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Employee motivation and academic staff performance in Nigerian private universities

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Abstract

This study examined the influence of employee motivation on academic staff performance in Nigerian private universities. The growing demand for quality teaching, research productivity, student supervision, and effective institutional service delivery has made staff motivation a strategic issue in university administration. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design and reports analysis based on a sample of 150 academic staff selected from private universities in Nigeria using a structured questionnaire. Data were analysed using frequency distribution, mean, standard deviation, Pearson Product Moment Correlation, and multiple regression analysis. The findings indicate that financial motivation, promotion opportunities, recognition and rewards, and a conducive work environment are positively associated with academic staff efficiency. The overall relationship between motivation and staff efficiency was strong and positive ($r = .78$), while the regression model indicated that motivation explained 61% of the variation in staff efficiency ($R^2 = .61$). Among the reported predictors, work environment recorded the strongest standardized effect, followed by financial motivation, promotion opportunity, and recognition. The study concludes that strategically designed motivational practices can strengthen teaching effectiveness, research output, commitment, classroom management, and student supervision in Nigerian private universities. It recommends improved remuneration, transparent and timely promotion, institutional recognition systems, conducive teaching and research facilities, and sustained professional development support.

Keywords: Employee motivation,academic staff performance, teachers' efficiency, private universities, higher education, Nigeria

Introduction

Education is a major instrument of national development because it contributes to human capital formation, technological advancement, economic growth, and social transformation. Universities occupy a central position in this process through teaching, research, community service, innovation, and manpower development. In Nigeria, private universities have become increasingly important as demand for higher education rises and institutions seek to maintain quality academic standards.

The performance of universities depends substantially on the competence, commitment, and efficiency of their academic staff. Lecturers facilitate learning, conduct research, mentor students, supervise academic work, implement curricula, and contribute to institutional administration. Consequently, the quality of academic outcomes is closely linked to the conditions under which lecturers work and the motivational mechanisms available to them.

Employee motivation refers to the internal and external forces that stimulate employees to direct effort toward organizational goals. Within university settings, these forces include remuneration, allowances, promotion, job security, recognition, professional development, research support, leadership support, and the quality of the work environment. Appropriate motivational practices can strengthen commitment, productivity, creativity, job satisfaction, and willingness to accept additional responsibilities.

In this study, academic staff performance is reflected in teachers' efficiency: the capacity of lecturers to discharge teaching, research, supervision, assessment, curriculum implementation, and administrative responsibilities effectively. Efficient lecturers contribute to students' academic achievement, institutional reputation, research visibility, and the overall quality of university education.

Private universities in Nigeria may face motivational challenges associated with remuneration, heavy workload, research support, promotion processes, staff development opportunities, and employment conditions. Such challenges can weaken morale and reduce the quality or timeliness of academic work. Conversely, evidence cited in the source paper suggests that adequate financial incentives, promotion opportunities, supportive working conditions, and recognition are associated with improved teacher productivity and commitment (Abubakar, 2024; Oni *et al*., 2017; Usman & Muhammad, 2025; Yusuf, 2022) [1, 9, 10].

Against this background, the study examines how financial motivation, promotion opportunities, recognition and rewards, and the work environment relate to academic staff efficiency in Nigerian private universities. The paper also evaluates the combined explanatory effect of these dimensions on staff performance.

Objectives of the Study

The major objective of the study is to examine the impact of employee motivation on academic staff efficiency in Nigerian private universities.

1. Examine the effect of financial motivation on academic staff efficiency.
2. Determine the effect of promotion opportunities on academic staff efficiency.
3. Assess the effect of recognition and rewards on academic staff efficiency.
4. Examine the influence of work environment on academic staff efficiency.
5. Determine the combined effect of motivation on academic staff efficiency.

Research Questions

1. What effect does financial motivation have on academic staff efficiency?
2. How do promotion opportunities affect academic staff efficiency?
3. What influence do recognition and rewards have on academic staff efficiency?
4. How does the work environment affect academic staff efficiency?
5. What is the combined effect of motivation on academic staff efficiency?

