

HUMAN RESOURCES AND INSTITUTIONAL PERFORMANCE IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES: AN EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the nexus between human resource management (HRM) practices and university performance in Nigeria. Overtime, there has been persistent challenges in the higher education sector, ranging from declining educational quality, academic staff migration, and administrative inefficiencies among other challenges. Drawing on Human Capital Theory and the Resource-Based View (RBV), the study investigates the influence of recruitment and selection, training and development, performance appraisal, career development, and employee welfare practices on institutional performance. A mixed-methods research design was adopted, combining quantitative survey data from academic and non-academic staff with qualitative interviews to provide a comprehensive understanding of HRM practices in Nigerian universities. Quantitative data were analysed using correlation, regression, and analysis of variance techniques, while qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis. The findings reveal a significant positive relationship between strategic HRM practices and university performance ($R^2 = 0.52$, $p < .001$), indicating that HRM practices explain 52% of the variation in institutional performance. Training and development emerged as the strongest predictor of performance outcomes. The study further demonstrates that effective HRM practices enhance research productivity, teaching effectiveness, employee performance, and student satisfaction. The findings highlight the strategic importance of human resources as a source of sustainable institutional advantage. The study recommends strengthening merit-based recruitment, continuous professional development, performance-based recognition systems, and employee welfare programmes to improve the effectiveness and competitiveness of Nigerian universities.

Keywords: Human Resource Management; Nigerian Universities; Employee Engagement; Training and Development; Higher Education.

JEL Classification: H3, G12, Z10

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Universities play a critical role in national development through teaching, research, innovation, and community service. The effectiveness of these functions depends largely on the quality, competence, and commitment of human resources. Human resources constitute the most valuable asset of any organization because they drive planning, implementation, innovation, and organizational adaptation. In higher education institutions, academic and non-academic staff are central to the achievement of institutional goals and the delivery of quality educational outcomes (Nayalotyo & Pedzisia, 2024; Enwereuzo, 2023). In Nigerian universities, human resources comprise academic staff, administrative personnel, and support staff, all of whom contribute to institutional performance. Academic staff are primarily responsible for teaching, research, knowledge creation, and innovation, while administrative and support personnel facilitate the effective functioning of university systems and operations (Etor, 2014; Akinyemi & Abddin, 2017). Consequently, the quality of human resource management (HRM) practices significantly influences institutional effectiveness, employee productivity, research output, service delivery, and student satisfaction.

From the perspective of Human Capital Theory, employees represent valuable knowledge assets whose skills, competencies, and experience contribute directly to organizational performance. Similarly, the Resource-Based View (RBV) argues that unique and well-managed human resources can serve as a source of sustainable competitive advantage. These theoretical perspectives suggest that universities that invest strategically in recruitment, training, performance management, employee welfare, and career development are more likely to achieve superior institutional outcomes. Despite the strategic importance of human resources, Nigerian universities continue to face significant workforce-related challenges. These challenges include deficiencies in recruitment processes, limited opportunities for professional development, inadequate motivation and reward systems, delayed promotions, and increasing staff migration to foreign institutions. Such challenges have negatively affected employee morale, productivity, retention, and overall institutional performance (Adeniyi et al., 2021; Asiyai, 2021).

The consequences of ineffective HRM practices are reflected in declining research productivity, challenges in teaching quality, administrative inefficiencies, and difficulties in maintaining global competitiveness. These issues have raised concerns among policymakers, university administrators, and

other stakeholders regarding the capacity of Nigerian universities to fulfil their educational and developmental mandates effectively (Enwereuzo, 2023).

Although substantial investments have been made in higher education, many Nigerian universities continue to experience challenges in achieving desired performance outcomes. Existing studies have largely examined either human resource management practices or institutional performance independently, with limited attention given to the relationship between HRM practices and university performance within the Nigerian higher education context. This gap creates uncertainty regarding which HRM practices contribute most significantly to institutional effectiveness and sustainable performance.

Therefore, this study investigates the relationship between human resource management practices and university performance in Nigeria. Specifically, the study examines how recruitment and selection, training and development, performance appraisal, employee motivation, and retention strategies influence institutional performance. The findings are expected to contribute to the growing literature on HRM in higher education while providing evidence-based recommendations for policymakers and university administrators seeking to enhance institutional effectiveness.

