on the male side and exasperation on the female side. Therefore, a predominant endorsement became evident toward "equal opportunity" but not to "affirmative action" at the organizational level (Galbreath, 2018). Through pronouncements, Government in Nigeria has acquiesced to the Affirmative Action. It is now trite knowledge that the Federal and State Governments have acknowledged the Affirmative Demand, with a firm commitment to its full realization. In essence, the Charter or Action is a "policy" of Government in Nigeria aimed at eliminating discrimination against women, with respect to employment and career progression.

Fair Labour Right Protection: Fair labor rights protection is a fundamental aspect of ensuring equitable treatment and dignity for workers across the globe. Rooted in principles of human rights, fair labor practices involve the protection of workers' rights to decent wages, safe working conditions, freedom from forced labor, and the right to organize. The protection of labor rights is essential to achieving social justice, reducing poverty, and promoting inclusive economic growth. This empirical review examines the current state of labor rights protection worldwide, the effectiveness of existing regulations and enforcement mechanisms, and the challenges that remain in ensuring fair labor practices (Rosenfeld, Denice & Laird, 2021). The empirical evidence on fair labor rights protection highlights both the progress made and the challenges that remain. While international frameworks like the ILO's conventions have established crucial standards, the effectiveness of labor rights protection varies significantly across countries and sectors. Strengthening enforcement mechanisms, supporting workers' right to organize, and addressing the exploitation inherent in global supply chains are critical to advancing fair labor practices globally (Kock, Nwosu, Richards & Pritchard, 2021)

Employee Engagement

Employee engagement was first conceptualized in the academic literature by Kahn (1990) as the harnessing of organization members to their work roles. Engagement encompasses not just the physical energy required to engage in or complete tasks, but also the psychological aspects of people's perceptions of themselves and their work environments. As a result, the term employee engagement encompasses both individuals' psychology about their work and environment as well as the actions that occur (Lee, Rocco & Shuck, 2020). Many researchers use different terms such as job engagement, work engagement, or employee engagement interchangeably to describe engagement. Employee engagement is the harnessing of organizational members' selves to their work roles. Work engagement is popularly defined as a "positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption". Employees are "engaged" when they are physically, cognitively, and emotionally invested at work. Cognitively engaged employees consider work to be meaningful, and physically engaged employees demonstrate high levels of productivity (Boikanyo & Heyns, 2019; Reissova & Papay, 2021).

Alam, Mendelson, Boamah & Gauthier (2022) opines that business leaders can improve employee engagement using strategies such as effective communication around rewards, empowerment of teams, leadership capability to implement the strategies, clear understanding of the relationship between employee engagement and profitability, and regular monitoring of internal and external engagement metrics. Kaaviyapriya and Xavier (2020) indicated performance management systems such as goal setting, feedback, rewards, and recognition, learning and development, appraisal process, and work culture, also impact the level of engagement in an organization. Engaged employees usually experience positive emotions and transfer their creativity and enthusiasm to other colleagues.

Dimensions of Employee Engagement

Physical engagement (PE): When employees are engaged, certain physical traits are visible. Engaged employees show commitment to achieving business objectives and extend themselves discretionally despite high work demands (Reissova & Papay, 2021). Engaged employees recover quickly from physical exhaustion, take ownership for their deliverables, are less likely to withdraw from a challenge, and show up at work when it matters most. Physical engagement is about presence; how present does the employee feel while they are working? In other words, does the employee feel that their job is simply happening to them (unengaged) or that they are taking an active role in their job and making moves to further their skills and career (engaged)? Physical engagement involves physical activity responding to work-related stimuli such as equipment operation or customer interaction. Employee physical engagement is essential because it helps increase productivity and promotes health among employees by encouraging them to move more throughout their day. Physical engagement involves the employee's attitude towards their work, engagement in work activities, and the physical and mental effort they expend while performing their jobs. These activities demonstrate their investment in their job. Kahn linked the amount of mental and physical effort one puts into their job with increased confidence. Physically engaged employees feel enthusiasm for the work they do and have an improvement mind set. Physically engaged employees may also be more likely to take advantage of learning and development opportunities. Physical engagement is tied to physical (and mental) well-being.

Employee Retention (ER): Recruiting employees is not just a matter of getting people on board; getting the right people on board and retaining them has become very important for any organization (Ahmad, Khan, & Haque, 2020). An array of evolutions, such as globalization, increasing knowledge work, accelerating technological advancement, and rising competition, make it vital for institutions to acquire distinctive human capital for competitive advantage and organizational success (Fahim, 2018). These valuable employees become beneficial resources for companies so that they can effectively provide and serve the organization's survival (Zainee & Puteh, 2020). However, Amarakoon and Colley (2022) argued that a key challenge faced by organizations worldwide in the 21st century is the attraction and retention of a skilled workforce. According to Milman and Dickson (2014), if human capital is viewed as a sustainable competitive advantage, retaining valuable employees must be one of the top priorities industry leaders must adopt. Employee retention is defined as an organization's ability to prevent proficient employees from withdrawing from the organization (Tyagi, 2021). Employee retention is a voluntary move by an organization to create an environment that engages employees in the long term. Retention is, therefore, viewed as a logical inverse of turnover, as it indicates the behavior of continue/stay rather than quitting or leaving the organization. Aman-Ullah, Aziz, Ibrahim, Mehmood, and Abbas (2021) further stated that the ways an organization deals with its employees through attraction, recruitment and motivation, keep employees closer or away from the organization.

