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SOUTH-WEST FEDERAL UNIVERSITIES OF NIGERIA**

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Abstract

Soft skills are regarded as interpersonal skills and character traits that complement the service delivery of academic staff in the university. This study examined the relationship between soft skills and academic staff service delivery in selected Federal universities in South-Western Nigeria. Two research objectives guided this study and were transformed into research questions and hypotheses. The theoretical framework adopted in this study was the Lean Management Theory. This study adopted a correlational survey research design. The population of the study comprised 2,947 academic staff from two Federal universities in South-West, with a sample size of 352 using Taro Yemane's sample size calculator. Random sampling technique was used in the selection of participants for the study. The instrument used for data collection was developed by the researchers, validated by experts and found reliable through a pilot testing. Data analysis was carried out using Pearson product moment correlation. The findings of the study revealed a positive and significant relationship between time management skill and academic staff service delivery and between problem-solving skill and academic staff service delivery in South-West Federal universities in Nigeria. The study recommended that academic staff should be trained on the importance of soft skills on service delivery in the university.

Introduction

Every organisation is concerned with the satisfaction received by customers or consumers after the purchase of a good or service. This is because the feedback gotten from the consumers will enhance the delivery of such products or services. Service delivery involves efficient delivery of service to

consumers. It is defined as the actual delivery of goods and services to clients, which involves the where, when and how the product or service is delivered in a fair or unfair nature (Martins and Ledimo, 2015). Provision of service is not exclusive to government or non-governmental organisations (NGOs), even the school renders service to the public. The university as a school organisation was established in Nigeria under the Ashby commission of 1960. The main purpose of establishment was to provide skilled manpower for the growth of the nation's economy. Hence, universities provide service to the nation through teaching, research and community service carried out by academic staff.

In delivering these services, academic staff needs to adopt some skills that would help navigate through the stress that surrounds the discharge of their duties. These skills are known as soft skills. Soft skills are behavioural traits that enable individuals to relate well with others. Vasanthakumari (2019) defined soft skills as a cluster of character traits, attitudes and behaviours that makes an individual a good being and able to interact with others in the workplace. Soft skills are necessary in every social organisation because they build social interaction, reduce conflicts and enhance service delivery. Academic staff appears to be overwhelmed with academic and administrative duties, which seems to have consumed time for personal activities and engagements. Time management skills help to differentiate between urgent and important issues in the workplace. Likewise, academic staff should involve problem-solving techniques in delivering their services through teaching, research and community responsibilities. These skills tend to make academic staff work smarter, thereby enhancing their service delivery in the university. Therefore, this study intends to examine the relationship between soft skills and academic staff service delivery in selected federal South-West universities of Nigeria.

Statement of Problem

The responsibilities of academic staff require soft skills in discharging them. This might be because of the overwhelming duties they engage in, which entail both academic and administrative duties. It seems time is never sufficient in fulfilling each day's task due to numerous meetings to attend, supervision of students' projects, course advising, teaching different levels of students, marking of scripts and others. This insufficient time sometimes might lead to academic staff being stressed out, especially in meeting deadlines. Academic staff also need problem-solving skills in meeting up with daily responsibilities in the university. Issues arising from students, staff and the university may require critical thinking in analysing the situations and proffering the best solutions. Moreover, inculcating problem-solving skills in the teaching and learning process may impart students' employability skills needed in the labour market. The inability of academic staff to resolve disputes amicably, collaborate with other staff members and being an exemplary leader might be because of lack of problem-solving skill.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between soft skills and academic staff service delivery in federal South-West universities of Nigeria. The following are the objectives of this study to:

1. determine the relationship between time management skill and academic staff service delivery.
2. investigate the relationship between problem-solving skill and academic staff service delivery.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What is the relationship between time management skill and academic staff service delivery?
2. How does problem-solving skills relate to academic staff service delivery?

Research Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses are tested in this study:

1. There is no significant relationship between time management skill and academic staff service delivery
2. Problem-solving skill does not significantly relate to academic staff service delivery.

Scope and Delimitation of the Study

The scope of this study covered soft skills and academic staff service delivery in selected federal South-West universities. This study selected the first-generation universities in South-West, Nigeria. This study also considered time management skills and problem-solving skill as the indices for soft skills. This study also covered teaching, research and community service as the indicators for academic staff service delivery.