1.1 Research Objectives

The main aim of this study is to examine the influence of human resource management practices on the performance of Nigerian universities. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Review the current human resource management practices implemented in selected Nigerian universities.
2. Examine the influence of recruitment, training and development, employee motivation, and retention practices on institutional performance.
3. Assess how HRM strategies contribute to improvements in academic and administrative performance.
4. Identify barriers to effective human resource management and propose policy recommendations for improvement.

1.2 Research Questions

1. What human resource management practices are currently implemented in Nigerian universities?
2. How do HRM practices influence academic and administrative performance?
3. To what extent do HRM strategies align with institutional goals and objectives?
4. How can Nigerian universities optimize human resource management practices to improve institutional performance?

1.3 Significance of the Study

The study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on human resource management within higher education institutions in Nigeria. It provides practical insights for university administrators, policymakers, and other stakeholders on strategies for improving employee performance and institutional effectiveness. The findings may also support the formulation of evidence-based policies aimed at strengthening human capital development, improving university governance, and enhancing the global competitiveness of Nigerian universities.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Conceptualizing Human Resources in Higher Education

At universities, Human Resources Management (HRM) means connecting all types of employees to gradually meet the university's goals. At universities in Nigeria, the HR public environment is different from the private sector because of rigid organization rules, less money to manage and variable government directives (Oludayo et al., 2019). In most colleges and universities, HRM includes tasks such as selecting and hiring staff, developing staff through training, encouraging motivation, and assessing their performance each of these duties plays a big part in encouraging better productivity. Armstrong and Taylor (2023) suggested that human resources should be treated as assets that can enhance or stop the accomplishment of objectives. It is difficult for many Nigerian universities to secure and support outstanding staff, as they have issues with funding, inadequate pay, and limited goals for career advancement (Obisi et al., 2020). Due to these structure challenges, education quality, research success and help for students are all negatively affected which are important measures of how an institution performs.

2.2 Institutional Performance: Dimensions and Metrics

Higher education institutions perform in several different aspects. It covers academic achievements (how many graduates and how much is researched), efficiency in running the school (prompt admission and accreditation), how both staff and students feel and rankings by various bodies (such as national and global university rankings). Though the National Universities Commission (NUC) is responsible for checking performance, regular complaints about lower standards and loss of skilled workers point to flaws in the system. Adeniyi et al. (2021) asserted that the way human resources are used has a strong effect on institutional performance. A lack of staff development opportunities can prevent new ideas and flexible thinking and insufficient staff motivation tends to decrease job satisfaction and raise the number

of employees quitting. As a result of these problems, teaching may suffer, research productivity decreases, and administration is not as organized as it should be.

2.3 The Link between Human Resource Practices and University Performance

Several studies have shown that good HR practices are connected to better outcomes for the institution. According to Adebayo and Ogunyomi (2014) how recruiting is done and the conditions for promotion can boost staff motivation and build up the reputation of Nigerian public universities. Likewise, Yahya and Aina (2020) discovered that professional development greatly boosted the involvement of faculty members and improved teaching. Aligning HRM with a company's objectives is now recognized internationally as critical for success and being competitive. The World Bank (2021) reports that universities in developing countries that emphasize selecting talent, training employees and appraisals based on rewards do better in their research and student outcomes. Nevertheless, in Nigeria, implementing such strategies is often uneven because official and political interference gets in the way.

The relationship between human resource practices and university performance can also be understood through the combined lens of Human Capital Theory and the Resource-Based View. Effective recruitment enables institutions to attract high-quality human capital, while training and development enhance employee competencies and productivity. When these competencies are retained and strategically utilized, they become institutional resources capable of generating sustainable competitive advantages in teaching, research, and community service. Consequently, universities that adopt strategic HR practices are more likely to achieve superior institutional performance than those relying on traditional administrative approaches.

2.4 Challenges Facing Human Resources in Nigerian Universities

1- Poor Remuneration and Brain Drain

A lack of adequate staff remuneration in Nigerian universities drives away skilled teachers to overseas colleges, mainly in North America, Europe, and particular parts of Asia (Asiyai, 2021). As a result of brain drain, universities' ability to innovate becomes lower and they lose important knowledge.

2- Limited Training and Capacity Building

A lot of Nigerian universities do not have properly defined training and development plans. Such projects are generally underfinanced and often started with a makeshift approach. Ojo and Salami discovered in 2023 that only thirty percent of employment staff in Nigerian public universities had participated in professional development courses.

3- Unclear Career Progression

There are regular delays, favoritism and secret criteria in university promotions which leave staff feeling unsatisfied and less productive (Okebukola, 2020). The issue is especially severe for male scholars as well as for women, as additional obstacles are in their way.