Methodology

The study adopted the descriptive survey design as its methodological framework and covered a population of 23,126 senior staff (teaching and non-teaching staff) of the five (5) federal universities in south-east, Nigeria. Data used in this study were generated from both primary and secondary sources and stratified random sampling technique was used in determining the 430 senior staff that were sampled. The research instrument was subjected to validity test while Cronbach Alpha was used to test its reliability. The research questions were analyzed using Spearman's rank correlation statistics as against simple Pearson (r) correlation statistic because the basic normality assumption of the error term was not satisfied, so as to establish the relationship between the dependent and independent variables in the study. Hypotheses were tested with Theil-Sen regression technique. The acceptance or rejection of null hypothesis was based on whether the calculated p-value is less than the level of significance (0.05), otherwise the null hypothesis was accepted not be rejected.

Results

Test of Research Questions and Hypotheses

In this section, the Spearman rank correlation coefficient and the Theil regression techniques were employed to address research questions and hypotheses respectively since the normality assumption of the error term was not satisfied.

Research Question One

How have compliance to affirmative action (CAA) affected the physical engagement of employees (PEE) in federal universities in South-East, Nigeria?

Table 1: Spearman’s Rank Correlation Summary for Compliance to Affirmative Action (CAA) and Physical Engagement of Employees (PEE)

Variables	N	Σ	\bar{X}	SD	R
PEE	382	5617	14.7042	2.9562	0.945
CAA	382	5788	15.1518	2.8373	

Very High Relationship

Source: Extracted from SPSS Output

Testing of Hypothesis One

H0: Compliance to affirmative action does not have significant effects on physical engagement of employees in federal universities in South-East, Nigeria.

Table 2: ANOVA Summary for Theil-Sen Regression of PEE and CAA

Response: PEE	Df	Sum of Squares	Mean Squares	F-value	p-value
CAA	1	3067.2	3067.19	2433.3	0.000
Residuals	380	479.0	1.26		

Source: Extracted from R-Studio Output

The result in Table 2 shows that the mean squares of 3067.19 for compliance to affirmative action and 1.26 for residuals, F-calculation value of 2433.3 and a p-value of 0.000 which is less than 0.05. This indicates statistically significant result. Therefore, the null hypothesis which stated that compliance to affirmative action does not have significant effects on physical engagement of employees in federal universities in South-East, Nigeria is rejected. Hence, the study concludes that compliance to affirmative action does have significant effects on physical engagement of employees in federal universities in South-East, Nigeria.

Research Question Two

What are the effects of fair labour right protection (FLRP) on employees’ retention (ER) in federal universities in the study area?

Table 3: Spearman’s Rank Correlation Summary for Employee Retention (ER) and Fair Labour Right Protection (FLRP)

Variables	N	Σ	\bar{X}	SD	R
ER	382	5387	14.9501	3.9402	0.9871
FLRP	382	5565	14.5415	4.9272	

Very High Relationship

Source: Extracted from SPSS Output

Table 3 shows the result obtained in respect of research question one. The result reveals that the Spearman rank correlation coefficient is 0.978, which is very high. This implies that the effect of

fair labour right protection on employees' retention in federal universities in South-East, Nigeria is of very high extent.

Testing of Hypothesis Two

H₀₂: Fair labour right protection does not have significant effects on employee retention in federal universities in South-East, Nigeria

Table 4: ANOVA Summary for Theil-Sen Regression of ER and FLRP

Response: ER	Df	Sum of Squares	Mean Squares	F-value	p-value
FLRP	1	6949.1	5849.1	1781.2	0.000
Residuals	380	1346.0	3.65		

Source: Extracted from R-Studio Output

The result in Table 4 shows that the mean squares of 6949.1 for fair labour right protection and 3.65 for residuals, F-calculation value of 1781.2 and a p-value of 0.000 which is less than 0.05. This indicates statistically significant result. Therefore, the null hypothesis which stated that fair labour right protection does not have significant influence on employee retention in federal universities in South-East, Nigeria is rejected. Hence, the study concludes that fair labour right protection has significant influence on employee retention in federal universities in South-East, Nigeria.

Conclusion

In conclusion, inclusive employment policies significantly enhance employee engagement by fostering a fair, inclusive, and respectful work environment. These employment policies lead to increased job satisfaction, enhanced trust and loyalty, higher morale, improved productivity, and better mental health among employees. By promoting diversity and reducing workplace conflicts, inclusive employment creates a positive organizational culture where all employees feel valued and empowered. This study therefore concludes that inclusive employment has significant effects on employees' engagement in federal government owned universities in South-East, Nigeria.

Recommendations

- i. Due to the profound positive effects that compliance to affirmative action has on the physical engagement of employees of federal universities in South-East, Nigeria and the need to sustain same, the management of these universities should ensure that there is a regular monitoring and auditing of affirmative action by scrutinizing the hiring, promotion, and compensation practices to identify and address potential disparities. They should also be intentional in ensuring that underrepresented groups are adequately represented in all spheres;
- ii. In order to enhance their equal employment opportunities contribution to employees' engagement, federal universities in South-East, Nigeria should ensure that the ethos of industrial democracy are respected and the protection of labour rights unbiased. They can achieve this through the formation of Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) that represent diverse communities within the universities. These groups can provide support, advocacy, and a sense of belonging for

employees on industrial right issues especially when an employee perceives and reports unconscious bias against him or her by their superiors or management.

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