Literature Review

Concept of Soft Skills

The term 'soft skills' are regarded as nontechnical skills necessary to build interpersonal relationships in the workplace, thereby improving workers productivity, performance or service delivery. There are also skills referred to as hard skills, these include technical skills, such as

proficiency in the use of information technologies. Both skills are essential for every member of staff in an organisation. Soft skills as defined by Kenton (2024) are character traits that enable individuals to interact effectively with others in the organisation. They are skills that complement the technical skills, which include time management skills, communication skills, leadership skill, problem-solving skill, and others. These skills help to reduce work stress, increase work commitment and job satisfaction, which will invariably enhance service delivery or productivity of the organisation. According to Doyle (2024), workers that interact with customers should possess soft skills because having listening ears, ability to resolve conflicts, effective communication, time management and ability to critically analyse problems and proffer solutions can only be achieved through possession of soft skills traits. The university can also be classified as a customer-based organisation because it engages and interacts with students. Therefore, soft skills should be adopted by academic staff in the quality delivery of service through teaching, research and community duties.

Concept of Service Delivery

Service delivery on the other hand, involves the production and quality of services given to a consumer. According to the Cambridge dictionary, service delivery is the act of providing a service to another person regarded as a customer or client. According to Indeed researchers (2023), they defined service delivery as a business framework that supplies services from a provider to a client. An effective service delivery implies having a satisfied customer with a great tendency to continue business interaction with the producer as well as promoting the services provided through recommendations to others (Okpa, 2019). The reverse is the case for a dissatisfied customer. The concept of service is described as an intangible good which cannot be stored or owned until it is needed for consumption. Service delivery involves delivering services effectively and efficiently

for customers' satisfaction (Green & Ramroop, 2014). Quality service delivery should be a top priority in public universities when considering the goals to be achieved in universities. Strengthening the provision of essential services can also contribute to quality service delivery. Quality service delivery is not only about the teaching methods but also involves resource allocation, administrative support to ensure conducive learning environment, and student services such as counselling. Universities are established to produce human resources through quality teaching, research and community service by interaction (Okwakol, 2009).

Concept of Time Management Skill

Time management as a factor of soft skills involves being able to set priorities and boundaries in the workplace to avoid unnecessary distractions that can affect one's productivity. Time management as defined by Doyle (2024) means to effectively plan completion of tasks or activities within the available timeframe. Being effective in managing one's time will help one meet deadlines, become more productive, create a healthy work-life balance, lower stress and attain personal and organisational goals. There is no universal definition for time management, different authors provide definitions on how the concept means to them (Qttai & Alarab, 2018). To promote efficiency and effectiveness, time management skills should be incorporated by members of staff in an organisation. Osawe (2017) affirmed that time management is essential in achieving organisational and individual goals in view of limited time available for man. He further explained that the available but scarce time can still be managed in the workplace, thereby resulting in efficiency and effectiveness in service delivery. Chaudhari (2022) identified the essentials of time management, they are for: effective planning on urgent, important and less important tasks; setting of goals and objectives; setting deadlines in achieving the goals; delegating of duties that can be

handled by other staff; setting priorities for urgent and important tasks; and spending the right time on the right activity which includes having fun or spending quality time with family.

Time is an essential factor which is available for everyone regardless of age, status, size or organisation. Time, though available, might not be managed well to promote efficiency in the workplace. Osawe (2017) carried out a study on time management as an imperative factor to effective service delivery in the Nigeria public service. He saw the need for time management in the public sector which has been underemphasised. The study examined how time though limited, can still be managed to enhance efficient and effective service delivery. The study recommended measures for effective time management, such as prioritising tasks, avoiding unnecessary visitors, and being flexible to adjust to the best use of time. In related research, a study was carried out by Oladipo and Oladejo (2018) on teachers' time management behaviours as correlates of their job performance in Lagos state public secondary schools. The study examined the extent of relationship between time management behaviours and teachers' job performance in Education District II of Lagos state. The findings of the study showed that there was a strong, positive and significant relationship between time management behaviours and teachers' job performance in Education District II of Lagos state. The study concluded that the indices of time management behaviours (monitoring, planning and time assessment behaviours) would facilitate effective job performance from the teachers. The study recommended among others, that teachers should be trained on time management techniques which would enhance their job performance.