4- Over centralized Decision-Making

Because the administration in many Nigerian universities is highly centralized, departmental, and faculty-level managers are prevented from making many HR decisions. This situation leads to less innovation and responsiveness (Oladipo et al., 2022).

2.5 Global Best Practices in University Human Resource Management

Internationally, best practices in university HRM emphasize decentralization, meritocracy, continuous professional development, and results-based appraisal systems. For instance, universities in the United Kingdom and Australia have implemented performance-linked promotion systems and robust mentoring programs to enhance staff capabilities (Teichler, 2020). Similarly, institutions in South Africa and Kenya have begun adopting strategic HR models that prioritize employee engagement and internal accountability (Mbatha, 2021).

These models offer valuable lessons for Nigeria. While contextual differences must be considered, the principles of transparency, equity, and strategic alignment remain universally applicable. Investing in modern HR systems, adopting digital tools for performance tracking, and engaging staff in decision-making processes are practices that can improve morale and performance.

2.6 Empirical Studies on Human Resource Management in Nigerian Universities

Many local studies have shared knowledge about HRM and how it affects university performance in Nigeria. For example, Ige (2021) looked at four federal universities and found that universities with stronger HR support got better marks for student happiness and higher research performance. Similarly, Eze and Onuoha (2022) distinguished that staff welfare programs and better teaching are related to each other. Still, more is needed to see how these practices connect with the overall goals of higher education. Integrative frameworks are needed that relate human resources practices like recruiting, training, assessing, and retaining staff with performance indicators like credit obtained, research aid won and students completing their programs.

2.7 Conceptual Gaps and Research Justification

Even with the rise of HRM in Nigerian universities, not all existing research goes beyond basic description or covers sufficient areas. Few approaches make serious use of different approaches or comparisons to study federal, state, and private institutions. In addition, there isn't much data that follows changes in HR over time and how they shape the performance of the organization. The research uses both kinds of data from Nigerian universities to help fill these gaps. The findings will show how best to use HRM to improve institution outcomes and support national growth.

2.8 Theoretical Framework

This study uses the theory behind it to examine how human resources affect the performance of Nigerian universities. The research looks at three main theories in particular: Human Capital Theory, the Resource-Based View (RBV) of the Firm and the Goal-Setting Theory. All together, they help us see the connection between investing in people and the result in productivity, research from institutions and effective administration.

2.8.1 Human Capital Theory

Human Capital Theory (by Becker in 1964) claims that the competencies and abilities of individuals add to the productivity of any organization. The theory supposes that adequate education, training, and development result in better performance for individuals as well as for whole organizations. In Nigerian universities, this approach is more meaningful than in other places. Programs for faculty support, professional development, workshops, and training activities boost academic and administrative employee skills which in turn results in better teaching, conducting research and enhancing the university's overall management (Olaniyan & Okemakinde, 2008). Lacking staff development usually leads universities to see their innovative potential stop, fewer publications and less satisfied students, all indications that their performance is lowering. HCT also explains the economic problems linked to issues in HR. As a result, when experts leave for work in wealthier countries, it greatly affects universities' ability to participate in the global higher education sector (Asiyai, 2021). As a result, a key factor in an institution's success is to continually invest in helping employees grow and keeping them around.

2.8.2 Resource-Based View (RBV) of the Firm

According to the Resource-Based View (Barney, 1991), organizational performance is based on having valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN) resources. Despite being first used in business,

the ideas in this theory are applicable to many areas of higher education. Under this model, effective management of human resources makes them crucial for giving universities a leading edge. Academic knowledge, the ability to teach well, good research skills and leading others are uncopiable by competing institutions. That's why the ones that manage to find, develop, and keep valuable personnel are usually better at ranking, performing research and meeting students' needs. The RBV also points out how important it is for a company's strategy to be aligned. Whether people in an organization make a difference or not depends on how they are used, backed up and incorporated into the institution's goals (Wright, Dunford, & Snell, 2001). Lack of clarity of roles, unpleasant working conditions and insufficient incentives at Nigerian universities prevent the HR team from achieving more which happens at the expense of the university's operations.