Research Hypotheses

H_{01}: Financial motivation has no significant effect on academic staff efficiency.
H_{02}: Promotion opportunities have no significant effect on academic staff efficiency.
H_{03}: Recognition and rewards have no significant effect on academic staff efficiency.
H_{04}: Work environment has no significant effect on academic staff efficiency.
H_{05}: Motivation has no significant combined effect on academic staff efficiency.

Review of Related Literature

1. Concept of Employee Motivation

Motivation is the process through which employees are stimulated to direct effort toward desired organizational outcomes. It incorporates intrinsic and extrinsic factors that shape behaviour, commitment, persistence, and productivity. In university settings, the source paper identifies salary and allowances, promotion, job security, recognition, training opportunities, research grants, leadership support, and a conducive work environment as major motivational factors.

Financial motivation addresses the material rewards associated with employment, including salary, allowances, and other incentives. Abubakar (2024) [1]is cited as showing that adequate remuneration and welfare packages improve teachers' morale and classroom effectiveness. Usman and Muhammad (2025) are also cited as reporting that institutional resources and motivational strategies positively influence teachers' job performance and productivity.

2. Academic Staff Efficiency and Performance

Academic staff efficiency refers to the extent to which lecturers competently and productively discharge academic and administrative duties. Relevant indicators include teaching effectiveness, research productivity, student performance, timely completion of tasks, classroom management, academic commitment, and quality of supervision. Yusuf (2022) is cited as associating lecturer motivation with stronger organizational commitment, research productivity, and teaching effectiveness in Nigerian universities.

3. Financial Motivation and Staff Efficiency

Financial rewards can influence the willingness of academic staff to sustain effort, meet deadlines, undertake research, and remain committed to institutional responsibilities. Salary adequacy and timely payment are especially relevant because they affect employees' ability to meet basic and family needs. Within the reported data, financial motivation was positively associated with academic staff efficiency and produced a significant regression coefficient.

4. Promotion Opportunities and Staff Efficiency

Promotion represents both career progression and institutional acknowledgement of professional contribution. Transparent and timely promotion can reinforce commitment, encourage research activity, and strengthen perceptions of fairness. Conversely, delayed promotion may reduce morale. The source paper reports that promotion opportunities significantly predict staff efficiency.

5. Recognition, Rewards, and Staff Efficiency

Recognition includes formal or informal acknowledgement of employees' achievements and contributions. Awards, commendations, appreciation from management, and other non-financial rewards can strengthen morale and organizational identification. The reported findings show a positive and significant contribution of recognition to staff efficiency.

6. Work Environment and Staff Efficiency

The work environment encompasses physical facilities and institutional conditions that enable academic work. Adequate offices, internet connectivity, libraries, teaching resources, and research facilities can improve teaching effectiveness and research productivity. In the reported regression results, work environment recorded the strongest standardized coefficient among the four predictors.

Theoretical Framework

1. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory

Maslow's hierarchy of needs proposes that human needs progress through physiological, safety, social, esteem, and self-actualization levels. Applied to university employment, the theory suggests that staff performance is strengthened when institutions provide adequate material welfare, job security, collegial belonging, recognition, and opportunities for professional achievement and self-development.

2. Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory

Herzberg distinguishes between hygiene factors and motivators. Hygiene factors include salary, working conditions, and organizational policies, while motivators include achievement, recognition, responsibility, and advancement. The framework is particularly relevant to this study because the explanatory variables include both hygiene-related conditions and higher-level motivational factors.

3. Human Capital Theory

Human Capital Theory emphasizes investment in employees' knowledge, competencies, welfare, training, and development as a basis for improved productivity. In higher education, staff development, research support, and professional growth can strengthen the capacity of lecturers to deliver teaching, research, and supervision responsibilities more effectively.

4. Conceptual Linkage

The study conceptualizes academic staff efficiency as an outcome influenced by four motivational dimensions: financial motivation, promotion opportunities, recognition and rewards, and work environment. The combined effect of these factors is assessed through multiple regression analysis.

Methodology

1. Research Design

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design to examine the relationship between employee motivation and academic staff efficiency in selected Nigerian private universities.

2. Area and Population of the Study

The study focused on selected private universities in Nigeria. The target population comprised academic staff working in the selected institutions.

3. Sample Size and Sampling Technique

The reported analysis used a sample of 150 academic staff. A simple random sampling technique was specified for selecting respondents.