Concept of Problem-Solving Skill

On the other hand, problem-solving skill is another factor of soft skills required in a workplace. Problem-solving skills entail critically analysing a problem, proffer solutions, and implementing the best possible solution. Nokes, Schunn and Chi (2010) described problem-solving skill as the

ability to solve varieties of tasks in different settings such as school, work or home. Rahman (2019) described problem-solving skill as an intellectual process of the brain which identifies a problem, comprehends the stated problem, design and execute the best solution proffered. This implies that problem-solving skill requires logical reasoning to process a given situation that can be used to solve problems effectively and efficiently. Problem-solving skill starts with identifying a given problem, thereafter, implementing a possible solution. A problem-solver do not depend on a particular possible solution, they make provision for varieties of solutions in which one would eventually be the best possible solution to be implemented. Doyle (2024) identified five essential steps in problem-solving, they include: analysing the causes of the problem; brainstorming on possible solutions with other team members; evaluating the best solution; implementing the selected solution; and assessing the effectiveness of the selected solution. Problem-solving skills promote teamwork, critical thinking and effective decision making, leading to quality service delivery.

In the study of Okorie (2022), research was carried out on problem-solving and self-management skills required for effective job performance of business education students in South- East public universities. The data analysis showed that there was no significant difference in the mean ratings of male and female business educators on problem-solving skills required for effective job performance by business education graduates in South-East public universities. The study concluded that problem solving skill is one of the prerequisites for effective job performance and it identified nine problem-solving skills with seven strategies for teaching problem-solving and self-management skills. In like manner, Adesanya, Sotayo and Bolarinwa (2020) carried out a study on the relevance of secretaries' problem-solving skills for improvement in job performance in Ogun state public service. The findings of the study revealed that the level of problem-solving

skill among the secretaries was high. The study therefore concluded that the high level of problem-solving skill among secretaries in public service make it essential to promote effective job performance.

Theoretical Framework

Lean Management Theory (Krafcik, 1988; Womack & Jones, 1996)

The term “Lean” was first coined by John Krafcik in his 1988 article “*Triumph of the Lean Production System*” and further defined in 1996 by American researchers: James Womack and Daniel Jones to consist of five key principles which are: precisely defining value by specific product; identifying and clarifying the value stream for each product; providing value flow without interruptions, allowing customers to pull value from the producer, and pursuing perfection. In the late 1940s, when Toyota laid the foundations for “Lean Manufacturing”, the goal was to reduce processes that did not add value to the product. In doing so, the leaders managed to achieve significant improvements in terms of productivity, efficiency, cycle time and profitability.

Lean management is described as an approach being managed by an organisation that supports the concept of continuous improvement, that is, a long-term approach that systematically seeks to achieve small, incremental changes in its production processes to improve efficiency and quality. The primary purpose of lean management is to produce value for the customer by optimising resources efficiently, thereby reducing wastage. The philosophy has its roots in manufacturing.

However, lean management theory is concerned with concentration on professional training and shaping staff attitudes as well as maintaining positive public relations. Therefore, this theory gives vital attention to the aspects that relate to human resource management in the organisation. There are selected constituents that every manager should consider important in the organisation. They

are: creating a good atmosphere in the workplace which would not only help staff in accomplishing tasks but also in building healthy relationships; setting of objectives, both long term and short term; ease in communication; intrinsic and extrinsic motivation should be encouraged; avoid wasting human potentials by imposing some obligations without consulting the employees directly involved; providing opportunities for employees' self-development; and adopting appropriate management styles.

Though, lean management theory is mostly considered for manufacturing companies, it is also applicable to the school system because the school also manufactures the students, who undergo different processes into finished goods ready for the labour market who are the consumers. This is one of the reasons schools are being competitive and striving for excellence in admission, research grants, quality ratings and prestige. This implies that schools can also adopt lean management strategies to achieve quality service delivery in the school system. Integrating lean management in the school can help eliminate wastage in the education sector, cut costs, utilise resources efficiently, improve revenue and ultimately improve teaching and learning activities.

Methodology

This study adopted the correlational research design because it considered the relationship that existed among the variables of the study. The population of the study consisted of 2,947 academic staff from the University of Ibadan and University of Lagos. These universities were selected meeting the criterion of first-generation universities in South-West, Nigeria. Using Taro Yemane's sample size calculator, the sample size for this study was 352. Bowley's proportional allocation formula was used to get the actual number of participants for each university. Random sampling technique was used in selecting the participants for the study. The research instrument used in this study was a questionnaire developed by the researchers. The questionnaire was titled 'Soft Skills

and Academic Staff Service Delivery Questionnaire (SSASSDQ)'. The questionnaire was grouped into two sections, Section A and Section B. Section A contained the demographic characteristics of the participants while Section B contained items which required responses on the variables of this study. The instrument was validated by experts in the Department of Educational Management. Through Cronbach Alpha formula applied on the pilot testing, the instrument was found reliable at 0.75. The instrument was distributed to the participants and collected after the administration with a zero-loss rate. Pearson Product Moment Correlation was used to test the stated hypotheses at .05 level of significance.