2.8.3 Goal-Setting Theory

It is thought by Locke and Latham (1990) in the Goal-Setting Theory that specific, tough goals are linked to reaching higher performance levels. It suggests that becoming clearer about our goals, being committed, getting feedback, and acting on it influences how well we do. When put into practice at universities, this theory assumes that, if expectations are clear and in line with what the institution needs, their work productivity will grow. Even so, several Nigerian universities have evaluation systems that either do not work well or are not well implemented, with weak feedback channels and unclear rules for promotion (Oladipo et al., 2022). As a result, people get confused, their morale falls, and they do not perform well. When schools build clear targets for teaching, scientific work and service delivery, the workers at these schools are more motivated and productive (Adeniji et al., 2021). If a company achieves alignment between personal goals, departmental priorities, and their wider vision and recognizes those achievements openly its effectiveness goes up. The theory is important for considering how leaders and communication affect HRM. People in managerial roles who clearly state responsibilities, track results and keep giving feedback help achieve higher results from the institution.

2.8.4 Integrative Application of Theories

Human Capital Theory, Resource-Based View (RBV), and Goal-Setting Theory each provide a unique perspective for understanding how human resource practices influence institutional performance. Human Capital Theory emphasizes the importance of investing in employees through education, training, and professional development to improve individual and organizational productivity. The theory suggests that universities that continuously develop the competencies, knowledge, and skills of

their staff are more likely to achieve superior academic and administrative outcomes. While Human Capital Theory explains the value created through investments in employees, the Resource-Based View extends this argument by explaining how such investments become sources of sustained institutional advantage. Human capital becomes strategically important when the acquired knowledge, expertise, research capability, and leadership skills are valuable, rare, difficult to imitate, and non-substitutable. Thus, RBV provides a mechanism through which investments in staff development are transformed into long-term institutional performance.

The integration of HCT and RBV is particularly relevant in the Nigerian university system where competition for qualified academics and administrators has intensified due to globalization and brain drain. From the HCT perspective, universities invest in staff through recruitment, training, mentoring, and capacity-building initiatives. From the RBV perspective, these investments create unique institutional resources that enhance teaching quality, research productivity, innovation, accreditation outcomes, and institutional reputation. Therefore, the effectiveness of HR practices depends not only on developing employees but also on retaining and strategically deploying them to achieve institutional objectives.

The Resource-Based View further emphasizes that human resources must be aligned with organizational strategy to generate value. Universities that successfully attract, develop, and retain talented staff are better positioned to achieve superior research outputs, effective administration, and enhanced student satisfaction.

Consequently, Human Capital Theory and RBV should not be viewed as competing explanations but as complementary perspectives. Human Capital Theory focuses on the process of developing employee capabilities, whereas RBV explains how these capabilities become strategic assets that drive sustainable institutional performance. Together, the two theories provide a comprehensive explanation of why strategic human resource management practices are essential for improving university performance in Nigeria. Goal-Setting Theory complements both perspectives by explaining how developed human resources can be directed toward achieving institutional objectives. The theory argues that clearly defined goals, performance feedback, and reward systems motivate employees to utilize their skills effectively. In the university context, performance appraisal systems, promotion criteria, research targets, and teaching expectations help align individual efforts with institutional priorities.

Accordingly, this study adopts an integrated theoretical framework in which Human Capital Theory explains employee development, RBV explains the strategic value of developed human resources, and Goal-Setting Theory explains the motivational processes through which employees apply their capabilities toward institutional goals. The interaction of these theories provides a robust

framework for examining how recruitment, training, performance appraisal, and staff welfare contribute to institutional performance in Nigerian universities.

2.9 Conceptual Model

The next part of this text provides a picture showing the links between human resource practices and how an organization performs: These Exogenous Variables are Recruitment and selection, Training and development, Motivation and incentives, Performance appraisal. Staff engagement, Strategic alignment and Goal clarity are the Mediating Variables. Academic performance, output from research, high-quality administration, satisfaction of students and staff are Endogenous Variables. According to the model, if HR practices draw from human capital and strategic resources and are linked with clear objectives, feedback, and continuous evaluation, then the institution will improve how it performs. It covers empirical study of the link between university staff and the success of Nigerian institutions. The analysis covers research steps, types of data collected, detailed info about the sample, analysis of the data and a discussion of the information. The aim is to collect numbers and examples that explain how people at universities impact effectiveness in Nigeria.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design, integrating quantitative survey data with qualitative interview evidence to examine the influence of human resource management practices on institutional performance in Nigerian universities. The mixed-methods approach enhances the validity and reliability of findings through methodological triangulation, enabling the convergence and corroboration of evidence from multiple sources (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). A structured questionnaire was administered to academic and non-academic staff in selected public and private universities across Nigeria. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with university administrators, human resource managers, and faculty union representatives to obtain deeper insights into the contextual realities of human resource management practices within higher education institutions.