4. Instrument for Data Collection

Data were measured using a structured questionnaire titled Motivation and Teachers' Efficiency Questionnaire (MTEQ). The instrument used a four-point Likert response format: Strongly Agree = 4, Agree = 3, Disagree = 2, and Strongly Disagree = 1.

5. Validity and Reliability

The source paper reports that experts in educational management validated the instrument. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with a reported reliability coefficient of 0.84, indicating acceptable reliability for the study instrument.

6. Method of Data Analysis

The reported data analysis comprised frequency distribution, percentage, mean, standard deviation, Pearson Product Moment Correlation, and multiple regression analysis. A mean score of 2.50 or above was accepted, while a mean below 2.50 was rejected. Hypotheses were tested at the 0.05 level of significance.

Results

1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	88	58.7%
	Female	62	41.3%
Qualification	Master's Degree	54	36.0%
	PhD	96	64.0%
Experience	1–5 years	40	26.7%
	6–10 years	65	43.3%
	Above 10 years	45	30.0%

The demographic distribution indicates that 58.7% of respondents were male and 41.3% were female. Most respondents (64.0%) held a PhD, while 43.3% had between six and ten years of experience.

2. Financial Motivation and Academic Staff Efficiency

Statement	Mean	SD	Decision
Salary motivates me to teach effectively.	3.45	0.61	Accepted
Allowances improve my commitment to work.	3.38	0.69	Accepted
Timely payment of salary increases productivity.	3.56	0.55	Accepted
Financial incentives improve research performance.	3.42	0.64	Accepted
Grand Mean	3.45		Accepted

The grand mean of 3.45 exceeds the decision threshold of 2.50, indicating that respondents generally agreed that financial motivation improves academic staff efficiency.

3. Promotion Opportunities and Academic Staff Efficiency

Statement	Mean	SD	Decision
Promotion motivates me to perform better.	3.49	0.58	Accepted
Delayed promotion reduces morale.	3.37	0.70	Accepted
Career advancement improves commitment.	3.44	0.62	Accepted
Promotion encourages research productivity.	3.31	0.71	Accepted
Grand Mean	3.40		Accepted

The grand mean of 3.40 indicates broad agreement that promotion and career advancement are associated with improved academic staff efficiency.

4. Recognition and Rewards

Statement	Mean	SD	Decision
Recognition improves commitment.	3.36	0.66	Accepted
Awards motivate better performance.	3.29	0.72	Accepted
Appreciation from management increases morale.	3.48	0.57	Accepted
Recognition improves classroom performance.	3.34	0.69	Accepted
Grand Mean	3.37		Accepted

The grand mean of 3.37 shows that respondents perceived recognition and rewards as important drivers of commitment, morale, and classroom performance.

5. Work Environment and Academic Staff Efficiency

Statement	Mean	SD	Decision
Conducive environment improves teaching effectiveness.	3.52	0.53	Accepted
Availability of facilities improves productivity.	3.41	0.61	Accepted
Good office conditions improve morale.	3.46	0.58	Accepted
Internet and library facilities enhance research efficiency.	3.58	0.49	Accepted
Grand Mean	3.49		Accepted

Work environment recorded the highest grand mean (3.49) among the four motivational dimensions. Internet and library facilities received the highest individual mean score (3.58).

6. Correlation Analysis

Variables	Correlation Coefficient (r)	Interpretation
Motivation and Academic Staff Efficiency	0.78	Strong positive relationship

The reported correlation coefficient of r = .78 indicates a strong positive relationship between overall motivation and academic staff efficiency.

7. Regression Analysis

Model	R	R²	Adjusted R²	Std. Error
Motivation and Academic Staff Efficiency	0.78	0.61	0.59	0.41

The model summary indicates that motivation explains 61% of the variation in academic staff efficiency ($R^2 = .61$), with an adjusted R^2 of .59.

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	45.22	4	10.67	42.68	0.000
Residual	34.20	145	0.24		
Total	76.88	149			

The ANOVA result reports F = 42.68 with $p < .05$, indicating that the regression model is statistically significant.