Test of Hypotheses

H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between time management skill and academic staff service delivery.

Table 1
Time Management Skill and Academic Staff Service Delivery

Variables	Mean	SD	N	df	r	p-value	Remark
Time Management	2.52	0.19	352	350	.42	.000	H ₀₁ rejected
Service Delivery	2.61	0.24					

Significant @ p-value <.05

Information on table 1 showed the analysis of Pearson product moment correlation on time management skill and academic staff service delivery. The result showed $r = .42$, $df = 350$ and $p\text{-value} = .000 < .05$ level of significance. This analysis revealed that the null hypothesis failed to be accepted. Therefore, the result showed a low and positive significant relationship between time management skill and academic staff service delivery. This indicates that incorporating time management skills leads to enhanced service delivery by academic staff in the university.

H₀₂: Problem-solving skill does not significantly relate to academic staff service delivery.

Table 2

Problem-Solving Skill and Academic Staff Service Delivery

Variables	Mean	SD	N	Df	r	p-value	Remark
Problem-Solving	2.75	0.17	352	350	.75	.000	H _{o2} rejected
Service Delivery	2.61	0.24					

Significant @ p-value <.05

Information on table 2 displayed the analysis of Pearson product moment correlation on problem-solving skill and academic staff service delivery. The result showed $r = .75$, $df = 350$ and $p\text{-value} = .000 < .05$ level of significance. This analysis revealed that the null hypothesis failed to be accepted. Therefore, the result showed a highly positive and significant relationship between problem-solving skills and service delivery of academic staff. This implies that applying problem-solving techniques increases the quality of service delivered by academic staff in the university.

Discussion of Findings

The result of the first hypothesis declared a low, positive and significant relationship between time management skill and academic staff service delivery in Federal universities of South-Western Nigeria. This indicates that time management skills are of utmost importance to academic staff. From the findings of the study, it can be deduced that possessing the skill of time management will invariably enhance the service delivery of academic staff. In agreement with this finding, the study of Osawe (2017) examined the importance of time management to service delivery in Nigeria public service. The study discovered that public service workers faced challenges in managing time which has affected their productivity at work. The study also found that workers allow unnecessary visitors, do not prioritise tasks and are unable to adjust to the best use of time. Similarly, Oladipo and Oladejo (2018) investigated teachers' time management behaviours as

correlates of job performance in public secondary schools in Lagos state. The study established a strong, positive and significant relationship between time management behaviours and teachers' job performance in Lagos state. The study concluded that the indices of time management behaviours (monitoring, planning and time assessment behaviours) would facilitate effective job performance from the teachers.

The findings of the second hypothesis established a strong, positive and significant relationship between problem-solving skill and academic staff service delivery in Federal universities of South-Western Nigeria. This finding contributes to the importance of problem-solving skills in the university. Problem-solving skills are paramount in the day-to-day activities within the university system. This is so because the university is meant to meet society's needs through teaching, research and community service. In support of these findings, Adesanya, Sotayo and Bolarinwa (2020) examined problem-solving skills and job performance in Ogun state public service. The study found that the level of problem-solving skill among the secretaries was high and the high level of problem-solving skill among secretaries in public service makes it essential to promote effective job performance. Okorie (2022) supported these findings in her study on problem-solving skill and the effectiveness of job performance among business education students in South-East public universities. The study concluded that problem-solving skills are one of the prerequisites for effective job performance and it identified nine problem-solving skills with seven strategies for teaching problem-solving and self-management skills in the university.

Conclusion

This study explored the meaning and importance of soft skills to academic staff service delivery in the university. Every organisation is concerned with the image and reputation portrayed in the eyes of the public, likewise the university. The university as producers of labour for the country

must ensure their end products (students) are able to meet the needs of the society, this can be achieved through quality service delivery from academic staff in the university. In enhancing academic staff service delivery, this study revealed a positive relationship between soft skills and academic staff service delivery. This implies that academic staff must be trained in the importance of incorporating soft skills in delivery of service through teaching, research and community responsibilities.

Recommendations

1. Time management skills are essential for prioritisation of tasks and completion of tasks. Academic staff are bottled with administrative and academic duties, it is therefore pertinent for academic staff to be trained in the importance of time management in enhancing service delivery. This would help avoid work pressure in the university.
2. The government, university management, staff (academic and non-academic) and students should possess problem-solving skills. Academic staff should incorporate problem-solving techniques in teaching and learning, this would help students become analytical and creative thinkers. Problem-solving skill aids innovation, creativity, and enhances service delivery in the university.

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