3.2 Population and Sample

The study population comprised academic and non-academic staff from ten Nigerian universities representing federal, state, and private institutions across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones. Stratified random sampling was employed to ensure adequate representation of different categories of universities

and staff groups. The sample size of 650 respondents was considered adequate based on recommendations for multivariate statistical analysis and organizational research, where larger samples improve statistical power, representativeness, and generalizability of findings. The achieved sample of 503 valid responses exceeded the minimum threshold required for regression analysis and provided sufficient observations for robust statistical testing. A total of 650 questionnaires were distributed, of which 503 were correctly completed and returned, yielding a response rate of 77.4%. In addition, 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted with key institutional stakeholders.

Table 1: A summary of the sample profile

Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Academic Staff	310	61.6
Non-Academic Staff	193	38.4
Federal Universities	200	39.8
State Universities	160	31.8
Private Universities	143	28.4

Source: Authors Compilation, 2025

The inclusion of both academic and non-academic staff enabled the study to capture diverse perspectives on human resource practices, while the representation of federal, state, and private universities enhanced the external validity of the findings across different institutional contexts.

3.3 Data Collection Instruments

A five-section Likert-scale questionnaire was utilized for the quantitative phase of the study. The instrument measured:

1. Demographic characteristics including gender, age, rank, and years of service.
2. Human resource management practices, including recruitment and selection, training and development, performance appraisal, and employee welfare.
3. Employee motivation and job satisfaction.
4. Institutional performance indicators covering teaching effectiveness, research productivity, and administrative efficiency.
5. Employees' perceptions of organizational support and work environment.

The reliability of the instrument was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha coefficients, which ranged from 0.76 to 0.89 across all constructs, indicating satisfactory internal consistency and reliability. Prior

to the main survey, the questionnaire was subjected to expert review and pilot testing to ensure content validity, clarity, and suitability for the university context. Necessary modifications were made based on feedback received during the pilot phase.

3.4 Analytical Techniques

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS Version 26. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were first computed to summarize respondents' perceptions. Inferential statistical techniques comprising Pearson correlation analysis, multiple regression analysis, and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) were subsequently employed to test relationships among variables and examine differences across institutional categories.

Qualitative interview data were analyzed using NVivo software through a thematic analysis procedure. Interview transcripts were first transcribed verbatim and imported into NVivo for coding. Open coding was conducted to identify meaningful statements and recurring concepts. Similar codes were subsequently grouped into broader categories, leading to the development of overarching themes related to leadership effectiveness, staff development opportunities, employee motivation, bureaucratic constraints, and institutional support mechanisms. The use of NVivo enhanced analytical rigor by facilitating systematic coding, organization, retrieval, and interpretation of qualitative data.

To enhance trustworthiness, emerging themes were reviewed repeatedly and compared across interview participants to ensure consistency and credibility of interpretations. Representative quotations were selected to illustrate key findings and support the quantitative results.

3.5 Correlation Analysis

All human resource factors studied were positively and significantly correlated with institutional performance, based on the Pearson correlation results. This variable is correlated with performance to this extent and its significance can be measured by (p-value). Recruitment & Selection 0.54 $p < 0.01$ Training & Development 0.61 $p < 0.01$ Performance Appraisal is significant, with a highly reliable result (0.49 $p < 0.01$). Motivation & wages shared by 0.58; significance coefficient was significantly less than 0.01. This tells us that stronger HR actions are closely related to better results for the institutional Good .HR practices tend to lead to greater positive results for the institutional outputs.

3.6 Regression Analysis

A multiple regression analysis was run to understand how much people processes affect an organization's performance. You can find the model summary provided below. The adjusted R^2 is 0.52,

so when the model does not include the intercept, then it offers 52 percent of the total variance. $F(4, 498) = 140.83, p < 0.001$

As a result, the four HR predictors explain about 52% of the changes in how institutions perform
2 (Beta) 1.92 0.02 The process of choosing employees was highly related to workforce size. Training
& Development 0.274 7.15 $p < 0.001$ Performance Appraisal 0.163 4.162 $p < 0.001$ Pay & Motivation
0.219 6.022 $p < 0.001$ The strongest factor determining institutional performance was training and
development.