Variable	Beta	t-value	Sig.	Decision
Constant	1.18	4.36	0.000	Significant
Financial Motivation	0.41	5.44	0.000	Significant
Promotion Opportunity	0.33	4.82	0.001	Significant
Recognition	0.29	3.98	0.002	Significant
Work Environment	0.46	6.13	0.000	Significant

All four motivational dimensions are reported as statistically significant predictors of academic staff efficiency. Work environment has the largest standardized coefficient ($\beta = .46$), followed by financial motivation ($\beta = .41$), promotion opportunity ($\beta = .33$), and recognition ($\beta = .29$).

Discussion of Findings

The results indicate that employee motivation is strongly associated with academic staff efficiency in Nigerian private universities. The overall correlation of .78 suggests that improvements in motivational conditions are accompanied by higher reported levels of teaching, research, supervision, and academic commitment. The regression model further indicates that the motivational dimensions jointly account for a substantial proportion of variation in staff efficiency.

Financial motivation emerged as a significant predictor of staff efficiency. This finding suggests that salary, allowances, timely payment, and other financial incentives can support lecturers' commitment to teaching and research. The result is consistent with Abubakar (2024) [1], as cited in the source paper, which associates adequate remuneration and welfare support with stronger teacher effectiveness and commitment.

Promotion opportunities also significantly predicted staff efficiency. The implication is that career advancement can function as both a reward for past performance and an incentive for continued academic productivity. When promotion processes are timely and credible, lecturers may be more willing to invest effort in research, teaching quality, professional service, and institutional responsibilities.

Recognition and rewards were positively associated with efficiency, showing the value of non-financial motivational mechanisms. Management appreciation, awards, and acknowledgment of achievement can reinforce morale and commitment. This result aligns with the paper's theoretical use of Herzberg's motivator factors, particularly recognition and achievement.

Work environment recorded the strongest standardized regression coefficient and the highest descriptive grand mean. This suggests that motivation in universities is not limited to pay. Academic staff also require functional offices, libraries, internet access, teaching facilities, research support, and a general environment that enables them to perform effectively. The finding supports the source paper's argument that institutional resources and supportive conditions are central to academic productivity (Usman & Muhammad, 2025).

Taken together, the findings support the central proposition of Maslow's, Herzberg's, and Human Capital perspectives: employee needs, meaningful recognition, advancement, and investment in productive capacity can shape work behaviour and performance. For private universities, a balanced motivational strategy that combines financial, career, psychosocial, and infrastructural interventions is therefore more defensible than reliance on any single incentive.

Summary of Major Findings

1. Financial motivation significantly improves academic staff efficiency.
2. Promotion opportunities positively affect academic staff productivity and commitment.
3. Recognition and rewards improve morale and performance.
4. A conducive work environment enhances teaching and research performance and recorded the strongest predictor coefficient.
5. Overall motivation has a strong positive relationship with academic staff efficiency (r = .78).
6. The reported regression model explains 61% of the variation in academic staff efficiency ($R^2 = .61$).

Conclusion

The study concludes that employee motivation is a significant determinant of academic staff efficiency in Nigerian private universities. Lecturers are more likely to demonstrate effective teaching, stronger research productivity, greater commitment, better classroom management, and improved student supervision when institutions provide appropriate financial incentives, credible promotion opportunities, meaningful recognition, and an enabling work environment. The results therefore position staff motivation as a strategic human resource and university-management issue rather than a narrow welfare concern.

Recommendations

1. Private universities should periodically review salary structures and allowances to maintain internal fairness and strengthen staff commitment.
2. University management should implement transparent, merit-based, and timely promotion systems with clearly communicated criteria.
3. Formal recognition and reward systems should be strengthened to acknowledge excellence in teaching, research, student supervision, innovation, and institutional service.
4. Universities should improve the physical and digital work environment, including offices, classrooms, internet connectivity, libraries, laboratories, and research facilities.
5. Institutions should expand professional development support through conferences, workshops, mentoring, training, and research-capacity initiatives.
6. University proprietors and relevant education stakeholders should treat academic staff welfare and infrastructure as complementary investments in institutional performance.
7. Future studies should use broader multi-institutional samples and, where possible, longitudinal or mixed-method designs to test the durability and mechanisms of the reported relationships.

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