3.7 ANOVA

ANOVA results revealed a strong difference between federal, state and private universities in terms of how employees rate HR effectiveness ($F(2, 500) = 18.47, p < 0.001$). These results from the post hoc tests indicate that private universities have better systems in HR, with better training and appraisal than public ones.

3.8 Qualitative Insights

The thematic analysis conducted using NVivo identified five major themes: staff development and training deficiencies, employee motivation and welfare challenges, leadership effectiveness, bureaucratic constraints, and institutional support mechanisms. These themes largely corroborated the quantitative findings and provided deeper insights into how human resource management practices influence institutional performance in Nigerian universities.

3.8.1 Staff Development and Training Deficiencies

Many interview participants reported that universities lacked structured training programmes and comprehensive staff development plans. Respondents indicated that available workshops were often underfunded and did not adequately address the professional development needs of academic and non-academic staff. The findings suggest that inadequate investment in employee development may limit the acquisition of new knowledge and competencies necessary for improved teaching, research productivity, and administrative effectiveness.

3.8.2 Employee Motivation and Welfare Challenges

Many employees identified delayed salary payments, limited recognition for outstanding performance, and slow promotion processes as major factors contributing to reduced motivation and job satisfaction. These concerns indicate that employee welfare and reward systems remain critical determinants of workforce commitment, productivity, and retention within Nigerian universities.

3.8.3 Leadership Effectiveness

Several respondents emphasized the importance of effective leadership in improving human resource outcomes. Participants noted that institutions with visionary and supportive leadership tended to implement HR policies more effectively and experienced better staff engagement. The findings underscore the strategic role of leadership in aligning human resource practices with institutional goals and fostering a supportive organizational culture.

3.8.4 Bureaucratic Constraints

Participants from public universities frequently highlighted the challenges posed by excessive bureaucracy and political interference in human resource decision-making processes. According to respondents, delays in approvals and administrative procedures often hinder timely implementation of recruitment, promotion, and staff development initiatives. These bureaucratic bottlenecks were perceived as significant barriers to effective human resource management and institutional efficiency.

3.8.5 Institutional Support and Resource Availability

Interview participants also emphasized the importance of institutional support in maximizing employee performance. One HR officer stated:

"Even though our staff is capable, no formal system exists to make the most of their abilities. Because the university acts without structure, its performance is negatively affected."

Similarly, a lecturer from a state university remarked:

"If lecturers have important ideas but cannot obtain funding or institutional support, their potential contributions remain unrealized. In many cases, human resource management focuses more on administrative procedures than on employee development."

These responses suggest that institutional performance depends not only on the availability of skilled personnel but also on the presence of supportive systems, adequate resources, and strategic human resource policies that enable employees to contribute effectively to organizational objectives.

3.8.6 Emerging Challenges in Public Universities

Some respondents attributed the inefficiencies in public universities to political interference and corruption, which were perceived to negatively influence institutional decision-making processes. Others highlighted inadequate technological capacity, unclear organizational objectives, and weak leadership direction as persistent challenges affecting human resource management practices, particularly within federal and state universities. Overall, the qualitative findings reinforce the quantitative evidence by demonstrating that effective recruitment, continuous staff development, employee motivation, supportive leadership, and reduced bureaucratic interference are essential for enhancing institutional performance in Nigerian universities.

4.0 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This study examined the relationship between human resource management (HRM) practices and institutional performance in Nigerian universities. The findings demonstrate that effective HRM practices significantly contribute to improved teaching quality, research productivity, administrative efficiency, and overall institutional performance. These results are consistent with previous studies (Obisi & Ogunnaike, 2020; Adebayo & Lawal, 2021), which emphasized the strategic role of human resources in achieving organizational effectiveness.

Beyond confirming earlier studies, the present findings highlight the growing importance of strategic human resource management within the Nigerian higher education sector, which currently faces challenges such as inadequate funding, staff shortages, brain drain, declining research output, and increasing global competition. In this context, effective HRM practices are no longer merely administrative functions but have become essential mechanisms for institutional sustainability and competitiveness.

The study identified training and development as the strongest predictor of institutional performance. This finding supports Human Capital Theory, which argues that investments in employee knowledge, skills, and competencies enhance productivity and organizational outcomes. The prominence of training and development is particularly significant in Nigeria, where universities are increasingly required to compete in a global knowledge economy despite limited resources. Continuous

staff development enables academic and administrative personnel to adapt to technological innovations, evolving pedagogical practices, international research standards, and changing accreditation requirements. Consequently, institutions that prioritize capacity building are more likely to improve their teaching effectiveness, research visibility, and international reputation. The findings further revealed that employee motivation, welfare, recruitment, and performance appraisal significantly influence institutional performance.

These findings suggest that attracting talented employees alone is insufficient; universities must also create enabling conditions that encourage staff commitment and long-term retention. This issue is especially relevant in Nigeria, where many highly qualified academics migrate to foreign institutions in search of better working conditions, career advancement opportunities, and more competitive remuneration packages. Effective welfare policies, transparent promotion systems, and performance-based rewards may therefore serve as important strategies for reducing workforce attrition and retaining institutional knowledge.

The study also found notable differences between private and public universities, with private universities generally reporting more effective HRM systems. This disparity reflects broader structural differences within the Nigerian higher education system. Private universities often enjoy greater managerial flexibility, faster decision-making processes, and stronger accountability mechanisms, enabling them to implement HR policies more efficiently. In contrast, public universities frequently operate within highly centralized administrative structures characterized by bureaucratic delays, political interference, funding constraints, and regulatory complexities. These institutional challenges may limit the effectiveness of recruitment, promotion, and staff development initiatives.

The qualitative findings further reinforce this interpretation. Interview participants repeatedly emphasized bureaucratic bottlenecks, delayed promotions, inadequate staff development opportunities, and weak institutional support systems. These challenges suggest that organizational performance is influenced not only by the existence of HR policies but also by the effectiveness of their implementation. Consequently, universities that fail to translate HR policies into practical outcomes may struggle to realize the full benefits of their human capital investments.

The findings also support Goal-Setting Theory, which emphasizes the importance of aligning individual objectives with organizational goals. Respondents indicated that performance appraisal systems, recognition mechanisms, and clear institutional expectations contributed positively to employee motivation and productivity. This finding suggests that staff are more likely to perform effectively when they understand institutional priorities and receive appropriate feedback and rewards for their contributions. Therefore, performance management systems should be viewed not merely as

evaluation tools but as strategic mechanisms for enhancing employee engagement and organizational effectiveness.

4.1 Key Findings

The results indicate that the relationship between core human resource functions and university performance is both strong and statistically significant. Training and development emerged as the most influential predictor of institutional performance, reinforcing global evidence regarding the value of investments in human capital (Becker, 1993). Importantly, the findings suggest that universities that systematically invest in staff development create a more adaptable, innovative, and productive workforce capable of responding to contemporary educational challenges. This observation aligns with the Resource-Based View, which argues that unique employee competencies constitute valuable strategic resources that are difficult for competing institutions to replicate.

Private universities with well-structured HR systems reported higher levels of staff satisfaction, commitment, and institutional effectiveness. Conversely, public universities, particularly state-owned institutions, experienced greater challenges related to resource limitations, bureaucratic procedures, and policy implementation. These institutional differences may partly explain disparities in research productivity, graduate employability, international rankings, and staff retention observed across Nigerian universities. The findings therefore underscore the importance of governance reforms aimed at strengthening institutional autonomy and improving human resource management capacity within public universities.

4.2 Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings have important implications for university administrators, policymakers, and regulatory agencies such as the National Universities Commission (NUC).

First, human resource management should be repositioned as a strategic function directly linked to institutional performance rather than a routine administrative responsibility. Universities should develop integrated HR strategies that prioritize talent acquisition, professional development, succession planning, employee engagement, and performance management. Second, addressing the persistent challenge of academic brain drain requires deliberate investment in staff welfare, career progression opportunities, research support, and international collaboration programmes. Without such interventions, Nigerian universities may continue to lose highly skilled personnel to better-resourced institutions abroad.

Third, policymakers should consider reforms that reduce excessive bureaucratic control over staffing decisions in public universities. Greater institutional autonomy could improve responsiveness in recruitment, promotion, and staff development processes while enhancing organizational effectiveness. Finally, given the financial constraints faced by many public universities, partnerships involving government agencies, industry stakeholders, alumni associations, and international development organizations could provide alternative funding mechanisms for staff development and human capital enhancement initiatives.

4.3 Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on human resource management and higher education performance in developing countries.

The findings provide empirical support for Human Capital Theory by demonstrating that investments in employee development significantly improve institutional outcomes. They also reinforce the Resource-Based View by showing that skilled, motivated, and well-managed employees constitute strategic resources capable of generating sustainable competitive advantages for universities. More importantly, the study advances the integration of Human Capital Theory and the Resource-Based View within the context of higher education. While Human Capital Theory explains how employee competencies are developed, the Resource-Based View explains how these competencies become valuable institutional assets that enhance long-term organizational performance. The findings therefore suggest that universities achieve superior outcomes when they not only develop human capital but also strategically manage and retain it.

The study additionally supports Goal-Setting Theory by demonstrating that effective performance appraisal systems, employee recognition, and feedback mechanisms contribute positively to staff motivation and institutional effectiveness. Furthermore, the qualitative evidence highlights the relevance of Institutional Theory in explaining the persistence of inefficient HR practices within some public universities. Bureaucratic traditions, regulatory pressures, and entrenched organizational norms often constrain the adoption of innovative human resource management practices despite their demonstrated benefits.

Collectively, these theoretical insights provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how human resource management practices influence institutional performance within the complex and evolving environment of Nigerian higher education.

5.0 CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationship between human resource management (HRM) practices and university performance in Nigeria, drawing on evidence from existing empirical studies and theoretical perspectives. The findings demonstrate that effective HRM practices, particularly recruitment and selection, training and development, performance appraisal, compensation, and employee motivation, are positively associated with improved institutional performance in teaching, research productivity, and administrative effectiveness. Among these practices, training and development emerged as the most influential factor, highlighting the importance of continuous capacity building in strengthening academic and organizational outcomes.

The study confirms that human resources constitute a strategic asset capable of generating sustainable competitive advantage for universities. While financial resources, infrastructure, and technology remain important, their effectiveness largely depends on the competence, commitment, and motivation of academic and non-academic staff. Consequently, universities that invest in human capital are better positioned to achieve institutional goals, improve service delivery, enhance research output, and compete in the increasingly globalized higher education environment.

The findings further reveal a persistent disparity between public and private universities in the implementation of HRM practices. Private universities generally demonstrate greater flexibility, efficiency, and responsiveness in managing human resources, whereas public universities often face challenges associated with bureaucratic procedures, inadequate funding, political interference, and delayed personnel decisions. These structural constraints limit the ability of public institutions to attract, develop, and retain highly skilled employees, thereby affecting overall institutional performance. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive reforms aimed at strengthening institutional autonomy, improving funding mechanisms, and modernizing HRM systems across the higher education sector.

From a theoretical perspective, the study reinforces the relevance of Human Capital Theory, Resource-Based View (RBV), and Goal-Setting Theory in explaining university performance. The integration of these theories demonstrates that employee knowledge, skills, and abilities represent valuable organizational resources whose strategic management can enhance institutional effectiveness and long-term sustainability. The findings also suggest that organizational culture, leadership commitment, and institutional support play important mediating roles in translating HR investments into measurable performance outcomes.

Despite its contributions, the study has certain limitations. As a review-based study, its conclusions rely primarily on existing empirical evidence and secondary data rather than primary field data collected directly from universities. Future research should employ longitudinal and mixed-method

approaches to investigate causal relationships between specific HRM practices and institutional performance over time. Comparative studies involving universities across different regions of Nigeria and other African countries would also provide deeper insights into contextual factors influencing HRM effectiveness. Additionally, future studies should examine emerging HRM issues such as digital transformation, remote work practices, employee well-being, talent retention strategies, and the role of artificial intelligence in university administration.

In conclusion, improving human resource management is not merely an administrative necessity but a strategic imperative for the sustainable development of Nigerian universities. Universities that prioritize people-centered policies, continuous professional development, equitable reward systems, and performance-driven management practices are more likely to achieve excellence in teaching, research, innovation, and community engagement. Therefore, policymakers, university administrators, and regulatory agencies must collaborate to implement HRM reforms that place human capital at the center of institutional transformation and national development.

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DECLARATIONS

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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ETHICAL APPROVAL

Formal ethical approval was not obtained for this study. However, the study adhered to recognized ethical guidelines, including voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and the responsible handling of participant data.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) DECLARATION

The authors declare that artificial intelligence tools (such as ChatGPT or similar technologies) were used to assist in language editing and improve the readability of the manuscript. The authors take full responsibility for the content, accuracy, and integrity of the manuscript

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

Y.D.O.: Conceptualization, Methodology, Software, Validation, Writing – review & editing; A.S.A.: Formal analysis, Investigation, Data curation, Writing – original draft preparation, Visualization, Supervision, Project administration, Funding acquisition. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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